

Managing the “Boss”: Epistemic Violence, Resistance, and Negotiations in Milman Parry’s and Nikola Vujnović’s *Pričanja* with Salih Ugljanin

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Without a doubt, Albert B. Lord’s seminal work *The Singer of Tales* owes much of its success to the series of *pričanja* (“conversations”)¹ conducted with the South Slavic singers in 1933-35 by his mentor, Milman Parry, and his native assistant, Nikola Vujnović. This was an endeavor that Lord initially assisted in and benefited from as a student, and a practice he adopted during his own subsequent research trips to Yugoslavia in the 1950s. Along with the hands-on experience of listening to and recording performances of epic songs and other lore, these interviews proved crucial to the forming of the so-called “Oral-Formulaic Theory” inasmuch as they provided vital contextual information, as well as some basic interpretative tools for approaching the sizeable body of recorded epics. Moreover, in the course of the interviews, the singers offered valuable insight not only into what they already knew and did (for instance, how they acquired their skill, how they composed, or what in their opinion counted as a truthful, beautiful, or “correctly” sung tale), but also into what they *could* know and do, as the interactive and heuristic nature of the interview presented Parry with ample opportunities to test his hypotheses—those that he brought from Harvard and the Sorbonne, and those that were forming and being transformed during the interviews themselves. The ways of thinking that resulted from such probing and experimentation² must to a significant degree account for the applicability and usefulness of the Parry-Lord method beyond the narrowly South Slavic context.³ As John Miles

¹ The literal meaning of *pričanje* is “telling.” To be sure, translating the word as “conversation” makes it less amorphous and better highlights the envisaged dialogic nature of the event. However, “conversation” is also a rather misleading translation as it connotes spontaneity; it gives a false impression that these were leisurely exchanges among equals, with questions and answers flowing bilaterally. Though in relation to this particular context another available option, “interview,” seems too technical and even somewhat anachronistic or anatopistic, it at least points to the hierarchy at work and thus accounts more accurately for the fact that although the singers do most of the “telling,” they are at the same time not the ones in charge of their talk, as this is the privilege of the interviewers.

² Roman Jakobson (1954:xii) particularly admired Parry’s experimental approach and deemed it a feature that distinguished Parry’s fieldwork above those of his predecessors and contemporaries.

³ This usefulness, of course, relies on the method being applied sensitively, with an awareness of the specificities of the particular tradition studied. Ruth Finnegan’s classic, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context* (1992), offers an important corrective in this regard.

Foley attests (1998:149): “to date more than 100 language areas have been affected by the approach they initiated.”

While explored and exploited as a rich resource for learning about oral tradition, the singers’ place within it, and attitudes towards it, these conversations are seldom considered as performances in their own right—that is, as meta-performances—that themselves feature the recitation/telling/singing of epic poetry and other traditional lore.⁴ Although they are likely to be as “genuine” as any other interviews (recorded or not), these conversations bear clear signs of staging. To take those with Salih Ugljanin as an example, just before the “official” conversation begins, the faint whispers of Nikola Vujnović’s leisurely, often preparatory chatter with the singer can sometimes be distinguished from the crackling background noise of the phonograph already set in motion. So, too, can some of Parry’s barely audible interventions and instructions to Nikola be made out in brief pauses, often marking the turning points of an interview;⁵ even amidst apparently impassioned debates, charged with ethnic and religious tensions (e. g., PN 659, VI:47-48, R 1053: 0:51-0:52),⁶ Nikola will not forget to remind the singer, under his breath and fully composed, to voice his contrary opinion *glasnije* (“louder”).⁷ At other times, the singer himself speaks in a lower voice: when tired or in pain, when insecure, or when he judges the content of his remark as not record-worthy (e. g., PN 654, II:67-68, R 928: 2:19-2:30). In these cases his interviewers rarely follow suit and instead ask him to repeat the remark more loudly, not missing an opportunity, paradoxically, to stage some spontaneity and realism as well.

⁴A notable exception is Elmer 2010.

⁵ Nikola tended to include Parry’s instructions in the subsequent transcriptions if they were audible enough. (Note that, in addition to acting as an interpreter and mediator for Parry and Lord, Nikola also transcribed the phonographic recordings.) If they were not, either Nikola would indicate by a dotted or a continuous line that Parry had said something, or he would not note it at all (e. g., PN 654, II:15-18 feature all these cases; for the referencing conventions, see footnote 6). The latter case occurs more often when Nikola subsequently repeats Parry’s question to the singer in a more or less unchanged form, and there is a strong tendency in the transcriptions of later conversations not to mark these kind of interventions, even when they can be heard (e. g., PN 659, VI:41-46, R 1051-52).

⁶ References to the *Pričanja* with Salih Ugljanin will adhere to the following convention: each *Pričanje* will be indexed by the Parry archives’ catalog number (here PN 659) and the Roman numeral corresponding to the interview cited (here VI). These will then be followed by the transcript page number(s) (here 47-48) and the number of the corresponding audio record(s) (here R 1053). Where the manner in which something is said is of particular importance, the reference will include the minutes and seconds of the cited excerpt (here 0:51-0:52). Since these recordings are freely available online and easily accessible, I will limit audio clips included in the eCompanion to this article to block quotations only. I hope that these excerpts will inspire the reader to explore further this fascinating material.

⁷ Nikola’s remark is heard here, but it is not included in the transcript. Please note that, as a general rule, I will prioritize the recordings over the transcripts, while noting the differences. Also, unless otherwise specified, all translations from Serbian/Bosnian are mine. In particular, when it comes to the *Pričanja*, I will attempt to follow as closely as possible features of the participants’ oral delivery (pauses, ellipses, incongruent grammar, semantic lapses, and so on) in the hope that what such a translation will lose in elegance, it will make up for by better conveying the mood of the speakers and the atmosphere of their exchanges. This decision touches upon important questions regarding the scientific method to which I will come back in the next section—“Staging My Own Staging and the Efficiency of Neglect.”

Casting the conversations in terms of useful, primarily supplementary material⁸ must have obscured, to a significant degree, their performative aspect, as well as rendered all too transparent the otherwise subtle relationships that developed between the collector, the informant, and the routinely neglected third figure that looms large in these recordings, that of the interpreter/mediator. However, one of the more mundane reasons for the conversations' remaining unstudied in their own right must have been the restricted availability of the phonographic recordings to a wider scholarly audience. With the recent establishment of the "Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature On-Line" (MPCOL) hosted by Harvard University, and their ongoing digitization of Parry's and Lord's recordings, it is becoming more and more possible for scholars around the globe to access some of this material unprocessed and study more closely the intricacies of the ways in which the three⁹ principal actors relate to one another.

The *Pričanja*¹⁰ with the singer Salih Ugljanin from Novi Pazar in Serbia offer a wealth of insights in this regard, and the present paper will focus on how the singer copes with, negotiates, sometimes stubbornly resists, and often mirrors what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988:280 *et*

⁸ As with other singers from Novi Pazar, the translated corpus of Salih Ugljanin's songs is preceded by a large part of *Pričanje I* by way of introducing the singer. However, Lord consigns ample portions of other conversations to explanatory notes for the published songs, thus stressing their value as supplementary material (*SCHS I*:330-400). Almost ironically, the notes to the "Conversation (A) with Salih Ugljanin" (329-30) make painfully obvious the fact that this contextual material is itself in need of contextualization and independent study.

⁹ Even as I speak of the "three principal actors" (because theirs are the voices that can be heard in the recordings and they are engaged in direct contact), I am well aware of the fourth participant, Albert Bates Lord. The silent phonograph operator from the adjacent room, the listener, the witness, Lord will also turn out to be the director of the proceedings, their ultimate presenter, the one in charge of the cuts, appropriation, and the final wrap-up in *The Singer of Tales*. For this reason he will continue to appear in the following discussion, even though I will mainly focus on Milman Parry, Nikola Vujnović, and Salih Ugljanin.

¹⁰ In addition to the series of six interviews with Salih Ugljanin dubbed as *Pričanja I-VI* (PN 652, 654-56, 658-59), in this article I will also consider *Pjevanje i pričanje* ("Singing and Conversing," PN 674), as this interview chronologically follows *Pričanje VI* and does not generically differ from other *Pričanja* in which the "singing and conversing" are also intermingled. Because its title could have easily been *Pričanje VII* and because the present one also reverses the word order in the original transcript title, *Pričanje i pjevanje*, when the need for an abbreviation arises, I will refer to this interview as "VII." On the other hand, I will not include here an item (PN 280a) designated simply as *Pričanje* (without an accompanying Roman numeral) because it is not an actual interview, but rather two manuscript pages containing Nikola Vujnović's notes on how the singer explains the similarities and differences between the two songs he recited that day, as well as a brief retelling of a story about Đerdelez Alija and Marko Kraljević. Please note that, with the exception of *Pričanje V*, the transcripts and audio recordings of all the interviews are featured in the "Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature On-Line" (<http://chs119.chs.harvard.edu/mpc/index.html>), which is the main source of all the related quotations in this article. However, the fact that I am still able to include *Pričanje V* in the discussions to follow testifies to the great dedication, care, and helpfulness on the part of the Milman Parry Collection curatorial staff. I am especially grateful to Dr. David F. Elmer and Peter McMurray who supplied me with the transcript scans of *Pričanje V* and *Pričanje*, as well as helped me obtain the necessary permissions to quote profusely from the Collection. Without their kind intervention, this article would have been poorer and drier.

passim) and others¹¹ dub the “epistemic violence”—an imposition of foreign (scholarly, Western, colonial) terms of engagement that experts of various callings, often inadvertently and with the best possible intentions, nevertheless repeatedly perpetrate against their informants.¹² In scholarly efforts to engage in a transcultural dialogue—the efforts that constitute the *raison d’être* of anthropological, folkloristic, ethnographic, postcolonial, and comparative literature studies—the “informant,” the “other,” still remains to be heard, his or her every utterance subject(ed) to the poetics of the imposed academic discourse. Through such “ventriloquist strategies of representation” (Ritchie 1993:366), the inadvertent and inescapable monologization that irons out the bumps of otherness from the smooth consistency of one’s own worldview, these endeavors seem doomed as dialogues from the start.¹³ Indeed, even as I proceed to discuss the epistemic violence of the fieldwork that translated Salih as “informant,” “indigene,” and “subaltern,” the question of my own complicity in this same project arises. Is it not yet more translation that I am about to inflict here?

Staging My Own Staging and the Efficiency of Neglect¹⁴

If this were a reflexive and reevaluating piece of ethnographic work intent on setting right what was wronged the first time around, there would be a paradox in purporting to speak for the misrepresented while in the same breath adding yet more layers of presumptuous representation. Even if I could never hope to mitigate the charges of representation in the first place, that this is no such work makes a difference. This is a collection of listening notes where what I listened to you can hear as well, with the sampling fairness and quantized fidelity of a digitized recording.

¹¹ Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is considered the key text in establishing the study of epistemic violence, more specifically “the narrow epistemic violence of imperialism” that “gives us an imperfect allegory of the general violence that is the possibility of an episteme” (1988:287). This more general notion of epistemic violence, however, originates with Jacques Derrida, whose work greatly influenced Spivak and whose paradigm-shifting book, *Of Grammatology*, she translated (1997). In particular, in the chapter scrutinizing Lévi-Strauss’s study of the Nambikwara people (*idem*:101-40), Derrida deals with epistemic violence in both the narrow and general senses. And while in her seminal essay Spivak severely interrogates her other important precursors (for instance, Foucault’s decidedly European perspective on “subjugated knowledge”), Derrida remains an important point of reference (Spivak 1988:292): “hard to read” but “less dangerous when understood than the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves.”

¹² Note how the very word “informant” connotes subordination and renders the bearer of this label an instrument of the one who has yet to make adequate use of the information provided (that is, the scientist).

¹³ These problems, as they play out in the area of comparative literature studies and beyond, were the intense focus of the 2006 American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) Report on the state of comparative literature as a discipline (Saussy 2006), and they were also central to Volume 3, Issue 1-2, of *Comparative Critical Studies* (2006) and the 2009 issue of *New Literary History* (Volume 40, Issue 3), both featuring articles written in reaction to the 2006 ACLA Report. For anthropological, ethnographic, and folkloristic perspectives, see, for example, Clifford and Marcus 2010, Ritchie 1993, Vasenkari and Pekkala 2000, and Marker 2003.

¹⁴ This section was co-authored with Miloš Ranković in response to the suggestion made by an anonymous reviewer. I wish to thank this perceptive reader for the depth of his or her investment in this project and for many useful comments, constructive criticism, and expressed enthusiasm. This text has changed considerably as a result, and I imagine that he or she would relish the way in which these contributions have further emphasized the non-triviality of the question of who hereby speaks. I thus dedicate this section to these worthy voices.

The difference this makes is that of a somewhat relaxed concern on my part for the preservation or presentation of anything, still less anyone. Certainly, there is violence—it is the name of the play, after all—except none of the characters that animate my stage, “I”, Salih, Nikola, or Parry, hesitates to show their teeth. And even if they only ever bare their teeth in laughter, that reminds me that I am in no place to redress the wrongs of ethnographic fieldwork, let alone to empower the other. As Michael Marker cautions (2003:370):

“Empowering” or “advocating” for Indigenous communities is a suspiciously ethnocentric and patronizing goal. Many Indigenous groups would find the language itself offensive and presumptuous since they maintain that they were never conquered and hence have never relinquished their “power.”

Perhaps more radically still, I do not seek to empower the other because power is never one’s own: power is others’. Even as I stage a certain scholarly framework as the source of epistemic violence, it is already I who is framed. Episteme is not what I *have* to wield or swear by, but rather what *has* me to do its dirty/cleansing work—I, the scapegoat, better known as the author. Wherever in what follows I detect a symptom of epistemic violence, read that I am confessing my own: not only is this *my* staging of the *Pričanja*, but I also recognize so much of Parry’s scholarly mannerism as my own. Between my training and my listening, I am much less a source of power than its instrument. As such, these recordings play me instead. They interest me, baffle me, touch me. They trigger my attitudes: personal, professional, epistemic. Inevitably then, as I stage the *Pričanja*, violence is the theme *and* the method, yet this is already to thematize the violence of all methods, especially those entrusted to take care of the other (if there is any other kind of method). Of course, if this is the unavoidable predicament of all staging, the question we are obliged to ask is why stage at all? What is the point? To what end? Perhaps, first of all, to worry aloud about all the ends and purposes programmed into methods of scholarly analysis; to stage what by definition cannot be seen, that the very economy of a well rehearsed method (which is the method’s own end) resides in the neglect of asking whose purposes and whose ends.

However, while the methods of fieldwork will inevitably be staged as suspect, they will not be my prime suspects. There is certainly much to say about the methods that produce “collectors” and “their informants,” but there is probably as much to be said about the *theory* of epistemic violence and *its* products. The “Other” and the “subaltern,” in particular, are some of the local produce of that theory. Thus I hear bell hooks, that she “was made ‘other’” during her graduate years, *in and by* those fields of foreign epistemic investment, whereas “in that space in the margins, that lived-in segregated world of my past and present, I was not ‘other’” (1999:342). I believe her that “often this speech about the ‘other’ annihilates, erases” (343), the speech she then goes on to stage as well (343):

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk. [italics in original]

I see that I am staged here in turn, generically speaking. How odd, though, is this true me. How “other” on this stage. How comically as well as tragically stupid I stand on it. I am still colonizer, the well-programmed instrument of colonization. I am still author, the scapegoat. (How interesting, too, is that I sound ironic and defensive here, even though that is certainly not how I feel about bell hooks’ staging of my speech: I recognized myself in it well enough.) But I remember, too, growing up in Serbia, back then when there was Tito and Yugoslavia, and all those jokes, so characteristic of small peoples with big national egos, featuring a line-up of fittingly grotesque representatives of “foreign powers” along with a homegrown exemplar. “There was once an American, a Russian, a Chinese,” and so on, the joke would go. I remember how power and stupidity seemed to go naturally hand in hand. And I remember the laughs. Perhaps such insubordinate laughter is just the kind of noise that bell hooks tells us is “more often silenced” (342), the din of props coming from another’s stage. The following staging of the *Pričanja* also features some hearty laughs from Salih, Nikola, and Parry, sometimes in unison, though I will save that for the end.

When such ill-mannered noises have been silenced, it may be safe to assume that some scholarly mannerism found itself offended, which is to say that some well practiced method took care of the other without reservation, slipping it into its reserved slot with the satisfying whoosh of no friction, the sound of efficiency and negligence. Which makes me think: how complete and consistent should I want my staging of the *Pričanja* to be? What kinds of reservation should I keep? And what is this silenced clamor of friction supposed to be in general?

What is silenced precisely by way of methodical generalization is the resistance of the marginalized, as bell hooks explains (342):

I want to say that these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance. And since we are well able to name the nature of that repression, we know better the margins as site of deprivation. We are more silent when it comes to speaking of the margin as site of resistance. We are more often silenced when it comes to speaking of the margin as site of resistance.

Equipped with our universal(izing) theory of otherness, we are well able to name. And the better we are able to name, the less conspicuous is the absence of the named. The other resists the resourcefulness of the “Other” and the efficiency of its theory. Every other is already a capital example of the other inasmuch as it remains after grasping by example. The other cannot be displayed, capitalized on, or manhandled as such, because “there is no Other as such” (Wood 2005:69). We fail others by miss-take, miss-appropriation and miss-management. The following is an attempt to stage the *Pričanja* featuring not Salih the subaltern, still less Salih the informant, but this Salih Ugljanin from Novi Pazar who is both 67 and 85 years old, and who both does and does not know a song in which a Serbian hero prevails. It is that Salih whom I have never quite

managed to characterize and who never tires of rearranging the propositions of my stage when I do not look. Wherever there is indecision, incompleteness, or inconsistency in my argument, read that beyond the scholarly incompetence it may be Salih and company insisting on their absence to be marked, insisting that their tale is not yet complete, insisting on their being in-decision.

But how am I to take care of such heterogeneous others? What would be a good method? To be sure, I cannot let (the words of) these others speak for themselves. I cannot even hear them speak for themselves any more than I can write/think about them in the homogenous unity of my “own” copyrighted words. I have heard them speak, though. It is too late now to pretend that I have not, that I read their text instead. So whenever in what follows academic propriety is offended by unscientific accounts of emotional prosody, with adjectives, adverbs, and other modifiers shamelessly staging the words of the other, read that I confess to having heard voices. Read too that “their” words, purged of “my” modifiers, would have been a staging still more dangerous, silent.¹⁵ At any rate, the finality of my representation is offset by the uncommon accessibility of the voices I heard. To draw attention to the potential value of this rare luxury was my first motivation to stage the *Pričanja*. Here, for the moment, we are listening to me listening to them listening to each other. If there is any interest in participating in this game of Chinese whispers, let it be to try and measure (up to) these distances and the value of participation, whether it is worth the violence of touch and the risk of entanglement.

Parry’s Scholarly Safari

It is certainly not hard to find the idea of epistemic violence within the context of Milman Parry’s fieldwork in Yugoslavia during the 1930s. Indeed, there is a strong parallel between scholarly expeditions of the kind Parry undertook and safari expeditions, colonial narratives, and movies: a young, white, middle-class Westerner (just as the cliché has it) goes off to explore an exotic culture. He does not do this out of a genuine curiosity about Yugoslavia, at least not at first, but for what its backwardness (or, cast in more positive and more patronizing terms, its still lasting golden age of cultural innocence) can teach him about a far greater civilization, the one whose intellectual heir he considers himself to be, that of Homeric Greece. Subsequently, after the South Slavic songs—and the region’s oral tradition in general—became passions in themselves and not merely the stepping stones on the way to understanding orality in Homer, Parry reminisced about his initial intentions as follows (quoted in Lord 1954:3-4):

It was least of all for the material itself that I planned the study. . . . Of the various oral poeties for which I could obtain enough information the Southslavic seemed to be the most suitable for a study which I had in mind, to give that knowledge of a still living oral poetry which I saw to be needed if I were to go on with any sureness in my study of Homer.

Decades later, Lord would still need Homer to justify his study of the South Slavic tradition. Lest the audience worry that his book reflect too parochial an interest and the songs discussed be too

¹⁵ For an example of a silent staging of Salih Ugljanin’s speech, see footnote 120.

mediocre, the first sentence of his “Foreword” to *The Singer of Tales* reads as follows (2000 [1960]:xxxv): “This book is about Homer. He is our Singer of Tales.” (As a subtle counterweight to this statement, however, the picture of the singer Avdo Međedović was placed upon the cover of this new edition.) The subsequent sentences of the “Foreword” try to make some room for the South Slavic singers in the heart of the reader (after all, they and not Homer, the declared subject, will pervade every page of the book), but the estimated price of the reader’s affection is the relegation of the South Slavic singers (even the lauded Avdo Međedović) to the position of modern Homeric surrogates whose song-making techniques can brightly illuminate the art of the long-gone genius, even if their end products fade in comparison.

Parry set off on his journeys well prepared, having mastered some Serbo-Croatian. On his second trip in 1934, he also took with him a student assistant and a state-of-the-art, custom-made phonograph, a nifty, if oftentimes annoyingly cumbersome gadget, bound to fill the natives with awe.¹⁶ “His enterprising spirit was admirable, his recording equipment excellent,” writes Roman Jakobson in his tributary “Preface” (1954:xi) to *Serbocroatian Heroic Songs I*.¹⁷ As every hero of a safari expedition, Parry, too, had been in need of a reliable native guide, and he found him in the young Herzegovinian singer (and stone mason) Nikola Vujnović, a man well versed in oral culture who could recognize a good song, yet also literate enough to serve as a scribe. For the next two years, Nikola would be Parry’s assistant, mediator, interpreter, and, as it happened, an enthusiastic and talented apprentice.¹⁸ He would take care of the practicalities, conduct most of the interviews following Parry’s instructions (but would also invariably take his own initiative), write down the poetry dictated by the singers, and undertake the long and arduous work of transcribing the recordings from the aluminum disks. Following Parry’s untimely death in 1935,

¹⁶ As Matija Murko testifies from his own field experience in the same region (1951:23): *Vijest, da će biti fotografirani i fonografirani, pravila je čuda, kao i to, da će dobiti svoju sliku i čuti svoj glas* (“The news that [the singers] would be photographed and phonographed worked wonders, as well as that they would receive their photograph and hear their own voice”). See also Tate 2010:314-15 for an eyewitness account of Parry’s arrival in the Croatian village of Kijevo and the villagers’ “shock” “when the two foreigners played the recording of Cicvarić’s singing” back for them. On the other hand, Albert Lord’s impression was that a town dweller is much more easily awed by such gadgets than the singer (1954:11): “In this matter indeed the singer is far more sophisticated than the urbanite, because he is less self-conscious. He is a trained performer to whom public appearance is nothing extraordinary. He is flattered by the recording, but he frequently listens to it without comment, except perhaps to marvel at the wonders of modern science.” While there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of Lord’s observations, his explanation of the phenomenon (that is, that a singer is “less self-conscious”) can be disputed, or rather turned around, to suggest that it is precisely because the singers were *more* self-conscious that they showed less reaction. In other words, they may have been too proud to show themselves easily excitable and ignorant, and they wanted to preserve their dignity in front of a foreigner. Conversely, in reacting strongly, the urbanite better signals his appreciation of, his cultural allegiance with, and an aspiration towards the world that the gadget represents.

¹⁷Henceforth, I shall refer to this volume as *SCHS I*.

¹⁸ While both Milman Parry and Albert Lord warmly acknowledge their debt to Nikola Vujnović’s talent and versatile abilities (*SCHS I*:10-11), subsequent scholarship has failed to take enough notice of Vujnović’s contribution to the Parry-Lord theory of oral composition. However, recent years are witnessing a change in this regard. See, for example, Foley 2005:235 where Parry, Lord, and Vujnović are referred to as a “research team.” See also Foley 2004 and Tate 2010.

he would continue to transcribe for Lord until World War II swallowed him, leaving no trace as to the kind of fate he met.¹⁹

Thus armed with knowledge, enthusiasm, hypotheses, awesome gadgetry, an apt pupil, and a nimble native, Parry spent about twelve days in November 1934 in the company of an old Albanian singer, Salih Ugljanin from Novi Pazar in southwestern Serbia. From the resulting series of “conversations” it is obvious that this was not their first encounter (they had already collected some poetry from him earlier in July 1934),²⁰ but it does seem to have been the first time Parry was able to conduct and record such a long, sustained, and comprehensive series of interviews with him. These interviews yield a wealth of insight into the singer’s biography, artistic practice and abilities, repertoire, and sources, as well as an abundance of epic poetry, legends, humorous stories, ethnographic information, and other lore. However, far from being a neutral means for obtaining information, the *Pričanja* are also sites of subdued—though at times also vehement—power struggles, clashes of interests, and differences of intention among the three people directly involved. While the overarching love of epic acts as a powerful leveler of their social, ethnic, religious, and age differences, at times it only thinly conceals their very particular and different ways of loving epic. Salih, for instance, likes his songs because they speak eloquently to his sense of identity. Nikola loves *Christian* epic songs, and Salih’s are enjoyed almost as inverted mirrors: the epic landscape, the cast of heroes, the patriarchal ethos, and the hoard of well-known idiomatic phrases are all there, familiar and comforting, yet it is the Muslims who win the day—not his fellow Christians. Parry loves the epics of Classical Greece, and Salih’s songs are for him primarily a means of gaining access to the pulleys and levers of oral composition that he believes underlie Homeric epics. The love is there, but as the saying and its parody go (and both get it right), love is a many-splendored and a many-splintered thing all at once.

Through the understated yet understood and undisputed social superiority of the interviewers, the patronizing efficiency of handling the singer as test subject, and the physical as well as mental strain of the tests, Salih’s role in these interviews in many ways chimes with the subaltern other: speaking yet dispossessed of voice, his actions directed, his life story collected. While this much fits the theory, there is much else that does not. For example, this was not the first time that this singer of great local renown had encountered a learned collector eager to study

¹⁹ Unlike Nikola, the ancient Salih seems to have lived to see the end of World War II. Albert Lord, for instance, mentions (*SCHS I:54*) that when he visited Novi Pazar in 1950, the singer Mustafa Rebronja told him how Salih died “something more than five years earlier,” that is, in 1945 or perhaps late 1944. In either case, the town was liberated in the autumn of 1944, which makes it likely that the singer survived the war, even if only just. With this hindsight, it is rather poignant to hear him note to his young interviewer (PN 656, IV:64, R 990): *Kad je čojek mlad on vara se. On misli ovako ka ti, on neće umrijet nikad* (“When a man is young, he deceives himself. He thinks, just like you, [that] he will never die”).

²⁰ A possibility that the trio also met an entire year earlier (1933) is suggested when Nikola asks the singer (PN 652, I:45, R 870): *Od koga si čuo tu pjesmu, koju si kazivo lanjske godine, kako je došla četa do Kolašina i pogubila jednoga turčina, i osvetio ga brat?* (“From whom did you hear that song, which you recited last year—how a band came to Kolašin and killed one Turk, and his brother avenged him?”). However, the singer’s subsequent identification of the song as the one about Kajović Mujan—and the fact that no record of Parry’s 1933 visit to Novi Pazar exists—makes it more likely that this was, in fact, a slip on Nikola’s part. He probably meant to say “earlier in the year” since Salih had indeed dictated the song now entitled “Kajović Mujan i Periš kapetan” to Nikola on 24 July 1934 (PN 278a).

his art of making oral poetry, and neither was it the last. Four years earlier, in 1930, Salih met the Prague-based Slovene scholar Matija Murko,²¹ and he was also interviewed again three years after Parry, this time by the famous German Slavist Alois Schmaus.²² And while the position title of “informant” was not entirely foreign to Salih, Parry’s braving the world of ancient customs and little known dialects as well as the world of novel fieldwork methods meant treading a very foreign ground.²³ As such, even before my stage production gets under way, my protagonists already resist compliant fieldwork role-playing. And they will continue to resist it as the balance of power between the participants shifts and fluctuates in the course of the interviews.

Sliding Hierarchies, Shifting Allegiances

Parry as the “Boss”

That the *Pričanja* are not conducted among social equals is apparent from the very way the three people address each other. Parry calls the singer by his first name and often refers to him—in his presence and in the language he can understand—in the third person, delegating his questions to Nikola (PN 652, I:16, R 862: 1:07-1:15): *Ali pitaj mu što je radijo . . .* (“But ask him what he was doing . . .”).²⁴ Out of context, this indirect form of address may strike one as bordering on rude, alienating and objectifying the singer. However, it is conditioned by the nature of the setup (the scientist endeavors to be “impartial” and to “remove” himself from the experiment as much as possible) and also driven by the practicalities (Nikola and the singer are closer to the microphone and Parry entrusts Nikola to better convey his requests to the singer). At the same time, it is the very nature and choice of this setup that gives Parry the slightly ominous, behind-the-scenes presence of a master puppeteer, his directions all the more potent for coming across as barely audible whispers. Of course, the aforementioned distance from the microphone

²¹ As Parry duly acknowledged, it was Murko who inspired him to undertake a research trip to Yugoslavia in the first place (see, for instance, *SCHS I:3*). Murko had already trodden more or less the same track as Parry in 1930-32 and had, a couple of decades before *The Singer of Tales*, published some of the results of this fieldwork as well as his own sketchy thoughts on oral-formulaic composition (1932-33; 1933; for Lord’s acknowledgement of Murko as “a true pioneer,” see 2000[1960]:280). Originally written in Czech, Murko’s *magnum opus* was first published in Croatian translation some years later under the title *Tragom srpsko-hrvatske narodne epike: Putovanja u godinama 1930-1932* (1951; see the short introductory note by Antun Barac, the book series editor). Unfortunately, to this day, his work remains largely unknown beyond the specialists in South Slavic studies. The late, founding editor of the present journal was one of the few scholars to have invested some time in addressing this loss by translating some of Murko’s work into English (Murko 1990).

²² See Schmaus 1938.

²³ For this perspective on Parry’s fieldwork, see, for example, Parry 1971:xxxvi.

²⁴ Here (and as a general rule) I am strictly following Nikola’s transcript, which means that I am reproducing both Parry’s grammatical error (using the dative instead of the accusative form of the pronoun *on* (“he”) and Nikola’s orthographical error of inserting “j” in *radio* (this at least according to the current orthographical rules of the standard Serbian language). It is interesting to note that Lord edits Parry’s remark out of his translation of *Pričanje I*; see *SCHS I:62*.

could in part account for this effect. However, as some of the quotations cited below will testify, the fact is that Parry had no difficulty making himself heard whenever that was his intention.

When not directly spoken to, the singer likewise refers to the collector in the third person, but with a marked difference: by invoking not the collector's name, not even his surname, but rather the honorific *gazda* ("boss;" e. g., PN 655, III:106, R 966), or *gospodin* ("mister;" e. g., PN 656, IV:58, 79, R 989, 994; PN 659, VI:4, R 1042), thus accentuating Parry's higher social standing. Again, practicalities and cultural assumptions are involved that complicate this obvious difference. For one, the singer would have most likely found it ridiculous or even uncomfortable to be called "Mr. Ugljanin," although a good part of this discomfort would have resulted precisely from his awareness that his status as an illiterate peasant and a laborer did not quite agree with the title of a "mister," or *gospodin*, which, in direct opposition to *seljak* ("peasant," "villager") connotes an educated, urban man—well off, usually dressed in westernized attire—a term that, when thus applied, would have felt more like mockery to him than a mark of respect. As for "Ugljanin," the word is not exactly a surname as such but rather a designation of the village (Ugao) from which the singer hails. Thus, in addressing Salih by his first name, Parry does nothing but follow the local social norm of the kind of egalitarianism peculiar to patriarchal communities. Equally, Salih may have opted for the honorific because it was preferable to twisting his tongue around a strange name, and there would have been an additional awareness by the singer of Parry as the foreigner in charge, the one paying for all the tea, tobacco, and daily allowances.

On the other hand, being the "boss" has its own distinct disadvantages in the present context. Assumptions about the unquestioned privilege of the one in charge make it very easy to miss how in certain situations the title of "boss," for all the social deference it connotes, inflicts on its bearer a violence of its own. Calling someone a "boss" is not only conceding the higher social ground, but also an expedient way of putting him in his place, keeping him on the other side of intimacy, which is the staple of any real conversation. Furthermore, in a tradition with such a strong penchant for humorous stories about a poor but witty man getting the better of the high and mighty (consider the stories about Ero and Nasradin-hodža),²⁵ being called *gazda* and *gospodin* has its ambiguities and potential pitfalls. The same words might have different meanings, depending on whether the singer uses them while in the company of the researchers or when alone with his neighbors and fellow singers.

Most likely, Parry does not object to the way Salih refers to him partly because the singer never addresses him directly in this way, and partly because, as said before, he does not want to interfere with the local customs; nevertheless, it is hard to imagine that the scholar could have actually enjoyed it. In the interviews he comes across as a modest and moderate person, likely to

²⁵ Ero/Hero is a humorous abbreviation of *Hercegovac* (a man from Herzegovina), but through frequent migrations in the Balkans, it eventually came to signify a peasant from around Užice in southwestern Serbia. In the tradition Ero always outwits his adversaries, most often the Turkish overlords, but also priests, judges, and various other higher-ranking people (cf. Karadžić 1870). Ero's Muslim counterpart is Nasradin-hodža, a comical hero from Turkey (Nasreddin hodja) who, transplanted from his native milieu, found a most appreciative and enthusiastic audience in the Balkans, among both the Muslim and Christian populations. Salih also knew stories about this character and related them to Parry and Nikola in *Pričanje V* (77-89, R 1023-26). The earliest and the most comprehensive collection of stories about Nasradin-hodža in the region to date (both translated from the Turkish and those originating in the Balkans) was published by the Serbian realist writer Stevan Sremac (1894).

have brought with him his own brand of egalitarianism—that of the university campus. On the contrary, one could sooner picture him waving an imaginary hand in denial and repeating (inwardly) the cliché of colonial benevolence: “No, not the boss! I am a friend. I come in peace.” Suspect speculations aside, one must not lose sight of the fact that, out of the three, it is Parry’s name that suffers the most violence in translation, as it is paraphrased in terms of a social role and thus reduced to a mere function. This “other side” to being the boss will soon be explored in more detail. For now, it is of primary importance to emphasize that the very lack of options for equal address already stratifies the social situation in which, with the best possible intentions, the singer and the collector encounter one another.

The relations are less severely imbalanced when it comes to the methods of address between the collector and the interpreter, but they are imbalanced nevertheless. While throughout the interviews Parry calls Nikola by his first name, as would befit two men of similar age and involved in a common undertaking, Nikola does not reciprocate. In fact, he cannot be heard addressing Parry by any sort of name in these particular recordings—at least not directly. Here, too, we encounter explanations of a practical nature, but also the politics that underpin the “practical,” in spite of the concept’s implicit claim of neutrality and triviality. Having ceded to Nikola the role of the leading interviewer but not that of the project leader, Parry is occasionally forced to step in, interrupt, correct, or curb Nikola, which requires that he address him by name and then follow it with imperatives (PN 652, I:58, 164, R 874, 905): *Čekaj Nikola. Pitaj ako je čuo pjesmu. . . .* (“Wait, Nikola. Ask if he had heard the song. . . .”); *Eh Nikola, sad pitaj samo za te riječi. Eh. Jesili, ja mislim, da si ti pisao riječi, jeli koje nijesi razumijo? Kad je pjevač pričao tu pjesmu. E pitaj onda da znamo* (“Eh Nikola, now just ask about those words. Eh. Did you . . . I think you wrote the words . . . were there some you did not understand? When the singer told that song. Well, ask then so that we know”). Conversely, this situation does not require Nikola (who is completely focused on the singer) to address the collector by name in turn, but rather simply to respond by obeying or ignoring the request, depending on how firmly, loudly, confidently, or persistently it is being posed.²⁶

However, the lack of direct oral address is compensated for in the transcripts by Nikola’s habitual ways of denoting the three speakers, which reveal his assumptions about the social hierarchy at work and perhaps an awareness of cultural differences with regard to the appropriate forms of address. While Salih’s and his own speeches are marked with the initials of their first names only (“S” and “N” respectively), Parry’s are preceded either by his full initials “M. P.” or by his academic title and the surname “P. P.”²⁷ However, one interesting and persistent phenomenon in this context is the appearance of Nikola’s signatures in the margins of the transcripts. From bell hooks’s perspective on margins as sites of resistance, it becomes rather interesting to consider the frequency and variety of ways in which Nikola signs his name as

²⁶ In the above-quoted passage (PN 652, I:164, R 905) when Parry asks Nikola to inquire from the singer about the meaning of the unknown words from the song about Golalija, Nikola proceeds to do it. However, a careful listener will remember that Parry already asked this earlier, though not very loudly, leaving Nikola to proceed with his own line of questioning first. Not only did Nikola not hear (or ignore) the request at the time, but on page 148 where Parry’s first question should have appeared he does not even transcribe it, marking it with an ellipsis instead.

²⁷ “M. P.” is more common in *Pričanja I-III*, while “P. P.” is more frequent in *Pričanja IV-VI* (with an occasional “M. P.” occurring); in *Pjevanje i pričanje* both are used.

attempts of sorts at reinscribing himself as a full-fledged participant in the proceedings and an official authorizer of the transcripts. Whether these are the transcripts of the song recordings or interviews with Salih or with other singers, Nikola often signs them with his full name: “Nikola Vujnović/Vujnović Nikola” (PN 655, III:86, 96, 125; PN 658, V:90), sometimes even including his patronymic “Ivanov” (see the last pages of PN 12434 or PN 275a; PN 12423 and PN 12380 feature the middle initial “I”). In addition to these long signatures—neatly executed, with each letter clearly legible—we also encounter florid abbreviated autographs that seem to communicate confidence (e. g., the last pages of PN 277, PN 12465, and PN 12471), as well as (more rarely) those written hurriedly and absent-mindedly (as in PN 652, I:61, 98). While this medley of signatures seems to point to a person who takes joy in his own handwriting and in seeing his name signed as a confirmation and assertion of his authority, it also perhaps communicates a certain indecisiveness about his identity in relation to the situation at hand, as well as a need to explore and experiment with it.

It is noteworthy that, in his translations of various parts of the *Pričanja* in *SCHS I*, Lord seems uncomfortable with the asymmetry of Nikola’s abbreviation choices, and thus he opts for marking Parry’s speech with a single initial as well, specifically that of his surname. Even so, the encoded hierarchy is still perpetuated, and the habit of thinking of the two natives with reference to their first names and of the collector with reference to his surname is reinforced. The pull of this convention is so strong that, even in this current essay that reflects upon the inequalities of the relationships between the three people involved, I find I cannot refer to them differently myself. At least I cannot do so without perpetrating yet another form of epistemic violence, one that claims to restore justice to the injured parties and thus presupposes the universality of such justice. However, this belief in one’s privileged, unmediated access to justice and the right to bestow it would itself, in a twist of deep irony, injure what it presumes to protect.

The stratification inherent in the forms of address, as well as in this transcultural encounter on the whole, seems both unavoidable and unjust, but perhaps there is some justice in that it works both ways—for and against the one on top. As the transcripts and recordings are inevitably narrativized and thus become not only interviews but simultaneously stories *about* the interviews, the “boss” ultimately becomes isolated and remains (unfairly) at the outskirts of the reader’s/listener’s sympathies which are (equally unfairly) drawn towards those who become heroes of the story. Furthermore, Salih and Nikola become heroes not only because their voices dominate the recordings, but also because they earn (and impose) narrative intimacy through being called (and calling themselves) by their first names.

Nikola and Salih versus Parry

As Salih’s compatriot, a fellow singer, a member of the working class, and one deeply immersed in the same patriarchal culture, Nikola is the singer’s equal—or perhaps is even subordinate to him, if we take their age differences into account. This near equality is reflected in the great variety of forms that are open to Nikola, in contrast to Parry, in addressing the singer. He calls Salih by different nicknames (Salko, Salja, Saliha, and even Salihaga), and he uses patriarchal terms of deference and endearment such as *dedo/dedo* (“grandpa”), placing himself in the position of instant familiarity, as a curious, loving grandson hungry for his grandfather’s

stories (PN 654, II:93, R 936): *Hajde moj dedo! To ti dobro znaš* (“Come on, my grandpa! You know that well”). This potential for great rapport that is, time and again, exceptionally well evidenced during the interviews is something that Parry very much counted on when he employed Nikola in the first place. His experience with other interpreters, such as the Russian émigré Ilija Kutuzov, had not been as rewarding. While granting that Kutuzov’s knowledge of English (Nikola only spoke Serbo-Croatian) was very useful to Parry during his stay in Dubrovnik in 1933, Lord (1954:7) writes that “as an educated man and a member of the intelligentsia he lacked the understanding and the insight of the peasant singer Nikola.”

The following is one of many examples where the warm “grandson-grandfather” interlude precedes a storytelling (PN 656, IV:40, R 983: 3:53-4:04):

N: *Koju ćemo dedo?*

S: *Ej koju? Pa ćeš se nasmijati.*

N: *Dobro! Neka bude malo smiješna.*

S: *Valahi smiješna će bit, i ono je istinito.*

N: Which one [story] shall we [pick? hear?], grandpa?

S: Eh which? Then you’re going to laugh.

N: Good! Let it be a bit funny.

S: Well, funny it’ll be, but true as well.



PN 656, IV:40, R
983: 3:53-4:04

An important thing to notice here is that, even though the collector “boss” is present throughout, the singer excludes him from this exchange. He addresses only Nikola (“you’re going to laugh” is rendered in the second person singular); the story is for the “grandson” alone. Although it is impossible to determine whether Nikola’s “we” in the above dialogue includes Parry or not, other instances amply exemplify the way he also leaves out the collector while creating this exclusive familial bubble around Salih and himself in order to facilitate a good storytelling situation (for example, PN 656, IV:7-8, R 975: 2:29, 3:13-3:26: *A reko si mi . . .* [“And you told *me* . . .”], *Znašli ti jednu Arnautsku priču . . . da mi je pričaš?* [“Do you know an Albanian story . . . to tell *me*?”], *E hajde da mi činiš . . .* [“Eh, come on, treat *me* . . .”]). Parry’s exclusion is, however, most spectacularly felt when, in rare moments of direct address, his fledgling attempt becomes hijacked by the interpreter—unintentionally and by force of habit and inertia, but with the result of ousting the collector. Thus, for example, when the singer mentions he knows a story about Marko Kraljević and Musa the Highwayman, Parry prods the singer (PN 562, I:50, R 872: 1:18-1:20): *E pričaj nam* (“Eh, tell *us*”), upon which Nikola repeats the collector’s request while at the same time changing Parry’s first person plural (*nam*) into the first person singular (*mi*): *Pričaj mi to, kako je bilo?* (“Tell *me* that, how did it happen?”). In this way, the initial desire for self-effacement by the scholar backfires in that it is picked up by the singer and the interpreter, who then proceed to efface the collector themselves. The price of that good rapport, likely to produce the most “natural” performance (under the otherwise “unnatural” conditions of a private recording session), is the exclusion of the scholar-foreigner, even as the nature of the conversations and his role in regulating them naturally keep drawing him in. The more forcefully he inserts himself into the conversation, the more he remains on the outside.

For instance, when the aforementioned story of Marko and Musa finishes, Parry notices that Nikola made a mistake when he inquired from whom the singer heard it. Instead of referring to it as the story of Musa and Marko, Nikola designates it as being *o Đerđeljezu i o Marku* (“about Đerđeljez and about Marko”). Salih proceeds to answer regardless, knowing what Nikola meant to say: *Ovo sam čuo od jednoga . . . iz Mitrovice Sadika, i on je Bosanac* (“I heard this from one [man] . . . from Mitrovica, Sadik, and he is a Bosnian”). However, the collector cannot place his faith in the two singers’ contextual understanding and overcoming of the lapse. He cannot rely on the correctness of the received answer, even as his own questions aimed at clarification are themselves insecure, elliptic, and thus in need of contextual understanding by the other two men in whose “club” he does not belong (PN 652, I:67, R 877: 0:13-0:24):

MP: *Jeli pričao [Sadik?] o Musi i Marku?*

S [in affirmation]: *E.*

MP: *De si čuo?*

S [realizing he needs to be clearer but still trying to rely on the context]:

Musu i Marka od onoga sam čuo.

N [trying to help out]: *U Mitrovici.*

S [realizing he needs to complete the “citation” for Parry’s benefit]: *U*

Mitrovicu od Sadika Bošnjaka.

MP: Did he [Sadik?] tell about Musa and Marko?

S [in affirmation]: Aye.

MP: Where did you hear [it from]?

S [realizing he needs to be clearer but still trying to rely on the context]: Musa and Marko I heard from that one.

N [trying to help out]: In Mitrovica.

S [realizing he needs to complete the “citation” for Parry’s benefit]: In Mitrovica from Sadik Bošnjak.



PN 652, I:67, R
877: 0:13-0:24

This interruption aimed at clarification places the collector further on the outside of the singer-interpreter rapport.

The rupture in the established hierarchy, the way the rug is being pulled from under the “boss’s” feet, is perhaps most keenly felt on the rare occasions when Parry attempts to interrogate the singer himself. One such opportunity presented itself during the penultimate interview when Nikola went to the local official to pick up an exemption for Salih from the singing ban that was in place for the duration of the mourning period following the assassination of the Yugoslavian king Aleksandar I Karađorđević in Marseille in October 1934. Whether to save time or to try himself out in the role of the lead interviewer, Parry resumes the recording in the interpreter’s absence, making this the longest direct exchange between the singer and the collector. His attempts to imitate Nikola’s manner of address are detected by the singer, who occasionally finds the collector’s requests funny and perhaps a bit desperate as they are delivered in a commanding tone of voice but with a foreign accent and a lack of Nikola’s humorous tone (PN 659, VI:58-59, 70, R 1056, 1061): *Da kazivaš dobro* (“You are to recite well”); *Dobro, ali*

glasnije i dobro (“All right, but [recite] louder and well”); *Ali sad misli dobro* (“But now think carefully”). Although for the majority of the exchange Salih is likewise trying to conduct business as usual, Parry’s Nikola-like imperatives are sometimes met with the singer’s barely distinguishable sounds of ironic dismissal and even slight sniggering. To make matters worse, in his imitation of Nikola’s argumentative manner²⁸ Parry becomes carried away and keeps insisting, erroneously, that Salih continue the song that he had actually already finished reciting just before the respite. Moreover, for all the feigned confidence, Parry stammers a little, repeats himself, and becomes confused about whether the singer should proceed in Albanian or in Bosnian. What this episode starkly reveals is that, while Parry may be the boss, it is Nikola who holds the authority and the singer’s confidence. Thus, as mentioned earlier, stratification ends up working both ways: the “boss’s” possession of ultimate power is precisely what disempowers him in the attempt to have a closer contact with the singer, and while he may occupy the peak of social hierarchy, he finds that, in society as in nature, peaks tend to be lonely, isolated places.

Nikola versus Salih

For all the familial intimacy that develops between Salih and Nikola, there still exist between them underlying inequalities and tensions that both men suppress in the congenial spirit of performance. Nevertheless, these tensions and inequalities all surface during the interviews, often only to be laughed off when things become a tad too strenuous. Even at the warmest points of contact, as exemplified in the “grandson-grandfather” exchange above, it is striking how, while playing along, Salih is more reserved, especially during the first three interviews. He accepts but does not directly reciprocate Nikola’s solicitations of patriarchal familiarity. Thus, when the interviewer addresses him as *dedo/đedo* (“grandpa”), Salih does not in turn call him *sine/sinko* (“son”²⁹), or even *sinovac*³⁰ (“nephew”). The singer clearly understands that Nikola is more than what his form of address implied. Rather than just a fellow singer or a frequenter of the coffee-houses in which Salih used to perform, or even a traveler spending the night in an inn and in need of a good story, the wide-eyed “listener-grandson” Nikola is also the extension of the “boss,” and thus the honor and familiarity that come from him are not simply a matter of course but are bestowed upon Salih from a higher social perch. As time goes by and the singer becomes accustomed to this particular setup and the two young men, he will on a few occasions relax into his role of “grandfather,” take advantage of the situation, and even expect to be treated accordingly. Thus, for instance, in *Pričanje IV* (83, R 996) he asks Nikola to pass him his cigar; he calls for a break and cigar in *Pričanje V* (54, R 1015); and he asks Nikola to order his tea in

²⁸ Interestingly, Nikola ascribes Parry’s speech here to himself, mistakenly marking it with an “N” rather than “P. P.” (PN 659, VI:59).

²⁹ In direct address the corresponding term here would not be “grandson” (*unuk*) but “son” (*sin*; vocative: *sine*). *Sine* or *sinko* (diminutive, voc.) are more general forms of addressing younger members of a patriarchal community (even girls!), whether they are genetic or artificial kin.

³⁰ Note that this noun also has “son” as its root, and it indicates a particular kind of relationship, one that is in patriarchal society second in closeness only to one’s own son. As opposed to *sestrić* (a sister’s son) *sinovac* indicates a brother’s son. From this perspective, it is all the more surprising that true heirs of heroes in Serbian epics turn out not to be their sons, nor *sinovci*, but *sestrići*.

Pričanje VI (57, R 1055: 2:28-3:26). However, these grandfatherly biddings are not unequivocally encouraged; instead of a good, obedient grandson, Nikola regularly chooses to play a rascally one (PN 659, VI:57, R 1055: 2:28-3:26):

N: *Dobro. Ti malo počini i odmori se [i smisli se³¹] malo, koju pjesmu.*

S [interrupting the end of Nikola's sentence]: *Prati mi jedan čaj tako ti sveca.*

N [most likely pretending not to hear]: *Što, što?*

S: *Jedan čaj mi prati otud.*

N [now definitely pretending]: *Reci dobro, ja te nečujem.*

S [louder]: *Jedan čaj mi prati.*

N [playing silly, yet serious]: *Zašto?*

S: *Da pijem brate.*

N: *Hotli popit rakiju?*

S [resolutely]: *Jok vala, fala, rakiju neću nikako.*

N [playing ignorant]: *Zašto ne?*

S: *Ja ne pijem nikad.*

N: *A Da ti uspe[m?] malo rakije u čaj, bili ti popijo? Zdravije ti je.*

S [adamantly]: *Bogami jok, nikako.*

N: *Zašto bolan nebijo?*

S: *Ja sam ostavijo rakiju sad.*

N: *E, dobro, ti počini malo sad.*

S: *A hoću da mislim sad, a ti . . .* [Nikola here turns away from the microphone addressing someone else (Parry?). The singer now refers to whatever is happening (Nikola lighting a cigarette, or fire in the room?): *Ne, ne to ti je pala žiška kad si naložijo . . .* [Now returning to his earlier request]: *Prati mi jedan čaj.*

N: All right. You rest a while and think a little, which song [you would like to sing].

S [interrupting the end of Nikola's sentence]: Send me one tea, by your saint.³²

N [most likely pretending not to hear]: What, what?

S: One tea, send it for me from there [the coffee-house kitchen?].

N [now definitely pretending]: Say it well; I can't hear you.

S [louder]: Send me one tea.

N [playing silly, yet serious]: Why?

S: To drink, of course.

N: How about some brandy?³³



PN 659, VI:57, R 1055: 2:28-3:26

³¹ This phrase can be heard, but Nikola omits it from the transcript.

³² This trivial request may hardly seem to warrant such a strong oath, but “by your saint” is in fact an automatically employed phrase, a byword used to place light emphasis on supplication. This is also the case with “by God,” a phrase frequently employed by both Salih and Nikola.

³³ Nikola is here hinting at Salih's earlier admission that, even though a devout Muslim, he had tasted brandy once and that it had recuperative power on that occasion.

S [resolutely]: No thanks, I don't want any brandy.

N [playing ignorant]: Why not?

S: I never drink.

N: And if they [I?] pour a bit of brandy in your tea, would you drink it? It's healthier for you.

S [adamantly]: By God, no, no way.

N: Why, might you not be ill?³⁴

S: I have given up brandy now.

N: Eh, all right, now you rest a while.

S: And I will think now [about which song to sing next], and you . . . [Nikola here turns away from the microphone addressing someone else (Parry?). Then the singer refers to whatever is happening (Nikola lighting a cigarette, or the fire in the room?): No, no, but a spark fell when you lit up . . . [Now returning to his earlier request]: Send me one tea.

Although rascally grandsons are usually liked and their antics encouraged in the Balkans, Nikola's reluctance to comply immediately with Salih's requests nevertheless adds weight to the already ambiguous position between the "grandson" and the "boss." This ambiguity makes it hard for the singer to take Nikola's teasing here as simply teasing and not also as indicative of a change from the role of grandson into that of the "sub-boss" who should not be expected to serve his employees, at least not without giving them a bit of a hard time in the process. Moreover, the patriarchal culture itself, the culture that sets such great store in honoring its elders is very much the culture that above all favors males of the fighting age, men at the peak of their physical and mental powers—in other words, men like Nikola and Parry. This means that the darker side of honoring elders is patronizing and infantilizing treatment. In particular, the usual respect and care for the elderly can sometimes give way to annoyance with their physical and/or mental infirmities. For instance, the frequent need to remind the singer to speak more loudly proves frustrating for all and sometimes induces Nikola to address the singer coolly, as *stari* ("old man"), instead of with his usual warm *dedo/đedo* ("grandpa") (e. g., PN 655, III:78, R 957).

And yet these are among the least noticeable tensions between the two men. Their ethnic and religious differences produce uneasiness of a much more conspicuous nature.³⁵ Nikola and Salih may both be Yugoslavs, and they may be speaking the same language in these interviews,

³⁴ As in the previous note, *bolan ne bio* (literally: "might you not be ill," meaning something along the lines of: "God save you from being ill") is just a characteristic expression in Bosnia and Herzegovina and is used here for light emphasis.

³⁵ These religious tensions are also present in the exchange quoted above, as when the Christian Nikola (even if jokingly) repeatedly offers the Muslim Salih some brandy, knowing that his religion forbids it. However, in Nikola's defense it should be said that the ban on alcohol was (and very likely still is) among the least observed religious prohibitions among the Balkan Muslims.

but in order to understand each other, Salih has to speak in Serbian/Bosnian,³⁶ the language³⁷ of the Slavic majorities, and not in his mother tongue. Most likely, this was not very difficult for the singer since the songs that were most pleasing to him to hear and sing were in that language, even if he did occasionally struggle to explain to Nikola the meaning of some of the Turkish and Albanian words that appear in his Bosnian epics. However, regardless of the levels of difficulty involved, it is Salih who must make the additional step towards his interviewer rather than the other way around.

While Salih is an old Albanian Muslim, Nikola is a young Catholic from Stolac in Herzegovina, most likely Croatian on his father's side and Serbian on the side of his mother.³⁸ With one man singing praises to Muslim heroes and the other to Christian ones, the radical difference in their political and religious sympathies was understood, even if it was only seldom allowed to surface, mostly in the guise of jokes. Only decades prior to their meeting (and during Salih's own lifetime) Christians had freed themselves from centuries of Ottoman rule, with the fiercest Muslim resistance coming precisely from areas such as Sandžak in which the town of Novi Pazar lies, and where Parry and Nikola met Salih. In every major and minor conflict mentioned during the interviews, the old singer fought against Christians—whether Serbs, Montenegrins, or Greeks. Although pleasant and congenial, the situation was also charged with these tensions. On the few occasions in which Nikola addresses Salih as “Salihaga”—which is a

³⁶ Salih refers to the language as both Bosnian (more often, since the songs he sings come from Bosnia) and Serbian. Interestingly, his much younger fellow singer who is also an Albanian, Alija Fjuljanin, refers to the language as “Yugoslavian” (PN 666:17, R 1146), and, unlike for Salih who apparently only learned it as a 30-year-old adult (PN 652, I:8, R 860), for Alija it is the language of everyday life. Other young singers from the same area, such as Suljo Fortić, also exhibit a more Yugoslavian spirit (PN 277b:32, R 127). Lord sees this as an effect of the “nationalist propaganda” of the time (*SCHS I:400*), but note that the “nation” of choice here is one that attempts to include the various ethnically and religiously divided citizens of Yugoslavia, and give them a sense of common belonging. In those times, as well as in more recent times, such endeavors proved controversial since inclusion on one level (global) often comes at the cost of suppression at another (local), and inclusiveness, although usually viewed as something *a priori* positive, can also have affinities with colonialism.

³⁷ Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian are now considered separate languages. However, some treat this as primarily a political rather than linguistically justified division, which seems to be reiterated by the current tendency among Slavists to refer to the three as a single entity with strategically inserted slashes (or dashes) and a common acronym: “Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (BCS).” See, for example, Alexander and Elias-Bursać 2006.

³⁸ Nikola is invariably simply referred to as a Herzegovinian Catholic (for example, Kay 1995:32). However, a more complex picture of his identity emerges when one pieces together some otherwise unrelated notes from Mathew W. Kay's *Index* (1995). Here, two singers of different faiths from Nikola's village of Burmazi are both listed as his uncles—the Catholic Vlaho Vujnović (Kay 1995:32, 135) and the Orthodox Đuro Kučinar (Kay 1995: 101, 135). Judging from the surnames, Kučinar must have been a maternal uncle, which very likely means that Nikola was a product of a mixed marriage between a Croat father and a Serbian mother. Nonetheless, one is in dangerous waters when conflating ethnic and religious identities, and we must allow for there being Catholic Serbs and perhaps Orthodox Croats as well. Whatever the case, Nikola's origins and outlook will have been complex, and an Orthodox mother and uncle might perhaps shed some light on Nikola's unusual persistence and zest in asking Salih to sing a “Serbian” (PN 652, I:34, R 867), or an “Orthodox” (PN 655, III:49-50, R 949) song. Note in particular that Nikola could have well asked for a “Christian” song, but he never does, and instead he keeps specifying the desired song as either Orthodox or Serbian. These parts of the *Pričanja* are discussed in greater detail below.

gesture of exaggerated respect³⁹ that poor men are known to extend to one another half-jokingly and half in acknowledgement of their inner nobility and mutual agha-like generosity of spirit—the unintended but nonetheless biting irony is that Salih really had been an agha⁴⁰ in what he considered the “good old days” of Ottoman governance,⁴¹ when people like Salih ruled people like Nikola and before poverty struck the former lords. Now that the tables have turned, Nikola’s inadvertent invocation of Salih’s former title is mildly unsettling, especially when measured against the instances when his joking remarks are indeed tinged with sarcasm and provocation. For example, when he asks the singer whether the Muslim lords fleeing from Bosnia used cars or were travelling on foot (PN 674, VII:2, R 1229), or whether the three men Salih said he beheaded in the various skirmishes with Montenegrins and Greeks were tied, he “concludes,” after denials from the singer (PN 652, I:20, R 863: 2:39-2:50), *sigurno su neka đeca bila* (“those must have been some children”). As these were all jokes, they were invariably met with the singer’s laughter, but they were also immediately followed by his negation and desire to ensure that the records were set straight.

Salih and Nikola are both singers of South Slavic oral epics, and they share the same inherited idiom and gallery of warriors, yet their songs spring from two distinct branches of that common tradition, the most conspicuous difference being that the heroes and adversaries of one branch exchange places in the other. The two men may both be said to belong to the peasant/working classes, but Nikola is literate, and although he has but four years of schooling, this already situates him four social degrees above Salih in terms of opportunities. After all, it is those years of meager education that placed him in Parry’s employ; his status in respect to the singer grows by this association. He is the “boss’s” extension, his spokesman, his negotiator, and the one in charge of leading the interviews and managing the purse. Nikola can therefore wield these powers over the singer as he pleases (PN 659, VI:12, R 1044: 1:52-2:27):

³⁹ *Aga* (“*agha*”) is a title of a minor Ottoman official, here a landowner, although “*agha*” was also a military title.

⁴⁰ See, for example: PN 652, I:13, R 861 or PN 656, IV:76, R 994.

⁴¹ For example (PN 656, IV:17-18, R 978): N: *Jeli tebi žao stari, što se tako okrenulo?* S: *Dosta vala.* N: *Žao ti je veliš?* S: *Vala dosta!* N: *Bili volio da je danas turčin ovde?* S: *Vala ja turčina jok, tek muslimana. Turčin ima i ciganin* [the singer laughs here]. (N: “Do you regret, old man, that things turned around like this? S: Very much, indeed. N: You regret it, you say? S: Indeed, very much! N: Would you prefer that the Turk be here today? S: Well, I wouldn’t [want] the Turk [necessarily], but a Muslim. There are Turks who are Gypsies even [the singer here laughs].”) It should also be added that in general Salih laments the passing of what for him was the “heroic age” (e.g., PN 655, III:62-63, R 952).

N: *E hajde sad lijepo*⁴² *Salja, od kraja do konca, ali, ako puštiš koji stih, nećemo ti platit ništa.*

S [anxiously]: *A da nemogu dok se neodmorim, bogme, ono [the song] je dugačko. Teke po jedan mah da stanem da se odmorim.*

N: *Dobro, dobro, kada budeš umorit se, a ti odmori*⁴³

S [interrupting the end of Nikola's sentence above]: *A onako da brojim hoću.*

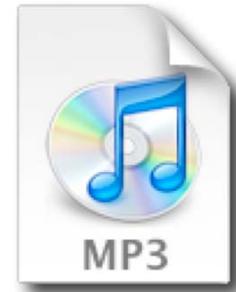
N [feigning seriousness in a "schoolteacher" manner]: *Jes, jes, jes,*⁴⁴ *samo svako slovo ako nebudeš kazat, tačno, ja je znam cijelu. . . .*

S [interrupts again]: *Ja vala. . . .*

N: *Ako nebudeš kazat tačno* [Salih here interjects, defensively: *Oooh*], *nećemo ti platit ništa.* [Exclaiming, as though to cut the interruptions from the singer and stress his seriousness]: *Salja!*⁴⁵

S [continues, slightly dejected and defensive at the start, but gaining confidence]: *Oh, ja ne znam kako koji peva, a ja kako je pevam, belji ostavit neću.*⁴⁶

N [interrupting the end of Salih's sentence above]: *E dobro! E hajde, bicmilah!*⁴⁷



PN 659, VI:12, R
1044: 1:52-2:27

⁴² This word can be heard, but it is missing from the transcript.

⁴³ Nikola's transcript differs slightly from what can be heard (which is what I prioritized here), but the meaning remains the same. Nikola even crosses out the verb *odmorit*[i] ("to rest"), which he wrote first, and replaces it with *umorit*[i] ("to get tired"), which in the context makes more sense: "All right, all right, when you get tired, you take a rest." In this particular case I followed the transcription because I cannot tell with certainty what Nikola actually said. It is possible that he said *odmorit*, just as he first transcribed, either as a slip of the tongue or to mean something along the lines of "when you need a rest, take a rest." Evidently, the great similarity of the two words makes the slip of the tongue (and ear!) an easy occurrence.

⁴⁴ This last *jes* is not transcribed.

⁴⁵ This word of address can be heard, but it is missing from the transcript.

⁴⁶ The word *neću* ("won't") is included in the transcript, but it is inaudible to me, as Nikola interrupts the singer at this point. It seems to me more likely that Nikola added this word for clarification, but it is also slightly possible that he recalled hearing it amidst his interruption.

⁴⁷ The word *bicmilah* means "in the name of god/Allah" (cf. Škaljić 1966:145), and while it is featured in many opening chapters of the *Qur'an*, "Muslims often say this phrase when embarking on any significant endeavor" (<http://wahiduddin.net/words/bismillah.htm>). Interestingly, when Nikola transcribes this word he departs from his pronunciation (*bicmila*), correcting the initially written "c" (pronounced "tz") into "s" and adding an "h" at the end so that it reads: *bismilah*. It is interesting that, with the exception of a couple of diacritics, this form is the same as it later appeared in Škaljić's 1966 dictionary of *turcizmi* (Turkish-derived/-adopted words) in Serbo-Croatian (145). Whether Nikola used a reference book of a similar kind or someone (perhaps Parry?) advised him to do so, I cannot offer a cogent explanation as to why he decided here to write the word differently from the way in which he pronounced it. This is particularly out of character since Serbo-Croatian is a phonetic language and Nikola followed this principle throughout the transcripts, including when he rendered the regional and personal peculiarities of his own and Salih's speeches. The puzzle only becomes more difficult to solve when one considers the matters discussed in the footnote below.

S [with a small laugh of approval, amused by Nikola's "Islamic" exclamation]: *Bicmilja*⁴⁸ i *Bože pomози*.

N [instructively]: *Samo čisto, jasno, glasno da pjevaš*.

S [calmed, in affirmation]: *A da*.

N: Eh, come on now, Salja, nicely, from the beginning to the end, but if you miss a verse, we⁴⁹ are not going to pay you anything.

S [anxiously]: Eh, I can't until I rest first, by God, it [the song] is too long. But if I stop at one point to rest a little.⁵⁰

N: Yes, yes, yes, but if you don't say every letter, exactly, [Salih here interjects, defensively: Ooo], I know it [the song] whole. . . .

S [interrupting the end of Nikola's sentence above]: And I'll recount like that.

N [feigning seriousness in a "schoolteacher" manner]: All right, all right, when you get tired, you take a rest.

S [interrupts again]: Well, yes. . . .

N: If you don't say [it] exactly, we are not going to pay you anything. [Exclaiming, as though to cut the interruptions from the singer and stress his seriousness]: Salja!

S [continues, slightly dejected and defensive at the start, but gaining confidence]: Oh, I don't know how others sing it, but the way I sing it, I [won't]⁵¹ leave out anything, of course.

N [interrupting the end of Salih's sentence above]: All right, then! Eh, come on, *bismillah*!

S [with a small laugh of approval, amused by Nikola's "Islamic" exclamation]: *Bismillah* and with God's help.

N [instructively]: Only sing neatly, clearly, loudly.

S [calmed, in affirmation]: Well, yes.

⁴⁸ As far as I can hear, Salih completely follows Nikola's pronunciation here, save for the softer "l" (effectively "lj") peculiar to Albanian pronunciation: *bicmilja*. However, Nikola opts for transcribing the singer's word as *basmalja*. Why Nikola does this is a mystery. However, as it happens, *basmalja* is uncannily reminiscent of the Arabic word *basmala*, which is cognate to *bismillah* and basically has the same meaning (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basmala>). I am completely baffled as to whether these changes are a sheer coincidence or if Nikola was somehow aware of the history of these various words (perhaps through the cultural affinity with the Bosnian Islamic milieu) and used the cognate versions to better distinguish his speech from the singer's.

⁴⁹ Note how, when payment becomes the topic of his sentence, Nikola reverts to the first person plural instead of his usual intimate first person singular. As the money is the ultimate prerogative of the "boss," Nikola's authority in this area needs buttressing and he thus invokes Parry.

⁵⁰ In my opinion, Lord slightly mistranslates this sentence and as a result, the following few lines of this part of *Pričanje VI* as well, which he includes among the notes accompanying Salih's song "The Captivity of Đulić Ibrahim." The crucial misunderstanding occurs when he takes the singer's words *da stanem* to mean "to get up" instead of simply "to stop." If the singer had wanted to convey what Lord thought, he would have most likely said *da ustanem*. The root of the two verbs is the same, which perhaps explains the misunderstanding. Lord's translation of this part of the interview is thus slightly confusing and reads as follows (*SCHS I:350*): "S: [. . .] Let me get up for just a minute and rest a little. N: All right. Since you're tired, take a rest. — S: Well, I'll recite it now. N: But every word. If you don't recite it exactly — I know the whole of it! . . . If you don't recite it exactly, we shall not pay you a penny. S: I don't know how anyone else sings it, but I won't leave a thing out from the way I sing it. N: All right, go ahead!"

⁵¹ Added by Nikola, either automatically, or for clarification.

And so in one fell swoop Nikola ends up thrusting his “grandfather” Salih, the wise elder, into the shoes of an inept schoolboy. Of course, Nikola does not really mean what he says here, and from his manner the singer can also tell that he probably does not mean it. However, “probably” is the crucial word here, since in that small space of real doubt lies the success of Nikola’s teasing, his interviewing skill, and his power of authority over the singer (since, theoretically, he can decide at any time to stop joking and make the threat real). Thus the singer is on the edge until the end of the exchange: he laughs, but he also objects, becomes alarmed, and is forced to stall and justify himself in advance of the performance. Although Nikola puts the payment at the center of his “threat,” everyone involved seems aware that this is not what is ultimately at stake. Salih’s responses all focus on his singing and not once does he raise the issue of money. Even if five to six *banki*⁵² per day was not insubstantial⁵³ for someone who made his living by doing odd jobs—from giving people advice on purchasing cattle⁵⁴ to mending broken bones⁵⁵—it seems clear that Nikola’s “threat” to withhold payment was primarily hurtful to his artistic pride and potentially his reputation, rather than to his purse. More likely, the payment is invoked to give a bit of weight to Nikola’s purposefully “literate” references and purported assumptions about completeness, exactitude, and the fixity of a narrative (note the exaggerated emphasis on “every verse” and “every letter”), as well as the notion of a correct/authorized version (“I know it whole”). He says these things not because he really considers such post-print attitudes toward texts to have value in the oral context; after all, he is a singer himself. On the contrary, as in reverse psychology, they are spoken to provoke Salih to react in opposition and thus reveal “oral” attitudes towards the stability (or the lack thereof) of an epic song and towards different singers’ renderings of the “same” song. Indeed, Salih delivers what the interviewers were hoping

⁵² In post-WWII Yugoslavia, a *banka* (or rather a *para*) was a unit worth a hundredth of one dinar. However, in the Yugoslavia of the 1930s, it seems that a *banka* was a larger unit, equal to 10 dinars. For instance, in *Pričanje III* (1-3) both Nikola and the singer refer to the 20 dinars that some man owed Salih as “two *banke*.” Later on, when asking him to compose a song about their encounter, Nikola will mention that they were paying Salih five to six *banki* per day (PN 655, III:106, R 965). In addition, at the end of *Pričanje V* (141-42) Nikola and Salih talk about the coin or note that the singer seems to have just received from Parry and call it *petica* (“a fiver”) and *pet banki*.

⁵³ Thus far I have not been able to find a reliable source of information regarding prices and salaries in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in the 1930s, but if the casual Google search result is to be taken into consideration, and an average worker’s monthly salary was indeed 500-600 dinars, then 5-6 *banki* (50-60 dinars) a day would be a tenth of a monthly income, which would have been a nice sum. This is especially true when taking into account that Salih, although indicated as a “worker” in one of the transcripts (PN 277:1), was not formally employed anywhere and therefore could not have hoped to earn as much as a factory worker. (See <http://www.svastara.com/razno/novcanice/kj/cene.html>.)

⁵⁴ Salih was a cattle trader while in his prime (see, e. g., PN 654, II:26, R 914). As Alois Schmaus testifies (1938:275), *Ovaj njegov stari zanat i danas mu je prirastao za srce. Još uvek voli ‘pomalo da džambasa’ na novopazarskoj goveđoj pijaci. Tamo sam ga jednog utornika, kad je bio stočni pijac, jedva i pronašao u kasno poslepodne.* (“This old trade of his is close to his heart even today. He still likes to ‘cattle-trade a little’ at the Novi Pazar cattle market. It was there that I only just managed to find him late one Tuesday afternoon when the cattle market was on.”)

⁵⁵ See, for example, PN 652, I:16, R 862.

for, but in order to ensure that the information is “genuine” (in other words, that the singer’s answer is uncontrived)⁵⁶ he cannot be let in completely on the joke, he cannot be “in the know.”

The whole scene could be read in the context of the folktales so familiar to both men: Nikola confronts Salih with an impossible task, but, as he cannot threaten the singer with his life if he fails, Nikola puts his payment on the line instead. However, *unlike* the familiar folktale scene, this threat is not made so that the hero-singer can in the end achieve the feat against all the odds (that is, sing the most beautiful, complete, and perfect song according to the tastes of the two young men), but in order to force him to divulge unadulterated views on distinctive features of the oral tradition—the real prize all along. And so, while masquerading as the “king” who sets an unattainable goal to the prospective suitors of his daughter, the crafty Nikola in fact himself acts as a folktale hero who, through slyness and wit, makes the “dragon” (or some other adversary) reveal the true source of his power. A direct question would not have accomplished this goal; instead, the dragon would have eaten the hero, with the creative singer likely providing an answer specially tailored to the situation, fishing for whatever he assumed his interviewers were hoping to hear.⁵⁷ Thus, to have Salih in the know is to ruin the experiment, yet not to have him in the know objectifies him: turned into the proper subject of an experiment, he becomes just that—subjected. While chosen to illustrate the fluctuating power relationships and inequalities underlying Nikola’s and Salih’s interactions, in the same breath the quoted dialogue reveals all the major aspects of epistemic violence perpetrated against the singer by Nikola and Parry acting together as a unit: objectification, teasing tinged with condescension, cognitive pressuring, and imposition/privileging of a kind of logic foreign to the singer (whether real or, as here, purported).⁵⁸

Perpetrating Epistemic Violence: Nikola and Parry versus Salih

Interesting and instructive as they are, the interviews with Salih form only a part of the whole series of long and short “conversations” with singers throughout the regions of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in which oral epic singing was still active. And while the singers changed, the collector and the mediator remained the same, building their professional and presumably personal relationship, too, on what seems to have already been a strong foundation. Nikola was not only Parry’s assistant but was also the very first singer the collector encountered

⁵⁶ Indeed, in “Ćor Huso” Parry reflects on the dangers of taking the singers’ answers at face value since “far transcending any desire to speak the truth is his [the singer’s] desire to give the answer which will please the most and will place himself in the most favourable light” (Parry 1971:447). While Parry here talks about singers in general, it is interesting that the two examples he gives to illustrate the point are in fact those of Salih and Nikola.

⁵⁷ This type of response is one that Salih (and other singers; see the above footnote) made rather often. Note, for example, how during the course of the interviews the singer realizes that what Parry values is not just an epic song, but a *long* epic song (e. g., PN 658, V:54, R 1015; PN 659, VI:57, R 1053). I return to this issue in the section “Cognitive and Physical Strain.”

⁵⁸ Note how, as he delivers his comical threat, Nikola indicates that he here acts as a part of a duo; he temporarily bursts the bubble of intimacy shared with the singer and emphasizes instead his allegiance to Parry as primary, swapping his first person singulars (“tell *me*”) for first person plurals (“*we* are not going to pay you anything”).

upon his arrival to Yugoslavia (cf. Lord 1954:6). That Parry's choice of interpreter/mediator should fall on the first person he heard sing seems in itself to indicate that the two took an instant liking to each other. Already in 1933 Parry praised not only Nikola's "professional knowledge of the poetry" and the region, his honesty, and his negotiating skills—all of which must have qualified him well as a guide—but also his "unusually ready understanding" (6) of what the scholar wanted from the singers. Furthermore, Parry never attempted to change his native assistant, while Nikola was obviously motivated enough to subject himself to training "in the arduous techniques of writing down songs from dictation" (6), as well as to leave his home and way of life for protracted periods of time in order to be included in Parry's expedition. This effort would hardly have been worthwhile if the two men had not had a personal liking for one another and if their rapport had not been good.

Although they came from different cultural backgrounds and walks of life, Nikola and Parry were of similar age and shared a common passion for the epic song. Through this close involvement in a common undertaking, they had time to develop their fellowship. When they met old Salih, they were likely already a team, the enduring allegiance of which overrode any temporary one that Nikola may have formed during the interviews with the singer of the day. They were also two literate young men with "modern" views (for example, through their questions to the singer they both imply that the change of rule that allowed Muslim women to uncover their faces was for the better; PN 674, VII:5, R 1229) and they had a similar sense of humor. (Note how they both encourage Salih and laugh during his account of his own heroics; PN 652, I:20, R 863: 2:48-2:57.) However, what distinguishes the two as a unit overall in respect to the singer is that they shared the aforementioned "unusually ready understanding" that they were the ones in the know. It is this particularly well-functioning aspect of their relationship that also pitted them against the singer and caused the epistemic violence to be administered so efficiently. The collector provided the epistemic framework for the experiments to be conducted with the singer, the mediator the most effective means of enforcing it: the joke.

Joke Power

Considering that *how* something is done colors all aspects of *what* is being done, in this section I will focus on the power of the joke, or rather, on the role of humor as a device that facilitates a relaxed working atmosphere and vital social cohesiveness, but also acts as an instrument of epistemic violence. One would be hard pressed to think of a more ingenious way to enforce something than through joking, as neither party need be fully aware of what is being enforced. The joke blunts the edge of violence, and its spontaneity excludes premeditation, which, if present, would make the interviewer's success seem sinister. At the same time, joking and teasing as a way of obtaining information can be tinged with condescension. And although here the young men's manner towards the singer is generally kind and respectful, and Nikola's humor in the vast majority of cases is well-meant and good-spirited, the accompanying patronizing effect that some of these jokes have itself imparts a distinct kind of violence on the one at the receiving end. In the present case this is all within the permitted cultural boundaries, which, as noted before, to some degree license(d) the child-like treatment of the elderly. To the extent to which I, having been born and brought up in the not-so-different Yugoslavia, can claim

any sort of inside knowledge, such conduct was most likely never meant to be hurtful or condescending, but in a way affectionate. This intended affection would also partly explain why the elderly members of the patriarchal community endure(d) it, the other possible reasons being their dependency upon the young's provision of care and the knowledge that they were once young (and acted similarly) themselves. However, this does not mean that they also enjoyed it, even if we allow for each individual to have different levels of tolerance and a penchant for self-irony. Indeed, from the ample praise that Parry and Nikola bestow upon the singer following a satisfying narration (PN 652, I:67, R 876): N: *Eh Bogami dobro. Dobro si to pričao!* MP: *Dobro!* (N: "Eh, by God, that was good. You told that well!" MP: "Good!") to gentle chiding (PN 659, VI:43-44, R 1052): N: *E vidiš koliko ti meni tako preskočiš, izostaviš stihova* (N: "Eh, you see how much you skip over on me like that, [how you] leave out verses!") and joking threats (PN 659, VI:12, R 1044): N: . . . *ali, ako puštiš koji stih, nećemo ti platiti ništa* (N: ". . . but if you miss a verse, we are not going to pay you anything!"), all the way to biting rebukes in order to motivate him to "do better next time" (PN 674, VII:18, R 1233): MP: *Sigurno da bi dobar pjevać . . .* (MP: "Surely, a good singer would . . ."), old Salih is often treated as a youngster, a pupil who is awarded or reprimanded according to how well or badly he performs for his "teachers."

In particular, the characterizing feature of Nikola's approach to Salih is similar to that found in the games of knowledge that adults often play with children. For example, instead of asking the singer a direct question, Nikola, by way of testing to what extent Salih is really familiar with the epic landscape of his songs, often pretends not to know where this or that town is, or makes a purposeful mistake, so as to give the singer the opportunity to "correct" him (PN 654, II:43, R 921: 0:55-1:03):

N: *Ja mislim da je Mostar najviši grad u Bosni.*

S: *Jok ima višije. Sarajevo je više.*

N [mildly incredulous]: *Više od njega!*⁵⁹

S [in confirmation]: *E.*⁶⁰

N: I think Mostar is the biggest town in Bosnia.

S: Nope, there are bigger ones. Sarajevo is bigger.

N [mildly incredulous]: Bigger than [Mostar]?

S [in confirmation]: Yeah.



PN 654, II:43, R
921: 0:55-1:03

On other occasions Nikola feigns confusion, seemingly needing the singer to help him out, but in fact hoping to perplex him and in turn achieve a comical effect. Thus, for instance, when the singer once refers to *ženska pijaca* (a "women's market") meaning the green market, which, as opposed to the cattle market, was dominated by female sellers and buyers, Nikola asks excitedly if that is a place where women are sold and if he could go there and buy one for himself (PN 659,

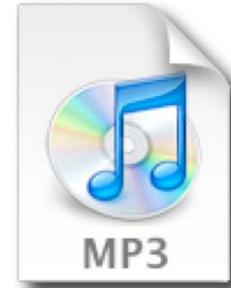
⁵⁹ Nikola places an exclamation mark here, but his sentence is delivered more as a question, requiring the singer to confirm his claim.

⁶⁰ This word is delivered quietly and is not included in the transcript.

VI:3, R 1042). Similarly, when they talk about the Islamic heaven and hell, Nikola uses the alliterative proximity of the two words—*dženet* (or *denet* in the singer’s softer pronunciation) and *džehenem* (*dehenem*)⁶¹—to act mixed up and create comic confusion. As the singer finishes describing the heavenly bliss that the deserving may expect to find in *dženet*, Nikola interjects as follows (PN 654, II:90, R 935: 2:20-2:25):

N: *De? U džehenemu, jeli?*
 S [pronouncing slowly for emphasis]: *U denet!*
 N:⁶² *A kako je u džehenemu?*
 S: *A u dehnem*⁶³ *sačuva Bože!*

N: Where [is all that]? In hell, isn’t it?
 S [pronouncing slowly for emphasis]: In heaven!
 N: And how is it in hell?
 S: But in hell, God keep [us from there]!



PN 654, II:90, R
 935: 2:20-2:25

The conversation about what to expect in each place continues for a while, and once again Salih dwells on the lovely things one can experience in heaven, when Parry interjects (PN 654, II: 92-93, R 936: 0:51-1:09):

MP: *E*⁶⁴ *kad ti umriješ?*
 S [longingly]: *Ej ako bogda tu da me povedu!*
 N: *U džehenem*⁶⁵ *jeli?*
 S [emphatically]: *Nedaj Bože* [Nikola and Parry chuckle].
 N [through laughter]: *De bi ti volijo? U dženet ili u džehenem?*
 S [laughing along]: *Ej, ja bi volijo u denet . . .* [makes a hopeful sound and then coughs]: *dekiku no ovamo hiljadu godina.*

MP: And when you die?
 S [longingly]: Eh, may God grant that they take me there!
 N: To hell, you mean?
 S [emphatically]: God forbid [Nikola and Parry chuckle].
 N [through laughter]: Where would you like to go, to heaven or to hell?



PN 654, II:92-93, R
 936: 0:51-1:09

⁶¹ On some occasions Nikola and Salih use slightly different, abbreviated, but still similarly sounding variants such as *džehem*, *džehnem*, and *dehnem*. See the subsequent quotations.

⁶² Nikola mistakenly marks his own speech with an “S” here.

⁶³ In the transcript, Nikola mistakenly replaces this noun with a corresponding pronoun in the locative: *njemu*.

⁶⁴ Here Nikola writes *ali* (“but”) instead.

⁶⁵ Although here he actually says *džehenem*, Nikola writes the shorter version in the transcript: *džehnem*.

S [laughing along]: Eh, I would like to [go to] heaven . . . [makes a hopeful sound and then coughs]: [and spend] a minute [there] rather than [be] here for a thousand years.

For all the “clarification” and Islamic instruction Nikola receives, he will, after a while, make the same “mistake” one more time before finally giving up and causing another bout of laughter in the process (PN 654, II:96, R 937: 2:25-2:45):

N: *I onda kad se umre, onda se ide u džehenem*⁶⁶ *jeli?*
 S: *Ne,*⁶⁷ *neko u denem,*⁶⁸ *neko u denet. Tu nema sem*⁶⁹ *dva, dva puta.*
 N: *Dva puta?*
 S: *Nejma! Treće nejma!*
 N [laughing while hinting at a known saying]: *A sad ako zna*⁷⁰ *đadu dobro je!* [Both chuckle.] *A ko nezna đadu, ode u Kanidu jeli?*
 S [laughing in recognition and quoting the full rhyme]: *Ooo!*⁷¹ *A da!*
“A ko nezna đadu, on ode u Kajnidu gradu.”



PN 654, II:96, R 937: 2:25-2:45

N: And then when one dies, one goes to hell, doesn't he?
 S: No, some [go] to hell, some to heaven. There are but two, two ways there.
 N: Two ways?
 S: There isn't. There isn't a third.
 N [laughing while hinting at a known saying]: Well now, whoever knows the road, good [for him]! [Both chuckle.] And who doesn't know the road, off he goes to Kanida!
 S [laughing in recognition and quoting the full rhyme]: Oooh! But of course! “Who doesn't know the road [down]⁷², he ends up in Kajnida⁷³ town!”

The other side of this game—in which the “adult” pretends to know less than the “child”—is when s/he instead pretends to possess superior, even superhuman knowledge. One such instance we encountered earlier when Nikola claimed in an exaggerated manner to know the “whole

⁶⁶ Again, Nikola writes *džehem* instead.

⁶⁷ Nikola here writes *E* instead, but both this sound and what I hear are aimed at communicating the singer's negative answer.

⁶⁸ This time Nikola does the opposite and writes the longer version: *dehenem*, even though the singer uses the abbreviated one.

⁶⁹ Nikola mistakenly renders these two words (*nema sem*) as one: *nemaše*.

⁷⁰ For some reason, Nikola renders this verb (here and with the negative form in the next sentence) as the second person singular in the transcript.

⁷¹ Nikola marks the exclamation as *U!*, but I believe *Ooo!* is closer to what the singer utters.

⁷² I added this word for the rhyme to work.

⁷³ The town in question is in fact Kanjiža in Vojvodina, Serbia. Located at the county's northern border (with Hungary), it became the proverbial faraway (yet-still-reachable, real) place for people from the southern and central regions of Yugoslavia. The town features prominently in the geography of the epic tradition.

song” that Salih was asked to sing, therefore being able to detect instantly if the singer missed so much as a letter. On another occasion, Salih tries to free himself from a sticky situation by claiming that the (possibly fictitious) manuscript he mentioned in *Pričanje V* would be of no use to Nikola since he does not know either Turkish or Arabic. The interpreter then insists that he knows both languages well, concluding with the following boast (PN 659, VI:5, R 1043): *Znao je Mujov Halil dvades i četiri, ja znadem dvades i pet jezika* (“Mujo’s Halil⁷⁴ knew 24; I know 25 languages”).

However, the most interesting example of this kind is surely when, following Salih’s long and passionate description of the past heroic age filled with cries of wounded warriors, Nikola asks whether, in any of the actual skirmishes in which he fought, Salih personally had an occasion to cry out to his mother (PN 655, III:63-64, R 953: 0:17-0:35):

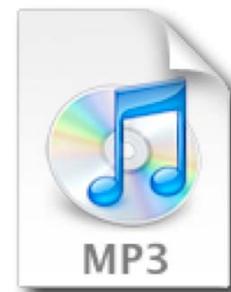
S [recites]: *Neko više jao mene majko, Neko kuku prifatime družē!*

N [through laughter]: *Jesili ti koji put reko: “Kuku majko!”*

S [emphatically]: *Nikad!* [Through laughter, but adamant]: *Nijesam zakukao tako mi vere!*

N: *A kako, kad je jedan stari mene iz Hercegovine meni pričo, da te ćerao kad si ratovao tamo neđe s Crnogorcima? Da te pušijo preko nekoga polja.*

S [through laughter, but firmly denying]: *Au, tako mi Boga laže!*
[Someone interjects with laughter, most likely Parry.] *Auh, nije tako mi Boga ni video. . . .*



PN 655, III:63-64,
R 953: 0:17-0:35

S [recites]: Someone cries: “Woe to me, my mother,” / Someone: “Alas, comrade, catch me!”⁷⁵

N [through laughter]: Have you ever said: “Alas,⁷⁶ mother!”

S [emphatically]: Never! [Through laughter, but adamant]: By my faith, I have never wept!

N: How is that, since one old man from Herzegovina told me that he chased you when you warred somewhere there with the Montenegrins? That he smoked you [made your feet smoke from running? / blew you off?] over some field?

S: [through laughter, but firmly denying]: Huh, by God, he lies! [Someone interjects with laughter, most likely Parry.] Huh, by God, he didn’t even see. . . .

In one of the footnotes to the portion of *Pričanje I* included in *SCHS I*, Lord provides some “amusing background” to this exchange, noting that the old man who served as an inspiration for the hoax was most likely Mićo Savić (Parry’s and Nikola’s favorite Christian singer) who fought

⁷⁴ Mujo and Halil are among the most famous Muslim heroes of the Bosnian *Krajina* (“Military Border”) and loom large in the South Slavic epic. Referring to Halil as Mujo’s (that is, belonging to Mujo) is formulaic and connected to the latter being the older of the two brothers. Mujo is thus seen as being in charge of (and responsible for) his younger brother.

⁷⁵ The formula invokes a dramatic scene in which a freshly wounded hero entreats a comrade-in-arms to catch him as he is falling to the ground.

⁷⁶ Rather than simply expressing deep sorrow, the original (*kuku*) is an onomatopoeic representation of actual weeping.

in similar skirmishes as Salih, but on the opposite side. It is likely that the problematic ethics of this joke made Lord slightly uncomfortable, and he concludes the anecdote as follows (330): “Be it said to Salih’s credit that he took the joke in the spirit in which it was meant.” I wonder, however, whether this assessment is entirely accurate, even though the need to credit Salih with some largesse is urgent and understandable. To be sure, the singer laughs along, but there is a certain uneasiness and insecurity about it, too.

In particular, note how the singer at least gives credence to the possibility that a man somewhere in Herzegovina may have actually made such a claim, and thus he does not say to Nikola: “You made all this up,” but rather, “He [the old man from the story] lies.” What makes this example especially interesting is that the joke works precisely because of the skill with which Nikola subverts what can tentatively be called the “oral episteme.” He first plucks the formula “Woe to me, mother” / “Alas, my mother” out of its epic context and places it in the realm of the everyday, thereby making it ironic. Then he proceeds with his fictitious story, assuming that Salih will give it at least a moment of serious consideration. As epic accounts of recent events start circulating in an oral community, they immediately become subject to scrutiny and censure (Jakobson and Bogatyrev 1971[1929]), with the participants being particularly sensitive about the way in which their feats are portrayed (Kilibarda 1972:94). Nikola thus counts on the fact that the singer’s primary concern will be with his honor rather than the probability of the story as a whole. It is precisely the expert understanding of the “oral episteme” that allows Nikola to violate it so effectively and achieve the intended comic effect.

However, one important saving grace in connection with the jokes and teasing of the type discussed thus far is that by the end of the exchange the singer is given some relief by being let in on the joke and invited to laugh along. More problematic and rare (after all, Nikola never comes across as intentionally cruel) are the jokes that the mediator makes more for his own personal pleasure and the benefit of his educated listener(s). On a few occasions he, highly amused and childish himself, copies the singer’s faulty pronunciation of “Austria” as “Austuria” (PN 674, VII:4, R 1229), or he feigns passionate opposition to the old man’s story so as to wind him up. Thus he sometimes vehemently challenges the truth of the singer’s claim that Muslim heroes were more powerful than Christian ones, only too ready to turn off his “anger” so as to remind the singer to state his own obstinate answer more loudly (PN 659, VI:48, R 1053: 0:51-0:52). On another occasion the singer tells a story in which the famed hero Đerđez Alija shows exceptional nobility (in addition to his celebrated strength) when he saves a Christian village from a dragon to whom the villagers had to sacrifice their young daughters in order to gain access to a well the beast was guarding. However, Salih feels compelled to explain how it is that the second well Alija created when he burst open a stone with his saber was called *Đurđeva voda* (“George’s water”), saying that Alija’s feat took place on St. George’s Day. Sensing that this explanation is perhaps a bit unconvincing, the ever-quick Nikola uses the opportunity to prod the singer concerning this weakness, knowing it would produce the desired comical effect (PN 656, IV:74, R 993: 2:29-2:44):

N [suspiciously]: *Aha! A da nije to Sveti Đurđe udrijo tu sabljom pa otvorijo vodu?*

S [interrupts with dismissive laughter]: *Kakav Đurđe i krmak? On je gotovo puka žedan.* [Nikola (and Parry?) laughs at the singer's passionate dismissal.] *Oni, oni nije drugome ništa dao. No ažda ih je opkoljila jadom. . . .*

N [suspiciously]: Ha! And could it be that it was St. George who hit there with his saber and opened a well?

S [interrupts with dismissive laughter]: Which George and a swine? He nearly burst of thirst!⁷⁷ [Nikola (and Parry?) laughs at the singer's passionate dismissal.] He, he gave nothing to another. But the dragon besieged them with suffering. . . .



PN 656, IV:74, R
993: 2:29-2:44

At other times, instead of seemingly antagonizing the singer, Nikola offers exaggerated praise, which he assumes Salih will take not as a cue to tone down his boasting, but to blow his own trumpet with even more gusto. For example, in *Pričanje VI* (119, R 1072-73) Salih claims that, after hearing the song from another singer only once, he can immediately sing it himself—exactly as heard if not even better—also stating that his manner of singing is superior to Nikola's and to many a singer who *više onako ka goveda da tera* (“shouts as though rounding up cattle”). Nikola then compliments the singer: *E ti si dedo, bogami “sveznadar” čini mi se* (“Eh, by God, it appears to me, you grandpa are a ‘know-it-all’”). Sure enough, this fires up the singer: *Bogami te jesam belji bio znadar što ga nema niđe, a da mu jebem majku, ovo nebi pisao ni jedan nebi ti mogo kazat* (“By God, indeed I was a knower the likes of which you couldn't find anywhere, and fuck his mother, no one else could write⁷⁸ this, no one else tell it to you”). In cases such as these, the singer is not exactly invited to laugh along. Rather, his emotions are manipulated so as to produce a humorous effect.

While it would be entirely wrong to assume that Nikola's (and more rarely Parry's) jokes were cruel—that they were not primarily good-spirited and aimed at relaxing the singer (and themselves!) into what should have felt as the most natural context in which to perform—the instances discussed here do leave the listener wondering to what extent Salih enjoyed them, and whether the young men's conduct towards him was always fair and respectful. More importantly, their discussion here was meant to remind us how, beyond its role as a social leveler and one of the most humane and congenial ways of approaching any “other,” humor is not unequivocally positive—or even neutral—and can itself entail epistemic violence.

⁷⁷ What is particularly interesting here is that Salih dismisses only the possibility that St. George created the well but takes his actual existence for granted.

⁷⁸ Note how the illiterate Salih here makes a meaningful lapse, presenting himself as the one who writes rather than the one who tells. Even though he immediately corrects himself, it is possible that he saw himself as the one writing in effect, if not in fact. Salih's attitudes toward writing are discussed later in the paper, but they are rich and varied and warrant a separate study.

Cognitive and Physical Strain

As noted at the outset of the article, Parry was interested not only in what songs the Yugoslavian singers sang, how they performed, and what they said about their craft, but also in what songs they could produce if challenged with a specific task, and what they could further reveal about the latent possibilities inherent in their practice and skill. In the preface to *SCHS I*, Roman Jakobson praises Parry's fieldwork above that of his predecessors, among other reasons because he did not simply take what the singers told him for granted. Rather, all their claims were (1954:xii) "checked by actual experiment." Words such as "test," "verify," and "check" permeate the penultimate paragraph of Jakobson's panegyric. With the hindsight which, all the more to his credit, the illustrious Russian formalist did not have at the time of writing, it is now not difficult to agree with him that (*ibid.*:xi) "the harvest from this fieldwork" was indeed "unique," rich, and paradigm-shifting precisely because of Parry's thorough probing and experimentation. However, the cost of such harvest in terms of the cognitive and physical strain it placed on the singers has not been given much attention. Indeed, experimentation that involves living creatures by its nature regularly entails violence (even if consensual), as it usually requires that the subjects be taken out of their comfort zones. It also implies a certain intensity of the procedure, as the economic and logistical limitations rarely allow the experimenter much leisure time.⁷⁹ More importantly—as in the case of the Yugoslavian singers—the speed, agility, and endurance in performing set tasks are often among the very things the subjects are tested for, and hence psychosomatic strain is certain.

In terms of shedding light on this procedural and, from the present point in time, ethically challenging side of Parry's experiments, the interviews with the singers are greatly enlightening—in particular those with Salih Ugljanin, not least because of the singer's advanced age. In addition to sharing his usual (and rather bulky) repertoire of songs and stories for protracted periods of time, old Salih was asked to perform bardic feats that he had never before attempted. These tasks ranged from those to which he could adapt with relative ease—such as transforming the heroic lore that he knew and told as stories into actual epic songs (e. g., PN 652, I:59, 75, R 874, 879)—to more awkward ones—such as extemporizing an epic song about the decidedly non-epic event of his encounter with Parry and Nikola (PN 655, III:105-07, R 965-66)—and on to those tasks that were incomprehensible to him, or simply tedious—such as reciting a song in Albanian and then "translating" it in rapid succession into Bosnian/Serbian and *vice versa* (e. g., PN 654, II:6-8, 13, R 907-08, 910).⁸⁰ In this last case, even the collector and interpreter occasionally became confused about which language they wanted a song translated from or into (e. g., PN 654, II:6, R 907; PN 656, IV:29, R 981; PN 659 VI:59, R 1058), which reveals how generally counterintuitive this procedure was: if the two could become confused when merely stating their wishes, one can only imagine how difficult it was for Salih to materialize them.

⁷⁹ On economical and social underpinnings of hurried and selective procedures in ethnographic fieldwork, see Marker 2003:367.

⁸⁰ John Kolsti makes a persuasive argument that the singer here is recomposing a song rather than actually translating it (1990:54): "the concept of translating a line from one language to another is as vague to the singer as the idea of repeating a song, or even an episode 'word for word.'"

On rare occasions when the singer resists a request, the interviewers often refuse to take “no” for an answer. Thus, for example, in *Pjevanje i pričanje* (PN 674, VII:36, R 1237) Nikola asks Salih to sing the same song (though preferably an improved and a longer version!) about Đulić Ibrahim which, less than an hour ago, the singer had already dictated to him: *E sad ćeš da zaguslaš!* (“Eh, now you are going to start playing the *gusle!*”). Salih immediately agrees to play, but when he timidly suggests that he instead sing another song, Nikola responds with determination: *Ovu ćeš* (“You will [sing] this one”). Similarly, after being asked to recite the original Albanian version of the song he had just delivered in Bosnian, Salih objects, saying that he has already done so, but just as Parry is about to accept this response, the ever-watchful Nikola intervenes, saying that Salih recited only a few verses and that he should now deliver the full version. The singer stalls awhile, mumbles to himself, and then makes a final desperate attempt to evade the request (PN 655, III:89, R 966): . . . *ne hujdiše se* (“. . . it doesn’t fit”), which will be ineffective against Nikola’s disarming humor and relentless enthusiasm: *Hujdisat će se ono samo ti pričaj* (“It will fit, just you speak”). To counter the singer’s resistance, Nikola here readily uses Salih’s verb *hujdisati se*,⁸¹ which was in fact unfamiliar to him until the previous day when he actually had to ask for its meaning (see PN 654, II:15-16, R 910). Not surprisingly, the singer gives a little laugh and delivers.

While attempting to meet the collector’s complex requests, Salih will often be interrupted in order to be reminded to speak more loudly (e. g., PN 652, I:60, 100, 115, R 875, 883, 890): MP: *Malo jače* (“A little louder”), *Glasnije, glasnije* (“Louder, louder”), *Samo malo jače* (“Just a little louder”). The frequent need for such interventions (especially during the first three interviews) puts further pressure on the singer and occasionally makes him the target of the collector’s and his assistant’s annoyance. However, no sooner than they snap, the two young men check themselves and try to make light of it, as in the following instance (PN 655, III:78, R 957: 0:31-0:39):

MP: *Glasnije. Pričaj glasnije.*

N: *Glasnije pričaj stari!*

S: *Glasnije . . .*

N [now softer, jokingly]: *Da se čuje, ja sam malo gluh ja ne čujem.*

MP [justifying the outburst]: *Kad ja ne čujem dobro odavlen. . . .*

[Presumably he is close by.]

S: *Znam, znam.*⁸²

MP: Louder, speak louder!

N: Speak louder, old man!

S: Louder . . .

N [now softer, jokingly]: So that it can be heard, I am a little deaf, I can’t hear.

MP [justifying the outburst]: When I can’t hear well from here. . . . [Presumably he is close by.]

S: I know, I know.



PN 655, III:78, R 957: 0:31-0:39

⁸¹ See the entry for *ujdisati* in Škaljić 1966:630: “to befit,” “to suit,” “to fit.” Kolsti (1990:79) chooses to translate this word more freely as “to adjust.”

⁸² Not included in the transcript.

At the end of nearly every poem or story, the singer is asked if that was all, whether there was any more; apparently he is never able to sate the collector's appetite for more and longer stories. Even when he receives positive feedback upon a completed tale (PN 655, III:133, R 973: 2:57-3:38): N: *Tako je dedo!* ("That's right, grandpa!"); MP: *Fina priča* ("A fine story"),⁸³ the singer is not safe from being asked for more: N: *Jeli to kraj te priče?* ("Is that the end of that story?"); MP: *Hoćeš li još malo?* ("Do you want [to tell us] some more?"). And so the singer cannot bask in the glow of a job well done for long, but he must instead scramble for a way to conclude the day's work: *Jok! Sad nema vakta više. Teke imaće ako Bog da . . . Dok namisljim još koju ovu, ja sam umijo ovije mlogo, pa sam [zaboravio?] . . .* ("No! There's no more time . . . There will be if God permits . . . until I can think of some more . . . I knew many like this, but I [forgot?] . . ."). At the end of *Pričanje IV* (PN 656, IV:98, 104, R 1000-01) Salih suggests that they continue working tomorrow, giving as his first reason the great length of the remainder of the song he was reciting and the fact that there is a lot more left for them to do: *Pa imamo da pišemo, pa imamo . . .* ("Then we have to write, then we have to . . ."). Then, as a final resort, he goes on to blame his haste on his wife who *ćeka tamo, hoću da je ubijem u glavu s ovom . . .* ("is waiting for me there . . . I'll beat her head in with this . . ."). When, after a bout of joint laughter at the old man's jokey pluckiness,⁸⁴ Nikola comes to the woman's rescue: *E neka babe . . .* ("Eh, let grandma be . . ."),⁸⁵ Salih realizes he is off the hook and is thus quick to agree that, joking aside, his wife is a good woman who does not deserve harsh treatment: *Bogami sirota je dobra* ("By God, the poor thing is good"). However, the culmination of Salih's evasive tactics must be towards the end of *Pričanje V* (137, R 1040), when upon being asked by Nikola to tell *još jednu dobru priču* ("one more good story"), he refuses, promising instead to go to his literate neighbor that same night to look up a notebook full of stories that were written down from him 40 years earlier. The two young men are suspicious about the existence of this manuscript and ask him to give the most sacred of Albanian oaths, the *besa*, that he will bring it along with him the next morning. Salih immediately agrees, but not without a caveat, which he repeats in three consecutive sentences (PN 658, V:140, R 1040): *ako ga nađem . . . ako nađem . . . čim nađem* ("if I find him . . . if I find . . . as soon as I find"). Like Scheherazade, Salih obtains his temporary respite by whetting the appetite of his listeners, enhancing their anticipation and coaxing them into a suspension of the current proceedings. Unlike the legendary Persian queen, however, the flesh-and-blood singer does not always deliver on his promises. Thus, in the end he is unable to produce the illusory notebook, and he is further unwilling to let Nikola and Parry accompany him to the neighbor to purchase the manuscript from him. Salih similarly betrays the two men's expectations when, after promising that the quantity of verses of the "Two Sultanas" would match the one delivered towards the end of *Pričanje IV* (c. 348), the following day he recites only a further 90 verses.

⁸³ Not included in the transcript.

⁸⁴ It is clear to everyone present that Salih means his wife no real harm.

⁸⁵ In the transcript, this utterance is rendered as: *E neka babe, to je* ("Eh, let grandma be, it/that is"), followed by an empty space to indicate that the rest is inaudible. While, after repeated and careful listening, I cannot make out what Nikola says here, I am certain that it is not *to je*. Presumably it is something in further defense of "grandma," but it is impossible to tell precisely what.

Still, it should be said that Salih usually becomes evasive in the ways described only after first being placed under a great deal of strain. For instance, after the first 259 verses of the “Two Sultanas,”⁸⁶ the singer asks for a break, stating that he is already tired and that a lot more of the song remains (at this point there is indeed a bit less than half of the song left). However, the two young men keep insisting that he continue, themselves promising to soon call it a day (PN 656, IV:98-99, R 1000): PP: *Još malo i onda* (“Just a little bit more and then”); N: *Još malo pa ćemo ić ća, kad si se umorijo ić ćemo ća* (“Just a little more and then we’ll go; since you are tired, we’ll go”). When after another 89 verses Salih stops for the second time and gives a negative answer to Parry as to whether the song is finished, the two young men do not hurry to honor their earlier promise but instead attempt to make him complete the song. At this point it is tempting to consider (but impossible to claim with certainty) whether, when Salih subsequently tells Nikola there is as much of the song left to recite, he was purposefully ambiguous and did not have in mind all the 348 (259+89) verses, but in fact only those 89 that he recited in between the two breaks. That way, having delivered 90 verses the next day, he would have both told the truth and misled the interviewers into letting him go home when he wished. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that Salih could have calculated (as I have) the length of the remainder of the song in terms of the number of verses, but that he nevertheless could have made such an estimate in terms of the time it would take him to finish it. At any rate, this is only a conjecture, one of the points of indecision that I have included as a way to resist the “efficiency” and feigned confidence of academic mannerisms that would often conceal such uncertainties, lest the “more solid” arguments suffer the consequences of such flights of fancy.

Indeed, even though the two young men generally show concern for Salih’s well-being,⁸⁷ the collector’s desire for continuous and long narratives and the native’s task of ensuring that the foreign scholar receives value for his money will time and again blind them to the fact that old Salih needs a rest or is actually in pain (PN 659, VI:92-93, R 1066: 2:03-2:37; PN 654, II:67-68, R 928: 2:19-2:50):

N: *A zašto si prestao sada?*
 S: *Bogami ne mogu.*
 N: *Kako ne moreš?*
 . . .
 S: *Odavno pričam ođe.*
 N: *Što ima, dva sahata još nema . . .*
 MP [interjects]: *Ni dva sata nema!*⁸⁸
 N: . . . *da si došao.*



PN 659, VI:92-93,
 R 1066: 2:03-2:37

⁸⁶ Note that Salih began reciting this song a few times that day. One of these times was the previously discussed instance when Parry and Nikola played a practical joke on him.

⁸⁷ Nikola, for instance, asks the singer whether he is tired (PN 654, II:96, R 937) and Parry even orders refreshments (PN 654, II:67-68, R 928).

⁸⁸ Not included in the transcript.

S: *Bogami . . .* ⁸⁹

N: *I dva si puta počivao!*

S: *Pa jes no hej duša jedna, nemore, nemore da je konj.*

N [complimenting and chiding all at once]: *Da ja imam pričat koliko ti ja bi pričao deset dana, ne bi nikada prestao.*

N: And why have you stopped now?

S: By God, I can't.

N: How come you can't?

. . .

S: I've been talking here for ages.

N: What is there, there's not yet two hours . . .

MP [interjects]: Not even two hours!

N: . . . since you came.

S: By God . . .

N: And twice you rested!

S: Well, yes, but hey, there's only one soul [I have], it can't, it couldn't if it were a horse.

N [complimenting and chiding all at once]: If I had as much to tell as you, I would talk for ten days; I would never stop.

S [halting mid-recitation]: *Iju!*⁹⁰

MP [barely audible]: *Što ti kažeš?*⁹¹

S [to Parry, through a quick painful laugh]: . . . *Zohar mi ovde, nešto me zabolje.*

N: *Što ti je bilo?*

S: *De pričam . . .*

N: *Nemoj ti prekinut sad. Pričaj naprijed.*

S: *Ne mogu, de pričam . . .*

MP: *Eh mi ćemo počinut, počivati malo. Dobro je za kafu.*

S: *Da počinem.*

MP: *Da.*

S: *Sam da malo se odmorim.*

N: *Samo nemoj zaboravit, de si osto.*

S: *Jok.*

S [halting mid-recitation]: Ouch!

MP [barely audible]: What do you say?

S [to Parry, through a quick painful laugh]: . . . [I feel pain] here, something started to hurt . . .



PN 654, II:67-68, R
928: 2:19-2:50

⁸⁹ Not included in the transcript.

⁹⁰ Not included in the transcript.

⁹¹ Not included in the transcript.

N: What is it with you?
 S: Where I speak . . .
 N: Don't you stop now. Go on.
 S: I can't, where I talk . . .
 MP: Eh, we'll rest, rest a little. It's a good [time] for coffee.
 S: For me to rest.
 MP: Yes.
 S: Just to rest a little.
 N: Just don't forget where you're at.
 S: I won't.

Of course, continually asking for more and longer stories was for Parry a good way of testing whether any single person would be able to produce narratives of the size of the Homeric epics. That the collector is primarily after long songs and stories seems to have been clear to the singer, too, and from day one,⁹² since he feels the need to alert the interviewers when a song they are discussing is only a short one and therefore may not be of their interest (e. g., PN 658, V:54, R 1015): *A nije dugačko znaš, kratka je* (“But it [the song] isn't long, you know, it's short”). Testing for possibilities of length and “fullness” will often push the singer away from his habitual way of rendering a story, which—as Parry's other experiments show—itsself varies depending on the audience, the immediate context of performance, and the singer's momentary inclinations but at least accords with his own notions of truth and correctness.⁹³ However, some of Parry's attempts to obtain from Salih the hypothetical “complete” and “definitive” song on occasion imperil the singer's *raison d'être* as the custodian of communal memory. For instance, when in *Pričanje VI* (113-14, R 1071) Salih ends the song he was reciting with the wedding of the hero Halil, Nikola asks doubtfully: *Šta je to kraj?* (“What is that, the end?”). As the singer confirms he is finished, the interpreter and the collector both then point to missed narrative opportunities as though they were not merely junctures for the singer to engage with or dispose of material while negotiating between his creative proclivities and responsibilities towards the communal truth, but rather points where he had failed to reproduce the song “correctly.” For instance, since the hero marries in the end, Nikola teases Salih for not having used the traditional closing formula: *Da je ljubi kad god se probudi* (“To kiss her whenever he wakes up”). Even though Salih at first resists, appealing to his own knowledge of the “correct” version of the story (*Vala to ljubljenje*⁹⁴ *nema*; “Well that kissing isn't there”), he eventually relents; after all, he is not being asked to compromise on how the actual events are related. Thus, he adds a further 17 lines of the formula expressing good wishes with regard to the prospective progeny of the happy couple. Not even this addition proves satisfactory enough, however, and the singer is spurred on further, this time by Parry: *Hajde naprijed. . . . Ali njesi rekao ništa za našega sultana* (“Go on

⁹² See PN 652, I:34, 48, R 867, 871. Also: PN 654, II:28, R 915; PN 659, VI:57, R 1053.

⁹³ For a discussion of the ways in which notions of truth and correctness may vary from singer to singer, see, for example, Elmer 2010. Similarly, I discuss elsewhere (2012) how the same singer may assign different truth-values to different songs in his own repertoire.

⁹⁴ Nikola does not transcribe the word, but the singer can be heard saying it.

further. . . . But you haven't said anything about our sultan"), upon which he adds another seven verses.

The described scene is, however, only a comical prelude to the final interview which was to take place four days later when, as Lord comments (*SCHS I:352*) "pressure was being brought to bear upon Salih to tell a full story and leave nothing out." Lord's description of what transpired as "pressure" (and in another place [341]: "vigorous questioning") hardly does justice to the epistemic onslaught that Nikola and Parry launched against the logic, truth, and aesthetics of Salih's song about Đulić Ibrahim, questioning both his abilities as a singer and the local tradition as a whole. Dissatisfied with the song Salih dictated to Nikola earlier in the day, they wanted to ensure that the version he was yet to deliver for the recording (to the accompaniment of the *gusle*) was a superior one. Hence, they begin interrogating the singer about the weaker points of his song, their questioning directly or indirectly suggesting ways in which it could be improved (improved, that is, in accordance with their own assumptions about coherence, plausibility, and narrative logic). In comparison with the previous six interviews, the ferocity and intensity of the last one is especially striking, as indeed is the slippage from the characteristic leisurely, humorous tone to an urgent, accusatory, and occasionally even offensive one. Thus, when Salih refuses to give in to the collector's persistent attempts to force him effectively to invent what Đulić's mother and sister said upon learning of his death⁹⁵ and then also dismisses Nikola's formulaic suggestions (e. g., PN 674, VII:15, R 1232: *Sunce moje rano ti mi zađe!* ["My sun, you set early on me!"]), Parry seems to lose patience. He proceeds to postulate his reasoning as superior and closer to the "truth" than Salih's song presents it (PN 674, VII:14, 16, R 1232): *Sigurno da je majka rekla nešto* ("For sure the mother had said something"); *Sigurno da je rekla nešto* ("For sure she had said something")—and he also openly casts doubt upon the singer's abilities (PN 674, VII:18, 36, R 1233, 1237): *Sigurno da bi dobar pjevač rekao kako su rekla majka i sestra* ("Surely, a good singer would have said what the mother and the sister had said"); *E mi tražimo pjevače, pjevače koji kažu cijelu pjesmu* ("Well, we are looking for singers, singers who tell the whole song"). Furthermore, he goes so far as to deride the two female characters who he knows must have represented for Salih (and the tradition at large) patriarchal ideals of every motherly and sisterly virtue (PN 674, VII:19, R 1233): *Nijesu bile mudre. . . . Budale su bile* ("They were not wise. . . . They were fools"). Of course, this derision forms part of Parry's reverse psychology tactics aimed at provoking Salih into delivering a better song. Had he truly believed what he implied—that is, that Salih was a bad singer—he would have most likely not bothered to apply his "pedagogical" skills in the first place. Rather, he must have recognized in the singer aspects of what he imagined would be a true Homeric bard—the very creature he came searching for in the Balkans—whom he will, as it turns out, encounter only the following summer in the guise of Avdo Međedović from Bijelo Polje. Nevertheless, whatever Parry's ultimate aims and "true" assumptions about Salih were, this episode highlights the dangers inherent in the method, with the situational contingencies pushing the line of questioning in directions that blur encouragement and personal annoyance—thus compromising the results of the experiment.

⁹⁵ The singer claims that they simply wept, even suggesting that they may have been too shocked to say anything.

Here the interpreter characteristically quickly follows where the collector leads, which only escalates the situation. Thus, while on many previous occasions, if perhaps only by way of encouragement, Nikola has exhibited (or enacted) an utmost, implicit belief in the singer's truthful telling of epic events (e. g., PN 655, III:7, R 939: *Kako ono bi? Kako je bilo Salja?*; “How did that happen? How was it Salja?”), he now ridicules Salih's logic for claiming that the hero entered a room alone and cut off 50 enemy heads, as though such a hyperbolic feat had suddenly become something entirely unknown to the epic (PN 674, VII:23, R 1234): *Dobro, a šta su radili ono pedeset ljudi, biće da su skupili ruke pa stali, za pasom s rukama* (“All right, and what were those 50 people doing, they must have folded their arms and stood with their hands tucked inside their belts?”). The singer ventures a guess that the unsuspecting enemies' weapons were out of reach, but he is then criticized first for not having mentioned this circumstance during the recitation, and then for his yet again faulty reasoning, with Nikola pointing out that there usually are such objects in a room (chairs, tables) that one can use for defense against a saber until the greater numbers can overpower a single armed attacker. The singer makes one more desperate attempt at rationalization (PN 674, VII:24, R 1234): *Oštra sablja ona išteti pamet* (“A sharp saber, it can impair one's wits”), but after this explanation is promptly dismissed by Nikola: *Nemoguće to* (“Impossible, that”), he finally defers to the ultimate authority—that of the tradition (PN 674, VII:24-25, R 1234: 3:03-4:10):

S: *E pa oni tako pjevaju.*⁹⁶

MP: *Tako pjevaju?*

S: *E.*

MP [argumentatively]: *Ali je li dobro da tako pjevaju?*

N [clarifying]: *Jeli to istina valja čut?*

MP: *Jeli bila istina? Ako nije bila istina zašto se pjeva?*

S [adamant]: *E pa, on da nije istina, nebi ga on pevao.*

...

S [on Parry's suggestion to include all this subsequent reasoning in his song]: *E oni ne kazuju da je imao koji oruža, da se digao na njega da učini huđum, niko.*

N [teasingly]: *Sigurno si ti preskočijo.*

S [emphatically, imitating Nikola's contesting tone]: *Nijesam.*⁹⁷

N: *E dobro!*

MP [interjects passionately]: *Mislim*⁹⁸ *da loši pjevač kaže samo da je, Haljil, odsjekao pedeset glava, tako, ali da dobar pjevač bi rekao tačno.*

S [not following]: *Ha!*



PN 674, VII:24-25,
R 1234: 3:03-4:10

⁹⁶ Not included in the transcript.

⁹⁷ Nikola here adds *vala*, the word used for emphasis. However, I cannot make it out while listening to the recording. It is also possible that Nikola added it mechanically, as Salih did answer emphatically.

⁹⁸ In the transcript, Nikola renders the beginning of Parry's remark as *znaš li* (“do you know”), rather than *mislim* (“I think”), which is what I hear here.

MP [explaining]: *Kako je bilo, zašto je mogo da k, o, osjeć* [laughs at own stammering], *osječe toliko glava.*

S: Well, they sing it like that.

MP: They sing it like that?

S: Yes.

MP [argumentatively]: But is it good that they sing it like that?

N [clarifying]: Is that the truth? It should be heard?

MP: Was that the truth? If it wasn't the truth, why is it sung [like that]?

S [adamant]: Well, he . . . if it wasn't true, he [the singer from whom he learned the song?] wouldn't have sung it.

. . .

S [on Parry's suggestion to include all this subsequent reasoning in his song]: Well, they don't say if anyone had weapons . . . that he got up to attack him, no one . . .

N [teasingly]: You have skipped [something] for sure.

S [emphatically, imitating Nikola's contesting tone]: I haven't.

N: Well, OK.

MP [interjects passionately]: I think that a bad singer only says that Halil cut off fifty heads, like that, but a good singer would tell it correctly . . .

S [not following]: Ha?!

MP [explaining]: . . . as it was, how come he was able to, c-, c-, cut [laughs at own stammering], cut off that many heads.

Again, a feeling of acute inadequacy as a singer and custodian of communal memory is being imposed upon Salih who is further confronted with two distressing options: either he told the untruth himself (and badly at that) or the fault lies with his predecessor (whom he deemed a good singer⁹⁹) and possibly the entire tradition passed down to Salih and trusted by him implicitly ("But is it good that they sing it like that?"). Parry even proceeds to lay the ultimate claim to truth, offering his own (thus obviously more plausible!) "reconstruction" of events and pressing the singer to agree that that is what *actually* transpired (PN 674, VII:28, R 1235): *Tako je bilo istina jeli?* ("That's how it truly was, wasn't it?").

In addition to being accused of having strayed from the truth, the singer also faces renewed accusations of skipping lines from an imposed monolithic construct of a song. That in Salih's world the "same" song can be short yet complete, and long yet featuring no superfluous material, is one of several such realizations—born from epistemic probing of singers—that remain so difficult and counterintuitive to us as literates more than 50 years after *The Singer of Tales*.¹⁰⁰ However, at this point of the interview, through his own experience of song-making and

⁹⁹ See PN 674, VII:35, R 1237: N: *Jeli bijo dobar pjevač?* S: *Vala jes.* (N: "Was he a good singer?" S: "Yes indeed.")

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, David Elmer's recent discussion (2010) of the South Slavic singers' different yet equally valid or "normative" stances towards *okićenje* ("performance"). In particular, see his critique of Zlatan Čolaković (283-90).

performance, the singer can resist but not actually dismiss the interviewers' ideal song construct. It is, after all, coming from figures of authority, the representatives of the literates who already dominated the social, political, economic, and cultural fabric of the country in which Salih was living; as an obviously more successful caste, they could thus claim superior knowledge.

While Parry's immediate goal to arrive at an improved version of the song about the captivity of Đulić Ibrahim ultimately fails,¹⁰¹ the cognitive and emotional ordeal to which, with Nikola's able assistance, he subjects Salih will nevertheless result in an abundant number of insights into the functioning of oral tradition and the nature of oral narratives. While Salih is obviously destabilized in the process, forced to scramble for explanations—which, as long as they remained within the rules of the imposed discourse, failed—the important thing to notice is how the singer destabilizes his interviewers in turn by continually breaking these imposed rules. The more aggressively he is challenged about the truth of his story, the more vehemently he defends it, persistently rejecting the interviewers' alternative scenarios and invoking the ultimate authority of tradition as the bottom line. When they think they have cornered him with their logical snares, he in turn ensnares them with one of his own, whereupon the song is true because people sing it that way, and they sing it that way because what it describes is true—otherwise why sing it? When they claim he has skipped something, he promptly quotes back the verses from his song as proof that he did not. When they demand cool, considered, cogent speech, he responds with a heated immediacy and the suggestiveness of onomatopoeia (PN 674, VII:25-26, R 1235): *A da Bogami tu je sekao lasno. Udarijo na red, klapa, klupa, klapa, klupa, hajt, hajt, hajt, hajt, dok je poredijo* (“Ah yes, by God he [Halil] cut there easily. He hit them in turn swish, swash, swish, swash, go, go, go, go, until he [cut them all] in a row”). When they ridicule his reasoning, he sniggers in turn at the kind of knowledge they presume to expect from an epic song (PN 674, VII:34, R 1236): *e pa ko ti zna?* (“Eh, well, who knows?,” “Whoever could tell you that?,” and “What a silly question!” all subsumed in this one sentence and the way it is intoned).

While the kind of epistemic violence perpetrated by the interviewers is of a more conspicuous nature, Salih's resistance (even if the term accurately evokes reactive rather than initiatory violence) was exquisitely aggressive in turn—resulting in Parry's (and also Lord's) own cognitive straining. It forced these enthusiastic students of oral literature (whose initial training, intuitions, and critical tools were nevertheless literary) to appreciate more fully that a value is a value only according to a measure, not because it holds universal currency, and that it was thus necessary to relinquish any residual claims on textual accuracy, completeness, truthfulness, and other such “clichés of another criticism” (Lord 2000[1960]:65). It taught them not to take for granted even the meaning of seemingly simple and self-explanatory words, such as the word “word.”¹⁰² It is in this clash of two apparently incommensurable worlds, in this

¹⁰¹ I base this assessment on that made by Albert Lord, taking it as likely to have coincided with that of his teacher (1954:354): “The dictated No. 6 is, as usual, better than the sung No. 4.”

¹⁰² See, for example, Lord 2000[1960]:28. As John Miles Foley writes (2007:9): “For Kukuruzović, and for other *guslari* as well, a ‘word’ had no relation to our typographically defined item; it was a larger, composite unit consisting of not a single but rather multiple written words . . . the term *reč* can also designate a speech, a scene, a narrative increment, and even an entire story-performance. . . . Anything smaller than a ‘word’—one of our typographical words, for example—just doesn’t register as a cognitive chunk.”

unique “out of joint” space where both were forced to regard themselves in the twisted mirror of the other, that a new episteme was born.

Countering Epistemic Violence: Salih versus Nikola and Parry

In scholarly discussions on epistemic violence, one inadvertent form of epistemic violence often committed in the same breath is the unstated privileging of the scholarly arena as the ultimate (that is, frameless, “placeless”) arena where the voice of the other is to be heard or else its inaudibility bemoaned. In her criticism of the current discourse on otherness, bell hooks specifically points to this problem of a relevant space in which to engage with these questions (1999:342):

I was made “other” there in that space with them [fellow scholars]. In that space in the margins, that lived-in segregated world of my past and present, I was not “other.” They did not meet me there in that space. They met me at the center.

Although of utmost importance, the question of whether the subaltern can speak should perhaps also be accompanied by other questions, such as *where* could the subaltern speak and *who* would be there to hear if/when s/he does. Does one’s having or not having a voice also depend on who is listening—an occupier, a foreign scholar, a local government official, one’s sibling, a friend over a coffee in the privacy of one’s home, or a peer in the local coffee-house, at once a place of great intimacy and a battleground over prestige and communal standing? And whose response will count most, in which situations, and about what topic? In other words, are not the listener and the context of utterance constitutive parts of the speaker’s voice?

In the present context, it would be instructive to know what stories Salih told about his encounter with the American scholar and his native assistant, and how he conveyed them to people in places that mattered to him: his family, his neighbors and close friends, the fellow singers from the same area, and the owners and frequenters of the *kafanas* in which he sang. Of course, we cannot hope to access these stories, but it is possible to venture a guess that, while these stories probably all had slightly different slants (depending upon the desired effects on each target audience), it is likely that in all of them Salih was the main character; that, whether he praised or poked fun at his “bosses,” he invariably came out on top. As mentioned before, the figure of the lowly man who outwits the high and mighty was prominent enough in the tradition that it did not require a great stretch of imagination for Salih to identify with this character. Moreover, there are humorous stories that specifically treat foreign travelers, stories that, having already been published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seem to indicate they began circulating orally as soon as the explorers of all hues discovered an interest in the peoples and cultures of the Balkans. Of particular interest is one such story (originally published in 1902) that actually involves a foreign scholar who came *da ispituje* (“to explore;” literally “to

interrogate”) the Montenegrin people.¹⁰³ After asking his first unsuspecting “subject” a few questions (for instance, what the name of Christ’s mother was), the Montenegrin stops him to ask in turn whether he knows what his mother’s name is. Upon receiving a negative answer, the “subject” concludes that because his interrogator does not know something that his whole village knows, he probably knows nothing at all (Đurić 1977:364): *Stranac, videći da je na prvom koraku ograisao, okani se ispitivanja, i povrati se oklen je i došao . . .* (“The foreigner, seeing that he came to grief at the first step, gave up his research [interrogation] and went back where he came from . . .”).

While I cannot claim that Salih in particular felt exactly as the Montenegrin from the story, or that he cast himself in a similar role when telling his friends and family about his encounters with Parry, I think the tale provides a very useful background against which to view Salih’s own resistance. Indeed, to the extent to which this story is indeed a part of *folk* lore, it can be said that it encapsulates general attitudes towards the scholarly invaders and testifies to the natives’ desire to beat them at their own game of knowledge and wits. In other words, the story seems to bear witness to the people’s recognition of attempted epistemic subjection and their desire to resist it and strike back. Of course, it also bears witness to the patriotic desires and nationalist zeal of the native collectors who deemed such stories potentially appealing to their readership and thus publishable, but the fact remains that these tales were first *told*, that people efficiently continued to use their age-old medium in order to deal with rather new experiences, and that they continued to tell each other stories—their stories—that they *could* speak. Inasmuch as this is the case, Gayatri Spivak would, quite rightly, question their subaltern status. However, if such stories did not happen to serve the current interests of those with the power to publish/record, would we have ever known that indeed there was a place where they could, or even wanted to, speak about these matters?¹⁰⁴

Even if such open confrontation and the neat, unequivocal victory for the “home team” that one encounters in the *Stranac i Crnogorac* (“Foreigner and Montenegrin”) remain the matter of humorous tales, the interviews with Salih also offer important insights into the ways of countering epistemic probing. As we shall soon see, these are subtler and messier, but also ultimately more effective: unlike the Montenegrin from the story who, by putting the foreigner “in his place,” reinstates the *status quo*, Salih and other singers will, by both making themselves

¹⁰³ I am greatly indebted to Dr. Sonja Petrović of the University of Belgrade for kindly presenting my children with a book in which, quite serendipitously, I first came across this story. However, I am even more grateful to Sonja for her subsequent effort in tracing for me the original source of its publication (Grđić Bjelokosić 1902), for suggesting other similar stories to read, for sacrificing her scarce free time to scan the essential yet for me inaccessible scholarly material, for offering heaps of helpful advice at various stages of this project, and, last but not least, for being an excellent colleague and a friend.

¹⁰⁴ For example, the contemporary Serbian *guslari* often censor their repertoires when facing a university researcher (even if the latter is a compatriot). They are very forward when it comes to performing what they deem to be the songs that a scholarly audience is likely to appreciate—that is, those of proven aesthetic quality and socially acceptable ethical values, such as the songs from Karadžić’s collections. However, they tend to be guarded and evasive when it comes to the songs of local significance and a personal nature, or those that treat more recent events, such as the 1990s wars in the former Yugoslavia, the songs whose content (for instance, the glorification of Slobodan Milošević) they judge might be politically and ethically controversial. According to Smiljana Đorđević (2005), before performing these latter types of songs, the *guslari* would first try to get to know their listener(s) better and would need a lot of reassurance and upfront approval.

vulnerable to the epistemic probing of the foreign scholars and simultaneously resisting it, affect and change their visitors' own epistemic frameworks.

The Power of Tradition

As briefly touched upon earlier, one of the most effective means by which Salih deflects Parry's and Nikola's strikes against the logic, completeness, and truth of his songs is not his engagement with these challenges on their proposed terms (that is, by "rationalizing"), but his resistance to them from within his own cognitive paradigms, those supplied by his tradition. For instance, the most effective defense that the singer puts up during the exhausting questioning session about the various "weak" points of the song "Captivity of Đulić Ibrahim" occurs when he repeats or re-narrates the disputed scenes (instead of offering the expected short, pointed explanations), usually starting with a prose retelling and then slipping into actual recitation (e. g., PN 674, VII:8, 11-13, R 1231-32). In this way, Salih not only repeatedly rejects Parry's imposition of a "fuller" song scenario, but he does so through the very act of that repetition. The repetition itself renders the disputed passage as self-evidently what it is, giving it the persistence required to stand as evidence. As such, it becomes an oral document and a proof that Salih himself wields. Such responses are, of course, not unheard of from performers asked to translate the meaning of their work. Pina Bausch, for example, the great German choreographer of Tanztheater, gave a similar response to an invitation to deliver a series of lectures at Stanford. Rather than quenching our thirst to "know" the meaning of her work, she simply had her dancers perform some more. Assuredly, Pina had more practice than Salih at dealing with this kind of pressure and had more time to think about it. She would sometimes tell the apocryphal story about how the composer Beethoven likewise played an entire piece again when someone asked him what it meant.¹⁰⁵ Apparently, for Pina, Beethoven, and Salih, their "work just is" (Climenhaga 2009:40).

The best the two young men can do in this situation is to claim that the singer skipped verses (e. g., PN 674, VII:13, 14, R 1232): N: *Ti si preskočio tu meni se čini*; MP: *Ne, ne; ne, ne, ali si preskočio* (N: "It appears to me you skipped [things] there;" MP: "No, no; no, no, but you skipped"). However, they cannot offer any immediate proof for these claims since, unlike the singer, they do not have a way to access the song instantly. Salih's ability to circumvent their logical challenges in this way proves frustrating (especially for Parry, as his is the most serious investment in these proceedings) and serves as an effective deterrent against the smug attitude the two men often assume towards him during the course of this interview. For example, after all his persistent and clever attempts to make the singer see just how plausible and necessary it would have been for Đulić's mother and sister not merely to cry but to honor the hero with a proper lament, Parry realizes that, against his generic expectations regarding an answer, Salih will respond with yet another round of verses. He thus quickly tries to cut off the old man (PN 674, VII:16, R 1232: 3:39-3:42): *Dobro, dobro, dobro . . . dobro za to* ("All right, all right, all

¹⁰⁵ This probably *is* an apocryphal story, but the fact that it is so often repeated by composers, artists, writers, and performers does not seem to detract from the point either.

right . . . all right [i. e., enough] about that!”).¹⁰⁶ The words as quoted here hardly do justice to Parry’s helplessness and annoyance at the unheeding singer who carries on, already moving beyond Đulić’s mother’s and sister’s wordless crying onto the hero’s own reaction to the two women’s inability to recognize in the bearer of the grave news their own disguised (and very much alive!) son and brother. While Nikola eventually manages what Parry could not and makes the singer stop reciting, he does so only by also letting the matter of Đulić’s mother and sister rest and then starting an altogether different line of questioning. However, that Parry will not be able to let go of his failure but will soon come back to the same topic with renewed and uncharacteristic passion, deriding the singer and the two female characters in the process, testifies to the profoundly unsettling impact of Salih’s reliance on his own knowledge, skill, and obstinate invocation of tradition as he knows it.

The singer’s profuse usage of epic formulas in the narration of not only his epic tales but also “real life” events as well may have presented another cognitively challenging factor for the collector. Thus, for example, when Salih tells of his encounter with the Serbian sergeant Uroš from Rogozno, who so appreciated his poetic acumen that he begged him to sing regardless of whether the Serbs or Muslims won the day, we are told that the sergeant’s company numbered “32 comrades” (*trides i dva druga*; PN 655, III:50, R 949). What makes this otherwise inconspicuous number stand out is the fact that Marko Kraljević (PN 652, I:35, R 867), Ahmet the standard-bearer (PN 656, IV:15, R 977), Mujo of Kladaša (PN 658, V:12, R 1004), Bojičić Alija (PN 659, VI:73, R 1061), Velagić Selim (PN 674, VII:6, R 1229), and nearly every other epic hero in Salih’s songs also tend to be accompanied by “thirty-two comrades.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Salih tells of how his teacher, the legendary Ćor Huso Husović from Kolašin, had been awarded by the Austrian emperor Franz Joseph (PN 652, I:10, R 860) *sto ovaca i sto napoljona* (“a hundred sheep and a hundred napoleons”), which is not only a formula modeled on *sto ovaca i sto jaganjaca* (“a hundred sheep and a hundred lambs”), but is also rendered in flawless decasyllabic meter. In fact, when later in the day, the singer is asked to “remind” Nikola of how much Ćor Huso received from Franz Joseph, he will actually reply (I:86, R 882): *sto ovaca i pod njima sto jagaca* (“a hundred sheep and under them a hundred lambs”),¹⁰⁸ quickly adding: *I dao mu je sto napoljona* (“And he gave him a hundred napoleons”). It is interesting to note that, in comparison to his former use of the word, the singer here has an extra “i” in “napoleons” (*napoljiona*, rather than *napoljona*). This pronunciation seems to suggest that he dropped the vowel “i” from the previous instance in order for the word to fit the decasyllabic meter.

On the face of it, this usage is not so unusual, and Nikola also often employs epic formulas in his conversations with Salih. For instance, he asks if the singer himself ever cried out

¹⁰⁶ The transcript has: *Dobro, dobro Salihe* (“All right, all right, Salih”), but I wrote here what I heard upon repeatedly listening to the recording.

¹⁰⁷ This number seems to be the singer’s personal formula. In the South Slavic traditions (both Christian and Muslim), 30 (e. g., *trides’ kapetana* (“thirty captains”)) is much more common.

¹⁰⁸ Compare this instance to the verses of Salih’s prosimetric narrative about Golalija that appears 17 pages later (PN 652, I:103, R 887): *nabavijo hiljadu ovaca / i pod njima hiljadu jagaca* (“he got himself a thousand sheep / and under them a thousand lambs”). Note how the number of sheep is now a thousand (still a multiple of ten) to better accommodate the decasyllabic meter.

to his mother (PN 655, III:63-64, R 953: 0:21-0:23, see above), inquires as to whether Albanians are indeed *ljuti Arnauti* (“fierce Albanians”) as the tradition has it (PN 654, III:4, R 938: 3:22-3:25), and upon hearing that a hero from Salih’s story died a natural death, he comments—to the singer’s approval—that he was killed (II:35, R 919: 0:17-0:20) *Ni od puške, ni od noža, no od Boga, staroga krvnika* (“Not by rifle, nor by knife, but by God, the old executioner”). However, for the literate singer Nikola, epic formulas clearly belong in the context of epic poetry, and thus when he employs them away from that particular context (as is the case here), he does so with light ironic distance and in a jocular tone. That there is no such distance in Salih’s own usage (epic or everyday) suggests that formulas are for him not simply a part of what we now call “traditional poetic idiom,” but are in fact constitutive of his general cognitive apparatus. For Parry (and Lord, too) such a confluence of the everyday and the traditional would have been counterintuitive not merely because it made sifting “fact” from “fiction” difficult, but because it actively challenged the validity of such a sharp conceptual division in the first place.¹⁰⁹

It is in this context, I believe, that the enigma of Salih’s age is to be considered most productively as well. Namely, at the outset of *Pričanje I*, the singer states that he is 85 years old, but in the heading to the transcript of *Ženidba Đerđelez Alije* (“The Wedding of Đerđelez Alija,” PN 277) which he had recited earlier in the year, Nikola wrote that Salih was 70. To complicate matters further, Matija Murko (1951:94) proposes that the singer’s age was 63 when they met in 1930 (which would have made him 67 at the time of the interviews), while also noting that Alois Schmaus reckoned Salih was born around the year 1866 (making him 68 in 1934). While it is not unusual for a person of that time and place not to have known the exact year of his/her birth, it is interesting that Salih here opted for more years rather than less. In a culture that, as said before, generally privileges men in possession of their full physical and mental powers, there is only one cultural niche where great age is an asset, and that is in the custodianship of traditional lore—Salih’s domain. Again, 85 is a significant and precise number in the context of the singer’s self-perception and self-performance, as it puts him on par with his most esteemed predecessor Ćor Huso, who, Salih claims (PN 655, III:55, R 950), was around 80 himself when he taught him some of his songs.

On occasion, it is not what Salih specifically says or does, but the sheer force of his performative habits that works to unnerve the two young men. Thus, for instance, at one point in *Pričanje I* after his recitation has been interrupted by the noise of squeaking doors, the murmur of intruder(s), and the interviewers’ frequent requests to speak louder, Salih, upon yet another *Malo jače* (“A little louder!”) from Parry, all of a sudden bursts into a song, apparently forgetting about the prohibition of singing during the mourning of King Aleksandar I. Under the strain of reciting (not his usual way of delivery) and being interrupted—and by this time in the day also being rather worn out—Salih here does nothing more than merely revert to his natural way of performing. The effect on Nikola and Parry, however, is mild panic, as the two men, probably worried that this might land them in trouble with the authorities, both scuttle to hush the singer (PN 652, I:144, R 898: 1:42-1:51): MP: *Nemoj pjevat, pričaj* (“Don’t sing, talk”); N: *Nemoj*

¹⁰⁹ Consider, for example, Lord’s explanation of Đemail Zogić’s conception of exactness/truthfulness (2000[1960]:28).

pjevat nego pričaj (“Don’t sing but talk”); MP: *Pričaj* (“Talk”).¹¹⁰ In this case, it is not that Salih acts on purpose so as to get back at the collector and the interpreter for putting these additional strains on him, but it is as though his very world of traditional performance is rebelling on his behalf against the discipline of the imposed setup.

Subverting the Request and Taking Charge

In addition to the traditional cognitive frameworks that enable Salih to counter his interviewers’ epistemic impositions, other rather effective means of resistance are his evasion of Nikola’s questions—often using the interviewers’ very appetite for stories to help him change the subject—and his pretending to give way to their request, only to subvert it in the end. For example, anxious to tell the story about the rescue of two sultanas from the town/empire of Đirit, Salih brushes aside Nikola’s hopes of hearing some stories about the famous Albanian hero Skenderbeg that his mention of a place called Skenderija inadvertently inspired (PN 656, IV:35, R 982): *Valahi nešto sam čuo za Skender bega, teke tu je jedna carevina bila. Đirit je bila dvadeset i sedam godina* (“By Allah, I did hear something about Skenderbeg, but there was an empire there. Đirit was there for 27 years”). Not only does Salih turn the focus back onto Đirit to suit his inclinations, but he also adds a narrative detail (“for 27 years”) to inspire curiosity in his listeners and thus make them forget or at least abandon their previous pursuits. Later, upon finishing a story about an Albanian outlaw, he sees that Nikola has some more questions, but instead of answering them, Salih quickly offers another tale in exchange (PN 656, IV:68, R 992): N: *Jeli to davno bilo?* (“Was that long ago?”); S: *Pa da ti pričam još jednu priču?* (“Well, shall I tell you one more story?”). And sure enough, such an offer proves too irresistible to pass up for the sake of some minor detail from the previous tale.

However, the most spectacular example of subversion must be Salih’s way of dealing with Nikola’s repeated requests for a song in which the Serbs win the day. In itself, this kind of request would not have been unusual as it was common knowledge that some of the more traveled singers often had two repertoires in order to cater to the tastes of both Christian and Muslim audiences, the most famous example being that of the nineteenth-century blind singer Filip Višnjić (Nedić 1990:43), whose portrait serves as the logo for this very journal. Murko is also familiar with the phenomenon and notes the sentiments of the frequenters of Muslim coffee-houses as follows (1951:42): *Samo da je dobar junak, tu se sluša bez razlike* (“If only he [the main character] is a good hero, [the song] will be listened to with no difference [as to the hero/singer being Muslim or Christian]”). In this context Salih himself is similarly eager to tell of his (already mentioned) encounter with the Serbian sergeant Uroš who granted him the liberty to cut down anyone he liked in his songs, and it is also a matter of great pride for him to claim that he would not kill off a Serbian hero in a song just because he was a Serb (PN 655, III:5, R 939). Thus the question that Nikola poses to the singer during the very first interview (PN 652, I:34, R 867): *Znaš li ti srpskije pjesama?* (“Do you know [any] Serbian songs?”) is neither offensive nor indelicate, even if Salih himself repeatedly fought against the Serbs—in the Balkan Wars, in World War I, and in any large or small local skirmish imaginable. However, what does imbue the

¹¹⁰ Nikola only transcribes his own intervention, but Parry can also be heard both before and after it.

question with some tension, despite Nikola's characteristically cheerful manner, is the fact that he persisted in posing it even though he received a negative answer the first time he asked (PN 652, I:34, R 867): *Vala ja srpski neznam, sem na ova jeziki* ("Well, I don't know any Serbian [songs] apart from [those] in that language"). Seeing that the young man would not get off his hobbyhorse so easily, Salih will in *Pričanje III* finally "admit" that he knows one such song, and he will take quite some time to recite a long poem about two Serbian captains who are not-so-bad heroes until the end when they still prove to be no match for the dashing Muslim hero Mujo, who kills them and carries off the wife of one of the captains to marry her himself (PN 655, III: 49-50, R 949: 1:17-2: 03):

N: *Kako to? Ti si rekao da ćeš pjevat pravoslavnu pjesmu, da ćeš pričat a ti si već sada da su turci pobijedili. Kako to Bogati?*

S [through laughter]: *Bogami, ja onako mi dade uz riječ, a neznam . . .*
[All chuckle].

MP: *Rekao si da će bit pravoslavna pjesma.*

N [repeating Parry's remark louder]: *Rekao si da će bit pravoslavna pjesma.*

S: *Vala pravoslavna jes, ama teke, ja zar zanosim na turski, a oni ovo pevaju.*

. . .

N: *A znaš li ti koju drugu srpsku pjesmu?*

S: *A pa ima.*

N: *Ma đe srbin pobijedio turčina? Znaš li?*

S: *Vala, pa znam to nekoliko.*

N: *E hajde jednu da mi kažeš, koju? Koju to hoćeš?*

S: *A da ope će platit Srbin najzadnje.*

N: How's that? You said you were going to sing an Orthodox song, that you are going to tell, but you now [made it so] that the Turks won! How's that, by God?

S [through laughter]: By God, that's how the words came to me, and I don't know . . . [All chuckle].

MP: You said it was going to be an Orthodox song.

N [repeating Parry's remark louder]: You said it was going to be an Orthodox song.

S: Well it is Orthodox, but I lean towards the Turkish [point of view?], and they sing this.

. . .

N: But do you know some other Serbian song?

S: Ah, well there are some.

N: But where a Serb won against a Turk? Do you know [any]?

S: Well, I know a few.

N: Eh, come on, tell me one! Which? Which one do you want?

S: Well, yes, but the Serb will pay in the end again.



PN 655, III:49-50,
R 949: 1:17-2: 03

Not even this outcome will deter Nikola, and a little later, as the conversation turns back to Ćor Huso, he asks whether the legendary singer knew any Serbian songs. Salih initially answers that (like himself) Ćor Huso only sang in Serbian/Bosnian, but when Nikola repeats the question one more time, the singer says that indeed Ćor Huso sang about a certain Stojan Čupić (the nineteenth-century Serbian chieftain and one of the leaders of the First Serbian Uprising). Excited but perhaps also suspecting that this roundabout way of finally coaxing the singer into reciting an “Orthodox song” is still too good to be true, Nikola asks cautiously (PN 655, III:58, R 951): *Jeli fina pjesma?* (“Is it a fine song?”). The singer’s preemptive answer *A da ono tako je bilo znaš* (“Well, yes, that’s how it happened, you know”) already hints at how the song will finish, and sure enough, Čupić ends up dead, with the final laudatory remarks devoted to the local Adempašić family of Novi Pazar. Here Nikola finally, if cheerfully, admits defeat by way of teasing the singer (PN 655, III:61, R 952: 1:55-2:04): N: *Beli se radi tu da je neki srbin pobjedio dok ti ne pjevaš?* (“Could it be that that song is about some Serb winning, just as long as you are not singing [it]?”); S: *Bogami . . .* (“By God . . .” [all chuckle]). Even though, as discussed before, Nikola will continue to tease and contest the singer over the issue of whether the Christian or Muslim heroes were better warriors, he does not, however, ask him again to recite an “Orthodox song.”

Unable to evade an imposed task completely, the singer at least sometimes manages to dictate the terms under which he will go about performing it. Thus when, after the initial confusion as to what is expected of him, Salih finally assents to improvise a poem about their encounter and (by then) a six-days-long collection of poetry, he proceeds in the typical manner of an epic singer faced with composing a song about a new event¹¹¹ (PN 655, III:106-07, R 966: 0:13-1:12):

S: *Kako*¹¹² *ime . . . gazdi?*

N: *Milman.*

S: *Milman?*

N: *Jes!*

S: *Tebe Nikola.*

N: *Jes.*

S [referring to Lord operating the phonograph from another room]:

Onoga neka.

N: *Što, što si reko.*

S: *Onog, onoga nećemo dofatit, znaš, no samo vas dvojicu.*

MP: *Dobro! Kako hoćeš.* [Laughter, mostly Nikola’s.]

N: *Ajde Salja da čujemo!*



PN 655, III:106-07,
R 966: 0:13-1:12

¹¹¹ As early as the nineteenth century, the singer Filip Višnjić offered useful insights in this regard. He said that after a battle he would ask the returning soldiers about who led the forces, where and against whom they fought, who was killed, and so on (Nedić 1990:52). Salih himself offers a similar list of such key narrative points in *Pričanje IV* (32, R 982).

¹¹² Nikola here inserts the verb *bi*, but the singer cannot be heard saying it.

S [quietly, to himself]: *E da vidim u koji dan smo počeli . . . u ponedjeljak . . .*¹¹³
 N: *Ma lijepo ko za gusle znaš.*
 S [quietly]: *A da vala . . .*
 N: *Počeli smo radit ovđe u ponedjeljak, a danas je subota.*
 S [pensively]: *Jes . . . demek radilji smo cijo dan do, do noći.*
 N: *Jes.*
 S [more confidently]: *U svaki dan cijo dan do noći, radilji smo . . .*
 N: *Jes.*
 S: *I tako, [Parry interrupts] . . . i tako smo pjesmu . . .*¹¹⁴
 MP: *Glasnije!*¹¹⁵
 S: *A?*
 N: *Glasnije pričaj!*
 S: *Glasnije ću pričat, teke sad dok . . .* [Recitation follows after a pause of seven seconds].

S: What is the name . . . of the boss?
 N: Milman.
 S: Milman?
 N: Yes.
 S: Yours is Nikola.
 N: Yes.
 S: [referring to Lord operating the phonograph from the next room]: That one, let him be.
 N: What, what did you say?
 S: The other, the other one, we won't put him in [the song], you know, but only you two.
 MP: All right, as you please. [Laughter, mostly Nikola's.]
 N: C'mon, Salja, let's hear it!
 S: [quietly, to himself]: Well, let me see, what day did we start . . . on Monday. . . .
 N: But nicely, as though for the *gusle*, you know.¹¹⁶
 S [quietly]: Ah, yes, of course. . . .
 N: We started working here on Monday, and today is Saturday.
 S [pensively]: Yes . . . indeed, we worked the whole day till night.
 N: Yes.
 S [more confidently]: Every day, the whole day until the night we worked. . . .
 N: Yes.
 S: And so, [Parry interrupts] . . . and so we did the song. . . .
 MP: Louder!
 S: Huh?

¹¹³ The last two words do not appear in the transcript.

¹¹⁴ Nikola transcribes this last bit as: *I tako ćemo pjesmu pjevat* (“And thus will sing the song”).

¹¹⁵ Nikola skips Parry's and his own requests to the singer to speak louder, signaling the ellipsis with a longish continuous line.

¹¹⁶ In his translation of this dialogue Lord (2000[1960]:287) mistakenly ascribes this sentence to Parry.

N: Speak louder!

S: I will speak louder, but now while . . . [Recitation follows after a pause of seven seconds].

As the singer gathers (or rather rehearses) the information about the participants, event, and details worth mentioning, he is already trying things out, placing the facts playfully into formulaic decasyllabic lines (“we worked the whole day until night,” “every day till night we worked”), repeating them as though to ensure they are correct, making choices (“we won’t put him in”), mumbling pensively, warding off with various fillers and elliptical statements the two men’s premature prompts and demands to speak more loudly—in other words, he is biding his time and stalling (in hindsight, his initial “confusion” about Nikola’s request may have been a part of this delaying tactic as well). Thus we see the singer taking charge, applying his expertise, exercising his liberty, managing his audience’s impatience, and making creative decisions, even if the resulting poem is but an adequate response to an inadequate request.

At least in the context of the South Slavic oral epic of the time, Lord rightly explains (2000 [1960]:286) that “collectors and collecting are not inspiring nor proper subjects for epic!” Jeff Opland (1988:353), however, is not entirely convinced and wryly suggests that Lord’s consignment of such material to “footnotes and appendices” may have had something to do with the fact that, in comparison with Parry, “Lord himself receives short shrift in these songs.” Opland then proceeds to cite this same part of *Pričanje III* in which Salih decides to exclude Lord from his song as a colorful background for his own story of Lord’s 1985 visit to South Africa, at which time this distinguished scholar “graduated from his position ‘in the next room at the recording machine’” (354) and thus managed to inspire a Xhosa praise poem. What entirely escapes Opland’s attention in this process is that Salih’s song actually excluded not only the student but “‘Professor Milman Parry the glorious’”¹¹⁷ (353) as well, the “boss” himself. The central characters are in fact the singer and the scribe, and in that order (PN 655, III:107, R 966): *Ja i Nikola pesme iskazali / Ja kazao Nikola pisao* (“I and Nikola recited songs, / I told them, Nikola wrote them”). Parry, the very person who instigated the collection and paid for all the tea, coffee, tobacco, and daily allowances, is only possibly subsumed under the collective pronoun, which may have, after all, included Lord as well (PN 655, III:107, R 966): *I mene su pošteno platili* (“And they paid me fairly”).¹¹⁸ In this way, Salih’s poem, which fails as an epic but amply fulfills the aims of Parry’s experiment by shedding light on both the improvisational techniques of oral singers and the importance of adequate subject matter, also bears witness to the singer’s self-assertion and his resistance to the imposed experimental setup.

Incomprehensibility for Incomprehensibility, a Joke for a Joke

When faced with an uncommon task, the purpose of which is not entirely clear to him, the singer sometimes responds by being unclear and incomprehensible himself. For instance, as

¹¹⁷ Opland here refers to the dedication portion of the song composed in Parry’s honor in 1933 by a literate oral singer, Milovan Vojičić.

¹¹⁸ Lord translates this sentence as (2000[1960]:287): “And they paid me honorably,” which better accords with the attempted genre but is not as close to the original meaning as “fairly” is.

mentioned earlier, the second interview was particularly cognitively taxing, as Salih was continually asked to translate songs from Albanian into Bosnian/Serbian and *vice versa*. Although both actions felt counterintuitive, Salih was, with minor effort, able to perform the first, which also made more sense since his interviewers could only understand Bosnian/Serbian. However, he found translating (or rather recomposing) a song¹¹⁹ from Bosnian into Albanian extremely hard, and was possibly also perplexed about what use such translations could be to the two men, neither of whom spoke Albanian. Although John Kolsti (1990:61) convincingly argues that the main difficulty with this task was that Salih understood he was supposed to translate “a ten-syllable line in Serbo-Croatian into an eight-syllable Albanian line,” I would suggest that the fact that his interviewers understood no Albanian also played an important role. As already discussed, a listener is a constitutive part of a speaker’s voice. It is perhaps no wonder then that, when asked to recite in a language no one present would understand, Salih struggles to find his “Albanian” voice. And so, just as Parry and Nikola are in no hurry to explain the purpose of such a request, the singer makes no great effort to make the explanation of his difficulty any clearer than the following (PN 654, II:14, R 910-11): *Ono povlažne su bosanske; znaš ne more da se okreće arnautska. Arnautska je pokrača jezik, a bosanska jok no poduža. I sličnije je bosanski no arnautski.* (“Well, Bosnian [songs] are a bit wetter [better flowing? smoother?], you know, it [they?] can’t be turned into Albanian. Albanian is a shortish language [poetic language? verse?], whereas Bosnian is not, but is rather longish. And Bosnian is more similar [pliable?] than Albanian.”)¹²⁰ When, shortly after, the matter is raised again, Salih offers the consistent and confident explanation (PN 654, II:15-16, R 910-11): *one vlažne su, povlažnije su. Posličnije dolazu riječi* (“they [Bosnian songs] are wet, they are wetter [better flowing?]. The words come out more similarly [fit together better?]”). As the issue continues to crop up in the subsequent *pričanja* (e. g., PN 655, III:79-89, 103-04, R 957-60, 965; PN 658, V:63-64, R 1019) and Salih’s vocabulary—although iterative—becomes clearer as it is applied in these slightly different contexts, it seems that what the singer means is that he finds it easier to lengthen the shorter Albanian meter as he translates a song into Bosnian, rather than to adequately shorten the Bosnian longer verse (cf. Kolsti 1990:61). In addition, as I tried to suggest in the square brackets above, to Salih Bosnian songs (which he generally prefers to his native Albanian) are “better flowing” and the words (that is, traditional idiomatic units) somehow tend to “fit” better or come along more easily upon translation from the Albanian into Bosnian than when he attempts the opposite. As I myself commit epistemic violence by presuming to speak for the singer here, I

¹¹⁹ See Kolsti 1990.

¹²⁰ In an attempt to provide a readable translation of this passage, Kolsti (1990:60) invests it with a clarity and coherence that it does not have. He also only concentrates upon Salih’s comments on the difference in length of the respective “languages” (verses), which indeed supports his claim regarding the singer’s difficulty in casting decasyllabic verses as octosyllabic. However, Kolsti does not give attention to the other part of Salih’s explanation—that Bosnian language is “wetter”—which the singer always repeats in conjunction with the comment on the length of the two “languages.” In fact, Kolsti does not include this concern in his translation at all. Of course, this omission is probably due to the extreme difficulty of understanding what precisely Salih meant; but its exclusion (for whatever reason) makes Kolsti’s explanation of Salih’s difficulty appear more definitive than it might otherwise have been. Furthermore, no explanation is given as to why *I sličnije je bosanski no arnautski* is translated as: “And Bosnian is more regular than Albanian.” Literally, *sličnije* means “more similar.” If a wider perspective is taken, the root of this word can be understood to connote harmony (as in *slik*, “rhyme”), something that is suitable or befitting. Regularity, on the other hand, is only one possible aspect of harmony.

cannot but notice that in order to arrive at even this meager translation of his “incomprehensible” statements, the singer’s entrenched position has forced me in turn to undergo a violent cognitive strain. I imagine (and in so doing commit yet another violent act) that the effect of Salih’s explanation on Parry and Nikola could not have been much different.

For a last example of Salih’s “counter-strikes,” I will briefly return to the power of humor since—even though it happens rarely—the singer himself occasionally jokes with the two young men as well. For instance, when, after a long and tiring day the indefatigable Parry asks the singer (PN 656, IV:104, R 1000): *Šta će bit danas* (“What [else] will be today?”), Salih promptly responds: *Ono veljiko vala malo ne* (“That big [thing], by God, not the small”), upon which everyone bursts into laughter. Not knowing the exact context, it is very difficult to guess the precise meaning of Salih’s ellipsis. However, the end of *Pričanje V* suggests a possible answer. There Salih refers to something in his possession (something that Parry seems to have just given him) as *ovo veljiko* (“this big [thing];” PN 658, V:141-42, 1041), which seems to have been a fifty-dinar coin/note, or *petica* (“a fiver”)—his daily allowance. He then goes on to distinguish it from a smaller unit, a *četvor* (“a quarter”? “25 dinars”? “40 dinars”?). If, therefore, Parry and Nikola knew that the “big thing” for the singer was the larger rather than the smaller amount within the range they used to pay him, it becomes clear why they instantaneously burst into laughter. Salih effectively subverts Parry’s roundabout way of asking that they do some more work that day by taking the question quite literally and suggesting that it is the time of day for them to pay up—in other words, that he is done for the day. Regardless of whether my guess is right, it seems that Salih not only successfully managed to joke back, but he also won his deserved break.¹²¹

Similarly, at another point during *Pričanje IV* (it seems Salih was in a particularly comical mood that day!), by way of explaining what details he would need to know in order to compose a song about an event worthy of an epic, the singer takes Nikola as a hypothetical hero of such a story (PN 656, IV:32, R 982: 0:17-0:33): *Otišao je . . . Nikola. Otišao je u Bosnu i učinio si neakvu ja štetu ja . . .* (“He went . . . Nikola. He went to Bosnia, and you did some damage there, or . . .”). Nikola here cannot resist the urge to tease the singer a little, so he interrupts: *Da, recimo posjeko trista turaka, recimo* (“Yes, for example, [he] cut down three hundred Turks, for example”), thus effectively putting into Salih’s mouth a story in which his usual heroes become defeated villains (and dispensable extras at that!). Unshaken, the singer promptly fires: *I posjeko jednoga, dosta bi bilo* (“And [he] cut down even one, that would have been enough”). Again, laughter is heard here (most likely Nikola’s own), as the witty mediator is himself outwitted. What makes this joke particularly clever is that, while Salih’s sentence appears merely to state a simple truth, that even a victory over a single enemy (for instance, in a duel) is perfectly song-worthy, he at the same time very clearly suggests that for “heroes” such as Nikola cutting down even one “Turk” would be enough of a feat.

¹²¹ I am grateful to Scott Garner for suggesting an alternative possibility—that Salih is here lightly mocking Parry and Nikola who frequently asked for longer rather than shorter songs. I must also add that, before encountering the above dialogue from *Pričanje V*, and purely based on the “inside” knowledge of the culture (which, of course, can sometimes lead one to spectacularly wrong conclusions!), my first impulse was to take Salih’s remark as a bit of toilet humor.

Claiming the Spoils of the Epistemic Clashes

Just as fascinating as Salih's self-assertion in terms of resistance is his equal readiness to lay claim to the imposed proceedings and adopt them as his own, as well as to appropriate instantly the products of the requests against which he had initially struggled but was unable to evade. For example, even though he was illiterate and Nikola was the sole scribe present, Salih seems to consider this imbalance a technicality and refers to the writing as a common undertaking (e. g., PN 656, IV:38, 104, R 983, 1001): *Pa ćemo pisat, iz kraja* ("Then we will write, from the beginning"); *Pa imamo da pišemo* ("Then we have [things] to write"). Moreover, his occasional slip of the tongue reveals that he may have perceived himself as *the* one writing—in effect if not in fact (PN 659, VI:119, R 1072-73): *ovo nebi pisao ni jedan nebi ti mogo kazat* ("no one could write this [for you] . . . [he] couldn't tell you this"). Although Salih immediately corrects himself here, another similar instance suggests this to be more than just a lapse. In *Pričanje V* he refers to a book of stories in which (PN 658, V:138, R 1040): *bijo sam upisao nekoljiko priči* ("I had written down a few stories"), only later implying that these were written down *from* him rather than *by* him. The singer thus sees and presents himself as the one with whom the writing originates, even if he is not the one holding the pen in his hand.

As discussed earlier, Salih's experience of rapidly translating songs from Albanian into Bosnian/Serbian (and especially *vice versa*) was particularly grueling. However, once he finds himself on the other side of the task, he is clearly proud, suggesting that nothing is beyond him, given a bit of time (PN 654, II:33, R): N: *Vidiš, a da nemoreš druge preves* ("You see, and [to think] that you can't translate others [songs] . . . ") S: *Pa ja znaš, dok bi misljio đavola . . .* (Well, I, you know . . . till I would [take some time to] think [about] the devil [i.e., the song?] . . .).¹²² Consequently, the singer does not always experience the tasks Parry sets as simply a burden, but also as a challenge, even if only in retrospect. For instance, in *Pričanje III*, as he enjoys Parry's praise for a successful translation, the singer takes similar pleasure in dramatizing the process that led him to this achievement and in (perhaps inadvertently) casting himself in the role of a tormented genius (75, R 956): *Ja svu noć đavola dok sedim. Sve mislim kako koja more da se prevedede, ovako da je slično, ovako da je . . .* ("All night I [thought of] the devil, as I was sitting. All the time I'm thinking how could this or that one [the song] be translated: like this it would accord well, like that it would . . . "). The collector's experiments also reveal to Salih the unexplored aspects of his practice and offer new insights into his creative abilities, which the singer finds gratifying. Thus, even though his own habit is to sing rather than to recite the songs, when asked in *Pričanje V* whether the sung or recited songs are better, the singer gives precedence to the latter. Even if this stated preference were nothing but an attempt to please his interviewers and tell them what he thinks they would like to hear, the act would have been empowering, reinstating the singer's control over his audience. As it is, Salih's long and ardent answer seems to express genuine excitement about this novel (at least for him) kind of delivery (PN 658, V:67, R 1020): *Bolje kazivane. Što ove, što se peva, ove što se pevaju u guslji, u ono*

¹²² The sentence is very elliptical, and thus one cannot hope for an incontestable explanation of the singer's meaning. Nevertheless, what seems most likely to me is that Salih is here agreeing with Nikola regarding his ability to translate those "other songs" as well, provided only that he is given enough time to think the "devil" (that is, the task/song/translation) over, rather than doing it on the fly as the two men requested from him earlier.

hitaš . . . ja će preskočit, ja će preturit, ja će poturit, a ovako iskazane, ono nema no ide ka ono, ka na ćitanju. Tak, tak, tak, tak, sve redom (“The recited [songs] are better. These that, these that are sang to *gusle*, during those you hurry . . . one will either skip [things], or jumble [them] up, or sneak [them] in, but recited this way, there is none of that, but [the whole thing] goes as if at a reading: tack, tack, tack, tack, all in order”¹²³). Thus, rather than merely being a passive “subject” of scholarly experimentation, Salih himself derives from the experience some professional satisfaction and personal sense of achievement.

Salih Ugljanin, an 85-year-old¹²⁴ man who had gone from riches to rags but was still making his living by relying on his cleverness (*pamećom*; PN 652, I:16, R 862), was one who had lived through several wars and also suffered loss and displacement. He was someone who, until his thirtieth year, had exclusively sung in his native Albanian, but he was so curious, so intellectually and spiritually agile, that by his thirty-fifth year he had mastered another language and another traditional epic idiom (that of the Bosnian Muslims). He was a singer who was proud of his skill and knew its worth for collectors;¹²⁵ he was also a performer who had encountered enough ethnically and religiously diverse audiences to learn to have an answer to any question (even when he did not have it). Such a man could hardly have let himself become a passive conduit of others’ bidding, a mere facilitator of their self-fulfillment.

As we have seen, throughout the interviews Salih responds with a series of intricate strategies by which he evades or resists various pressures from his interviewers and sometimes takes control over a situation that has become uncomfortable. Whether these are conscious or intuitive strategies is hard to say (and it is even harder to draw a rigorous distinction between the two), but they are rather effective in terms of his self-assertion and disruption of the imposed hierarchy in which his place is decidedly lower. Moreover, Salih readily lays claim to the fruits of the epistemic clashes in which he engages with the collector and the interpreter. It is in this space, I have argued, where the “dominant” is thrown off balance and the “subaltern” finds personal stake in the imposed proceedings, where a dialogue has in fact taken place and mutual learning occurred.

Violence and Splendor of Epistemic Harvests

The *Pričanja* with Salih Ugljanin call for a more optimistic revision of the possibility of dialogue between the dominant and the subaltern. What I believe they vividly (and at times poignantly) remind us is that epistemic violence is constitutive of *any and all* relations with the other, and that as such it is necessarily a two-way economy. Rather than lamenting the very

¹²³ *Kazivati redom* (“to tell in order”) seems to be one of the main aesthetic principles in composition of South Slavic oral epic, and its importance is particularly emphasized by the famous nineteenth-century Serbian collector of oral lore, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić. For a more detailed discussion see Milošević Đorđević 2002. Coincidentally, David Elmer’s (2010) already convincing comparison of South Slavic *kita* and Homeric *kosmos* would have been made even stronger had it featured a discussion of this traditional principle.

¹²⁴ Salih’s exact age has been discussed above.

¹²⁵ As mentioned earlier, Salih had already sung for Matija Murko and would later sing for Alois Schmaus as well.

condition of possibly ever encountering the other, we must rather be forever vigilant against *forgetting* the violence that in each case brought to us the fruits of our epistemic harvests. If Lord's *Singer of Tales* is one such splendid product guilty of neglect and this forgetting, the *Pričanja*—with Salih Ugljanin as the record of both the “harvest” and the “fruit” in its own right—accuse their authors of epistemic violence and simultaneously exonerate them because none of the violence is forgotten. Published online, available for inspection, and open to endless scrutiny, these interviews, with their relentless complexity, are enabled to fight any simple appropriation of the other: that of Parry and Nikola regarding the singer, or mine regarding all of them.

Finally, as an afterthought and a brighter counterweight to some of the more somber thoughts on the subtle and ongoing power struggles at play in the *Pričanja*, I would like to stress that we only ever manage to see our differences, our “othernesses,” because they are framed by the commonalities that define us—among other things as (Swift 1983:62) “the story-telling animal[s].” Indeed, there are such moments in the *Pričanja* when the balance of power is shifted away from the collector, the mediator, and the storyteller alike onto the story and the performance itself—moments when the captivated collector forgets about the purposes of his research trip and about the hypotheses he might be able to prove or form; when the mediator, eager to hear the end of a funny story, cannot compose himself enough to stifle a juicy swear word of approval, begging the storyteller to continue; when, infected by his audience's laughter, the storyteller falters at his post and cannot go on because he must hold his own splitting sides. And then, when the story is finally told in full, no one rushes to move on, to use up the time prudently and efficiently, to collect more, to prompt more, or to command more attention, but instead they all want to use the fancy technology to hear the story again and repeat the experience; for a moment, these three very different men indeed become a true small community, hard won by those days of intense interaction and mutual probing and violence (PN 655, III: 99-100, R 963: 2:30 to R 964: 0:37):

N [fighting his own and general laughter]: *Pričaj još Bogati jebem!*

S [himself laughing]: *Ma neda mi smijeh.*

[Salih continues, and at times also enacts his story, interrupted only by common laughter. . . .]

N [coughing and laughing along with the others]: *Jeli to istina bila čiča?*

S: *Istina istinska, ovo ti pričam.*¹²⁶

N [laughing and swearing approvingly]: *I nije išo po drugu jeli?*

S [fighting his own laughter]: *Bože sačuvaj!* [Parry here contributes an inaudible but obviously jolly remark] . . . *Tako mi Boga . . . ne znam. . . .*¹²⁷

N [interjecting, through laughter]: *Ajde Bogavam da čujemo ovu ploču šta je bilo?* [All burst out laughing.]



PN 655, III:99-100,
R 963: 2:30 to R
964: 0:37

¹²⁶ Nikola here instead transcribes: *Istina istinska ovo ti je bila* (“The truest truth this was”).

¹²⁷ The last two words are not transcribed.

S: *Haj Bogami . . . Ovo nema nide ni u Auropu.*¹²⁸

N [fighting his own and general laughter]: Tell more, for fuck's sake!¹²⁹

S [himself laughing]: The laughter is not letting me.

[Salih continues, and at times also enacts his story, interrupted only by common laughter. . . .]

N [coughing and laughing along with the others]: Was that a true story, old man?

S: The truest truth, this, I tell you.

N [laughing and swearing approvingly]: And he didn't go for a second one [wife], ha?

S [fighting his own laughter]: God forbid! [Parry here contributes an inaudible but obviously jolly remark] . . . I swear to God . . . I don't know. . . .

N [interjecting, through laughter]: C'mon, by God, let's hear this record [again], what happened.
[All burst out laughing.]

S: Let's, by God . . . There's nothing like this anywhere, not even in Europe!

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¹²⁸ Nikola omits the conjunction "u" in the transcription and inserts the noun "*Auropa*" (Europe) in the "correct" locative case (*Auropi*), whereas the singer gives it in the dative (*Auropu*).

¹²⁹ Literally: "Tell some more, may I fuck your God!" Although in English this swear word, directed at the singer, sounds supremely offensive (especially when taking Nikola's and Salih's religious differences into account), this is in fact one of the mildest Balkan swear words and is here employed in just the opposite spirit—to emphasize Nikola's approval of Salih's story.

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