

Introduction

THE OTHER WORLD

Polje was a space unto itself. An informal Romani settlement on the edge of Belgrade, it was home to approximately two hundred Ashkali and Roma living in small one-room shacks. Piles of trash lined the narrow lane that served as the main thoroughfare. Water was obtained from nearby fire hydrants while electricity was siphoned from streetlights. Completely concealed by a series of small berms, Polje was situated between two contrasting geographies. On one side, gray concrete high-rise buildings punctuated an urban landscape, and on the other, bucolic green fields stretched to the horizon. If Polje seemed out of place, so too did its inhabitants. Every resident was a migrant, refugee, or displaced person. A site of temporary asylum, the settlement was largely divorced from the realm beyond its borders. A teenage resident, Deon, aptly described Polje as “the other world.”¹ But the settlement was also an Other world, where the exiled sought to build their lives before they were inevitably dislodged once more.

Characterized as unhygienic, a squatter camp, and a slum, Polje was one of an estimated 583 “substandard” Romani settlements that pervaded Serbia.² Serbs decried the blight caused by these settlements while the government prioritized their destruction. Polje’s residents were continually under threat; their homes would never be secure. In addition, informal

Romani settlements were socially, materially, economically, and legally isolated from the rest of the nation. The most substantive link between Polje's inhabitants and the world outside its borders was the trash. In the urban sprawl just beyond the settlement lay a realm of discarded commodities that could be converted into food, housing, and cash. In so doing, Ashkali and Roma sought to turn garbage into success. Like everyone else in Polje, this is what drew Bekim to the settlement.

Although he was twenty-four years old, Bekim stood just over five feet tall and weighed barely ninety pounds, a result of being malnourished for most of his life. Given his slight build, Bekim had difficulty finding clothes that fit. Because he refused to wear boy's sizes, he was constantly pulling up his pants in an effort to keep them from falling off. But this did not bother Bekim, who often joked about his wardrobe malfunctions. However, his humor belied a history of loss and dislocation. He came to Serbia as a child when his family fled the Kosovo War. Arriving in Belgrade, they first lived in Zgrade, and then, after it was destroyed by the Serbian government, Polje. Despite residing in Serbia for almost two decades, Bekim still lacked identity documents. As a result he was unable to work legally, open a bank account, or access state health care. Barred from the formal economy, Bekim earned money recycling paper and metal he found in dumpsters. This work was filthy, physically debilitating, and barely provided enough income to support his family. Married at sixteen, Bekim had fathered eight children, four of whom died in infancy. His wife, Fatime, was pregnant again and he fervently hoped this child would live.

Late one night as Bekim and I visited a nearby supermarket for food, his incessant struggle for survival was vividly illustrated. Walking out of the settlement, we entered a busy street lined with bright lights and tall buildings. As Bekim contemplated the proliferation of stores along our route, he asked if I had visited the nearby mall. He had never been inside and was curious what it was like. Even though it was not far from his home, the mall was a place Bekim would probably never go. People like him, he said, could get into trouble if they went to malls. Bekim knew the areas he should avoid. Suddenly, his stomach started to rumble. There had not been much food for dinner and Bekim only ate a fraction of it, wanting to ensure that his children had enough. Thinking about his last meal, Bekim casually commented that another one of his molars had fallen out. This was the

second in as many weeks and a little more than half of his teeth remained. Stoically, Bekim added that at least it had been painless. He expected to begin losing his incisors soon, which were already black with decay.

Before long, we crossed an empty parking lot and arrived at the front of a large supermarket. Its windows were dark and the building appeared deserted. As I expected, it had closed an hour earlier. We had not come to shop. Wanting to avoid harassment, Polje's residents assiduously avoided purchasing food at supermarkets. Nevertheless, these large stores were an important source of sustenance for Bekim's family. Skirting around the side of the building, we made our way to a row of dumpsters in the rear. With Bekim starting at one end and me at the other, we meticulously combed through their contents. This is where we hoped to obtain our next meal. We were searching for any rotten fruits and vegetables that the supermarket had discarded at closing. While Serbs expressed disgust at eating food found in dumpsters, it was an accepted part of everyday life in the Other world. Molding tomatoes were not trash; they were nourishment. But despite our efforts the dumpsters yielded nothing. Fortunately, two other supermarkets were not far away. Perhaps, Bekim mused, we would have better luck there.

As we began walking, Bekim suggested that we buy a soda from a nearby convenience store. Although the door was locked, a clerk was conducting transactions through an open window. She fetched candy and snacks from inside the premises but allowed customers to choose their own beverages from an exterior refrigerator. For security, it could only be opened once the clerk disengaged a magnetic seal. However, when Bekim asked her to unlock the refrigerator, as she had done for the Serbs in line before us, the clerk refused. Instead, she summoned a coworker to fetch the bottle. Bekim paid in silence but as soon as we were out of earshot, he vented his anger. She treated us like thieving *cigani*, he said. Although *cigan* is routinely translated as Gypsy, these words have different origins.³ Furthermore, the former is far more pejorative and pervades Serbian speech. While Lady Gaga sings about loving the "Gypsy life," Serbs discuss the dirty, lazy, and dishonest *cigani* who pervade their city. Given these stereotypes, Bekim was accustomed to regularly enduring interactions like the one at the convenience store.

Strolling two blocks more, we found ourselves in front of another supermarket. This time, Bekim paused. A group of young Serbian men

was loitering not far away. Bekim knew that like the clerk, they regarded him as a *cigan*. *Cigan* was not only an insult; it inspired violence. Especially at night, *cigani* were chased and assaulted. Bekim had been forced to run for his life on several occasions and he did not want to repeat the experience now. A few scraps of food, he whispered, were not worth broken bones. Turning around, he guided me to yet another set of dumpsters. Once again, several men were standing nearby. Urging me to walk faster as we made our retreat, Bekim repeatedly glanced over his shoulder to ensure we were not followed. At this point he decided to return home, remarking that it was simply too dangerous to stay out any longer.

As we entered Polje, I was reminded just how separate the settlement was. Leaving the main thoroughfare, we turned down an inconspicuous lane. In the distance lay only darkness. Walking further, we left the city behind. The streetlights grew fainter, the din of traffic disappeared, and the air became colder. Soon we were enveloped by the night and unable to see anything but the narrow road we were traversing. Then, through the blackness, a scattering of faint lights began appearing in the distance. Suddenly, we entered the settlement, surrounded by shacks, trash, and silence. Bekim and I were home.

Sitting down outside his shack, I thought about our experiences that night. Bekim, a refugee, had spent an hour trying to feed his family by rummaging through dumpsters for rotten vegetables. During this brief time his alienness seemed to be omnipresent: he was fearful to enter a mall, treated as a thief, and risked being beaten. He returned to his home, a shack in a trash-strewn, segregated settlement, with nothing more than a bottle of soda. And this settlement, Bekim's shelter from the dangerous streets, was continually threatened with demolition. He could lose what little he had in a matter of days. Seeing my expression, Bekim asked what I was thinking. I replied that I was contemplating our evening. Bekim nodded. Yes, he said, it had been an incredibly boring night.

Boring was a word commonly used to describe people's lives in Polje. For Bekim, there was nothing exceptional about scavenging for food, avoiding assault, or facing eviction. Hunger, segregation, racism, and marginalization were so entrenched that they were not just the norm, they were tedious. This response was born out of the world of the settlements and the trash that sustained them. Polje and the people who called it home were so fundamen-

tally estranged from Serbian society and from the Serbian state that the Other world became their only world. There was simply no alternative way to be. But if life in the settlements was boring, it was not without hope. The potential for a better existence lay in the dumpsters. Banned from the world beyond Polje, Ashkali and Roma looked to its detritus for their survival and prosperity. To understand these precarious spaces of displacement where trash is ubiquitous and transformative—these wastelands—this book follows Bekim and his neighbors as they scavenge life.

VISIBLE INVISIBILITY

Four years before that night with Bekim, I arrived in Belgrade to explore the feasibility of conducting anthropological research in informal Romani settlements. During that initial trip I quickly became aware of how Roma were both exceptionally visible and relentlessly hidden. Every day I saw Roma. When I walked to the grocery store or to the tram stop, I observed Roma sorting through dumpsters, begging at traffic lights, and pedaling three-wheeled bicycles called *trokolice*. As I sat in my apartment, I regularly heard the clop, clop, clop of horses' hooves on the asphalt before catching a glimpse of a Rom driving a cart laden with scrap metal. Scavenging, coupled with their noticeably dark skin and black hair, marked Roma as Other. Their difference was obvious but also unremarkable. My Serbian neighbors were accustomed to passing Roma on the street and standing next to them at convenience stores. Yet despite the ubiquity and visibility of Roma, they were in many ways just as much of a mystery to my neighbors as they were to me. When I asked where the Romani horsemen were from or how many settlements were in the vicinity, Serbs could not answer. They passed the same Romani individuals every day but knew nothing about their everyday lives. Echoing Deon, one woman replied, "*cigani* live in their own world." This book explores the alternating contexts of visibility and invisibility to understand the complex relationships that occur between Roma and Serbs, between Roma and the state, and between Roma and a global economy of trash.

Serbs saw little reason to know the particulars of Romani lives because *cigani* were assumed to be a homogeneous and eternal underclass. *Cigani*

would always be poor and dirty, I was told. They lived in shacks and remained unemployed because that was their preferred lifestyle. One man was adamant that although *cigani* blamed the Serbian government for their poverty, it was their own fault. In their hearts, he said, *cigani* were different. Overhearing this conversation, a young woman volunteered that when she was a child, her parents told her *cigani* would kidnap her. To this day she was still terrified. *Cigani* were deceitful, she added, predicting they would only talk to me for money and would never be my friends. Others were concerned that I would be robbed or assaulted while visiting Romani settlements. One man believed that my informants would encourage me to steal manhole covers or electrical wires. Once the police discovered these crimes, he continued, they would send me to prison while the instigators remained free. Although most comments focused on the inherent laziness and criminality of Roma, a few stressed their carefree attitude. One woman remarked that *cigani* always smiled and laughed even though they could not feed themselves. These Serbian narratives were a patchwork of uncertainties, emotions, and moral equivalencies that exerted considerable power but were ultimately, and necessarily, based in ignorance.

Stereotypes of Roma were not confined to Belgrade. For hundreds of years, representations of Gypsies have circulated through Europe and North America.⁴ Authors including Shakespeare (*Othello*), Cervantes (*La gitanilla*), Austen (*Emma*), Hugo (*Hunchback of Notre Dame*), Lawrence (*The Virgin and the Gypsy*), and King (*Thinner*) have written about Roma while painters such as Hals (*The Gypsy Girl*), Caravaggio (*The Fortune Teller*), Manet (*Gypsy with a Cigarette*), and van Gogh (*The Caravans—Gypsy Camp near Arles*) have depicted them. In the 1990s the films of Emir Kusturica, such as *Time of the Gypsies* and *Black Cat, White Cat*, exposed international audiences to Balkan accounts of Roma. Today, Roma are most conspicuously represented in reality shows such as *Gypsy Sisters*, *Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*, and *American Gypsies*. Nevertheless, Romani characters have also graced *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *MacGyver*, *X-Men*, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, and *Criminal Minds*. In most renderings Gypsies are cast as a mix of thieves, fortunetellers, and exotic vagabonds. These various depictions are unified by a common theme: the stranger among us. Gypsies are familiar yet separate. They

constitute a permanently marginal and potentially dangerous population who are inherently alien, unable to integrate into modern society, and capable of assailing national norms and values.⁵

This is particularly true in representations of, and responses to, Romani disparities. In many cases, segregation and disadvantage are portrayed as intractable expressions of an innate Romani desire to remain apart and preserve an itinerant lifestyle.⁶ While ostensibly dedicated to aiding Roma, initiatives such as the Decade of Roma Inclusion stigmatize Roma, invoke poverty, and make a point of notionally separating them from the non-Romani population.⁷ These attitudes are on vivid display in newspapers and magazines such as *The Economist*, where one headline declares that Roma are “Europe’s biggest societal problem.” To express the magnitude of Romani destitution, it opines that Romani settlements “rival Africa or India for their deprivation.”⁸ This article renders Roma as so fundamentally different that their communities have more in common with iconically impoverished countries than they do with Europe. In reality, many Roma are members of the middle class, own multistory homes, and work as salaried employees. However, the affluence of some Roma is ignored as identity and indigence are conflated. This discourse relies upon the fixity of stereotypes through which non-Roma construct and perpetuate Gypsy identity while Roma remain virtually powerless to shape dominant narratives about themselves.⁹

After a few weeks of hearing horses pass beneath my window and being told stories of dirty and dangerous *cigani*, I finally met a resident of a Romani settlement. One afternoon as I was disposing of my trash, a middle-aged man arrived on his *trokolica* and began sifting through the dumpster’s contents. I approached him and explained that I was an American anthropologist who wanted to understand the histories and everyday lives of Roma living in the area.¹⁰ Did he have a few minutes to talk to me? Yes, he replied. After telling me that his name was Endrit, he immediately asserted that he had not always lived in a shack. Born in Kosovo in 1968, Endrit spent his childhood in Germany where he attended school and excelled at gymnastics. He returned to what was then Yugoslavia as a teenager, eventually completing his mandatory military service, marrying, purchasing a home in Kosovo, and fathering six children. But Endrit’s life changed forever in 1999 when war and ethnic

cleansing enveloped the region. Fearing for his safety, he fled with his family to Belgrade.

Endrit's circumstances were the result of violent conflict and not a culture of poverty as so many Serbs assumed. Narratives underscoring *ciganski* foreignness fail to acknowledge the degree to which Roma have been embedded in European trajectories. Despite living in Europe for centuries, Roma were rendered as a people without history.¹¹ In reality, national and international crises, such as the geopolitical fragmentation of the Balkans, have fundamentally shaped their existence. As ethnic Serbs and ethnic Albanians sparred over control of Kosovo, Roma were not only displaced; their identity was splintered. Endrit, I would eventually learn, identified as neither a *cigan* nor a Rom. He was Ashkali. Endrit's ethnicity was the result of recent events in a centuries-long struggle over self-determination in Kosovo.

For most of its history, Kosovo has been home to a multiethnic population of Serbs, Albanians, and Roma. Today, Serbs view Kosovo as an indisputable part of their nation's territory, pointing to its role as a political and religious center of the thirteenth-century Kingdom of Serbia. However, the Ottoman Empire annexed Kosovo in the fifteenth century and Albanian-speaking people began to settle the area in greater numbers. When Yugoslavia was formed after World War I, Muslim Albanians had firmly replaced Orthodox Christian Serbs as Kosovo's majority population.¹² Ethnic tensions between the two groups had occasionally flared into violence, but Josef Tito's socialist government muscularly repressed any anti-Yugoslav sentiments. In an effort to build a unified nation, Roma were also integrated into the state apparatus alongside other ethnic groups. By the 1970s, Yugoslavia boasted antidiscrimination legislation, a prohibition on using the word *cigan*, and unprecedented access to education and employment for Roma.¹³

After Tito's death in 1980, ethnic ambitions were rekindled. By 1991 Yugoslavia was disintegrating as its constituent republics were declaring independence. With war erupting in Croatia and Bosnia, the Serbian government of Slobodan Milošević tightened control over Kosovo. In response, Kosovar Albanians increasingly called for self-determination and soon the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was attacking Serbian security personnel. In 1999 urban warfare, shelling, and ethnic cleansing were occurring across the province as Serbs expelled Albanians. In an effort to end the

conflict, NATO conducted a bombing campaign targeting strategic sites across Serbia. The offensive lasted seventy-eight days and resulted in the withdrawal of Serbian forces and a ceasefire. At the end of the war, 8,000–10,000 people had died with thousands more missing.¹⁴ To forestall future violence and ensure the safety of returning Albanians, NATO stationed peacekeepers in Kosovo. Several years later, the Albanian-dominated government declared its independence from Serbia. The United States and most member states of the European Union (EU) recognized Kosovo's new status, but Serbia has steadfastly refused to abandon its claim to the region.

Although the war was fought between Serbs and Albanians, it deeply affected the lives of Kosovo's Roma. Prior to the conflict, Kosovo was home to an estimated 100,000–150,000 Roma, which some scholars have separated into two broad groups.¹⁵ The first lived primarily in Serbian-dominated areas and was conversant in Romani and Serbian. In the 1970s and 1980s these individuals increasingly embraced a Romani identity that was in opposition to Albanian nationalism.¹⁶ When the Milošević government forced Albanians out of public-sector jobs, these Roma, who generally backed the Serbian state, were hired if no Serbs were available.¹⁷ The second Romani group resided in Albanian regions and spoke only Albanian, having lost proficiency in Romani approximately two generations earlier. Kosovar independence advocates urged these individuals to record their ethnicity as Albanian on the census to bolster the case for autonomy.¹⁸ Eventually, Albanian-speakers would reject the label of Roma in favor of two alternate ethnicities: Egyptian and Ashkali.¹⁹

Beginning in the 1980s, evidence from Byzantine texts bolstered narratives of an Egyptian migration to Europe, while folktales described a Romani kingdom in North Africa.²⁰ Seizing on these stories, a movement to adopt an Egyptian identity was born, and in 1991 the Yugoslav government approved "Egyptian" as a census category.²¹ Serbian nationalists were quick to support the Egyptian label for their own purposes, hoping it would simultaneously reduce the number of Albanians recorded in the census and prove to international governments that Kosovo was a multi-ethnic province, not an Albanian one. Firmly embedded within a specific geopolitical context, the creation and perpetuation of Romani and Egyptian identities was fueled by the disputes between Serbians and Albanians.

During the Kosovo War, *cigani* were targeted by both sides, their property was destroyed, and they were subjected to assault and murder.²² Although the 1999 ceasefire was celebrated as the end of ethnic warfare, there was little relief for Roma and Egyptians. Albanians fighting for independence viewed Romani-speaking Roma and Egyptians, both of whom had relied on the state bureaucracy, as collaborating with the Milošević government.²³ In retaliation, Albanian refugees returning to Kosovo sought revenge for perceived past injustices. The KLA and other nationalist groups have been accused of rape, forced labor, and confiscating personal possessions.²⁴ Not expecting the Albanian victims to become victimizers, NATO peacekeepers did little to stop the violence. Even international efforts to shield Roma from retribution resulted in harm. The inhabitants of a United Nations refugee camp situated near a heavy metal mining complex were exposed to toxic levels of lead for over a decade.²⁵

As brutality against *cigani* continued, a third identity, Ashkali, was popularized.²⁶ Ashkali attempted to mitigate the risk of reprisals by distancing themselves from Roma and Egyptians while stressing their affiliation with Kosovar Albanians, for instance by emphasizing their use of the Albanian language and ignorance of Romani.²⁷ With Ashkali ethnicity becoming increasingly common, international peacekeeping bodies such as NATO and the OSCE took notice. These organizations eventually accepted Ashkali as an independent group, arguing that self-determination was an integral component of an international human rights framework.²⁸ Relying on the support of these bodies, the Kosovar government, and its constitution, also acknowledged Ashkali as a category while Serbia added the classification to its 2002 census.²⁹ But even as their ethnicity gained recognition, Ashkali were still bound by enduring stereotypes of *cigani*.³⁰

Despite stressing an allegiance to Albanian language and customs, brown skin marked Ashkali as aliens in an Albanian-dominated Kosovo. Like Roma and Egyptians, Ashkali were excluded from the postwar nationalist narrative and cast as hindering the development of an ethnically pure Albanian-dominated Kosovo. As a result Ashkali were forcefully expelled alongside Roma and Egyptians. Under the watch of NATO troops, 12,600 Romani, Ashkali, and Egyptian homes were partially or completely destroyed.³¹ These and other acts of ethnic cleansing resulted in a mass exodus. Approximately a hundred thousand Roma, Ashkali,

and Egyptians fled Kosovo, leaving as few as eleven thousand in the country.³² Many families applied for asylum in Germany and other countries in the European Union, but most of these requests were eventually denied, resulting in forced repatriation to Kosovo. The largest percentage of those displaced, about half, sought safety in Serbia.³³ Endrit and his family were among this group.

In Belgrade, Ashkali were invisible refugees. Their history of eviction was publicly unnoticed and unacknowledged. To Serbs, who watched from a distance as Endrit rummaged through dumpsters, he was simply another *cigan*. They did not realize that his life in Belgrade was the result of being a bystander at the margins of the aspirations of others. Furthermore, nationalist ambitions resulted in the bureaucratic misrecognition of Endrit's status. Serbia's continuing claims to Kosovo officially rendered Ashkali internally displaced persons (IDPs), not refugees.³⁴ Because many Ashkali lacked identification or possessed invalid documents, they were unable to prove their citizenship, attend school, obtain routine public health care, get married, receive welfare, or purchase property. They interacted with the state only by suffering a medical emergency or by being arrested and imprisoned. Legal and economic exclusion facilitated spatial segregation. Having no place to settle, many Ashkali constructed their own housing in illegal settlements. Ashkali were so marginalized that they have been labeled the most vulnerable community in Serbia.³⁵

Like numerous others, Endrit's family built a shack of discarded plywood, old doors, and tarps alongside other Ashkali in a field on the periphery of the city. The settlement, Zgrade, would eventually contain thirty-two structures sheltering approximately 150 people. Lacking secure tenure, sufficient living space, durable edifices, water, and sanitation, Zgrade was, according to UN-HABITAT's definition, a slum.³⁶ But the settlement was also a home. It was here that Endrit's daughter, Fatime, would meet and marry Bekim before moving into their own shack to start a family.³⁷ As months became years, Zgrade incubated Ashkali personhood. The everyday life of settlements generated belonging and solidarity, defining the place of Ashkali in Serbia and the world. Examining a Burundian refugee camp in Tanzania, Malkki notes that Hutu "located their identities within their very displacement, extracting meaning and power from the interstitial social location they inhabited. Instead of losing their collective identity,

this is where they made it.”³⁸ A similar process occurred in Zgrade. Although Ashkali identity was formed from the Kosovo War, living in Belgrade’s settlements solidified it.

EXCLUDED PEOPLE AND DISCARDED COMMODITIES

Throughout Europe, Romani populations have been confined and controlled for centuries. The most horrific example occurred during the Nazi regime, when Roma were labeled an inferior race, sent to concentration camps, and exterminated.³⁹ Today, Roma are no longer overtly murdered by the state but they continue to be detained in sites across Europe. In Italy, for instance, state-sponsored “nomad camps” are often fenced, guarded, and surrounded by security cameras while residents must meet strict eligibility criteria.⁴⁰ In areas such as these, the normal rule of law is suspended and *ciganski* bodies are controlled.⁴¹ While I am not equating nomad camps with concentration camps, there is a family resemblance between the two. In each case, *cigani* were confined, functionally stripped of citizenship, and rendered as nonpeople.

Foucault argues that modern states govern their populace through these conditions.⁴² In the past, individuals deemed aberrant and a threat to social order were the subjects of explicit violence, but contemporary regimes rely less on openly taking lives. Instead, they subtly disallow existence through “indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on.”⁴³ Agamben builds upon Foucault’s ideas, asserting that sites such as concentration camps, airport detention centers, and squatter settlements are “zones of indistinction,” where noncitizens are defined, labeled expendable, and ultimately left to die.⁴⁴ These spaces are constituted through a state of exception, when governments portray certain events—such as migration, drug use, or an epidemic—as a national emergency. Then, citing security concerns, the state is able to justify abandoning legal norms and revoking the rights of those judged outside the national order. Citizenship is delineated by forging geographies for noncitizens.

In contrast to many other European countries where Romani camps were created, monitored, and controlled, those in Belgrade were charac-