Living on Trash: Wasted Identities and Wasted Bodies among Belgrade's Ashkali and Romani Trash-pickers

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Abstract

Amid global economic restructuring and increasing precarity, more and more people are reusing and reselling discarded commodities. For Ashkali and Romani refugees living in Belgrade's informal settlements, trash work is essential for survival. Clothing, building materials, and food are all sourced from dumpsters, as is cardboard, plastic, and metal, which are sold to recycling corporations for cash. Trash-picking is not simply an economic strategy; it requires negotiating a complex social, political, and material environment. Following Ashkali and Roma as they collect and recycle trash from city dumpsters, this article argues that waste is not simply a livelihood, or means of survival, but rather a process through which people and places become wasted. Through trash, Ashkali and Roma are consigned to living in substandard settlements, made to assume a series of stigmatized identities, and left vulnerable to the structures of global capitalism, and the debilitation of their bodies.

Keywords

- Ashkali
- Roma
- Serbia
- Trash-picking
- Waste

Introduction

Garbage suffuses our public and private spaces yet is relegated to the edge of our attention. Trashcans, dumpsters, and their contents are often unreflexively taken for granted. Nevertheless, waste plays a central role in our world. As factories churn out mass-produced, discardable commodities, trash has proliferated. Consequently, the management of waste has become a global industry. Governments set environmental standards and award disposal contracts while private corporations consolidate, transport, and transform garbage. And as formal labor markets are restructured and destabilized, trash-picking has become a staple for a growing number of people (Downs 2000; Davies 2012; Crang et al. 2013). Garbage is now a lifeline for survival in an increasingly precarious world (Whitson 2011; Resnick 2018; O'Hare 2019). But trash is also denotatively powerful. Waste is often used as a metaphor to typify and stigmatize excluded groups (Reno 2009; Alexander and Reno 2012; Giles 2014; Millar 2018; Reno 2015) Trash is both complex and productive, transforming economies, personhood, and corporeality.

In Serbia's capital, thousands of Roma, Ashkali, and Balkan Egyptians derive an income from collecting garbage from dumpsters, landfills, and building sites (Simpson-Hebert et al. 2005, 3).[1] Many of these individuals live in substandard Romani settlements: informal communities that lack formal housing and government services such as electricity and running water (Macura 2009; Schwab 2013; Živković and Đorđević 2015). The Polje settlement, for instance, was home to approximately 200 Ashkali and Romani migrants, displaced persons, and refugees, all of whom relied on garbage (Saethre 2020). One of its residents, Bekim, a 24-year-old Ashkali man, often told me that his family lived on trash.[2] Each morning they woke up in a shack built from discarded doors and plywood from worn-out couches. Bekim's clothes, ranging from Dolce and Gabbana sweaters to neon-orange construction vests, were all found in the garbage. His wife Fatime prepared the family's meals from rotting vegetables discarded by supermarkets. The family's income was earned by selling paper and metal to recycling companies and junkyards.

To gather these materials, Bekim spent his days pedaling a cart from dumpster to dumpster. He would visit approximately 80 dumpsters in a two-hour circuit, making as many as eight circuits a day. As Bekim searched the dumpsters, his body was routinely injured, malnourished, and threatened with violence. Serbians often referred to Ashkali, like Bekim, as *cigani,* a word often translated as Gypsy but far more pejorative.[3] This reflects a larger pattern throughout Europe, where Roma were stigmatized

1 While often historically considered to be as Roma, Ashkali later rejected this label, in part due to the Kosovo War, in favor of a unique ethnicity (Balcer 2007, 259). In contrast, Balkan Egyptian was popularized as an identity in the early 1990s using evidence from Byzantine texts and folktales of a Romani kingdom in North Africa (Marushiakova and Popov 2001, 467). In southwestern Europe, the acronym RAE is sometimes used to include all three groups.

2 To protect people's privacy, I have used pseudonyms and disguised the identity of the settlement.

3 *Cigan* (*cigani* – plural, *ciganski* – adjective) has its roots in eleventh century Byzantium and may refer to a heretical sect that was associated with magic, as were Roma. In contrast, Gypsy was introduced a few centuries later and is derived from the misidentification of Roma as originating in Egypt (Fraser 1995, 46). Because the epithet *cigan* is commonly employed in stigmatized and pejorative portrayals, I invoke it when communicating these narratives and perspectives.

and portrayed as permanently marginal, potentially dangerous, and inherently alien (International Crisis Group 1999; Imre 2005; Sigona 2005).[4] In Serbia, these views were often linked to waste. The association between Roma and trash was so pervasive that one dumpster close to Polje was spray painted with graffiti declaring it the "home of *cigani*."

The intersection between trash, spoiled identities, and segregated spaces like Polje is not coincidental. It reflects the ways in which ethnic stigmatization, economic marginality, and imposed debility work together in excepted geographies. Dirt is not trans-historical or intrinsic but rather contextual and fluid. But the notion of waste need not only apply to objects. Rather, wasting can be conceptualized as a process of discarding that classifies people and places as disposable (Armiero 2021; Baumann and Massalha 2022). This is made possible through capitalist and racial logics that devalue the labor of wasted individuals, deny their political citizenship, and consign them to zones of indistinction (Gidwani and Reddy 2011). Racial capital – the social, economic, and political value associated with one's racial identity – structures the opportunities or constraints afforded to different groups of people. In settlements such as Polje, this operates in tandem with spaces of exception, where the rule of law is suspended and inhabitants are stripped of personhood. Therefore, these are also wasted spaces, where the bodies are desiccated and maimed in the service of economic "progress" (Mbembe 2011; Yates 2011; Puar 2017; Mbembe 2019; Gupta 2022). Ultimately, wasted bodies exiled to wasted geographies not only mark matter out of place but matter tied to place (Armiero 2021; Bauman and Massalha 2022).

1. Waste Makes Wasting

To understand this process, I spent fifteen months collecting trash alongside Polje's residents, eventually moving into Bekim's family's one-room shack.[5] As a white, male, middle-class American, my own positionality was in many ways very dissimilar from those with whom I was laboring. To ensure my understandings and interpretations reflected people's lived experiences, I consistently discussed our work together in the dumpsters with Polje's residents. I came to learn that wasting occurs through three interrelated processes: political and economic marginalization that creates wasted spaces, the perpetuation of wasted identities, and corporeal wasting. Exploring each of these concepts in turn, this article begins by recounting the history of war, dislocation, and economic crisis that resulted in both the growth of informal Romani settlements and a preponderance of trash. The subsequent section follows Bekim from dumpster to dumpster as he collects trash, illustrating the social consequences of reclaiming the discarded property of Serbians.[6] Finally, the corporeal realities of trash-picking – cantilevering

4 These portrayals echo representations of Gypsies that have circulated throughout Europe and North America for centuries: thieves, fortunetellers, and vagabonds (Silverman 1988; Lemon 2000; Csepeli and Simon 2004; Myall 2004; Bhopal and Myers 2008; McGarry 2014). As a result of being cast as perpetual foreigners, European nations have attempted to limit the rights of Romani citizens (van Baar 2012; O'Nions 2015; Maestri 2017).

5 Primary fieldwork was conducted from 2013 to 2015, and a follow-up visit was made in 2017.

6 Although Serbs comprise the majority ethnic group in Serbia, the nation is home to Bosniaks, Croats, Hungarians, and others. Consequently, when referring to the general population of Serbia, I will use Serbian rather than Serb.

bodies over dumpsters, collecting food from dumpsters, and being covered in smelly, sticky residue – are explored to demonstrate the ways in which Ashkali and Romani bodies are debilitated and maimed through trash work.

2. The Political Economy of Trash

Over the years, the context and conditions of trash and trash-picking have changed dramatically. Today, trash work is routinely viewed as dirty and degraded, but this was not always the case. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, trash-picking was lauded as an efficient reuse of resources and an inherently moral enterprise (Downs 2000; Strasser 2000). In fact, trash contributed materials vital for the development of modern technology: a significant amount of the books and treatises that made the Scientific Revolution possible were printed on paper derived from rags (O'Brien 2007, 58). But the rise of mass production gradually transformed these ideas, making trash-picking synonymous with poverty and poor hygiene (Stallybrass and White 1986). As factories churned out an ever-growing number of goods, producers needed to expand the markets for their wares. They stressed the value of newness and argued that older items, even those that remained functional, should be discarded in favor of the latest models. Disposing of the "obsolete" was thought to precipitate progress and economic advancement (Strasser 2000, 15). Whereas trash was once a valuable resource, it became despoiled. In post-socialist Europe, in particularly, the transition to capitalism and a focus on European integration has increasingly linked trash with dirtiness (Gille 2007, 209).

While trash and trash work are now stigmatized, it has nevertheless become a major source of income for many Ashkali and Roma in Belgrade. Bekim's reliance on trash was the result of particularly recent events, namely the confluence of violent European ethnic nationalism alongside the growth of neoliberal states. Beginning in 1991, Yugoslavia started disintegrating as its constituent republics declared independence. War would break out in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, eventually, Kosovo. Competing claims of Serb, Croat, Bosniak, and Albanian sovereignty excluded Roma, who were often the targets of violence. In 1999, after the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo and under the watch of NATO troops, 12,600 Romani, Ashkali, and Balkan Egyptian homes were partially or completely destroyed in ethnic reprisals (Bloom et al. 2002, 21). As a result, approximately 100,000 Roma, Ashkali, and Balkan Egyptians fled to Serbia and the European Union (European Roma Rights Centre 2011, 21). Bekim, then a young boy, was among these refugees.

Ashkali and Roma escaped ethnic cleansing only to arrive in Serbia to face discrimination and legal barriers to full participation in Serbian society (Cahn and Peric 1999; International Crisis Group 1999). Like many of the displaced, Bekim's family lacked identity documents, which rendered them unable to secure a bank account, access welfare payments, own or rent a home, or have legal employment. Unable to rent or buy property, many refugees and internally displaced people built shacks on undeveloped or unclaimed land. Belgrade's landscape had been dotted with informal Romani settlements for decades, but the wars and economic collapse of the 1990s led to their proliferation, with illegal settlements like Polje eventually comprising an estimated eight percent of Belgrade's area (Macura 2009, 6; Schwab 2013, 1). As settlements expanded, Serbians typically blamed the lifestyle choices of Roma, rather than

acknowledging the history of popular racism, state economic policies, and asylum laws in creating these spaces of exception (Fekete 2014; Saethre 2020).

Due to the wars and sanctions against Serbia, international trade was severely reduced. Foreign goods, mostly cheaper items produced in China, were smuggled over the border from Hungary (Milutinović 2008; Blagojević 2011; Korać-Sanderson 2013). This established a market for Chinese goods even as Serbia possessed weak links to global trade. Within this economy of scarcity, Chinese merchants faced minimal competition and government oversight (Nyiri 2007, 139). By 1996, Serbia relaxed its immigration laws for Chinese traders, hoping to court investment (Korać 2013, 251). A similar pattern occurred in other central and southeastern European countries— including Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania—as they sought to attract international investment and commodities (Chang 2012). Economic necessity prompted these nations to adopt a graduated sovereignty, in which state authority and citizenship became flexible (Ong 2000).

As Serbia's trade relations and immigration laws were reshaped, so too was its trash. Serbia's dumpsters came to be filled with toys, clothes, and other mass-produced products. While the variety of trash increased due to economic restructuring, it was a history of war and racial capitalism that would consign Ashkali and Romani refugees to picking through dumpsters. Ethnic Serbs fleeing conflict were routinely assisted by the Serbian state, which often provided social housing. However, Ashkali and Romani refugees were disregarded and excluded. With the country's resources severely strained and prioritized for Serbs, displaced Ashkali and Roma were afforded few resources. One of the few outlets of material goods that they could freely access was garbage. This, in concert with the restructuring of Belgrade's trash, created an avenue through which Ashkali and Roma could fulfil many of their needs, including a cash income.

While the wars, displacement, and increased trade with China all played a role in remaking trash as a livelihood for Ashkali and Roma, so too did the growth of the international recycling industry. Serbia itself provided only limited investment but, just next door, EU environmental regulations and initiatives prioritized sustainable industries. This resulted in significant EU funding for the construction of processing plants as well as related infrastructure, which led to the growth of Serbia's recycling capacity (Hempfling 2010, 19). Consequently, trash-pickers were but one link in an international supply chain that moved materials from Serbia to the European Union and beyond. This is apparent in most informal Romani settlements in Belgrade. Anyone walking through Polje would notice that beside almost every shack stood a large 1.5-meter-high metal "basket" (*korpa*) used to hold paper waiting for recycling. Distributed by paper consolidators, these industrial containers had a permanence that residents did not. As families moved in and out of a shack, the basket beside it remained in place. Polje may have been an illegal settlement without government services, but capitalist infrastructure was nonetheless entrenched within it.

Examining Romani livelihoods, Brazzabeni et al. (2015) assert that while scholars often describe Romani strategies as "niche," these practices are firmly entrenched within commercial markets, albeit in unique ways. Highlighting the simultaneous internality and externality of Romani work within global capitalist networks, they (2015, 1) note that it "is embedded in the modern economic system and created in relation to a milieu from which it cannot be dissociated, but which nevertheless cannot be fully characterized

with reference to the modern economic system alone (such as being 'outside' it) without looking at the material processes that in each instance went into its fabrication." These complex relationships are embodied through the visible, material, and economic integration of global capitalism into settlements through recycling.

Ashkali and Roma were not excluded from the "real" economy: corporate recycling baskets stand next to Polje's shacks while Chinese Hannah Montana bags littered its thoroughfare. Rather, they were relegated to its lowest ranks. This constituted a form of racial capitalism, separating marginalized groups and extracting surplus value from their labor (Yates 2011; Gupta 2022). Bekim's efforts collecting and selling metal, paper, and plastic may not have given him a paycheck, but it provided recycling companies with resources to create wage labor for others. This was only possible because of entrenched racism, international trade, the disposability of mass-produced goods, and, crucially, war. The conflicts that displaced Ashkali also resulted in a neoliberal order in which Chinese merchants could prosper as independent entrepreneurs and recycling companies could export cardboard to the EU.[7] Bekim exemplifies a burgeoning trend whereby economic integration is made possible through a reliance on limited and unstable resources. This is a double precarity, born of capitalist processes, that both comes from and produces urban life (Lancione 2019). Furthermore, this process continues a longstanding practice, though which European cities are racialized and Roma are segregated (Picker 2017). These social, economic, and spatial relationships significantly shaped the identities of Ashkali and Roma within Belgrade.

3. Scavenged Identities

Whether riding through traffic, sorting through garbage, or stacking recyclables in the cart, Polje's trash-pickers were constantly being observed by Serbian passers-by. Removing items from dumpsters was a deeply significant act because garbage is the result of an individual's actions not an object's inherent qualities. Private possessions only became collective waste through the process of disposal, often by placing it in a dumpster. Ultimately, gathering refuse required traversing a shared interactive space where liminal objects moved from Serbians to Ashkali and Roma. This persistent exposure impacted Bekim's material interactions with trash, his relationships with Serbians, and his public identity. Every time that Bekim pedaled out of Polje on his cart, he had to negotiate a jumble of identities, both for himself and for the trash he was collecting. But in each instance, Bekim's agency was constrained. Not only did Serbians decide what items became trash, their responses to Ashkali and Roma necessarily shaped Bekim's personhood in ways largely beyond his control.

The overlapping registers through which Serbians regarded Polje's residents were apparent when walking past dumpsters. While most people simply threw their refuse inside, some individuals hung small bags of items over the exterior. These parcels contained things Serbians believed struggling Ashkali and Roma could readily use such as old clothes, worn shoes, and broken electronics. Simultaneously garbage and gifts,

7 While precipitating the flow of cardboard to the EU, neoliberalism simultaneously reinforces a racial capitalism that labels Romani migrants, including those with EU citizenship, as illegitimate (Kóczé 2018).

they embodied Serbian attitudes toward Ashkali and Roma. In Belgrade, dumpsters adorned with bags reinforced the notion of charitable Serbians and destitute Ashkali and Roma. Simply leaving trash on the side of a dumpster was a declaration of morality. Furthermore, this gesture of "giving" required no social or physical interaction. Serbians left their parcels confident that it would aid an underprivileged family. The actual lives and experiences of their Ashkali and Romani neighbors never had to be interrogated.

When I first began trash-picking with Bekim, I became hopeful every time I spied a bag hanging from a dumpster, assuming it held something of value. Unfortunately, a bag's contents were often, as far as Bekim was concerned, nothing more than junk. Household electronics were only valuable if they functioned, which few did. Most clothing was old, damaged, or soiled, and thus rendered useless. After opening a bag to find a pair of shoes ridden with holes, an Ashkali man told me that no one was so poor that they would take them. Instead of replacing the shoes for another person to find, he threw them into the dumpster. Reflecting on the contents of most 'gifts,' Bekim complained that Serbians must think that Ashkali and Roma lacked standards and pride.

One afternoon as Bekim and I were walking down an alley, we encountered a Serbian man cleaning out his garage. When he beckoned us over and offered us several boxes of items, Bekim was careful to be docile, polite, and thank the man. Once we were out of sight, Bekim examined the goods, which he deemed unprofitable. Shaking his head in irritation, Bekim noted that Serbians seldom parted with anything of value. Without another word, we promptly walked to the closest dumpster and threw almost everything inside. Even if giving items to waste collectors was ostensibly motivated by compassion, these acts were, in some cases, also about convenience. The man's "gift" notably shifted the responsibility of disposing of his trash, an onerous and dirty task, to Bekim and me. Gift giving created an illusion of charity while allowing Serbians to exploit Ashkali and Romani labor.

The material that Bekim sought the most, metal, was almost never given away. Compared to other recyclables like paper and plastic, metal commanded a higher price and could more easily be exchanged for cash. However, dumpsters contained only small objects such as aerosol cans, tins, curtain rods, automobile headlights, shower hoses, and pans, which fetched relatively little. Bekim was constantly on the lookout for larger items like old piping, broken boilers, and dilapidated refrigerators. But when Serbians did dispose of these articles they did so for a price. Serbians were aware that waste collectors sold metal to junkyards and expected to receive a portion of this money. When Serbians believed trash could be readily commoditized, charity had limits.[8] The shifting distinction between worthless junk as valuable metal also transformed trash-pickers from beggars to middlemen. Through these exchanges – metal for money – personhood was remade, and Bekim's public identity was constructed yet again through trash. While Bekim disliked paying for metal, it benefited him much more than gifts from Serbians. He was able to profit from these transactions because, as he frequently boasted, Serbians possessed scant knowledge regarding the true value of metal.

8 However, this had not always been the case. It was only after the Yugoslav wars and the subsequent economic downturn that Serbians sought to profit from recycling.

Given the uncertainty of metal, Bekim spent the majority of his time searching for paper products. Paper was the least valuable recyclable material but, in part because of this, dumpsters were routinely filled with cardboard boxes. Hoping to maximize his yield, Bekim strategically targeted receptacles behind convenience stores and supermarkets, where empty shipping boxes were thrown away en masse. And if we spotted any empty boxes lying outside these businesses, we asked permission to take them. While staff often assented, they watched us intently, worried that Ashkali and Roma would steal any unguarded merchandise. We routinely encountered suspicion and even disdain. For instance, employees rarely handed cardboard directly to us. In some cases, they made a point of tossing the boxes in the trash while Bekim and I watched. Only when the workers were finished could we then retrieve them. At other times, staff kicked boxes off the loading dock, forcing us to pick them up from the ground while dodging incoming boxes flying toward our heads.

In these instances, trash-pickers were transformed yet again, this time into impoverished individuals who were prone to theft. Serbians, including several who worked in retail establishments, routinely told me that if store employees were not vigilant, Ashkali and Roma would use waste collecting as a cover to shoplift. This shift in identity to devious thieves occurred, in part, because the line separating public from the private was particularly thin at retail spaces. Stores were openly accessible as was their merchandise. Furthermore, trash-pickers were the antithesis of customers because they took items without making payment. Although boxes were deemed trash, their removal destabilized the order of capitalist enterprise. Consequently, Roma and Ashkali were recast into potential thieves. This led to discernible surveillance and hostility. As hypothetical criminals, Ashkali and Roma deserved to have boxes thrown at them. Bekim was well aware of his status and bristled at being portrayed as deceitful. Collecting boxes, Bekim repeatedly said, was an honest job to earn honest money.

Serbians not only created trash through the disposal of goods; this act also constructed Ashkali and Romani identity. On the streets Bekim was simply another Rom going through dumpsters. Neither his Ashkali identity nor his experiences as an IDP escaping the Kosovo War were acknowledged. Instead, he had to fit into the mould of the deserving poor, recycling middleman, or devious criminal. But these differing personas created a productive space for maneuver. For instance, after collecting discarded boxes at a market, Bekim, Fatime, and I were confronted by security guards, who claimed the cardboard belonged to the market owners. Taking them was stealing, they said. Concerned that the police could be called and reluctant to abandon the cardboard, Bekim and Fatime began pleading with the guards to let them leave with the cardboard. Fatime added that they had three children at home who were hungry and needed to eat. She then stretched out her hands and asked the men to observe how dirty and sore they were. This was proof that she was a hard worker not a criminal. After more entreaties, the guards finally agreed to let us depart with the cardboard, which we did immediately.

As we drove home from the market, Bekim took pride in our accomplishments. He had collected a considerable amount of cardboard and while there was a confrontation, it was successfully resolved. Then, while we waited at a traffic light, a Serbian woman pointed her mobile phone at us and took a photo. At that moment, I became aware of how we must have looked to Serbians. We were covered in grime and sitting in a wooden horse cart that was brimming with trash. While circumscribed by economic and political constraints, trash-picking gave Ashkali and Roma an opening, albeit a limited one, to create their

own authority. Through informal interactions and economies, individuals are able to snub state strategies and generate their own localized forms of sovereignty (Humphrey 2007). The informal nature of trash-picking refashioned social and political life through shared experience and cooperative labor. In searching through dumpsters, Ashkali and Roma established an independent sociality and economy. What Ashkali saw as good fortune was, for Serbians, an embodiment of the stereotypical Rom: dirty and poor.[9] But in appearing this way, Ashkali and Roma carefully negotiated their positionality by surreptitiously throwing away useless gifts, being polite to the authorities, and tactically invoking stereotypes of neediness. In this way, trash-pickers actively manipulated imposed social identities to exert an independent agency over their lives and livelihoods.

4. Wasted Bodies

As Polje's residents sought to navigate the social world of trash-picking, they also had to engage with its materiality. Garbage was inherently physical and as such it drastically impacted trash-pickers' bodies in a number of different ways. Foremost, waste collecting was a dirty, malodorous, abject enterprise. This was impressed upon me as I began hunting for cardboard alongside Bekim. Every time we leaned over and peered inside a dumpster, we were greeted with a potent stench. As I sifted through debris, my hands became black with the remnants of discarded meals, dirty diapers, and wet coffee grounds. Because garbage was uncertain and to ensure nothing of value was missed, we delved to the bottom of each receptacle and tore open every trash bag found inside. Ripping open trash bags released another cacophony of smells and textures.

In the heat of summer, when the odor was even more overpowering, I become nauseous. On the final circuit of the day, I occasionally skipped a row of dumpsters, unable to face the stench. I was not alone in these reactions. Bekim often refused to eat, saying the ubiquitous smell of garbage left him perpetually nauseated. When Fatime occasionally searched dumpsters during her pregnancies, she repeatedly stopped to heave and vomit. Wiping her mouth after each incident, she calmly walked to the next dumpster. But given the conditions of life, repulsive and nauseating odors were not only found in dumpsters; it embedded itself in and around one's body. Not only were our hands stained and sticky, so were our clothes, shoes, and hair. Without access to running water for washing, there was no relief. Like everyone else in Polje, I stank.

Dumpster residue contributed quite a bit to my odor but so did the exertion of the work itself. Trash-picking was strenuous, debilitating, and sweaty. Just sorting through a dumpster was painful. While items on the very top were relatively easy to reach, accessing anything further down required awkwardly bending over the side and stretching out an arm as far as possible. Each time I performed this procedure, the hard metal rim of the dumpster cut into my ribs as my back bent uncomfortably. Even more demanding was retrieving a box from the very bottom of a dumpster, which involved carefully cantilevering my body over the rim. The entire maneuver took strength and concentration.

9 Slippages between varying identities have been highlighted as one significant reason why governmental Romani policies have failed to be effective (Rostas 2019).

But removing boxes from a dumpster was only the first step. Next, they needed to be broken down. This entailed punching, kicking, and tearing to remove packing tape and industrial glue. Then, the flattened boxes were stacked onto the cart and pedaled to the next dumpster. By the end of the circuit, a full load could weigh over 200 kilograms. I often returned to Polje exhausted, drenched in perspiration, and out of breath. But even then, our work was not over: the boxes needed to be unloaded and placed on a large pile at the rear of Bekim's shack.[10] After a short rest, it was time to repeat the process. By the evening, my back, arms, and legs ached, and my hands were peppered with cuts and lacerations.

In addition to collecting paper, preparing it for recycling was also a monumental task. While most shacks in Polje possessed a recycling basket, Bekim's did not. Instead, he simply dumped the paper on the ground. After a couple of weeks, the resulting mound could measure as much as 35 square meters and be as deep as 20 centimeters. Prior to recycling, Ashkali saturated the mound with water in an effort to make the paper heavier and, in theory, command a higher price.[11] This process involved transporting a large plastic bin to a small creek behind the settlement, filling it with water, then carting the heavy receptacle to the paper pile and forming a human chain to drench the paper. This process was repeated at least three times. One man commented that this was the recycling task that he disliked the most. Transporting water was heavy and cumbersome, he said, and it always strained his back. However, the recycling process was still not completed.

It was also our responsibility to load the paper onto the truck that would subsequently transport it to the depot. Working as a group, we stooped over, gathering bundles of paper, and tossed them onto the flatbed. The only effective way to separate the overlapping layers was to grip two or three pieces of cardboard and roll them into a large cylinder. If too much paper was used to create the roll, it grew heavy and unwieldy. But without enough material, it would not hold together. Dry and rigid cardboard would not bend into a roll but if too wet, the bundle dripped, sagged, and fell apart. And throughout this process, the odors and textures of the dumpsters were revisited. Burrowing into the pile uncovered rancid pizza grease, decayed vegetable matter, and pockets of unidentifiable goo. As children also used the mound as a toilet, lifting up a layer of paper could reveal a pile of faeces. Earthworms permeated it all. As I scooped up piles of paper, their mangled bodies fell through my fingers and onto my clothes, adding to the stains that festooned everything I wore.

Packing a truck took at least two hours and often much longer. On one occasion, we moved ten tons of wet paper over the course of seven hours.[12] Repeatedly bending over, wrestling with the wet cardboard, and then hefting the heavy rolls to the truck was exhausting. That evening, it felt like I had strained every muscle in my body, and I tried to move as little as possible. My back hurt, my arms were sore, and my

10 All the items that I collected from Belgrade's dumpsters were given to Bekim and his family.

11 The recycling companies were well aware of this tactic and attempted to counter it by paying less per kilogram for damp paper. Nevertheless, Ashkali still felt the practice was advantageous, and so it continued.

12 This earned 28,000 dinars (€280) and represented two months of sifting through dumpsters, breaking down boxes, contending with store clerks, and avoiding assault.

legs ached. And I stank. When I remarked upon the fortitude necessary to recycle paper, Bekim simply shrugged and commented that this was the life of a trash-picker. And it came with profound long-term consequences. Men in their early twenties routinely complained of chronic pain, while those in their forties could become impaired. The strain of trash work wrecked people's ability to function.

Once the truck departed, we sat down for a hard-earned evening meal, but even then trash played a critical role in nourishing bodies. The majority of food that Fatime served to her family came from the dumpsters. As supermarkets sought to showcase blemish-free foods devoid of decay, wilted and moldy produce were routinely discarded.[13] Yet these items were still at least partially edible. What Serbians deemed to be rotten, trash-pickers turned into meals. Nevertheless, recyclable produce was always difficult to reliably locate and in short supply. As a result, food insecurity and the chronic hunger were commonplace (Saethre 2020). Bekim's thin frame barely exceeded 150 centimeters, a result of constant malnutrition.

Although produce from the dumpster was trimmed, washed, and cooked prior to consumption, these meals, like all meals in Polje, would nevertheless become embedded with trash. Polje's residents eschewed knives and forks, preferring instead to scoop up their food using bread purchased at a local convenience store. Furthermore, the lack of water dissuaded people from washing their hands prior to eating. Consequently, the dirt of dumpsters, which coated everyone's hands, was transferred to food and ingested. During a meal, bread quickly became dotted with dark fingerprints, while a murky film congealed on the surface of other dishes.[14] Not only did food come from the dumpsters; meals became saturated with waste. Consequently, trash was not only a job and an identity: it was embodied.

In Polje, bodies were quite literally wasted. Trash and trash work ensured that settlements were spaces where everyday existence was made difficult. People were simply worn out, what Puar (2017, 16) refers to as the "slow death of debility." This is made possible by evolving technologies through which bodies subsidize capitalism and "are made to pay for 'progress'" (Gidwani and Reddy 2011; Puar 2017, 13). The debilitated bodies of trash work, then, were evidence of human disposability through corporeal wasting (Yates 2011). Restricting infrastructure, such as legal access to the electrical grid, as well as calories are also part of this process. But equally important was the stinking, cloying, abject nature of waste. Trash-picking produced deeply physical reactions through the body and its senses. Chronic filthiness and nausea were significant sites of incapacitation.[15] Consequently, Ashkali and Roma were not only managed through stigmatized identities, economic marginalization, and racialized labor; through trash, their bodies were actively and repeatedly incapacitated and wasted.

13 Meat and cooked food were always rejected for fear that they were spoiled. Meanwhile, packaged foods such as candy and potato chips were only retrieved if they were unopened.

14 As a result, gastrointestinal complaints were common among Polje's residents.

15 Furthermore, the association between waste workers and abjection acts as a sensorial marker of their social transgression and expulsion to excepted geographies (Baumann and Massalha 2022, 560).

Conclusion

For Polje's residents, trash – collecting it, managing it, recycling it, eating it – was at the center of their lives. The necessity of living on trash is the result of a series of intersecting factors. First, the materiality of garbage coupled with the rise of mass-produced goods created the potentiality for a plethora of discarded yet still useful items. Furthermore, when Serbia's economy and infrastructure was devastated after the Kosovo War, the government looked to China, the major producer of low-cost merchandise, to provide goods that it could no longer access via other markets. Just as Chinese imports were pouring into Serbia, so too were refugees. The war itself was sparked by ethnic nationalism which not only excluded Ashkali and Roma; it subjected them to violence. As families like Bekim's arrived in Belgrade, longstanding prejudices regarding Ashkali and Roma ensured that they were viewed as dangerous and relegated to informal settlements while being denied the opportunity to work legally. With few other options, many like Bekim turned to trash.

Polje, a discarded and excepted geography, was functionally excised from the city that surrounded it. As they searched the surrounding dumpsters, its inhabitants were dismissed as dirty, needy, and deceitful. Finally, trash work debilitated people's bodies through chronic exhaustion, strain, and nausea. Yet even as these conditions increasingly structures people's lives, they often are taken for granted. Rather than an exceptional crisis, wasting has become a normative and banal aspect of social and economic precarity (Puar 2017). Indeed, Ashkali often spoke of the pain of trash collecting as boring and unremarkable. Broken bodies were not framed in terms of suffering but rather as ordinary. As Bekim had told me: this was simply the life of a trash-picker.

In a world increasingly characterized by precarity, where more and more people have become tied to detritus produced by others, trash transcends objects found in dumpsters. A reliance of wasted objects parallels the wasting of spaces, identities, and corporealities. But in Serbia, trash was also a lifeline. It allowed people like Bekim to earn a living and express agency in doing so. Acknowledging this, and the ways in which trash work is embedded into global capitalist networks, is one step in mitigating marginalization. Reframing trash-picking in terms of formal work could potentially lead to de-stigmatization and encourage its incorporation into fair labor practice legislation. Trash is fundamentally transformational and its status, and that of those who rely on it, is capable of change.

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