# Making Virtue Out of Necessity

# In a Southern Romanian *Mahala*

By

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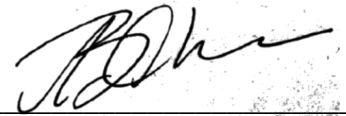
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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Anamaria Berbec-Chirițoiu, candidate for the PhD degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology, declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Bucharest, 31 July 2021

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis is an ethnography of inequality, social order, and virtue set in the midst of a Roma population who call themselves 'Thieves' ('*Rom Čor*'). The Rom Čor maintain that what sets them apart from other Roma and from non-Roma is their 'talent' to outsmart the latter through various means of wealth extraction. In this thesis, however, I analyse outsmarting beyond the logic of procurement, legal categories, and methodological moralism. Instead, I propose to view outsmarting as the Rom Čor's attempt to circumvent the social exclusion that defines their place in society and to assert themselves in a social landscape dominated by non-Roma where they are denied access to basic resources and, what is perhaps even more vexing, dignity. Outsmarting highlights a proactive and resourceful agency that inserts control into a system of structural restrictions and power inequalities. I argue that the social inequality that encroaches the Rom from without and the hierarchies that they cultivate from within interact dialectically to place outsmarting at the core of the Rom Čor's social reproduction, in both material and ideological terms. As the first ethnography of the Rom Čor, this research is new. Using a holistic approach, I examine how the Rom cultivate virtue through adverse circumstances across a variety of contexts: place-making, domesticity, making relations, legal practices, economy, and politics. My argument is that the Rom strive for, and often achieve, virtuous personhood not just despite, but also *through* social exclusion and the many obstacles that this raises in the way of having a good life. Specifically, with this ethnography of social order, crime, and virtue at the European margins, I propose that the relation between social inequality and virtuous personhood need not be analysed as adversative, but as dialectical. And, with that, I argue that people do not merely aspire to live good lives *in spite of* social exclusion, but *by virtue of* it; indeed, that they make virtue out of necessity.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people and institutions contributed to this work over the years and, while I may not be able to thank all of them here properly, my gratitude to them extends well beyond these pages. Thanks are due, first of all, to my supervisor, Daniel Monterescu, whose enthusiasm for this project remained intact even in times when mine faltered. He was not just a supervisor but, in the kinship parlance of this thesis, something of a 'mother's brother:' he provided just the right combination of trust, help, encouragement, and autonomy to see this through. I am also grateful to Andreas Dafinger, who pushed me to strive for relevance and responsibility and who treated me as a colleague long before I started behaving like one. My work with them both has shaped my academic *Bildung*, and I thank them for that.

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Ana Chirițoiu
Bucharest
31 July 2021
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# CONTENTS

*Dialect*

I use the phonetic transliteration of the Mahala Rom's spoken dialect of Romani in the manner they use it themselves in writing. This differs from the standard versions of the language that I have learned in Melinda Vajda's language classes at CEU, who taught a version of the Lovari dialect, and from the versions standardized, for instance, by Prof. Sarău (e.g., *Curs de limba rromani*. 2000. Cluj Napoca: Dacia), by Prof. Yaron Matras (*Romani: A linguistic introduction*. 2002. Cambridge University Press), or by Ronald Lee (*Learn Romani: Das-duma Rromanes*. 2005. University of Hertfordshire Press). The Rom of Mahala met my attempts to speak these dialects with amusement but insisted that I should learn to speak as they did if I was going to speak Romani with them at all. Apart from the inherent lexical variations that all Romani dialects manifest, as they borrow words from the dominant languages around them, the differences between the dialect spoken by Mahala Rom and the dialects I learned elsewhere are mainly phonetic and pragmatic.

Most Rom in Mahala spoke Romanian to me and conducted conversations with one another in my presence in Romani, aware of the fact that I understood them. When I cite fragments from these conversations, I italicize Romani and Romanian terms, and provide the English equivalent between brackets. All Romani terms are italicized and preceded by the notation 'Rom.;' terms in Romanian are preceded by the notation 'Rou.' Proper names are not italicized in the text.

*Terminology: Rom/Roma/Gypsy*

I use the word 'Roma' to refer to the minority at large, and 'Rom' to refer strictly to the population I worked with, as they do not employ the form 'Roma' for plural, but 'Rom.' I also refer to them as 'the Rom Čor' or 'the Rom of Mahala.' Although the Rom of Mahala used the word *tsigan* ('Gypsy') to refer to themselves when speaking Romanian, given its pejorative overtones, I only use this word occasionally, when I refer to the Rom from the eyes of non-

Roma or when citing their own words. However, I use the word *tsiganie* in the same way the Rom would use it, both in Romanian and in Romani, to refer to a collectivity of Rom. Likewise, I mostly use the Romani word for non-Roma, which is *gaʒo* (fem. *gaʒi*, pl. *gaʒe*), and only switch to the term 'non-Roma' to avoid repetition.

*A note on pronunciation and transliteration*

Ʒ (as in Rom. *gaʒo*) is read /dʒ/ like in Eng. '**j**ump'.
Ă (as in Rom. *khăr*) is schwa /ə/
X (as in Rom. *baxt*) is read /h/ like in Eng. '**h**ouse'
Č (as in Rom. *Čor*) is read /tʃ/ like in Eng. '**ch**oice'
SH/Ş is read /ʃ/ like in Eng. '**sh**all'
TS/Ţ (as in Rom., Rou. *tsiganie*) is read /ts/ like in Germ. Schwar**z**.

*A glossary of frequently used terms*

*rom* (pl. *rom*) = man, husband; person of male gender acknowledged as a Rom by other Roma
*romni* (pl. *romnea*) = woman, wife; female equivalent of Rom above
*shei*, *sheiorri* (pl. *sheia*, *sheiorrea*) = Roma girl; daughter
*shavo*, *shavorro* (pl. *shave*, *shavorre*) = Roma boy; son
*gaʒo* (pl. *gaʒe*) = non-Roma man. Dictionaries usually translate the Romani word 'gaʒo' as 'foreigner, outsider or non-Roma'. In its frequent occurrence in daily speech, however, the word acquires multiple, often contradictory meanings. The Rom of Mahala would use it to refer to things as varied as the state, utility companies, random Romanian ethnics, assimilated Roma, one another, and the world at large. When speaking Romanian, they used 'român' ('Romanian') to translate gaʒo. For a schematic equivalence of the terms that will come forth in the thesis, *Rom* is to *gaʒo* (in Romani) as *tsigan* is to *Romanian* (when speaking Romanian). In the thesis, for the sake of clarity, I use the word 'gaʒo' where the Rom would say 'român.'
*gaʒi* (pl. *gaʒea*) = non-Roma woman
*raklo*/*rakli* = non-Roma boy/girl
*neamo* = 1. a distinct group of Roma, identified by their ethnonym (Bear-tamers, Tinkersmiths, Musicians, etc.); 2. extended family or clan, identified either by an illustrious forefather or by an illustrious contemporary. Most *neamos* in this second sense have a plural form, e.g., Ioneștii < Ion.
*tsiganie* = a collectivity or gathering of Rom who recognise one another as fellow Rom from the same *neamo* (in the sense of 1 above) and who live *romanes*, in accordance to Rom values. For comparison, see also Piasere's notion of 'ensemble *romanès*': 'J'appelle «

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ensemble *romanès* » cet ensemble d'une grande variété de groupes et de personnes qui disent vivre ou simplement faire les choses *romanès*, justement.' (2015:19).

*mahala* = 1. area or neighborhood populated by Rom; 2. the sum of Rom who inhabit this area. Like in the many other languages where it entered from Arabic (through Turkish, in the case of Romanian), *mahala* (pl. *mahalale*) initially meant an administrative division comparable to the term 'neighborhood.' In time, in Romanian the term acquired a decidedly pejorative nuance, like many other Turkish imported words. Thus, it came to refer to mostly marginal areas that somehow escaped the sweep of 'civilization;' its inhabitants, *mahalagii*, stand for insufficiently urbanized dwellers (and are most likely working class and/or former peasants). For more details on how the notion of *mahala* became pejorative in Romania, and how this is connected to the national bourgeois ethos, see Pulay (2017: 76 ff); Sârbu (2009). For the Rom the word is *not* pejorative, even though they are aware that ethnic Romanians use it as such.

*khăr* = house

*forro* = town, city

*gav* = village. Cognate with the Hindi word *gāmv*, 'village'.

    *Ʒan and-o gav* = lit. going to the village; fig. going to make money

*abeav* = marriage. Cognate with the Rajasthani word *byāv*, 'marriage'.

*avel la vorbaia* = lit. to come with the word. The phrase captures the process when the (potential) wife-takers visit the wife-givers to ask for the latter's daughter hand in marriage. The word *pețania*, an adaptation of Romanian, is also used.

*avel la sticlaia* = lit. to come with the bottle. The phrase means that after the alliance was agreed upon, the wife-takers bring a bottle of liquor and the bride's father takes the first sip from it as a sign of his agreeing to the marriage

*bori* = bride, young wife, daughter-in-law

*condiții* = conditions that are formulated by wife-givers to wife-takers. It generally means the amount of money that the wife-takers will pay for their daughter-in-law as a sign of valuing her, and may also include that the family of the groom pays for the wedding, that the woman is allowed to visit her parents, etc.

    *Beshav ande tumare condiții* = lit. I sit in your conditions, meaning, I will agree to whatever you ask of me. It is used by wife-takers to express their willingness to whatever wife-givers might ask of them, and also by people who have committed a mistake and were found guilty towards the person they injured.

*jamutro* = son-in-law

*xanamici* = parents-in-law

*nashavel* = (used for men) to run away with a woman (to cause her to run away)

*nashel* = (used for women) to run away with a man

    *nashli* = (past participle, fem.) a woman who ran away with a man

*lel peskă romni* = lit. a man is getting himself a woman; to get married. It is also used to refer to parents-in-law begetting a daughter-in-law, e.g., *O rom lea pala pesko shav la shea ăl Antonioski* = The man got Antonio's daughter for (literally 'after') his son.

*baxt* = luck, happiness, blessing, accomplishment. One of the most frequent imprecations in Mahala is *marel ki baxt*, meaning '[may God] strike your luck.'

*belea* = 1. trouble; 2. conflict; 3. bad luck. E.g.: *Kărav beleaua tuia* = 'I will make trouble with you,' 'we'll get into a conflict.' The proportions of *belea* can vary from small interpersonal quarrels to conflicts between extended families involving hundreds of individuals. As such, *belea* can mean a verbal confrontation as well as a physical one.

In terms of Romani jurisprudence, *belea* is the antonym of *judecata*, 'trial,' whereby conflicts are mediated rather than enacted.

*xoli* = annoyance, vexation

*xap-ke vast* = lit. 'I eat your hand'. A formula for respectful address, conveying the humility of the speaker. It is used by children to elders, between spouses, and by both genders, where in English people would use 'please' or 'thank you.' Several similar formulas exist, referring to other body parts as well, and their usage and intent (ranging from respect to offense) vary widely according to the gender, age, and relations of the interlocutors. For instance, *xap-ke mij* (lit. 'I eat your [expletive for female genitals]') can be used by women who are on friendly terms to one another; equally, it can be used by a woman towards another woman whose commitment the speaker is trying to elicit. Variations of these formulas are also used towards non-Roma, in Romanian, when trying to elicit their goodwill.

*merav anda tute* = lit. 'I die for you'. It is used as the equivalent of 'I love you' or 'I care about you,' to express friendship, devotion, loyalty.

*marel ki baxt* = lit. 'may your luck be beaten.' Used as an insult or a 'lighter' curse.

*te bengoav* = I swear, lit. 'may I be bedeviled.' From '*beng*,' 'devil.'

1. Used as an oath (in conditional sentences) to testify to the truth of what follows it.

2. It can also be used as a way to swear to do or not to do something in the future, e.g., *te bengoav te mai doa duma tuia* = 'may I be bedeviled if I talk to you again.' When made seriously, such oaths need to be 'undone' by a priest.

3. It can also be used to swear (i.e., oblige) someone to do something (only when seniority allows the speaker to direct other people's behavior).

4. At the same time, the phrase can also be used in casual speech, without any ritual load, when an interlocutor expresses or feigns interest at what is being said ('te bengaves?' = 'really? is that so?').

# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

*Maps*

*Both maps were made by Jutta Turner at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale)*

*Figures*

*Figures made by author unless otherwise specified.*

*Photos*

*Photos showing people's faces have been blurred for anonymity. With thanks to Ștefan Voicu.*

# FOR A DIALECTIC OF VIRTUE

# INTRODUCTION

> Only those defences that depend on you yourself
> and on your own virtue are good, certain, and lasting.
>
> — Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (2005:84)

This thesis is an ethnography of inequality, social order, and virtue set in the midst of a Roma population who call themselves 'Thieves' ('*Rom Čor*'). The Rom Čor maintain that what sets them apart from non-Roma (whom they call '*gaʒe*' in Romani) in particular, and also from other Roma, is their 'talent' to outsmart others through theft, begging, witchcraft, and other means of wealth extraction. In my thesis, however, I analyse outsmarting beyond the logic of procurement, namely as the Rom Čor's attempt to counter social exclusion and assert themselves in a social landscape dominated by non-Roma that denies them access to basic resources and, what is perhaps even more vexing, dignity. Insofar as outsmarting highlights a proactive and resourceful agency that inserts control into a system of structural restrictions and power inequalities, through outsmarting, Rom Čor challenge the social exclusion that defines their place in society. Thus, the various marginalizations that define them as 'Gypsies' are not merely a plight but become circumstances to be harnessed in pursuit of what the Rom Čor call 'capability' and I conceptualize as relational virtuous personhood. I argue that the social inequality that encroaches the Rom from without and the hierarchies that they cultivate from within interact dialectically to place outsmarting at the core of the Rom Čor's social reproduction, in both material and ideological terms.

The Rom Čor also call themselves '*Rom tsiganiake*' in Romani, or '*ţigani de ţigănie*' in Romanian, which is more of an evaluation than a descriptor, as it means something akin to 'true' or 'authentic' Roma or, as they put it, people who live in a Roma settlement in accordance with their group's values. Living on the outskirts of a southern Romanian town, the Rom Čor are not only geographically and socially marginal, but also seen as ungovernable by the town institutions and by the non-Roma majority population. In many respects—administrative and legal, among others—their neighborhood, which I shall call 'Mahala,' is effectively reduced to an enclave. What's more, the Rom of Mahala see themselves as beyond the purview of the state, which to them is synonymous with, and a construct of, the gaʒe, hence it needn't concern them. Therefore, they cultivate a social order that runs parallel to, and sometimes in opposition with, the order, institutions, and values of the non-Roma. However, my thesis shows that this relation is not merely oppositional or adversarial, but instead complicit and dialectical.

The marginality of the Rom Čor is emblematic for most Roma populations: dire figures indicate that across Eastern Europe the majority of Roma continue to live at the spatial, economic, and social margins of society, lacking basic state provisioning, recognition, and representation (European Commission 2020). Furthermore, the Rom's appropriation of the label of 'Thieves' and of the pejorative Romanian term '*ţigan*'[1] into their ethnonyms indicates that they have internalized many of the stereotypes that the non-Roma circulate about them (Bó 2019). But they did not stop there: they also strategically turned some of these stereotypes around, 'owned'

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[1] The word *tsigan* derives from the Greek word *athinganoi*, meaning 'untouchables' and dating back to Byzantine times, when it is believed that the groups of the populations we now call 'Roma' first arrived into Europe (Fraser 1992). It is debated whether the Byzantine term is a derivation of the Indian notion of 'untouchable' or a European invention, and whether it was a value judgment or a mere acknowledgment of the newcomers as 'pagans.' A separate hypothesis was proposed by Romanian linguist Cherata (2018), who suggested that the word *tsigan* may well come from Sanskrit variations for 'nomad,' *at(i)-ingā-nin* and *tyāgan(in)*, and hence should not be seen as pejorative. In Romanian, the word *tsigan* historically designated slavery status rather than ethnicity.

them as it were, and made them part of who they are. Building on this observation, my ethnographic research of Romani marginality analyses the exclusionary politics from without and the social reproduction of 'Gypsyness' from within as contiguous, dialectic processes.

The Rom Čor are far from unique in asserting their distinction from non-Roma and from other Roma groups or in claiming to be the most 'authentic' of all Roma. What is particular to them, however, is that they describe themselves not just as different from the gaʒe but as explicitly and substantially at odds with them. This makes them an exemplary case of 'owning' the stigma that all Romani populations are faced with and turning it into a resource for social reproduction, rather than an obstacle. Analysing how the Rom Čor live and practice their occupations not despite of, but *through* prejudice, my thesis focuses on the dialectics of exclusion and cultivation of virtue in order to overcome the theoretical stalemate between 'suffering,' 'otherness,' and 'resistance' that characterises much contemporary research on marginal groups (Ortner 2016; Robbins 2013).

The antagonism implied by outsmarting—or, as Sahlins (2017) phrased it, 'negative reciprocity'—not only states a difference between Rom and gaʒe but also shows that difference does not merely exist for its own sake. On closer examination, this apparent antagonism exhibits a relational logic and undergirds 'vernacular' notions of social order and virtuous personhood—how to be in the world and how to act upon it—that my thesis sets out to explore. Piliavsky (2020) argues that it is only when inequality is put to work and enacted—when it is turned into hierarchy, a logic of social rank that comes with belonging and obligations—that it acquires its true, relational meaning (rather than the substantive meaning it has been attributed from Dumont (1970) onwards). One of the arguments that my thesis puts forth is that the purported antagonism of outsmarting disguises in fact a much more nuanced relation, that, under the guise of enmity, in fact entails making relations and belonging. Williams (2011)

termed this apparent paradox 'the "detachment-attachment" process,' which 'is about differentiation by way of the very thing that belongs to those that one is differentiating from' (*op. cit.*: 27). As he explains:

> This process denotes at once belonging and emancipation. Perhaps it is due to its success that Gypsies seem unable to shake the reputation of thieves, a phenomena [*sic*] that articulates totality, the "thieves" stereotype, and community; the process through which the community constructs its cultural specificity (which is also an articulation between stereotype and reality). This manner of establishing specificity … at once detaches them from the original material (from the *gadje*) and ties them to it (to the *gadje*). (*idem*)

In line with these arguments, I examine the ways in which the internal hierarchies of the Rom Čor reflect, reproduce, resist, or counter the inequalities that encroach them from without, and the ways in which they attempt to turn their position of inequality into a place in a social hierarchy: to become socially incorporated, rather than 'integrated.' My ethnographic engagement with 'outsmarting' beyond legal categories and methodological moralism, as a mode of being in the world and of acting upon the world, proposes a more decidedly relational and political understanding of moralities and a moral understanding of politics, too.

Most broadly, my thesis aims to revisit the relation between social inequality and virtuous personhood and map out the intersection of political, legal, and moral anthropology. Analysing how the Rom of Mahala live and practice their occupations through marginalization and exclusion, I focus on the dialectics of social marginality and the cultivation of virtue in order to overcome the theoretical stalemate between 'suffering' and 'otherness' or 'resistance' that characterises much contemporary research on marginal groups. Indeed, the topic of inequality that is often employed to describe the structural position of the various Romani populations across European societies (and beyond) continues to loom large over contemporary social sciences and public debates alike. Much scholarship concerns itself with documenting the

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horrendous effects of inequality, while a smaller, but compelling body of work argues that people can nonetheless live virtuous lives even in the most improbable circumstances, whether they be afflicted by inequality, exclusion, criminalization, or by other forms of social suffering. Despite of all these hurdles, the argument goes, the human search for meaning and virtue prevails. But does it in fact prevail *in spite of* hardship, or *through* it? My argument is that the Rom strive for, and often achieve, a virtuous personhood not just under, but also *through* the most unfavourable conditions, against social exclusion and the many obstacles that this raises in the way of having a good life. In this ethnography of social order, crime, and virtue at the European margins, I analyse the relation between social inequality and virtuous personhood not as adversarial, but as dialectical. And, with that, I argue that people do not merely aspire to live good lives *in spite of* social exclusion, but *by virtue of* it; indeed, as the title of my thesis implies, that they make virtue out of necessity.

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*Map 1. Approximate location of research site.*

# A very special 'talent'

*Ambivalent encounters*

Not much in my upbringing prepared me for my work with Roma, save for the fact that in the early '90s, my father, an engineer at a rapidly downsizing factory, befriended Antonio, a Roma shopfloor worker, who lost his job and started bringing electronics from abroad. Soon, my father set up shop in Antonio's house in the infamous *tsiganie* (Roma neighborhood) on the margins of a town I shall call 'Oraș,' repairing the used electronics that Antonio and his fellow Rom brought from Western Europe, selling them on, and sharing the profit. This lucrative business lasted for several years, until the end of the nineties, when my father passed away and Antonio moved abroad with his family.

I met Antonio again some fifteen years later, at a civil society event in Bucharest, where I was working for a Roma NGO. Meanwhile, Antonio had returned to his hometown after several years abroad and was rising through the ranks of the local branch of the 'Pro Europa' Roma Party. He had gotten a degree in law and a job as the mayor's advisor for ethnic relations, and slowly but surely secured for himself the reputation of being *the* Roma leader in town, if not in the region. Our reencounter in the bosom of civil society in Bucharest was deeply ambivalent: on the one hand, Antonio was the only person in the room who knew and called me by my childhood nickname; on the other hand, it quickly became clear that we found ourselves on different sides of the Romani movement—he, the embodiment of patriarchal 'traditional leaders' who kept entire communities 'captive' in networks of patronage and obligations, as cosmopolitan activists denounced, and me, an enthusiastic non-Roma 'ally' of said activists, working in a project dedicated to enabling the access of Roma to the labor market.

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Beyond the awkwardness of our reencounter, there was something that caught my eye: the people who accompanied Antonio. A handful of men wearing lofty hats and shiny, pointed shoes, making ample gestures, and women dressed in long skirts heavily adorned with sequins, their long hair covered with colourful headscarves, wearing opulent golden jewellery, and chattering in Romani. They seemed like a completely different sort of 'Roma' than the ones that civil society in Bucharest talked about, i.e., equal, emancipated citizens, integrated into the labour market, aware of gender equality, and able to claim their rights. In fact, Antonio's lot appeared to embody most of the stereotypes about 'Gypsies' that civil society was at pains to combat: they were colourful, loud, and did not seem to have much in common with their fellow Roma who animated the Romani movement, least of all an interest in equality and integration. At the same time, it was precisely by embodying these stereotypes that they rendered them vacuous and silly. I wanted to find out just how they did that. Soon after this encounter, I quit my job in civil society and embarked onto my academic research that resulted in this thesis.

One of the queries that drove my research was precisely why most of the issues that Roma activists and policymakers represent as urgent to act on largely failed to resonate with their purported constituencies. Members of so-called traditional groups, like Antonio's—a label that is used loosely in common parlance (and in Romani civil society) to refer to Romani-speaking, usually endogamous groups who tend to live clustered together—seemed to be moved by completely different values than those which animated civil society. With their parochial preoccupations for what activists call early-age and/or 'arranged' marriages, patrilines, chalices (Berta 2019; Tesăr 2013) and clans, these 'traditional' groups appeared as what anthropologists

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of yore would have labelled as 'kin-based societies'—if such labels did not obscure just how coeval and European the existence of these populations really is[2].

The realization that kinship matters—for Roma and for many others—far more than our self-congratulatory notions about modernity would have us believe (McKinnon and Cannell 2013) is not new in itself: various forms of relatedness continue to be a resource for people living on the margins of society and the state (Thelen and Alber 2018). (And politics shows the same often holds true for those at the very centre of power.) My initial puzzle stemmed not so much from the truism that kinship matters for Roma, or indeed that it is central to the political life of their communities, but from noticing that it even animates such harmful practices—so-called 'kinship wrongs' (Sahlins 2013a)—as human trafficking for grooming, begging or prostitution that appear to be particularly prevalent among Roma (Trafficking in Persons Report 2021:471; Vidra et al. 2015). If kinship is a resource, a place of trust and mutuality, how does it also become a context for exploitation and encompassment? Does belonging curtail autonomy? And, when push comes to shove, which of the two matters more? Moreover, if the people who accompanied Antonio appeared to be indifferent to the emancipatory promises of integration, better access to education, healthcare, and jobs, that civil society demanded in their name and instead turned to kinship for self-realization, what mattered for them? What did *they* aspire to?

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[2] Early anthropology employed multiple dyads to distinguish between the various forms of political organization of non-Western societies. Kin-based, status, *Gemeinschaft*, pre-class, and stateless societies are among the most frequently employed in contradistinction to the modern state. For ample critiques of these models, see e.g., Fabian (2014); Godelier (2012); Kuper (2017).

*Thieves, witches, and activists*

I sought Antonio out a few years after our encounter in Bucharest, in the spring of 2016, as I was starting my doctoral fieldwork. We made an appointment at his office at the local Roma Party headquarters and, after remarking that it was about time I got married, he offered me his unconditional support for my work, in memory of his friendship with my father. Although neither he (nor I) knew exactly what I was researching, he was adamant that he would help me finally write 'the truth', as opposed to the 'lies' written about Roma to date by Romani activists whom I had been associated with and who, in Antonio's eyes, were not even 'real Gypsies.' His tirades against activists would become a recurrent topic in our conversations and were meant for me to expiate my previous association with the more cosmopolitan (and less 'real') branch of the Romani movement, as Antonio saw NGOs in Bucharest. At this preliminary discussion, however, he merely wanted to set the terms of our work together.

'I can't collaborate with just anyone,' he said, firmly. 'I need to work with someone whom I trust completely, because nobody else knows the things I know.' It would have been foolish to reassure him that he could trust me—clearly, trust was something to be gained, not merely declaimed. His manifest affection to me and his loyalty to my father, whom he invoked early on during our encounter, did not automatically translate into trust. Indeed, trust is a matter of strategy and pragmatic judgments, not of sentiments. I said I was open to his terms—something that, as I would later learn, the Rom of Mahala would term as 'sit in someone's conditions.'

Second, Antonio was adamant that everything I thought I knew about Gypsies was wrong, because I had learned it from books or from 'people who have only been Gypsies in the past 15 years' (referring to Roma activists in Bucharest, who, unlike Antonio, rarely come from 'traditional,' Romani-speaking backgrounds). He also warned me that every different community had its own peculiarities, so I needed to know from the outset which group I wanted

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to study. As for access, he swore[3] that no family I would live with would open up to me about their secrets either, even though they might share everything they had with me. In short, Antonio made it clear that nobody else would tell me the truth the way he would: 'Listen to me,' he exclaimed, 'because nobody else on this planet will tell you the things I tell you.' What he wanted in exchange for his honesty was that I write 'the truth.' He expressed this in no uncertain terms: 'I don't want to collaborate with people who harm my community, who give it another face, maybe beautiful, lyrical, but not real.'

What was the truth that Antonio wanted told? He informed me that there are two types of Rom in Mahala: Brickmakers ('Cărămizari') and Thieves ('Hoți'), and that nobody had ever written about the latter. Their existence went ignored in both activist and academic circles: 'Nobody talks about Thieves. Let's make history. All the activists attacked me for saying this. Let's see the real, untold story, let's see how they stole.' Still unsure whether 'Thieves' was a proper ethnonym or merely a slur, I explained hesitantly that writing about how Roma steal would reinforce exactly the stereotypes that the Romani movement was trying to refute. No wonder they would not hear of it. Antonio decided to ignore my reservations and went on to talk about his childhood memories of living among Thieves. I took his insistence on telling the truth not just as an ultimatum, but also as an encouragement for me to do exactly what I happened to think my job was: make sense of whatever 'the field' throws at me. Unlike the engaged research I had conducted until a few years before then in the service of civil society, academic research did not need to be teleological and calculate the impact of its findings in other terms than analytical or theoretical. Or so I thought back then.

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[3] 'I swear on whatever I hold most precious that even if you spend three years in a Gypsies' house you won't find out their secrets.' (Rou. *Eu îți jur pe ce am mai scump că și dacă stai trei ani într-o casă de țigani tot nu o să afli secretele lor.*)

Antonio then spent the remainder of our discussion exploring the history of the neighborhood and of Thieves over the past 150 years since the Gypsies' liberation from slavery, through itinerancy and deportation. 'This nation of Thieves wandered with their carts across the country to steal. And I was in those carts.' At this point he paused to say it brought tears to his eyes that nobody acknowledged the truth he had lived. His urgency on writing the truth came from his view that the vernacular world of 'communities' was 'a vanishing world,' at least in relation to the image of Roma projected by activists. Indeed, he felt that the latter held a monopoly over how Roma were represented and had homogenized this category according to their political interests, ignoring groups such as Antonio's merely because they posed some inconveniences. Antonio acknowledged that activists might want to eliminate stigma, but he felt that this could not be done at the expense of the truth and of accurate representation, indeed of self-denial: 'I cannot say we aren't Thieves if we are Thieves. One should not forget [who one is].' While he stated that stealing was 'a shame' and 'a painful fact,' Antonio was adamant that the truth had to be known despite such considerations, because the skill of stealing was unique to his 'nation' (Rou. *nația*). Stealing was not just what they did, but also who they were.

When free, 'Thieves' roamed around in order to steal for a living; when deported, they falsified official stamps and stole soldiers' uniforms in order to be released from Transnistria. During socialism, when several laws forbidding 'vagrancy' were passed, they kept outsmarting the authorities in order to avoid assimilation. For instance, a leader would go to the police—and that's why he was a leader, Antonio clarified, because he knew how to talk to gaʒe and especially to people in power in the way that these expected a Gypsy man to talk, i.e., by employing humility formulas such as 'I kiss your hand, boss' (Rou. *Sărumîna șefule*) or 'May I eat your [expletive for male genitalia] (Rou. *Mînca-ți-aș pula*)—and claim that Gypsies from elsewhere had stolen someone's daughter. He would then ask for a document stating that he had permission to pursue the wrongdoers to get back his daughter. The authorities, who, much

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like today, were convinced that marriage among 'traditional' Gypsies typically happened by elopement or kidnapping, but did not want to become involved themselves in the matter, concurred. With such a document, a group of two-three caravans could travel wherever they wanted. The message was that the Rom would continue being Rom regardless of which political regime was in power—far right, far left, and anything in-between—by mimicking their logic, or else adapting to it, whilst continuing to pursue their own lifestyle. Antonio once more paused to tell me I was the first 'Romanian' to find out these things, because 'nobody else [but him] wants to say them.'

And why did Antonio think that these things needed to be told? Because stealing was not just 'shameful' and a source of facile indignation; the stake of his expose was not the moral evaluation of theft, since everyone (including himself) can easily agree that stealing is wrong. What he wanted was for me, a researcher, to acknowledge his group and their profile, which he felt were being unjustly erased from the representations of Roma as operated by activists and scholars—indeed were being erased from history. This way, I could finally tell 'the truth' about the Rom's defining 'talent:' 'It's about stealing something, outsmarting (Rou. *a înşela*). We're the only ones on this planet who steal in our own way, that nobody can imitate, even though other groups and even Romanian women might try to, by putting on long skirts.'

And whence this uniqueness? 'We're the only ones on the planet who made two things: *şperaclu* ['picklock'], which no other community in our country uses, and *pusuchi*. The picklock is made in such a way that you can hide it inside your [expletive for female genitalia][4]. The *pusuchi* is a bag that you can put under your skirt and can fit many things inside it. We even stole my eldest son inside my wife's *pusuchi* from the hospital in Hamburg. Gypsy women

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[4] I use the English-language approximation of the register in which Antonio described these things to me (amid apologies that he had to be so crude, but 'your brother tells it like it is').

are talented with their big skirts, they put everything in there, they're professional. When a policeman catches them stealing and searches them, they grab the skirt together with the *pusuchi* [that hangs under their skirts] and show their [expletive for female genitalia] and yell, "What do you want, go to hell..." You never heard of such things, did you?'

These material prerequisites for stealing notwithstanding, what recommends Gypsy women as professional thieves is their 'talent,' according to Antonio. This means that they can easily guess where to find the money is hidden in a household they enter or can 'hypnotize' the people they steal from under their very noses so as to make themselves 'invisible:' a couple of women keep the prospective victims talking, while the third one sneaks inside their house without the owner noticing. 'They don't even know how they do this, because they have no schooling, they're primitive, but they've become experts in psychology,' concluded Antonio.

As if to illustrate this claim, the second part of our discussion delved more into this metaphysical direction: it revolved around a famous witch from Mahala, Fericirea, whom Antonio invoked by way of talking about the psychological skills of Gypsy women. Fericirea was the wife of Antonio's grandfather's first cousin and the sister of his wife's mother ('because we marry amongst ourselves,' per Antonio's clarification).

First, Antonio described the fabulous wealth that Fericirea had acquired due to her 'psychological' skills—'she had thousands of gold coins back when we didn't even have spoons to eat with'—and then gradually slipped into minute descriptions of how her magical powers afflicted various people around her, including the prosecutor who had sentenced her to prison. Antonio believed that Ceaușescu summoned her to Bucharest and assembled a group of scientists to study her, but they failed to break her secrets.

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*Figure 1. Schematic diagram showing how Antonio, Armonia, and Fericirea are related.*

There are many topics to unpick from this preliminary discussion. One is the representation of Roma and their internal variety that Antonio felt was being erased by activists. Another topic is the very difference that Antonio drew between himself and activists in terms of 'purity' or 'Gypsyness' and of the subsequent knowledge of the Roma, which can only be lived and embodied. Relatedly, there is the topic of secrecy, which looms large over Roma ethnographies (as one of the earliest contributions to the field acknowledged in its title: *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* [Sutherland 1975], and as Williams [1982] discussed in detail)—both in terms of being impenetrable by outsiders, and in terms of defying gaʒe epistemology. And, lastly, Antonio's quasi-functionalist description of Thieves as an unknown (or deliberately ignored) occupational group, along with its history, methods, and skills, which he embedded in his emotive, fantastic story of witchcraft. Per Antonio's description, outsmarting appears as a less deliberate activity than it is generally assumed to be and seems more akin to a 'calling' than to a conscious strategy. The point was that, while morally despicable in Antonio's view, theft cannot be reduced to such a petty issue as mere procurement: it is a quasi-magical predisposition, well beyond people's own control, buried deep within their 'genes,' as Antonio

liked to say. The continuum between outsmarting and witchcraft, in his depiction, is a capacity to control other people's minds, which ultimately stands for the Rom Čor's attempt to alter reality when the only means available to do so is simply not from this realm.

## *We live by outsmarting*

Several weeks after this preliminary interview, there was not much progress on the topic of my finding an accommodation in Mahala: as a veritable gatekeeper, Antonio found multiple reasons as to why this was near impossible and, even though he was generally obliging about my project, he met my veiled suggestions that I could start by moving into his household with polite yet firm refusals. He did however put me in touch with his daughter, Mirabela, who was 19 years old at the time and a student in politics, and I started taking Romani-language classes from her. Antonio warned us against conducting our classes in their family home, lest people might disturb us, and invited us to his office instead, but Mirabela wanted us to meet at home, so she could regale me with her hospitality, all the while taking precautions to schedule our classes when everyone else was away or sleeping.

One day, however, her mother, Armonia, came home earlier than usual from her stall at the second-hand market in town. Visibly tense, Mirabela introduced me as a friend of her father's, who often brough home non-Roma friends on account of his political connections. Armonia was distant and deferential, so I tried to warm up to her by recalling how I had once visited their house with my father some twenty years before, when she was pregnant with the very same daughter who was now teaching me Romani. Visibly underwhelmed by the 'fatefulness' of our encounter, Armonia answered with a vague smile: 'Oh yes, I remember. We helped your father a lot and I'm glad we're helping you now. My husband likes to help the gaʒe and get

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nothing in return.' Her remark made me uneasy, partly because it portrayed me and my father as profiteers, and partly because it depicted what I saw as egalitarian, friendly, and mutually beneficial relationships (although the 'benefits' they might derive from my presence were unclear even to me) as inherently and hopelessly unequal. Despite my discomfort, I refrained from arguing back, which turned out to have been a good call: a few days later, Armonia started confiding in me and asked me to move in with them, so that she would have someone to talk to and I could get some help for my research.

Fast-forward a year or so, towards the end of my fieldwork, long after I had moved out of Armonia and Antonio's household. On one of the daily visits I paid her, I found Armonia beside herself with anger: She had just heard from relatives in the US that her eldest daughter, who was in California at the time, had been putting up some distant relatives for quite a while. The people who called Armonia were worried that the guests were abusing her daughter's hospitality. Armonia immediately called her daughter to admonish her. She was embarrassing the entire family, Armonia told her in no uncertain terms, by allowing herself to be taken advantage of by some distant relatives and behaving like a gullible gaʒi (non-Roma). Trying to lift her spirits after she hung up, I suggested that her daughter was being kind in fact; aren't people expected to help others, especially relatives, when abroad and in distress? Armonia gave me one of her fiercest looks and told me loud and clear: 'Would you stop getting on my nerves as well?! We know these things because we're Gypsies, we live by outsmarting, we fool people' (Rou. *Nu mai îmi face nervi și tu. Noi știm lucrurile astea, că sîntem țigani, trăim din șmecherii, fraierim oamenii*).

Her remarks about the seemingly irreducible difference and antagonism between Rom and gaʒe, on the one hand, and about outsmarting as the 'essence' of being Roma sit uneasily not only with the emancipatory projects of activists, EU institutions, and many scholars, but also

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with my own political ideas, to say nothing (for now) of the ethical conundrums that they raise. And yet, despite the many inconveniences that they pose, it would be wrong to treat Armonia's utterings about outsmarting or Antonio's soliloquy about 'Thieves,' as mere casual utterings. They translate a worldview and a sense of social and moral order that constitutes the central topics of my thesis, as they illuminate another facet of the Rom's plight and the ways in which they handle it than the one we know from the terrible statistics describing the position of the Roma in today's Europe. I therefore take the social exclusion of Roma as the starting point of my analysis and trace how it reflects onto this particular group of Rom, who claim to have a monopoly on 'outsmarting' and who, unlike many, or indeed most other Roma groups, choose to describe themselves in uncompromising terms in relation to the gaʒe—albeit, as we shall see, in practice their purported antagonism disguises a more complementary relation.

At the core of my thesis is a preoccupation with social inequality resignified as antagonism and the ways in which antagonism or enmity not only disrupts the social but also regenerates it[5]. Necessarily, this antagonism speaks to the wider world of which the Rom are part, and throughout the thesis, as I explore the self-image of the Rom in relation to the gaʒe, I tackle this process of mutual reflection, shaping, and distinction that unfolds between the Rom and their 'others.' My central concern remains, however, with the Rom and their worldview. This compels me to examine not only the Rom's unequal position vis a vis the gaʒe, and their relation to the outside world, but also the inequalities that they cultivate from within, and how the two shape one another. The thesis looks at the ways in which internal hierarchies among the Rom reflect, reproduce, resist, or counter the inequalities that encroach them from without.

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[5] This notion has had considerable traction in sociology (e.g., Bourdieu et al. 1999; Becker 2008; Popitz 2017; Tilly 2003; Wacquant 2008) particularly in correlation with social suffering, deviance, and marginality. In anthropology, adversity or antagonism have mostly been tackled in an implicit manner. For an explicit treatment of adversity as a socially creative process, see: Blok 1975; Carey 2017; Gluckman 1955; Mühlfried 2019; Piliavsky 2020; Stasch 2009; Turnbull 1987; Umbreș, n.d.

This thesis is focused neither squarely on the 'difference' that the Rom maintain from others, nor on how they 'suffer' under marginalization and exploitation, but on the dialectic between these two processes, and on the practices and ideologies of virtue that this dialectic engenders.

My thesis is, then, a political ethnography of a Roma population located on the margins of a mid-sized southern Romanian town. Specifically, I examine how the inequalities that encompass the Rom from without reflect onto their internal organization and onto their inner hierarchies, and how the Rom attempt to turn inequality—a dry statistic regarding the unequal distribution of resources—into hierarchy, an encompassing relation whereby the people on top are morally accountable towards those on the bottom (Piliavsky 2020). This task is compounded by the fact that, much like the Gitanos researched by Gay y Blasco (1999), the Rom of Mahala do not imagine themselves collectively as an ethnic group or a community, but as a sum of individuals who permanently evaluate each other in terms of what they regard as Rom morality. The tenets of this morality remain largely unspoken but are amply performed: a Rom simply *knows* when someone behaves, speaks, or looks *Romanes*. Being a Rom, much like being a proper person, or being well-bred, is not an inborn quality but a contingent quality—indeed, an achievement—that needs to be continuously reenacted or *performed* (Gay y Blasco 1999), both inside the *tsiganie*, and outside of it, and often in very different ways.

## The dialectics of marginalization and distinction

The academic representations of Romanies swing uneasily between two disjointed approaches: one, self-avowedly 'critical,' tackles the *situation* of Roma from the perspective of social justice but often pays less attention to the self-representations, practices, and politics of situated

Roma groups. The other approach tackles the *lives* of discrete Roma populations ethnographically, and is criticized by the former for insufficiently tackling the broader systemic or structural processes that might have shaped these lives. A survey across these two bodies of literature—Roma ethnographies and activist literature, respectively—would lead an unsuspecting reader to believe that they describe two distinct population groups, that only coincidentally share the same ethnonym. On the one hand, critical scholars (e.g., Acton 2018; van Baar 2018; van Baar and Kóczé 2020; Greenfields 2018; Kóczé 2021; Matache and Barbu 2021; Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2018; Sigona and Trehan 2009) largely decry the ways in which the Roma suffer under various forms of exclusion on behalf of majorities, be it racialization, marginalization, exoticization, social exclusion, or other forms of social suffering. On the other hand, ethnographers tend to study more 'traditional' groups that often engage in peculiar or controversial practices, such as 'arranged' marriages or the circulation of prestige objects or busy themselves with 'resisting' gaʒe and state assimilation through informality, and one way or another 'celebrate' being Roma (examples include Berta 2019; Olivera 2012; Stewart 1997; Tauber 2006; Tesăr 2013; Williams 2003). The Roma described by ethnographers often appear to proudly 'not want in' (Gmelch 1986); those described by activists and critical scholars seem to never have been invited.

This schematic account is further complicated by demographic details: no single one of the Romani populations which drew the attention of ethnographers, which are usually Romani-speakers and self-avowed 'traditional Roma,' can be described as 'representative; for the many diverse Roma groups out there, let alone for Roma groups and individuals who find themselves in various stages of 'assimilation.'[6] In a strange division of academic labor, these latter Roma,

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[6] Williams (2011) addressed this inevitable particularism by emphasizing the 'historical destiny' (*op. cit.*: 34) of all groups labelled as 'Gypsies' that spells out 'the fundamental nature of Gypsy presence: [namely that] we

who do 'want in' but still find themselves left out and discriminated against, who speak little or no Romani, and who do not self-identify as belonging to a particular subgroup, have largely constituted the focus of sociologists and activists, while the more 'traditional' populations have raised the interest of ethnographers (exceptions include Gay y Blasco 1999; Kovai 2020; Okely 1983a; Racleș 2021). Of course, many of these authors try to bridge this gap with various degrees of success but for the purposes of laying out my argument it is important to acknowledge this disconnect and the pitfalls of conducting an ethnographic study of a self-avowed 'traditional' group that defines itself through its 'criminal' propensities.

In my analysis, I explicitly move away from the 'suffering subject' (Robbins 2013) that constitutes the implicit assumption in most of the 'critical' literature delineated above, and I depict the Rom not only as objects of policies and exclusions, but also as agents of their own fates. Not only that, but as people who, despite the many obstacles that define them as 'Gypsies' and circumscribe their place in society, nonetheless strive to lead good lives and to be good people, at least by their own standards. This is in no way meant to deny that a majority of Roma populations suffer under marginalization, poverty, and racialization, but to acknowledge that my choice of fieldsite was decidedly distinct from this norm, which I had engaged with during my stint in civil society. For my doctoral research, I deliberately chose to work with a group who are proud of being Roma, are relatively prosperous, and who are even thought to run the town. This is in many ways the opposite of the lived reality of most Romani populations and of what media depict as 'Roma' or indeed what most people imagine when they hear the word 'Roma': poverty, exclusion, and despondency. To be sure, these too exist in my fieldsite, and I seek to explain how they sit with the sense of supremacy of the Rom that the surrounding

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encounter them only immersed within a society, and it is through the contact with the Other that they become "Gypsies"' (*op. cit.*: 30).

majorities assume and that the Rom themselves sometimes proclaim. Despite their self-representation as tricksters, however, many of the Rom in Mahala are employed in temporary, low-skilled jobs, especially abroad, or earn their living through commerce at the large second-hand market in town; a minority have businesses in real estate, and a few are known usurers catering to Roma and non-Roma clients indiscriminately. Likewise, the gaʒe are not consistently an 'other' to be outsmarted, despised, or kept at arm's length: they are also neighbors, exchange partners, employees, partners in crime, and possible wife-givers. This ambivalence constitutes the topic of my thesis.

## *Marginalization*

If the enduring puzzle that most Romani ethnographies try to resolve is the maintenance of an identity that is so evanescent and so besieged by the surrounding populations like that of Romanies (Stewart 2013), with the fall of socialism and the rise of civil society, a parallel, but not altogether distinct riddle emerged (and persists) for Roma activists and engaged scholars: Why do the Roma still find themselves at the margins of society, after decades of integration policies? Very sketchily put, literature on Roma marginalization generally depicts this phenomenon as a one-way process: majorities and states marginalize Roma, who then suffer under this predicament. This strand of literature has amply documented the marginalization of Roma in most areas of public life, from access to housing and infrastructure to employment, education, environment, and political representation, e.g., Sigona and Trehan (2009), van Baar (2018); Kóczé (2021); Matache and Barbu (2021). In what follows, I will refer in particular to works on urban marginalization, which is relevant to my topic.

In the Introduction to their edited volume on racialized labor in Romania, Vincze et al. (2018) draw a firm connection between racialization and urban marginalization. As their argument goes, this connection needs to be understood as the by-product of global capitalism at the

periphery of Europe as a polity, and of individual European cities. Delimiting themselves firmly from the 'Romani Studies' paradigm as exemplified by ethnographers (Okely, Stewart, Gay y Blasco etc.), whom they criticise for emphasizing cultural politics to the detriment of class politics and structural inequalities resulting in ghettoization, the authors propose viewing *tsiganie*s as '*loci*… constructed within processes of postsocialist de-proletarianization and gentrification' (*op. cit.*: 22). The contributors examine forms of employment, housing, social citizenship, urban development, and ghettoization, convincingly drawing connections between labor (and its lack of organization), class formation, and racial and spatial stigmatization. Such connections indicate the colonial nature of Eastern European postsocialism, as Picker argues in his Conclusions to the volume. Essentially, the volume offers material for pondering upon 'the spatial dimensions of capitalism, that is, how the organization of labor, structured through a capitalist logic, contributes to perpetuate racialized hierarchies via the use of (urban) space in Central and Eastern Europe; and how in turn, then, spatial divisions function in the perpetuation of racialized labor relations, keeping socio-symbolic hierarchies in place.' (Picker 2019: 214). My thesis, however, shows that in the case of Mahala, the marginal position of the Rom is not solely a side-effect of global capitalist processes, but also a mode of ecological adaptation and a political reaction to these structural processes on behalf of the Rom, by way of reproducing a *Romanes* way of life that the state—or the gaʒe, because this is how the Rom usually dub the state—have been incessantly encroaching.

In his study on the urban segregation of European Roma, Picker (2017) dwells on the racial undertones of urban marginalization, which he documents throughout four mechanisms of segregation: displacement, omission, containment, and cohesion. Connecting these contemporary mechanisms back to the urban planning of three colonial cities in three different empires, Picker shows that, while race is no longer an explicit rationale of urban planning, it very much continues to structure the segregation of Roma across Europe. While he emphasizes

that his focus is not with Romani populations as such, but with the marginal spaces that these find themselves in due to racialization, Picker does not tell us how the people in question make sense of their situation. The Rom in my fieldsite with whom I talked at length about their marginal position in the city and in society alike did not wait for me to point out that they have been systematically excluded from citizenship, labor, and belonging. They made all these points themselves, while also insisting on their own *choices* and adaptations in relation to these processes, in a dialectical logic that I examine further in the next chapter.

## *Distinction*

The maintenance of Roma distinction in the midst of hostile majorities that have deployed every means to assimilate them has been at the forefront of ethnographic scholarship on Roma for over one century now (Stewart 2013). The explanations given are as diverse as these populations themselves and the contexts in which they lived. Initially, the academic study of Roma/Gypsies grew out of the same colonialist enthusiasm that also inspired the research of other 'Others': a mixture of curiosity and paternalism. In the case of Romani groups in particular, it took a healthy dose of both to 'discover' a population that, unlike those who lived overseas, had been on the European continent for several centuries and had been subject to well-recorded pogroms and persecutions, including slavery, particularly in the area now known as Romania. One preliminary attempt to pick up the topic of 'Gypsies' was made by the 'Gypsy Lore Society' in London, which issued a journal with the same title[7]. This aura of 'lore' that surrounded Gypsies made them more likely candidates for linguists, folklorists, and ethnologists, under whose purview Romani Studies fell until the 1970s. Possible exceptions include Cotten (1951, 1954) and Barth (1975 [1955]). Part of the belatedness with which

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[7] The Society and the Journal were both founded in 1888. The Journal changed its title to *Romani Studies* in 2000. Some attempts were made to change the name of the Society too, unsuccessfully thus far.

ethnographers picked up the topic of Romanies owes to the taboo of studying populations in Europe that Okely (1994) reminisces of[8].

Among the first ethnographies about Gypsy/Romani populations are Sutherland's *Gypsies, the Hidden Americans* (1975) and Okely's *The Traveller-Gypsies* (1983), both of which shunned 'exoticism' and employed social anthropology to examine these groups' social organisation, maintenance of distinction from surrounding populations, and the ways in which they reflected back on the societies in the midst of which they lived. Okely's work was particularly daring in this respect, shunning the view of Gypsies as outsiders or foreigners (of Indian descent), and instead focusing on their autochthonous roots. Her argument is that, given that the one single feature that various groups labelled as 'Gypsies' share is their rejection of wage labor, they could be seen as a product of capitalist relations of production, specifically landless peasants who refused to become proletarianized at the onset of the industrial age[9]. This view of the Romanies' resistance to state incorporation is also employed by Stewart (1997, 1987) but with respect to socialist relations of production, whereby Gypsies looked down on peasants, played

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[8] Even so, having been ignored for several decades because they did not find themselves in an exotic enough location, Gypsies began to be studied as 'exotic others' among Europeans, and Okely (1994) is right to point out that the ongoing preoccupation with their Indian origins risks minimising just how European their predicament is.

[9] A similarly constructivist argument is put forth by historians Lucassen, Willems, and Cottaar (2015 [1998]), who argue that Gypsy identity is partly the result of stigmatization and labelling by state institutions, which also explains why there is no collective Gypsy ethnicity as such. This tradition continues in the work of Surdu, for instance, who asserts that the Roma collective is a construct of classifications made (with different purposes, obviously) by activists, states, and racists: 'Roma population exists as a negative and oppositional construction made by dominant groups and self-internalized by many of those labelled as Roma' (Surdu 2016: 39). For a critique of constructivism in Romani Studies, see van Baar and Kóczé, who propose instead 'An understanding of Roma agency through the lens of mimicry … [which] helps to explain why the ways in which those who are classified as "Roma" always do more than just mirror the power relationships (of being classified, stigmatized, and so on) in which they are implicated' (2020: 29).

down their forceful incorporation into the proletariat, and glorified dealings in the marketplace instead[10].

Apart from these materialist criteria of differentiation, both Okely and Stewart also discuss symbolic criteria for the Gypsies'/Rom's distinction from Gorgios or gaźos, respectively, and those are pollution beliefs rooted in the (female) body. In the case of English Gypsies, these pollution taboos are to do with the separation between the inner and the outer body, i.e., what goes inside the body and what goes onto it; for this reason, they do not share the same criteria of something being 'dirty' as the Gorgios: clothes may well be dirty or dusty, Okely shows, but tea towels cannot be washed in the same bowls as clothes. For the Hungarian Rom studied by Stewart, it is the separation between the upper body and the lower body that plays this role. A similar argument was made earlier by Sutherland (1975).

Pollution beliefs are of course a huge topic in anthropological literature and are not at all restricted to Romanies; they originate, on the one hand, in Douglas's (1966) oft-cited title, *Purity and Danger*, and on the other hand, in the South Asianist literature that traditionally explains caste division through preoccupations with purity, perhaps most famously by Dumont (1970 [1966]). In taking up the topic of pollution beliefs among the Rom of Mahala, my thesis follows Piliavsky's (2015) argument that the values which organize hierarchies should not be understood as substantive or transactional, but as relational. Piliavsky furthermore suggests

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[10] Several decades after these books were published and created schools, so to speak, one cannot supress the impression that their authors projected some of their own critiques of the societies in the midst of which they studied onto the Gypsies they studied with. Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand how Gypsies studied by Okely in the UK could be staunch anticapitalists whereas Gypsies studied by Stewart in socialist Hungary a mere decade later would turn out to be unrepentantly anti-communist. The fact remains however that most ethnographies document the tendency among various Romani populations to exercise autonomous economic activities (see especially Williams [1982]). This is not so much due to ideological predispositions as it is to do with the fact that waged labor, a fixed schedule, and being part of a labor hierarchy is incompatible with the demands of living *Romanes*, i.e., being there for relatives and carrying out family activities at any time necessary.

that the values that order a given society do not reside within people, entities, or social roles as such, but in the relations between them (2020: 19-22).

This relational view is almost unavoidable in Romani Studies, given that Romanies everywhere live permanently in a world of 'others' on whom they depend. Williams, for instance, famously stated in his study of Kalderash invisibility (1982) that, 'immersed in non-Gypsy societies, where the Rom exert no influence at all on the organization and evolution of these societies… they have chosen to act as if they were not within these societies, but to the side and beyond them' (*op cit.*: 324) or, later, in his study of the Manuš: 'the Manuš live in the world of the Gadzos' and not only 'in the same world as the Gadzos' (Williams 2003:29). Piasere likewise described the identity of the Rom as 'toujours relationelle, jamais substantive' (1994: 34). The ubiquity of the gaʒe is handled differently by different authors: building on Barth (1969), Okely (1983) focuses on transactions and practices of 'boundary-maintenance'; Stewart, under the influence of Leach (1970 [1954]), looks at the performance of identity in everyday relations; and later ethnographers, such as Gay y Blasco (1999) and Engebrigtsen (2007), focus more squarely on relations of mutuality, borrowing, mimicry, or 'interdependence.' Engebrigtsen's (2007) ethnography shows that the exchanges between Roma and villagers in Transylvania display a complementarity that is disguised by means of a strategic 'mutual misrecognition.' While focusing on the gendered performance that she places at the core of Gitano belonging, Gay y Blasco (1999) shows that the gender norms proclaimed by the Gitanos as their very own have a solid conservative Spanish genealogy and can be recognized by payos (non-Roma).

Gay y Blasco's ethnography is relevant to my project for yet another reason. While previous authors exalted the egalitarian relations of the Rom—most notably Stewart (1997), who talks about the Rom's 'brotherhood' both as redistribution of material goods, and as a sense of all being part of the same 'community' of people who do things *Romanes*—Gay y Blasco is critical

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of the metaphysical dimension implied by the notion of 'community,' suggesting that the word should be understood as 'commonality' rather than 'communion' (1999: 15-16; 46-50). This invites a scrutiny of the 'centrifugal forces' that differentiate the Gitano community internally, not just from payos, but from one another. Theirs is an individualist (as opposed to a communalist) type of belonging, whereby, for all the scarcity of their interactions, Gitanos are aware '*of each other as moral beings*' (*op. cit.*: 41, emphasis in original).

Gay y Blasco begins her analysis of the inner differentiations in Gitano society with the observation that cooperation is restricted to kinsmembers. It is therefore kinship that gives Gitano sociability its 'fragmented character' (*op. cit.*: 43), because patrilineal units (*raza*) constitute the main basis in the case of conflicts, which are always a latent possibility.[11] Their strength draws on sheer numbers as well as on overlaps between affinity and consanguinity that intensify solidarity, very much like in the case of the Rom Čor, as I show in Chapter 5. (Unlike the Gitanos of Jarana, however, the Rom of Mahala do not favour cohabitation or proximity among members of the same family group, which I discuss in Chapter 3 as a perpetuation of the same centrifugal tendencies discussed by Gay y Blasco.)

Herein lie a number of paradoxes. One is that between the Gitanos' internal fragmentation and their insistence that they are a separate people from payos; Gay y Blasco shows that this is only an apparent contradiction, since 'Gypsyness does not imply communion or cohesiveness' (*idem*: 47) but rather 'adherence to… *la ley Gitana*' (*idem*: 48), i.e., performing Gypsyness in a way that is recognized and morally sanctioned by other Gypsies. This raises another question: Who are those capable of this moral evaluation? In my fieldsite, one Roma girl who went to town dressed in jeans went to great lengths (quite literally) in order to avoid her cousins' house,

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[11] The same is noticed by Grönfors (1986: 102) who nonetheless characterizes the Finnish Gypsies he studies as 'apolitical.'

even if this meant being seen wearing jeans by other, unrelated Rom. Incidentally, one of these unrelated families appreciated her efforts to spare her cousins' feelings so much that they asked her to become the wife of their son. Hence, it is not the entire community that can evaluate propriety, but different people in different contexts can have diverging evaluations of the same behavior. My suggestion is that it is only those who have stakes in this evaluation, i.e., those whose reputation can be squandered by someone else's (usually girls' or women's) un-*Romanes* behavior that have a say in their conduct, most notably parents, brothers, male cousins, and uncles. This brings us (back) to the modes and criteria of internal differentiation, or hierarchy.

There is an enduring theory of Roma egalitarianism in the field of Romani Studies (according to, e.g., Berta [2019]). This idea gained traction mostly through the work of Stewart, who emphasized 'brotherhood' among Hungarian Rom, consisting mainly of (some) redistribution and cooperation, and the absence of manifest competitivity. For the sake of accuracy, Stewart talks in fact of 'negative egalitarianism,' which he defines as the 'refusal to admit that anyone is a better man than yourself while not being able to enforce claims that you are better than anyone else' (Stewart 1989: 82). He illustrates this by the fact that the Rom readily share food and 'help' one another (however, in Chapter 7, I argue that help, which I analyse as a form of grace, is not a leveller, but a marker of rank and distinction). At the same time, Stewart remarks on the Rom's 'pre-occupation with honour, status and the paying of respect which is made all the sharper by the conflict between an egalitarian and a competitive individualist ethic' (*idem*: 83) and shows what elaborate rhetoric is put to work in men's speeches to appease this conflict. A similar dynamic is described by Berta (2019), who criticizes Stewart for his egalitarian assumptions, and describes the impressive displays of oratory necessary for Gabor Roma in Transylvania to boast with their prestige objects while at the same time making sure that nobody present gets offended, and by Olivera (2020) with a view to marriage negotiations

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within the same Roma group. Tesăr (2013), who also worked with a Roma group (Cortorari) that are just as keen as the Gabors on demonstrating their genealogy, shows the importance of coming from a '*neamo lašo*' (good family) for an individual's trajectory and social standing (similarly to Romanian peasants). This tension between cooperation and competition is of course not specific to Roma (or even humans on the whole); nor is the fact that the balance between them is typically preserved through ritual (Molina et al. 2017). The contradiction between egalitarian tendencies (or what Gay y Blasco [2021], following Stewart (1989), calls 'competitive egalitarianism' and what I would depict as hierarchy-induced obligations to cooperate) and the urge to demonstrate strength and prestige in order to deter conflict could be summarized in the manner of Leach (1970) as existing in a state of an 'oscillating equilibrium.'

## The value of hierarchy

The question is therefore not whether hierarchy exists among the Romanies, but what values organise it. As we have seen, many authors argue that the organising principle of social order among Roma is genealogy (Berta 2019; Olivera 2020; Piasere 1984; Tesăr 2012, 2018; Williams 2003); others point to the potential for violence, or chances of prevailing in case of conflict (Grönfors 1986); and others yet, of a more sociological persuasion, indicate that new hierarchies emerge around individuals who can 'redistribute' money through usury (Durst 2015) or can mobilize other forms of violence (Fotta 2019). Given this variety of answers, a more pointed question would be then, what does hierarchy do for/among the Rom? The answer that my thesis gives is that it constitutes a political society. Although some of the authors cited above shun the suggestion that there is anything 'political' about Roma groups, given for example that they do not have distinct leaders, chiefs, big men, or aristocratic orders, my thesis

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analyses the maintenance of social order among the Rom of Mahala as a quintessentially political endeavor, in one of the senses originally put forth by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (and forgotten since) in their *Introduction* to *African Political Systems* (1940): 'a balance between power and authority on the one hand and obligation and responsibility on the other' (*op cit.*: 12). And, while power and authority may be evanescent in Romani groups, obligation and responsibility abound, as this thesis amply shows. To Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, politics can be summarized as the process of elaborate negotiations of sovereignty at the intersection of material interests and 'moral and legal norms the order and stability of which is maintained by the political organization' (*op. cit.*: 20-21). In other words, what makes social hierarchies (among the Romanies) political is that they instantiate collectively agreed-upon representations about how people ought to live, behave, and handle one another (the argument for the return of morality to the study of politics, on which I draw here, is made much more elaborately by Piliavsky and Scheele [n.d.]).

Accommodating shared social values into the definition of politics only solves part of the puzzle, however, since values, unlike value, are incommensurate (Lambek 2008), particularly after the postmodern turn. In this thesis, I follow Piliavsky's (2020) view of relations as the location of value and analyse social order and the relations that make it up as instantiations of the values that organise the lives of the Rom from Mahala. Sociality should then be understood not so much as a competition of rank, prestige, or other means of exercising power over others, but rather as a map of obligations which, unlike power, are not unilateral, but move along multiple dimensions: upwards, downwards, and sideways.

This applies not only to the inner order of the Rom's sociality, but, in their view, should also apply to their relation to gaʒe; as I explain in Chapter 6, outsmarting is a way of correcting the failure in obligations on behalf of the gaʒe, who control all resources, and yet wouldn't share;

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likewise, in Chapter 7, I articulate the political ideology of the Rom as revolving around 'help' and 'pity,' two notions that are meant to signal not so much the Rom's destitution in relation to non-Roma but rather the obligation of those who have and who can to live up to their status and redistribute. Or, as Piliavsky (2020: 170) put it, 'This is the crux of hierarchy as a moral theory: those who can do more, owe more. Power implies responsibility. *Noblesse oblige*.'

Hierarchy as described by Piliavsky above does the conceptual work of bridging the chasm between theories of social suffering and the emphasis on 'the good' of scholars such as Robbins (2013): people do hope, she says, but they pursue their hopes with the means they have at their disposal—in this case, the most reviled notion of South-Asian anthropology, hierarchy. She shows that, despite a plethora of anti-caste and egalitarian activism, for most people it is still social attachments and dependencies that help them move about in the world. Although well-wishers sought to turn the Kanjar into 'good townsfolk, like themselves' (*op. cit.:* xxv), the Kanjars themselves have different aspirations:

> Ramesh [Piliavsky's main Kanjar interlocutor] had no interest in equality. He did not want to be like anyone else, upper-caste or caste mate. His heroes, to the extent that he had them at all, were Bollywood baddies. Otherwise, he was violently opposed to being treated on an equal footing with anyone. He did not, for instance, want the police to treat him as they treat others. There was no talk of human or citizen rights; instead, he wanted special treatment: for officers to take fair cuts of his profit and leave him to burgle in peace. He wanted to be above others, not like them: to command respect and the recognition of a grander, more powerful man. He wanted to be a "boss," a "don," a "danger man" (some of the few words he knew in English), with a bigger gang, a larger house, more parties, more money for entertaining more guests. As he often said, I want to have many men eating from my hand. (Piliavsky 2020: xxxi)

Paying attention to what the Kanjar want to achieve and what means they have at their disposal to do so, Piliavsky concludes (if *à contrecœur*) that the only means for them to fulfil their aspiration is patronage: a network of social attachments, belonging, obligations, hierarchies.

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The Kanjar did not deplore inequality as the fact that they are unequal to those above them; they merely deplored that those above forgot about their obligations to those on the bottom, in other words that social asymmetry was no longer 'virtuous' (*op. cit.*: xxxiii) or redistributive.

Ferguson (2013) reached a similar conclusion based on research in South Africa: social incorporation has a long history on the continent, where for centuries, the scarcity of people pushed for tribal affiliation or social belonging: 'In such a world, dependence was not simply bondage or unfreedom (as the emancipatory liberal mind tends to assume). On the contrary, in a social system put together around competition for followers, it was actually the existence of possibilities for hierarchical affiliation that created the most important forms of free choice' (*op. cit.*: 226):

> The phrase 'social inequality' perhaps rolls off our lips too easily – as if 'social inequality' is simply a synonym for 'inequality'. But what is specifically 'social' about it? The term 'social inequality' implies a common membership within a 'society', and relations of inequality among those members. But today we are seeing, all around the world, a shift towards what we might call 'asocial inequality', where huge inequalities of life conditions and life chances are increasingly severed from those embarrassing experiential social relationships of inequality. … Increasingly, then, those suffering from what I call *asocial* inequality actually seek out *social* inequality. A great deal of poor people's labour, in fact, goes into trying to turn asocial inequality into the social kind. (Ferguson 2013: 233)

Truly, this is not an 'emancipatory' (Nilsen 2021) vision of social dynamics, power, and violence, and that is because, like Piliavsky and Ferguson's interlocutors, the Rom of Mahala do not deplore the mere fact of inequality, but that it does not work as it is supposed to. For this reason, women do not seek equality with men, but expect men to care for them, as their social superiors; children do not want to be equal with their parents, but expect care and guidance (and, as we shall see, fast cars); sisters do not aspire to equality with their brothers,

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but expect their protection. As my Roma friend and collaborator Izabela Tiberiade has put it in our exchange about the transgression of a Gitana woman depicted by Gay y Blasco and Hernández (2020) 'what the *tsiganie* gives you [as a Roma woman] is this feeling of belonging and security, especially when you have no chance in the world outside, among the gaʒe… In exchange for this belonging, you spend your life learning how to please the others and how to respect rules for them' (Chirițoiu and Tiberiade 2020). The problem, then, is not that these bargains exist at all; it is that they are rarely so straightforward.

It is with this relational understanding in mind that I discuss virtuous personhood as the ideology that organises the Rom's social life. First, I should clarify that I use the phrase 'virtuous personhood' instead of 'virtue' because the latter term carries a heavy philosophical and theological baggage that has little purchase over my argument here; as far as its current usage in anthropology goes, the ultimate reference of virtue is the self, e.g., Laidlaw (2013), whose emphasis on virtuous *selves*, rather than socially situated *persons*, envisages virtue as a subjective goal[12]. Building on the critique of this view formulated by Piliavsky and Sbriccoli (2016), I am interested here in the intersubjective or social dimension of virtue. As they write, 'the social world is neither residual nor ancillary to the self but is itself the purpose of moral judgement and action.' For the Rom, being virtuous—which is what they strive to with remarkable tenacity—is not a mode of being in the world, but a mode of acting upon it. To borrow Mattingly's (2014) apt formulation, their teleology is 'world-oriented,' not 'I-oriented.' My analysis necessarily starts from the fact that the Rom's notion of virtue is shaped by external

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[12] While this conceptualization was meant to emancipate ethics from its conflation with the social where Durkheim and Mauss had left it and to turn it into a field of study proper, placing it under Foucault and Aristotle's directorship may have been a bridge too far (Mattingly and Throop 2018). Neo-Aristotelian approaches amount to what Mattingly (2012) calls 'first person virtue ethics,' whereas analyses inspired by Foucault privilege the genealogy of virtue, along with the view that the cultivation of virtue constitutes the basis for moral action in everyday social life.

forces that they do their best to navigate and counter, so as to make space for 'freedom,' and equally by their deep conviction that they can only do so together, through belonging.

# Outline of the dissertation

This thesis consists of seven chapters divided into three parts. The logic and order of the parts reflects the organizing principle of the argument regarding the dialectical relation between outer inequality and inner hierarchy that I have outlined thus far and continue to document throughout the thesis. The narrative starts on the outside, where I started myself, then gradually enters the inner world of the *tsiganie*, only to re-emerge, as if on a Möbius strip, into the realm of dialectics, which is only comprehensible after having been inside and outside. At the same time, it should be made clear from the outset that the borders between the three parts are necessarily porous: the outside spills into every realm, the inside recoils and reshuffles, the dialectic prevails. First, I discuss how marginality is constituted spatially and historically, by tracing the social history of Mahala as a container of 'Gypsyness' and as a territory of Roma social reproduction. Second, I discuss the social reproduction of the group through an ethnography of households, marriages, and Romani jurisprudence that maintains the Rom's internal hierarchies. Third, I address the dialectical relation that I have foregrounded here through 'outsmarting' and politics.

Part I, 'Outside In,' sets the scene of my research: it describes the geographical setting and historical trajectory of Mahala, along with my entry to the field, my research methodology, and the way in which the research topics caught shape. Chapter 1 accounts for my entry into the field and my incorporation into Antonio and Armonia's household, by way of providing an

overview the topics discussed in this thesis *in statu nascendi*. My ambivalent status in Antonio's family—daughter of his old-time friend, former activist, non-Roma woman, his wife's confidante—had an impact on my data and calls for clarifications about my methodological and ethical approach. Chapter 2 examines the spatial and historical dimension of the 'centrifugal forces' that turn Mahala into a 'container' or enclave of Gypsyness, while also accounting for the agency of the Rom in making this a space of their own. In my attempts to document the history of the neighborhood by interviewing Roma elders, rather than elicit stories about place, I found myself collecting life-stories of 'nomadism' or itinerancy, and thereby documenting a notion of Roma sociality as incumbent not upon a given place, but upon being on the move, which I theorise as 'circulation.' Next, I take stock of the Rom's objections to how they are represented in non-Roma society and media, and sketch an emic understanding of discrimination, in contradistinction with the versions put forth by Romani activism. Lastly, I move onto the statements that Gypsy houses make, and argue that, on the outside at least, if read as façades, they are material and architectural renditions of the Rom's 'capability' intended to mitigate their social marginalization.

With Part II, 'Inside Out,' the analysis moves inside the house and the *tsiganie* that have been observed from afar in Part I. Chapter 3 proposes an ethnography of Roma habitation and argues that the Rom's houses exhibit their owners' preference towards shared and versatile spaces which reflect their view of sociality. The chapter also discusses how spatial arrangements in turn reshape the relations between people. Focusing on the flows of personnel and money that intersect inside the house, I then analyse Roma houses both as spatial renditions and as modifiers of Roma relatedness and sociality, against the background of the wider society in relation to which they stand. The chapter bridges between the previous section, on the neighborhood, and anticipates the following one, on gendered bodies and gendered relations,

as it traces a relation between the body and the neighbourhood, and how differently gendered, aged, and related bodies circulate in these spaces.

Chapter 4 tackles aspirations and gendered relations through the lens of marriage, as the main institution in Roma social organisation. I show that marriage creates and breaks alliances between families and enacts the antagonisms inherent to this process. Moreover, I discuss marriage from a processual point of view, as the central and most transformative event in a person's life, and account for the development of intimacy between people usually brought together by a mixture of family strategies and love. In fact, the Rom see love as the by-product of marriage, rather than its basis, and this gives certain insights into their notion of personhood. I then synthesize this data in an analysis about social order and the internal hierarchies among the Rom. The chapter thus maps the hierarchies inside the family and between various families, supplying a sociography of the neighbourhood as well as an explanation of the intensity of community ties and obligations.

Chapter 5 discusses Romani vernacular justice on the continuum between feuds and Roma tribunals and analyses the case study of a ransom hit and its aftermath. Based on this ethnographic record of vernacular jurisprudence among the Rom, I argue that 'Gypsy law' needs to be understood as procedural, rather than substantive, and that Romani jurisprudence does not develop separately from state law, in institutional autarchy, as it is often thought, but in complicity with it.

With this notion of complicity, the argument moves onto Part III, titled 'Dialectics,' which focuses on the dialectical relation between the 'outside' and the 'inside' described hitherto and analyses the two main realms of the Rom's engagement with the world outside Mahala, namely outsmarting and politics, which entail a mixture of cooperation, antagonism, and complicity. Chapter 6 tackles the practice of 'outsmarting' that the Rom Čor define as central to who they

are, along with its associated moralities and imaginaries. I unpack 'outsmarting' as being at once a mode of differentiation and a mode of claiming belonging and redistribution; at the same time, I examine the meanings of theft inside the *tsiganie* as well, where it is more transparently a mode of claiming something that one feels entitled to, whether objects or status. Then I discuss the mobile imaginary of theft, both as an itinerant activity that speaks back to Chapter 2 above, and as a moral injunction against standing still. Lastly, by way of discussing the fact that among the Rom Čor it is usually women who go stealing, I revisit notions of gender purity and defilement put forth by previous researchers.

Chapter 7 examines Roma politics in the vernacular, looking both at the Rom's modes of engagement with the outer world and at the obligations and critiques that derive from the social ranking I described in Chapter 4. The chapter focuses on Antonio's liminal position between the internal politics and values of his community, including his family obligations and his wife's criticism of his politics, and the realms of the Romani movement and that of non-Roma party politics. I show that Antonio and his fellow Rom negotiate their social relations, both within and without the group, through an ideology of help and pity, which I compare to Pitt-Rivers' notion of 'grace.' Although these concepts seem to invoke associations with the perpetuation of inequality and dependence, I argue that for the Rom they constitute a means to bridge the multiple contradictions that determine their structural position in relation to the broader non-Roma society that dominates yet does not encompass them.

Beyond outsmarting, my research unpacks the connections between legal, moral, and political regimes at the margins of Europe, through my ethnographic engagement with a social group that, whether because of its apparent legal and political autarchy, its putative 'criminality,' or its deep marginalization, remains for many the exemplary opposite of liberal European citizenship.

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# PART I : OUTSIDE IN

# CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH ON THE MARGINS OF SOCIALITY

'Have you arrived here to investigate me?'

— Armonia

This chapter provides an overview of my fieldsite and the people I worked with—focusing on the family of Antonio and Armonia, who were my main interlocutors and my hosts in the field— along with a genealogy of the topics that informed my research and a discussion of the methods and ethics that shaped it. The entry into the field, the equivocations that preceded it, and the ethical and methodological issue that my fieldwork raise lay out some of the core topics that I will explore in the remainder of the thesis. One of these topics is the very evanescence of Mahala, not just in terms of access but also of composition and precise location. The closer I got to it, the blurrier its boundaries became, and the more restricted the access to it, at least in the terms I had imagined when I first set out to do this research. Once I became the guest/friend/client of a particular family, it became near impossible to expect being hosted by others, or even welcomed in their midst without being accompanied by my hosts.

I then provide an overview of the family I lived with, by way of introducing the main characters of this thesis—Antonio, Armonia, and four of their six children, who did more than host me and teach me Romani: they also socialized me in the ways of the Rom and brought me along on their daily activities, whether visiting relatives or selling merchandise in the town's second-hand market. With this, I also became part of their conflicts, both inside and outside the family, and thus learned first-hand about the relevance of rank and adversity in Rom society.

In the final section of the chapter, I analyse the research methods pertaining to my situation—the fact that I entered my fieldsite as a non-Roma, but also as the daughter of one of Antonio's friends, and as his wife's confidante. I reflect on how my gender, age, marital status, childlessness, and ethnicity (in this order) shaped my access to data and limited the degree to which, due to my citizenship, I could play the role of the unknowledgeable stranger. Being a native of the same area, for the Rom, I was neither a complete stranger, not entirely unknowledgeable—they assumed from the outset that what we had in common outweighed what we did not have.

And yet, my positionality and the topics I analyse in this thesis come with certain ethical caveats: one was the fact that being a non-Roma did not translate into unambiguous power relations with my interlocutors and hosts, as it might be assumed given our different ethnicity and statuses; sometimes this relation existed, but at other times it was reversed, and the particulars of my access often meant that I was subordinated to them, on account of being the recipient of their help and of becoming part of the household. This entailed certain limitations, in particular the lack of access to households where my hosts did not see fit for me to go, e.g., into the households of Armonia's brothers who, although they were relatively close to Armonia and Antonio and lived nearby, 'could not stand having gaʒe around' and did their best to ignore me whenever we had to meet. I was advised to do the same with them. These limitations were largely mitigated, however, by the fact that the Rom permanently discuss the lives of others so, even though I was not myself a witness to these lives, I was made privy to enough details so as to make up for the fact that I only occasionally had physical access into their households.

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# Entering the fieldsite

*Gatekeeping*

Armonia's invitation for me to move into their household in early autumn 2016 could not have come at a better time. I had spent the previous six months hovering around Mahala and meeting with Antonio at his office or on terraces in the city. It was becoming clear that none of these activities would result in my securing accommodation in the neighborhood. My discussions with Antonio started to become ritualistic: he would voice his critique towards Roma activists in Bucharest or he would launch into a tirade about the general history of the Roma; I would listen politely and then steer the conversation towards whether he could find me a place to rent in Mahala. He appeared sceptical but said he would do his best. Next time we would start all over again.

In parallel, I went driving on my own through the southern part of town, where Mahala is located. With its village-like, parochial atmosphere, Mahala is not the kind of place where someone just stops the car and starts cheerfully chatting up the locals (if such places exist); when walking around, the inquisitive gazes of people who hang out in the street follow you with such insistence that you almost feel compelled to provide an explanation as to what brings you there. The only non-locals who ever come there are the police or gendarmes, politicians on campaigns, or journalists who try to catch a new lead about 'one of the country's most dangerous neighborhoods,' as Mahala is lazily dubbed. Although I was a gaʒi, I was not foreign enough to pretend I did not recognise the boundaries of this parochialism.

Besides, there was Antonio. Even if I could have just asked someone for a place to rent, Antonio would have felt that I was stepping onto his turf, as he did when I went on my own to shop at the second-hand market that he administers. 'How would you like it if I came to your university

or where you work and did not tell you?' he quipped when I informed him of my transgression. I muttered that I had not wanted to disturb his work, but he had made his point: I understood that, even if I had managed to find some willing hosts, I could never move into a household without crossing him. My gatekeeper neither denied, nor granted me access to the field: he kept me in check.

As I moaned to my colleagues about not getting access into my fieldsite, a friend who had done research with Roma in Italy recalled she had met a community organizer there, Razvan, who came from Mahala, and she put us in touch. As it happened, Razvan was home those days, so we met in the city centre and had a long talk. He said he left Romania not so much because of money but because of discrimination: one of his children had an accident when he was two years old and died at the hospital, and Razvan overheard the doctors saying, 'That's nothing, one Gypsy less.' He also said that the emancipation of Roma can only be done through women, as long as they are educated, and that Roma abroad still feeling discriminated against and they are all homesick and hope to return home one day, although things are changing in Mahala, old customs die, people spend more and more time away from home, and families are drifting apart. To help me get a glimpse of the neighborhood, he invited me to his niece's betrothal a few days later.

To say that nobody expected me there would be an understatement. Nonetheless, the people recovered quickly from their surprise and courteously invited me to sit down with them. I noticed that, much as I had expected, the tables were segregated by gender, and the women's table was still empty. Although the family had hired a catering service, the women were still running around drying their hair, putting on make-up, or bringing their husbands a drink. I was sat at the men's table. Before the music started, we tried to do some small talk to alleviate the unease. I asked the men where they lived and, when they answered that they lived in Italy, I

offered my sympathies for the horrid living conditions there and the discrimination, as I had just discussed with Razvan the previous day. The men look appalled. 'Please come over and see for yourself how clean and beautiful our trailers are,' one of them said. 'And how well we get along with everyone.' I had miscalculated the swaying power that context can have over the truth value of an utterance. Thankfully, women started sitting down at their table, so I moved there. I stayed for the entire ceremony, but rather than join in the dance, I made my way deeper into the courtyard, where older women sat. I found myself next to the grandmother of the bride, with whom I hoped to find out more about the participants. She said she was from a village and did not know most of them, after which she gradually changed the topic towards her migration to Italy with her husband and the discrimination they encounter there. 'So, are you giving something to the Gypsies?' she asked, in an attempt to decide whether we were just doing small talk, or our conversation was perhaps more purposeful. 'I don't have anything to give,' I answered. 'I'm just here for my studies.' At this point, the woman politely cut the conversation short, saying that she had to join the rest of the guests to the restaurant. The party in the courtyard, the only ceremony to which I had been invited, was indeed coming to an end.

The next day, energised, I called Antonio to set up a meeting. I had informed him before that I would be going to the betrothal of Razvan's niece and as he picked up, he said right away that he did not want to disturb me since he knew I was busy. However, he said I should know that what I had witnessed in Razvan's family was not a 'real' betrothal, because it was 'copied after those of the gaʒe,' and that I had to see something 'traditional.' The next day, we met at his office and he told me about the distinction between Brickmakers (to which Razvan's family belonged) and Thieves (to which Antonio belonged). Naturally, the separation between the two were not so immutable as he made it sound, but I would only find this out later. We resumed our meetings in town with their known scenario. On one occasion, he was especially passionate about the activists in Bucharest because one of them had just visited the city and had a meeting

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with the mayor. First, Antonio remarked that the said activist had had a high governmental position while the Social-Democrats were in power, and later came to criticize the Social-Democrats on Facebook. 'This is not done,' Antonio commented. 'If they gave you a job, the least you can do is keep your mouth shut.' I questioned what sounded to me as a statement of unconditional loyalty; Antonio clarified that, while loyalty was important, the man's disowning of previous choices implicitly helped disqualify himself too, not only his previous associates. Second, throughout his meeting with the mayor, the man had barely looked at Antonio, who was also in the room. At the end, he told Antonio that he did not want the mayor to think that they were in some 'combination.' 'See how stupid he is,' Antonio went on. 'The mayor called me first when he learned that this guy was coming, to ask me what I know about him. And I vouched for him, I said he was my friend, and then he let me sit there like a fool. This is how you can tell he's not a real Gypsy, because he doesn't know what respect means.' I could see that Antonio's idea of rank was formidable but did not anticipate just how central it would be to my research.

## *The façade, raised and shattered*

Meanwhile, I started my Romani-language classes with Mirabela. Our classes took place in the family kitchen, which is a standalone building at the back of their courtyard. When I arrived at their gate, I would call Mirabela on the phone so that she would meet me there, and we would cross the courtyard together, because I felt self-conscious about wandering around on my own, having no sense of who was in the house and whether they knew what I was doing there. 'When you enter the courtyard, you have to call out my name loudly,' she had told me on one of my early visits. I objected that I was afraid I might disturb someone. She must have thought I was being shy, like the stereotypical gaʒi, because she insisted: 'That's how it's done with us

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Gypsies (Ro. *Așa e la noi, la țigani*). You need to learn this if you want to live with us.' I was accustomed to this practice from my childhood visits to the countryside, where upon entering our courtyard, the neighbours would call someone's name out loud. The reason I hesitated to call her name loudly and preferred to use the phone to let her know I'd arrived was because I had no idea what went on inside the house, how many people were there, and what it was that my shouting would disrupt. There was a sense of secrecy about the things that went on in the house, and it seemed to me that making my presence known by shouting would be at odds with Mirabela's cautious efforts to keep me separate from whatever went on inside the house.

Wary of my gaʒi expectations and my limited knowledge of the Rom, Mirabela tried to beautify her world for me, giving me a sense of culturally remarkable traits – she went on and on about 'respect', 'modesty' and other values of the Roma – while avoiding, or at least postponing, my encounter with the real people. Once, she casually mentioned that one of her brothers had just taken off to Paris on a whim because he became so obsessed with Da Vinci after having watched a documentary about Da Vinci and aliens that he wanted to see the Mona Lisa with his own eyes. I found it a remarkable story by any standards, both Roma and *gaʒikanes*, but Mirabela said it as if it was something that happened all the time. Throughout our classes, she was always careful not to mention anything she thought might sound controversial, like the fact that her mother had only recently been released from prison after she served two years for robbery, or how her siblings made money abroad from begging or pimping their Romanian girlfriends, or how her sister was married off when she was 14 and came back home severely traumatized. Instead, she made it sound like they were the most unremarkable family—which, as far as Mahala is concerned, they were indeed.

When she finally introduced me to her siblings, it was at an outing over a pub quiz. Her siblings were knowledgeable and friendly to me and for most of the evening it did look as if we were

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just a group of friends on a night out. But we all knew that was not the case, and the fact that I was 'studying' them made us all somewhat uneasy. Nicolas, the elder brother, asked about my research and told me I needed to talk to the women in Mahala to find out about how they behaved, about respect, and about disguises, e.g., the many ways in which they tied their scarves on their heads and what each of them meant, or about their expensive, grandiose skirts, or the secret language that Thieves used. In short, he made it sound as if my research would be an exercise in semiotics rather than in anthropology: everything was coded and needed deciphering. Geertz (1973) would have approved; I wavered. A few days after this meeting, however, as I recounted in the Introduction, Armonia abruptly cut through everyone else's hesitations and simply invited me to stay over.

Ultimately, then my access to Mahala owed to family connections initiated by my father and Antonio in my childhood and later maintained by my mother's collegial relations with Antonio in public administration. It is doubtful, though not entirely improbable, that I could have gained access to the field in the absence of such connections just as well, but there is no denying that they have eased my access not only in Mahala as such, but specifically into Antonio's household. His determination to help me that he professed in our preliminary encounters owed exclusively to his friendship with my late father; his wife's openness to me from the outset of our relationship was likewise predicated on a history of help. At the time, I felt encumbered by this debt that I had not incurred myself and by the ensuing air of patronage that seemed to govern our interactions. However, as I discuss in Chapter 7, this ideology of help goes well beyond such petty calculations and is very much at the heart of the Rom's political engagement with the gaʒe. Besides, as an autonomous researcher, i.e., beyond my identity as my parents' daughter and tapping into the history of their relations with Antonio, I did not have many resources.

*The family*



*Photo 1. Anthropologist with Antonio and Armonia.*

Antonio was in his early fifties at the time of my research. Armonia was in her late forties.

They have six children, four of whom were unmarried and were living at home in 2016-17:

Mirabela, Brianna, Nicolas, and Octavio[13]. I only learned later that Brianna and Nicolas had

been married before and that their marriages did not last. Brianna was 14 when she got married

to a second cousin on her father's side. The husband and his mother were seriously abusive, so

Armonia took her daughter back home after only three months of marriage. Five years later,

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[13] As I finish writing this dissertation, all but Mirabela got married, moved to the US, and got one or two children.

Brianna still found it hard to talk about this experience and only opened up to me about it after many months (meanwhile, I had learned the details from her mother and siblings). Nicolas, who was 24 when I met him, had had a Romanian girlfriend for many years, and would not give up on her even after his parents found him a Gypsy wife. His marriage also lasted only a few months, seemingly because of his attachment to his non-Roma girlfriend (or, in Armonia's view, because the *gaʒi* did not leave him alone). Another version of why their marriage ended was that the girl's father once insulted Antonio so that Nicolas felt compelled to beat up his wife and send her back to her parents for this grave offence. Armonia tried to get her back, but the girl's parents refused to let her go anymore.

Antonio and Armonia's household was a couple of streets away from the area I thought of as Mahala, so I resolved that my stay with them would only be temporary, until I managed to find a host in the precise area I wanted to study. This plan never came to fruition because, on the one hand, I could not leave their house without crossing Armonia and Antonio, and none of the families I interacted with in the location I thought of as the actual Mahala would have hosted me for the same reason (not to mention that many of them, however friendly, still maintained some basic suspicion about my motives—on which more in the final section of this chapter). On the other hand, I understood that what people referred to as 'Mahala' was not so much a physical location with fixed boundaries, but the households of related Roma, as I explain in the next chapter.

## *Household*

Antonio and Armonia were adamant in fact that they did not live in Mahala. Armonia was nostalgic about her times there, while Antonio saw the fact that they no longer lived there as

moving up in the world. Once he told me once that he had moved his family out of Mahala so that his children could live among gaʒe—yet another effort towards his ongoing 'integration'—and he did make sure that at least his three youngest children attended a central, prestigious school, instead of the neighbourhood school, which was conveniently located just across the street from his new house, but was peopled only with Roma children, since it was where all the children from Mahala and the surrounding streets went. As usual, Armonia had a different take on his motives: he moved out of Mahala and onto this street, she said, because he wanted to be close to her brothers, since he did not come from a large *neamo* to support him, so he got adopted into hers. Indeed, three of Armonia's siblings lived in neighbouring houses, and some of her nephews, uncles, and cousins lived further down the street. The houses in-between these Roma households belonged to ethnic Romanians.
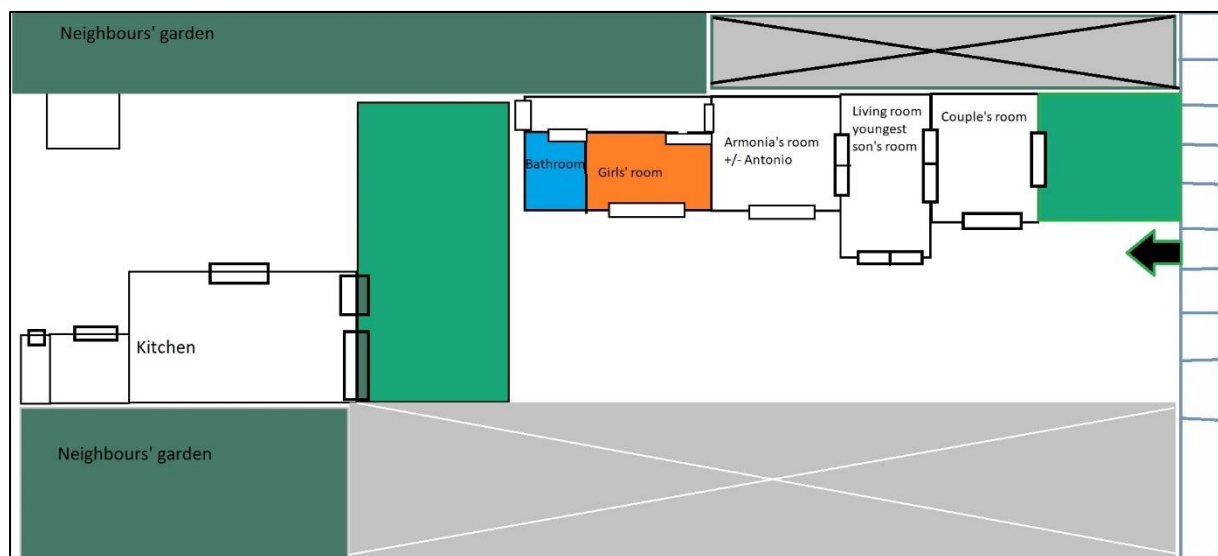


*Figure 2. Floorplan of Antonio and Armonia's household. The squares in grey on each side depict houses belonging to Romanian ethnics.*

## Livelihoods

As regards family incomes, Antonio had been working in public administration for almost two decades and was head of the local branch of the 'Pro Europe' Roma Party, which had been

headed by one of Armonia's uncles before him. Importantly, he was also 'the boss' of the second-hand market on the edge of town. Officially, he was an inspector with the town's Direction for Markets; unofficially, he was solely in charge of the second-hand market, known as 'the Gypsies' market' since the early nineties, when it first opened. The sellers on the market were mostly Roma from all over town, along with ethnic Romanians; the buyers were also mixed, but the majority were gaʒe who benefited from the bargains offered by a second-hand market with products of uncertain provenance from all over Europe and the US (which included stolen cosmetics, perfumes, and sunglasses, or rare bulk fabrics for Roma clients).

Antonio was especially proud that he had managed to give up on 'his old ways' and become 'integrated,' as he put it, among the gaʒe. Integration amounted to more than a life choice: it entailed a lifelong effort of observing others, learning, and adapting to them. He often said it did not come naturally to him or to other Rom; unlike most of the latter, however, he was willing to keep it up. 'Integration' was an achievement that he thought not many other Rom were capable of or inclined to make. Armonia was one of his favourite examples: even though she 'lacked for nothing' thanks to his work, she still went stealing, 'because that's in their idiotic genes' (Rou. *că așa e gena lor de tîmpiți*). Whatever money she made stealing, Antonio reasoned, the family lost double paying for lawyers to get her out of prison.

Armonia had a different take on her occupation: 'I have always been a producer,' she told me (Rou. *Eu mereu am fost producătoare*). First, she hated sitting still, and she complained about this often during my field research because she was under a double bind to do so. For one, she was not allowed leave the country as part of her conditional release after serving two years for robbery. ('It wasn't robbery,' she clarified to me once, 'but I took it upon myself lest someone

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else fell into prison.'[14],[15]) Then, her eldest son had 'sworn her' to not go stealing in Romania anymore, because gains were meagre and punishments were harsh. It would have been very disrespectful towards him to break his oath, so she complied. Second, she often explained to me that it was a woman's duty to fend for the family and prove herself as 'capable.' She started stealing as a teenager, asking elder girls to take her along, despite her parents' interdictions to go stealing (obviously, these interdictions had not been accompanied by oaths, else she would not have gone, but often her parents beat her up when they learned she had been gone stealing). She recounted that, with money she brought over time, she bought the house we were living in, paid off Antonio's debts of thousands of euros, bought her sons several cars, and amassed some gold to have in her old age. What Antonio described as fending for the family did not consist only of putting food on the table, which is pretty much what she said he did. The spouses did not have an accurate notion of each other's incomes and savings; on good days, they might give each other a 'tip' (Rou. *ciubuc*), but most of the time money was an opaque issue.

For most of my stay, Armonia had a stall in the second-hand market that Antonio controlled. She bought her merchandise—used clothes and shoes—from a wholesale distributor who in turn got it, through channels that never became clear to me, from 'charities,' as Armonia told me. Sometimes her cousins came along to sell items brought by their daughters-in-law from abroad. I accompanied her to her stall on most days, and several months later, when her daughters took over, I went along with them.

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[14] A literal translation into English for the phrase 'going to prison,' which the Rom formulate in Romanian as 'to fall into prison' (Rou. *a cădea la pușcărie*), a translation of the Romani phrase *perel phandado*.

[15] Being guilty of enabling someone's arrest (even if they were arrested rightfully) can result in retribution. Conversely, deciding to share in someone's punishment can be either an obligation, if the person is a social superior, or a source of social capital, if done in the absence of obligations.

Their children only made money for themselves when abroad; therefore, those abroad sometimes sent some for their siblings back home, either on request (only the youngest son used to request) or as a gift or favour. So did the parents. Money for daily expenditures was unpredictable, unlike money for solid expenditures, such as cars for the boys or skirts for the girls, for which parents and elder siblings would either pool resources, or one of them would take it upon themselves to provide. In the absence of a fixed income, members of the household other than Antonio would often pawn their belongings; someone in the family would then pay to get back whatever they pawned (in which case the item nominally belonged to the person who had paid to get it out of the pawnshop). The children who were abroad sent money home via transfer services rather than banks, even if this implied larger commissions, because they found banks cumbersome with all the paperwork and limited opening hours, and also because they often found bank clerks to be unfriendly.

### *The minefield*

The context of Armonia's invitation for me to move in is consequential for the rest of my research: she and Antonio had had a fight recently and Antonio had left home. Armonia feared she might have become depressed as she had spent two weeks crying in her room, so she welcomed the possibility of talking to me, an outsider, who had nobody else to tell, unlike her sisters or acquaintances. Meanwhile, her daughters clarified to me that she hadn't been crying out of love for Antonio, but out of shame, because when people learned that he went away they would think that she was an impossible woman. As Armonia put it, she liked that I listened and did not talk much. Besides, she had understood that I needed some help with my 'project,' so it seemed like everyone stood to win. Or at least the two of us. My euphoria that I had finally 'entered' the field was soon complicated by the realization that the household, with all the

conflicts and the parallel stories that I was made privy to, and the many others that were kept from me, was a minefield that I had to learn how to navigate. My very presence in the house was part of this minefield: when Antonio returned home a few weeks later, he told me that that his wife had invited me over just to spite him. Armonia also told me later that Antonio had explicitly warned them to avoid telling me too many things, since it was not clear what I was going to do with my data; she chose to trust me and hoped that I would not breech her trust (she said this as we had our first conflict, a month after I moved in, when she threatened to kick me out of the house). At the same time, when Antonio returned home and found me living there, moving with ease around the kitchen pots in the long skirts that I had borrowed from his daughters, he had no choice but to remark that I was 'cunning' (Rou. *șmecherită*)—in a good way, he added. I had eluded his gatekeeping. He took my presence there as a fait accompli and, seeing that he had not managed to keep his wife from befriending me, he decided to share his own stories with me, lest my understanding of their household dynamics be lopsided.

I moved out of Antonio and Armonia's house after four months of cohabitation, upon finding a room to rent in a nearby house whose owners had recently moved out of town. The new house was right across the street from Armonia and Antonio's house, so I continued to spend most of my time with them, not just in the house, but also going about town with them on business (to the second-hand market, to tailors, to pawn shops), or visiting friends and relatives.

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# Ethics and methods on the margins

## *The confidante*

Joining the household as Armonia's confidante raised some challenges. One of these was that she expected my loyalty to reside with her when conflicts occurred within the household, not just between her and Antonio, but also when she fought with her daughters. She expected not blind devotion but respect, which in practice meant I should not contradict her when she was at the height of her anger, and some sense of female solidarity. The first lesson I learned the hard way: as she was angry with the girls and amply criticized them to me, I tried to stand up for them, and she redirected the bulk of her anger to me. The second, I learned gradually: she would often remark that I could understand things because I was also a woman, 'although a Romanian' and, even though I was not a mother yet, I still had a notion of gendered relations and bodily matters, which she believed to be ultimately universal. She trusted me with details of her life and even gave me the dozen handwritten notebooks that compiled her diary, just so that I could understand her better. She did however forbid me explicitly from using any of this material in my writings, and while her stories have greatly enriched my understanding of what it means to be a Roma woman, I shall abide by this interdiction and not cite anything from these sources.

Another challenge of my status was that I was not in a position to ask questions. After I settled in, I thought it would be time for me to start interviewing the people in the household. The girls gave in to my questioning, often adding that 'one does not normally ask such questions, but for you…' Armonia, however, was reluctant to do so. Although asking questions may be one of an anthropologist's main tools, among the Rom it is a privilege of the powerful and of the clueless, and since I had become a member of the household, I was neither. When I insisted to

interview her, Armonia cut to the chase: 'Have you arrived here to investigate me?' (Rou. *Eşti venită pe capu' meu să mă anchetezi?*), she asked, deliberately using a verb associated with police questioning to convey how disagreeable she found my attempt at asking questions. My methodology was thereby quickly reduced to participant observation, and then gradually more to participation than observation, as I explain below. I did conduct several interviews with elders and judges of Mahala, because their status (as elders, judges, and survivors of the WWII deportations) and mine (as a researcher) allowed us to have this sort of interaction without the power implications that questioning typically had among regular people. And, although it does not count as interviewing, men would often launch in didactic soliloquies—not just Antonio, but most other men of his age, of whom it is expected to provide (unsolicited) 'advice' (Rom. *sfato*). This was not only because I was a researcher or a gaʒi, since they also did this around their own female relatives; it was a function of gender rather than one of ethnicity or profession.

This seemingly simple approach was compounded by my ethnicity. The issue, as far as my guests were concerned, was not that I was a gaʒi—to be sure, Armonia took it upon herself to socialize me in the ways of the Rom, to draw my attention when I defaulted on obligations or failed to live up to norms of respect and civility—but precisely the opposite: that I was not foreign enough to permanently demand clarifications. Being a gaʒi did warrant me some explanations, but it was up to the Rom to provide them as they saw fit, and not for me to demand them. This was partly to do with my gender and especially my status as an unmarried woman, that the Rom acknowledged was different among the gaʒe than among them but it would still not cause them to turn their entire world upside down, and allow themselves to be 'investigated' at will by a woman who, in their world, was the equivalent of a teenager. Moreover, my access to their life worlds owed to my intimacy with these families; in other words, it was in the nature of the social setting that I would become more of a participant than an observer. Hence, asking questions would have jeopardised the very intimacy that me and my hosts had spent time

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establishing, and would remind them that I was there solely for the purpose of writing my thesis, rather than take part in their daily life.

This was perhaps the most insidious challenge: that my interlocutors could never tell whether I was listening to them out of human compassion or out of scientific interest; not that I could tell where one stops and the other begins. At times they invited me along in their visits to other families or allowed me to attend their gatherings 'for my project,' and at other times they became suspicious of my interest, sometimes warning me not to write down what they told me or what I had seen. From the outset, the silent agreement between us was that I would gather my data discretely, without reminding them that I was there to 'study them.'

A couple of times, conflicts erupted between me and Armonia around this matter: she felt I had disrespected her and had failed in my duties to her (once because I went out with Antonio and left her alone at home at a time after they had a fight, and the other time because I did not visit her often enough after I moved out of their household). She reproached me that I was only there 'out of interest' (Rou. *pe interes*), while she had acted in good faith to me, inviting me into her home, trusting me with her secrets, and enabling me to understand enough things so that I could do my work. Such situations rendered visible the contradictions of my research: gathering data both depended on the intimacy I had developed with people, and came into conflict with it, when fulfilling my social duties or adapting to situations required that I stop gathering data, and simply take part in people's lives.

*The subaltern researcher*

The fact that I was a non-Roma conducting research among Roma raises some further issues in terms of positionality. As I belong to the dominant majority, it can be argued that my

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relations with the Rom were tinged from the outset with power imbalances. That was certainly true as it pertains to the gaʒe world outside Mahala, as I have already indicated: I had access to places where the Rom did not, or where they were surveyed in ways that I have never been. I could order cabs, stop people in the street to ask for directions, and walk into any shop without being followed by guards; I had access in pubs and institutions—in short, I was privileged. Inside Mahala, however, power relations were often inversed.

To begin with, the Rom were well aware that they were 'helping' me and did not have anything to gain from my presence. I may have lent a sympathetic ear now and then, occasionally fulfilled household duties, contributed towards food costs, and driven them around. But none of these services measured up to their effort of hosting me, especially at a time when their house was so full that we had to take turns sleeping on the floor. There was never any doubt on either side that I was in their debt. During my stay, I often felt Armonia's patronage hovering above me loud and clear, and my debt to them continued well beyond my field research: When, at the end of my fieldwork, she said that their house was always open to me, she conveyed not only her hospitality, but also the expectation that I would live up to it.

In time, I realised she was behaving like my patron not because I was a gaʒi, as I had feared, but precisely because I had become a member of her household. Indeed, their relations with the various gaʒe helpers and collaborators were far more transactional and finite; it was only inside the family that obligations were incommensurate. And, since it was Armonia who had invited me to stay, and who was the matron of the household, she was in a sense responsible for me, as I was accountable to her, in the way a younger sister would be. Being a gaʒi, of course, my behavior was 'deficient' in certain ways as per Romani norms (as she never tired of pointing out, with the best of didactic intentions), and she did not expect from me as much as she did from her daughters or daughters-in-law, but she would not put up with too many transgressions

either. Whenever I behaved like a stereotypical gaʒi, she promptly taxed my behavior as inconsiderate, silly, or outright rude.

For instance, she liked to make fun of how I always wore the safety belt while driving and said that I drove so cautiously that, if she ever took me along stealing, the police would catch us in no time. Once, when she was cooking and invited me to taste the soup, after slurping the soup I carelessly put the spoon back into the pot; Armonia berated me and resolutely declared that she would no longer eat from it, and then proceeded to tell everyone we visited what distasteful habits the gaʒe have. This was not only a question of my being *marime* or *neujo* ('impure') on account of being a gaʒi, and hence not preserving similar rules of conduct; it was also a matter of how to behave in polite society, to which she adhered herself. Similar taboos went around sexuality, which could be seen as defiling, as previous authors intimated (Okely 1983, Stewart 1997), or it could just as well be a function of rank: while she did not mind talking about private issues or appearing naked before me, I sensed I was not supposed to reciprocate. Likewise, Mirabela and Brianna were squeamish around this topic, and in the four months I spent sharing a room with them, I never saw either of them even partially naked, or heard them say they were going to use the toilet. Then again, neither did their mother, because social subalterns are not supposed to 'burden' their superiors with details of their corporeality. Whether these bodies were Roma or gaʒe was secondary to their rank. In time, I learned to treat my basic needs with the same discretion, which sometimes meant postponing using the toilet for hours when men were around, lest they guessed where I was headed. For such reasons, the family had built a bathroom at the very end of their courtyard, so that their daughters-in-law could use it unbothered that their husbands or father-in-law would know when they went to the loo.

The most difficult issue for me was being accountable to Armonia as to how I spent my time. While she was often mindful of my times of 'study' when she found me jotting down fieldnotes

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in the kitchen, whenever I went to the city to meet with friends or to visit my mother, she would call me to say she needed my help with something, or simply to ask when I was planning to get home. Even after I moved out of their household and wanted to spend an afternoon on my own or had friends visiting me, she called or came over, expecting me to drop everything and be at her service. I perceived this as a complete lack of autonomy and it infuriated me (and, not coincidentally, this was at the root of our two conflicts that I mentioned above). Nevermind that everyone in the family (Armonia included) adhered to the same rules, for me this was the most difficult aspect to translate and accommodate to. Part sociality, part indebtedness, her expectations about my availability go well beyond what is customary when being in the field and speak directly to the deeper sense of hierarchy and obligation that I explore throughout this thesis.

Another issue that reflects the power relations in the field is the fact that, as I have already mentioned, I could not always ask for clarifications or details, nor did the Rom supply them voluntarily. In a sense, their life did not stop because of my presence, but went on as usual, which does not reflect on how unobtrusive my presence might have been (I have made it amply clear that it was not) but on how resilient their sociality was. A case in point is the fact that they kept talking Romani to one another regardless of my presence, while knowing I would not be able to follow them. Sometimes they asked if I understood what they said in Romani, and when I answered, 'A little,' they would reply, 'That's for the better. You don't need to understand everything.' When they spoke Romanian, they were usually addressing me, or addressing one another with the explicit purpose that I would hear ('I speak Romanian now so that this Romanian here can understand me' – Rou. *să mă înțeleagă și românca asta*). In such cases, my non-belonging inconveniently stood out; moments later, however, one of the girls would exclaim how much she hated 'Romanians' and, because I looked puzzled, she would add that she had obviously not meant me, since I was now 'one of them' (Rou. *de-a noastră*).

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In short, the fact that I was a gaʒi did not translate into a clear separation between me and my hosts, as there were more things that we had in common than the things that separated us— such as being women, living in more or less the same broader society, albeit with different positions in it, sharing some elementary social codes, and, most importantly, being tied by affection and obligation, akin to a family. Likewise, it did not translate into a straightforward power relation whereby I was in a superior position at all times; while I certainly held the upper hand in relation to most of the non-Roma world (save for Antonio's political connections), inside the household and Roma society, my privileges waned and gave way to relative weakness—all of which, of course, became my heuristic devices.

*Problematic truths*

It has become clear thus far that my research is riddled with ethical issues. I am a non-Roma conducting research among Roma. The family practices that I set out to research often border on the abusive. The occupations and views of the people I worked with challenge liberal political notions about rights, obligations, property, and sociality. The social order I have observed in the field, which sometimes turned violent, likewise prompts a reassessment of topics such as belonging, autonomy, and morality.

These are not post-hoc challenges, but the very reasons for which I chose to conduct this particular research. These problematic topics are rarely accounted for, because, especially when placed amidst marginalized minorities, they are inconvenient and run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes. But to dismiss the claim that 'Gypsies steal' as a racist stereotype or to justify it merely in terms of poverty and marginalization is to tell only half the story. The Rom I work with do steal, and do so with pride, not merely out of necessity, but because they

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think it is what makes them who they are; the money that they thus obtain does not go only into daily subsistence, but also into items of prestige, such as luxury cars and imposing houses, and into the acquisition of daughters-in-law. My research shows that 'Gypsy crime' cannot be reduced to such politically and theoretically safe abstractions as power, violence, and exclusion. While these concepts do account for it to a certain degree, they do not explain what makes them more than mere criminal acts—indeed, what makes them moral acts, central to the social reproduction of Gypsyness.

In these times, when the ethics of our discipline are conflated with social justice, my approach might appear as provocative. I cannot entirely disown this purpose, since I believe that, if the social sciences are to contribute in any way to the social good (an issue that has long been under question anyways), they can only do so if researchers 'own' the facts that they observe in the same way the Rom 'own' stigma and work through it towards virtuous personhood. This is a tightrope: some of our observations come dangerously close to stereotypes, such as my discussion about outsmarting and the Rom Čor; the challenge is to render such stereotypes vacuous through explanation. The alternative, i.e., to gloss over the problematic things that the people we work with might do or say, is intellectually complacent and politically irresponsible.

My thesis takes no issue with the notion that some of the behaviors of the Rom are indeed problematic. It is a notion that the Rom Čor also share, both with regards to the fact that they do not enjoy being burgled any more than the next person, and to the fact that they often describe themselves their occupations as 'shameful' or controversial. I shall explain in the following chapters how they accommodate this dissonance. At the same time, it is beyond the purposes of this thesis to impart moral judgments. I can merely provide the facts so that the reader can formulate her own, but I will not wage any moral battles in her stead.

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I cannot claim that I have no problems with getting robbed, or with domestic violence, or with being accountable to my extended family for every minor act, including how I dress or who I talk to, the way my Roma friends are. I cherish personal autonomy for myself and for my non-Roma friends, and to claim this does not apply for Roma would mean to hold them to a different standard—to 'other' them. Matters are complicated, however, by the fact that the Rom sometimes hold themselves to a different standard. For instance, my Roma female friends are well aware of the moralities and lifestyles of non-Roma women and of the fact that their lives are far easier in most respects. But that does not make them want to become gaʒe, simply because the choice is never so black and white. First, they have no means to become gaʒe, and those who try often fail, because gaʒe society is only willing to receive them on its own terms. Then, if you're going to be a Gypsy no matter what, then it's certainly more profitable to be a Gypsy among other Gypsies, where you can feel you belong, than among gaʒe, where you never quite fully do. (The families I know to have blended in and erased their Roma provenance among gaʒe effectively lead a double life, always being careful not to be seen with Gypsies or to be heard speaking Romani.)

Belonging, however, has its price, and it would be cynical to claim that the Rom have decided which price they have to pay, when their only choice is that between discrimination and encompassment. The explanation for the fact that they continue to remain Rom despite the shortcomings that this entails should not be construed as a 'choice' any more than choosing between a rock and a hard place. In what follows, I will provide more context for this 'choice,' not in order to justify it—hopefully by now it became clear that my dissertation sets out neither to glorify the Rom's predicaments, nor to commiserate them, nor to impart moral judgments—but in order to render it comprehensible.

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*Limitations*

As regards my interactions beyond Antonio and Armonia's household, these were usually mediated by them. Either Antonio went through the trouble to arrange some interviews for me with some of the Mahala elders or judges, or Armonia took me along on her visits 'on the Mahala.' In time, I began to visit some of these households on my own, but they were naturally part of the same extended family as my hosts. Antonio forbade me from visiting Armonia's brothers who lived on the same street as us, saying that they were sexual predators; Armonia said that it was for the best that I did not bother them because they were 'difficult' people who did not like having gaʒe in their house. None of them ever spoke to me, although their wives and daughters did. Apart from these explicit interdictions, it would have been foolish (and pointless) to contact people with whom either Antonio, or Armonia, or their 'clan' was at odds, and these were many. Even as I joined them on house visits, they often had to provide an explanation as to why they were accompanied by a gaʒi, because many people were suspicious. Likewise, when people visited our house, at first they assumed I was some domestic help, and did not mind me much, except when they noticed I was not doing much housework. Armonia usually said I was a friend of her daughters and/or her driver. This did not surprise anyone, since it is generally well-advised to have gaʒe friends who might help you out with stuff in the gaʒe world, and rather frequent to employ gaʒe for various services around the house, either as cleaners, or as babysitters, or to have one of the younger men's gaʒi girlfriends moving in. What was less usual, however, was to make them privy to personal or familial conversations, but since my hosts implicitly vouched for me by bringing me along, my presence often blended into the background and people stopped paying attention to me.

The other restriction I had to observe, beyond my ethnicity and my family's boundaries, was that of gender, which meant that I never had access to the company of young men. I could and

did talk freely to men past their 40s, who already had children and grandchildren, and to women of any age, but young unmarried men avoided my company, and I instinctively avoided theirs, save for the two young men in our household and their gatherings, where I helped their sisters serve them, but never joined directly. Generally, although I was in my early 30s, at an age when most women around me were mothers or grandmothers, because I was unmarried and childless, I was assimilated to the group of young unmarried women in their late teens, who were supposed to maintain propriety, help around, and be discreet to the point of invisibility. For this reason, at the various gatherings that I attended, I offered (or was prompted) to help out rather than sit and listen. At first this felt frustrating, before I realised that the proceedings always had a way of reaching the backstage, complete with social commentary on behalf of the wary and knowledgeable young women whose job, much like mine, was to survey the community and figure out all the recent developments (in their case, with a view to their marriage prospects).

All of these conditionings resulted in what might seem like an incomplete survey of the Roma families in Mahala. One way to mitigate this shortcoming was my economic activity in the town's second-hand market, where I joined Armonia or her daughters at their family stall or manned it on my own a few times. The market brings together Roma from all across the city and from outside of it and is massively frequented by gaʒe. Although the market was controlled by Antonio, this mixed, anonymizing setting, away from Mahala and from our household, enabled me to meet more people who, encouraged by the context, shared their stories with me liberally over the frequent coffee breaks that a slow day warrants.

My data cannot claim to be 'representative' for all Roma as such; as I have clarified, the internal variety of the groups that call themselves 'Roma; or variations thereof, plus the groups labelled as 'Gypsies,' cannot be captured ethnographically by a single study. What they all have in

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common, as Williams (2011) showed, is the process of identity construction which is always centred on the fact that they always live in the midst of others, with whom they have ambivalent, perhaps contradictory relations. Nor does my research entail an exhaustive survey of all the household that make up the *tsiganie*. My data is limited to several prominent *neamos* in Mahala, with that of Antonio and Armonia inevitably at the centre. This is a limitation that most researchers of Roma groups report: being affiliated with one family curtails one's access to other families, especially those involved in feuds with one's hosts. At the same time, the Rom speak of nothing else so keenly as they do of one another's behavior, and this has been a source for data I could not have accessed otherwise. After about a year, I noticed how the stories that had fascinated me in the beginning were starting to repeat themselves and settle into patterns. That's when I knew that my fieldwork had come to an end.

'Why don't you boys play in your own hood?'

— Non-Roma official to several Roma involved in apparent car accident

Mahala is located on the town's south-western margins, amidst swampy terrains, a landfill, ruins of early industry, and cemeteries of three different denominations (Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish), just past the town's former sewage canal that used to delimit the urban proper from its hinterlands. Despite being officially integrated into the town several decades ago, Mahala is neither fully in, nor out, but awkwardly in-between. Its location, fuzzy margins, unclear history, tentative infrastructure, and architectural cacophony all testify to this in-betweenness that constitutes the topic of the present chapter. Its Roma residents feel that Mahala ensures them a certain autonomy from the gaʒe; the non-Roma townspeople feel that Mahala 'contains' the Roma from spilling over the rest of the town. But beyond these (inaccurate) representations, what is the relation of Mahala to the rest of town, and how does it translate into the social relations between the Rom and the town's non-Roma majorities?

In addressing these questions, I discuss Mahala as a physical and social location, whose boundaries are as blurred as they are guarded. In the eyes of non-Roma townspeople, Mahala spreads way beyond its administrative contours, whereas for the Rom Čor who inhabit Mahala and its surroundings, the name refers mostly to a social, rather than a physical location, and means a gathering of related or like-minded Rom with whom they can hang out and whom they can morally evaluate, and be evaluated by. After mapping out this socialised space along with its tentative boundaries, in the second section I attempt to document the geographical and historical formation of Mahala. As I tried to document location, however, my interviews with

Roma elders shifted towards dis-location; or so it appeared. I grapple with my interlocutors' emphasis on the Rom's recent history of nomadism as a mode of place-making and a means of refusing to stay put that ultimately culminates in 'outsmarting' the authorities. In the final section, I provide an overview of the Rom's relations to the town beyond Mahala through a series of examples provided by my hosts or that I witnessed myself. My interlocutors summarized these incidents as cases of 'discrimination,'—by which they did not mean just social inequality, as the word is usually used, or an observation about gaʒe domination, but also a critique of how the latter default on the obligations deriving from the position that they claim for themselves. In short, this chapter deals with the forces from the core that keep the periphery just where it is, neither too far, nor too close, and with the ways in which the Rom navigate these forces to assert themselves as members of the social body on their own terms.
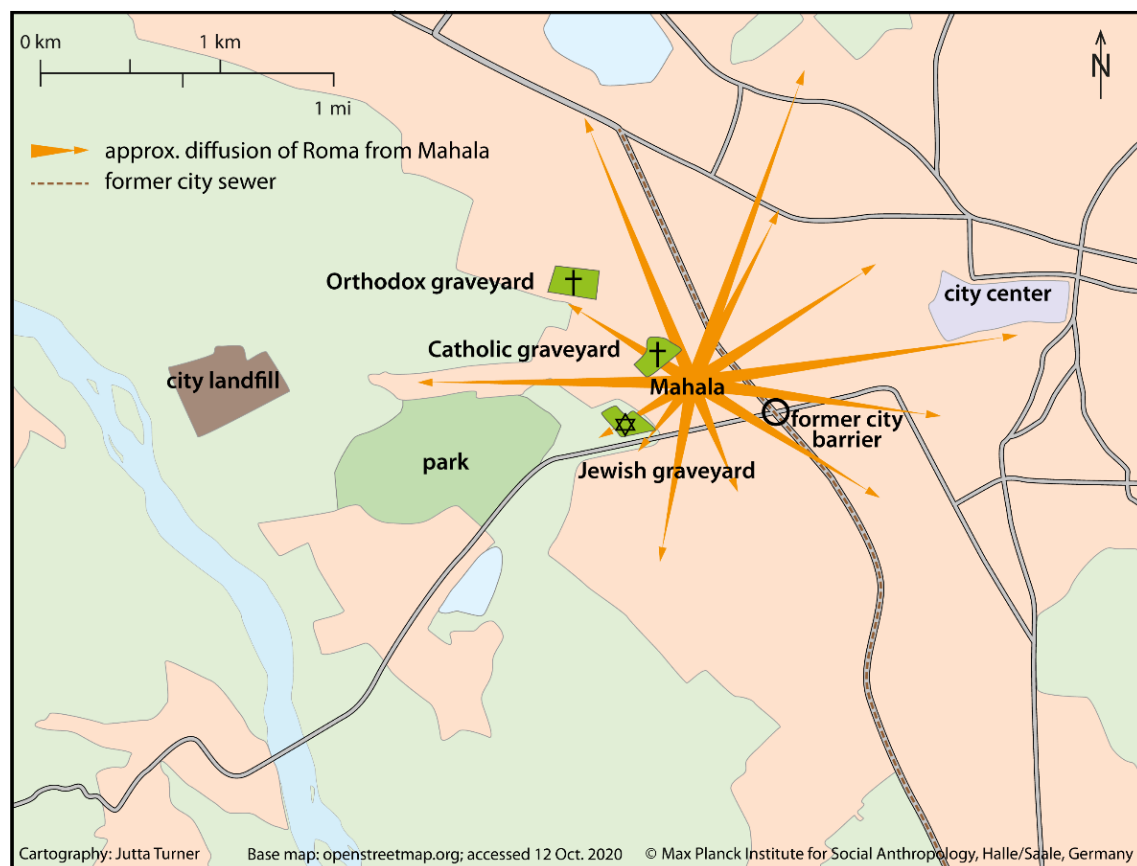


*Map 2. The approximate position of Mahala relative to the town's centre and to its south-western margins. The areas in light green are wetlands on the side of the river. The arrows departing from Mahala indicate that Roma households are moving out of Mahala onto neighboring areas.*

# Locality

Mahala finds itself alongside one of the town's main roads. Starting in the center of town, the road swings past the remains of the former Jewish neighborhood, the oldest remains of the city to its left, goes past several historical buildings and former factories, dives into a sleepy residential neighborhood of late 19<sup>th</sup> century houses and then, just before it exits town to plunge into the countryside, goes past the Catholic and the Jewish cemeteries, and a large park located on the riverbank. At the crossing of this street with the former sewage canal that used to encircle the city, the area known as Mahala begins. This crossroad is still called 'the barrier' by local residents, although there is no barrier in sight nowadays, and the stretch of land that spreads beyond this point has been included into the urban area for decades now. The name however indicates that this was one of the main entry points into town up until the 1980s, when the area beyond the canal was integrated into the city proper. Walking on this main road, one could easily miss Mahala, because nothing entices the unsuspecting traveller to turn right between the ruined buildings that now serve as an impromptu garbage-collecting area, which mark the entrance to the neighborhood.



*Photo 2. The ruins of the former cinema that mark the entrance to Mahala.*

## *The* longue durée *of ungovernability*

Oraș is one the largest towns in the Romanian south and is located in the Oltenia region, which spans the country's southwest. Oltenia has been on and off part of Wallachia, at times supplying the ruling family, and at other times revelling in autarchy, particularly in the 18th century, when irregular armies of bandits (Rou. *haiduci*, *panduri*) controlled the area[16]. The rule of bandits and the fact that the area was declared ungovernable after only two decades of occupation by the Habsburg Empire in the early 18th century, which left it *de facto* ungoverned for decades, count as sources of local pride, along with the several revolts initiated here against the various administrations that Wallachia came under during its long feudal and Ottoman rule (15th-19th centuries).

For centuries, Oraș was a small market town composed of numerous neighborhoods (Rou. *mahalale*), each centred around one church, that were reunited into one town in mid-19th century. For most of its history, the town found itself at the behest of landowners and merchants, who later turned into small industrialists. The size of the city population took off significantly during socialism (between 1948 and 1992, the population grew by 358%), due to the rise of heavy industry and the proletarianization of peasants from neighboring villages.

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[16] The hajduk as a figure of popular sovereignty is revered among Rom and Romanians alike: celebrated as a figure of 'national independence' in Romanian history books, for the Rom hajduks are a disembedded, mobile epitome of the independent and plentiful life that the Rom imagine for themselves, particularly in nature, as illustrated by the following quote from the film *And-ek ghes* ('One day'), directed by German director Philip Scheffner in collaboration with Roma immigrants in Berlin, and released in 2016: *Șavale tsigănie, avileam kîta la Berlin, șuteam ame and-ek parco te kăras amengă gretăraș te xas amengă i ame, sam sea i tsigania koce… te dikăl soavră tsigănia șavale că sam șukar, xas amengă sar haiduci…* = 'Boys, *tsiganie*, we arrived here in Berlin, we put ourselves in a park to make a barbecue to eat, we're here all the *tsiganie*… so the whole *tsiganie* can see, boys, that we're fine, and we're eating *like hajduks*.' (Translation and emphasis mine.)

Until the 1970s, when the socialist administration proceeded to systematize it, Oraș was, and in important ways has remained, a place of stark contrasts. Home to several ruling families of Wallachia, it housed the city residencies of the region's landowners (boyars), later replaced by a class of industrialists, as elsewhere in the region. Their luxurious residences are still visible today, as are the remnants of some old shabby *mahalale*. Luxury notwithstanding, infrastructure remained rather underdeveloped, and hygiene in particular was a fraught topic, as less than one fifth of households had access to sewage (*** 2014)[17].

In recent decades, Oraș consolidated its name as a city of contrasts due to several incidents involving local criminal groups (and their solid connections with police heads) that made the national news. Because of such incidents, the city gained the nickname of 'the Romanian Palermo:' [18] a place under the domination of 'Gypsy mafias' abetted by a corrupt and complacent administration[19]. The incident that made this label stick was the 'Gypsy riot' of 2003, which brought hundreds of Roma from Mahala onto the streets and in confrontation with the police forces. Ostensibly, this was a protest against discrimination, the rioters' complaint being that their access to bars and restaurants in town was blocked on ethnic criteria. The riot did not cause any casualties, and the police mainly resorted to negotiations, rather than violence.

Several Mahala inhabitants whom I interviewed later confessed that this was not an ethnic conflict as such but a confrontation between two clans of moneylenders, one from Mahala, the

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[17] Author and title redacted to preserve anonymity.

[18] 'This seemingly accurate copy of Sicily's Palermo in Romania, [Oraș] is a city of extremes'—this is how the report begins that proposed the comparison between Oraș and Palermo and its nickname as 'City of the Mafia.' [Source withheld to preserve anonymity]

[19] The Wikipedia entry on Mahala states in capitals that Romanian ethnics have been driven away by 'Gypsy clans' through 'daily terror,' something that amounts to 'ethnic cleansing,' with the 'complicity' of politicians and policemen who have been 'bought' by Gypsies. [Source withheld to preserve anonymity]

other from another part of town, and belonging to a different Roma *neamo*. The latter had extended their control over all central venues and were restricting the access of the former to casinos and other places where they could encounter clients. The dwellers of Mahala took to the street to protest discrimination—not against non-Roma, but against another Roma group. In other words, even though it was reported as an ethnic conflict, this was primarily an economic conflict between two groups of usurers from different *neamos*[20].

The SW of Oraș, where Mahala is located, was the initial industrial area of the city at the end of the 19th century. Some 20 minutes' walk from the city centre, the area was nonetheless marginal enough (due to the elongated shape of the city) to allow for the development of incipient industries and the housing of workers, and to become a hotbed of crime and prostitution, as historical records suggest. A former periphery located on the swampy grounds of the river that flows west of the city, where agriculture met small industry and peasant-style dwellings sat alongside typified, cubical workers' housing, in the early 20th century the SW of the city was already infamous, but *not* for the great concentration of Roma in this area. Mahala only became known as a *tsiganie* much later, in the second half the 20th century: its ill fame preceded the actual presence of Gypsies in this area.

After the Second World War, when industrial platforms were developed elsewhere across the city, the south-west fell in the dereliction in which it finds itself to this day. While it has long been part of the city proper, the outlook, location, and parochial air of the area continue to invite the label 'peri-urban:' the neighborhood is composed exclusively of single houses, most of them similarly structured, save for the ones that have been reconstructed in recent years,

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[20] What added to the confusion is the fact that the Rom of Mahala would refer to the other Roma with whom they were in conflict as 'Romanians' (meaning 'gaʒe'), a word that is not only reserved for Romanian ethnics, but also for assimilated Roma, who do not come from a clearly distinguishable *neamo*, as was the case with their opponents.

with garden plots and mostly cobbled streets, among which are sprinkled the ruins of the former small-scale industry that once developed here.

Oraș on the whole is very unevenly urbanised, with numerous 'pockets' of pre-war clusters of housing areas in-between the high-rise apartment buildings that were mostly added to the urban landscape in the 1970s and '80s. No such attempt to systematization was ever made in Mahala, however. This has remained a house-only area, that has only recently (and partially) been asphalted and connected to the city sewage and water supply. When I interviewed the former town planner ('urbanist') hoping to understand why the southwest of the town was so visibly underdeveloped as compared to the rest, the man conceded that 'it never crossed [their] minds' to build apartment buildings and the associated infrastructure there, partly because the place rests on a swamp, and partly because the inhabitants would have had no means to maintain their apartments. Unlike most other neighborhoods in the city that were gradually integrated into the city as it expanded to accommodate new industries and an influx of workers, Mahala, despite it relatively central location, remained as marginal as it had ever been, a pocket of underdevelopment in the heart of burgeoning urban growth[21]. This was as much a political decision as it was an environmental adaptation, and both of these rationales reflect onto the area's ungovernability and onto the Rom's decision to settle there.

Not that the local state has been thoroughly absent. The locals of Mahala like to reminisce about the times when the area did benefit from some urban planning. The ruins pictured in Photos 1 and 2 above used to host a cinema and a pub during socialism; across the street, in a string of buildings that now belong to a private (Rom) owner, there were several shops, and

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[21] The last couple of years have witnessed a steady wave of real estate expansion in Oraș, and it is possible that the empty plots around Mahala might be taken over by private developers for residential and commercial purposes. The proximity of modern urban buildings will contrast dramatically with the peri-urban aspect of Mahala.

further down the road towards the city centre, next to the neighborhood school, there was a large department store that is now an empty building housing garbage and stray dogs. An interesting detail pertaining to the ethnic profiling of the area during socialism recounted by the locals is the fact that the former cinema on this street often projected Indian films, popular with Roma, that were not screened elsewhere in the city.

The area is now connected to the gas, electricity, and water systems of the city; however, many Roma households use gas cylinders, dig their own wells, and tap into the water and electricity systems irregularly, because utilities require regular payments which they are not always in a position to make. Frequent raids of the police to check the electricity connections and power cuts ensue, but the episodes are quickly forgotten with the help of one (non-Roma) electrician who caters to Roma households. A former employee of the city electrical company, the man was discharged without pay as he became ill, and he therefore has no objections to tapping into the company's resources in exchange for a small fee from the Rom. In fact, he confessed to me that he felt more 'respected' doing this informal work than in his previous 20 years of formal employment with the company.

Similar symptoms of state withdrawal reflect onto the presence of the police: except for the heavy-handed interventions organised by the Directorate for Investigating Organized Crime and Terrorism upon suspicions of human trafficking and money laundering, the local police tends to cooperate with local leaders, as I show in Chapter 5. And, in the case of a car accident that looked like (and was) a random hit and that took place outside of Mahala, close to the town centre, local authorities asked the victims 'Why don't you boys play in your own hood?' Despite its in-between belonging and mixed demography, the area designated as the town's *tsiganie* is in effect an enclave.
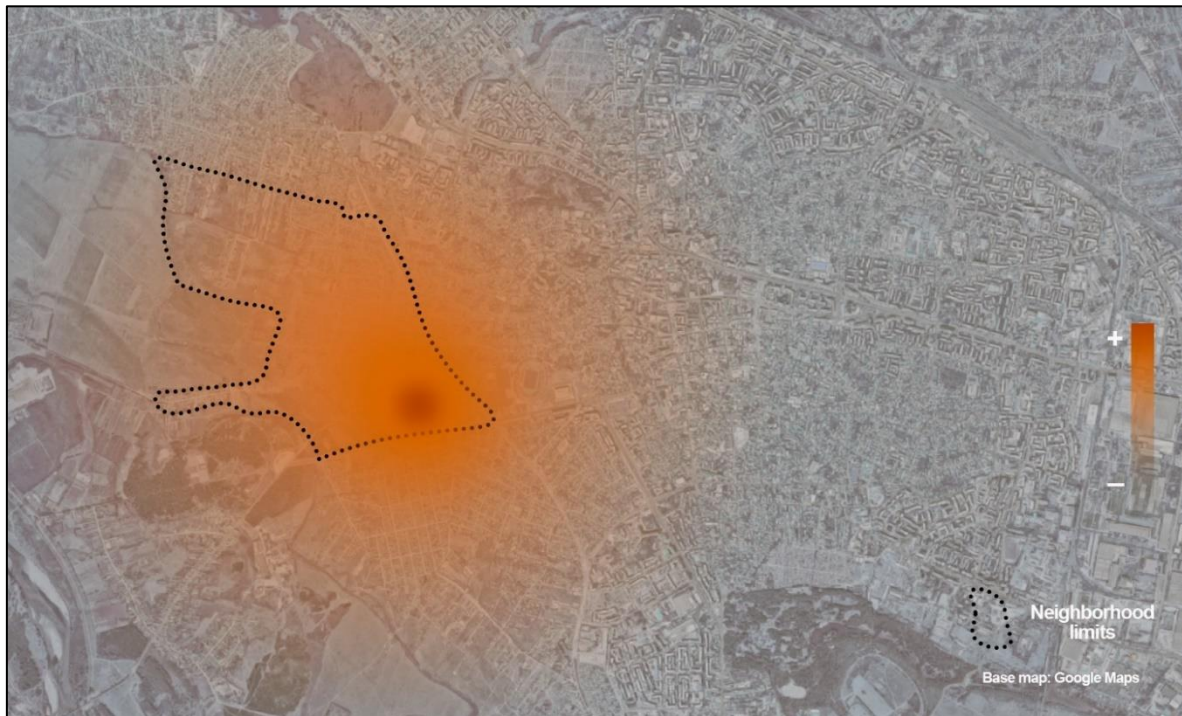
*Figure 3. The black contour designates the official demarcation of Mahala. The overflowing gradual colour signify the mental representation of both Roma and non-Roma as to the spread of 'Gypsy territory,' while the more intensely coloured area signifies the location of the street after which Mahala takes its name, which is one of the two or three streets inhabited mostly by Roma. Map made by Ştefan Voicu.*

The administrative limits of Mahala do not coincide with its imaginary ones: since the inhabitants whose families once lived in the neighborhood proper appear to have spilled out onto neighboring areas, Oraș dwellers have come to refer to a much wider area as Mahala, which they use interchangeably with *tsiganie* to refer to where Roma live. Thus, during fieldwork, although technically I lived several hundred meters away from Mahala, my non-Roma friends thought I was living in Mahala, some declining to visit me for this reason. My hosts, on the other hand, as I have mentioned, were adamant that they did *not* live in Mahala. They would say they were going 'onto Mahala' when they visited relatives, even if those households were equally far from Mahala as their own, and when going to the exact location that carries Mahala's administrative name, they rarely used this name.

When talking about Mahala, the Rom did not mean a precise geographical location, but the sum of relatives and like-minded Rom with whom they would gather, as well as a set of genealogic ties and behavioural rules that they abode by and used to evaluate one another as 'proper' or 'true' Rom. Much like the Kalderash in Paris studied by Williams, for whom 'the commune, a non-Gypsy administrative unit, is not meaningful… For them what counts is the distance between one household and another' (1982: 326), the Rom of Mahala do not conceive of the town, and especially of the area in which they live, in terms of gaʒe representations and units. Therefore, the contours of what the Rom mean by 'Mahala' overlap only partially with those of the official and of the non-Roma versions of the area. At the same time, the spatial contours of what the Rom designate as *tsiganie*—the sum of people, rather than the place, in their parlance—overlap with what the non-Roma mean by the same word, although the latter use it to mean a place. In any case, with its shifting, ever-expanding contours, 'Mahala' is a vague reference, ultimately a misnomer. For the non-Roma, it is not so much a location as an ever-expanding trouble spot; for the Roma, it is the locus of Gypsyness. If the Rom move, the Mahala moves with them.

In this chapter, I analyse Mahala as a case of 'relational urbanism' (Monterescu 2015:20) focusing on the minority/majority relations and 'the local identities that they produce:' 'The perspective of relational urbanism … revises the multiscalar links between the hegemonic logic of urban nationalism, the economic logic of neoliberal gentrification, and the social logic of ethnic cohabitation.' Although both the Rom and the non-Roma maintain the notion of separation—the Rom by presenting Mahala as their *Heimat*, the gaʒe by expressing desires that Gypsies were indeed contained in Mahala or stayed 'in their own hood'—the ways in which their interactions make the city tells a different story.

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*Demographics*

Two other misconceptions about Mahala endure in its popular representations: one is that it is a compact Roma neighborhood, and the other is that it is *the* Roma neighborhood of Oraș. None of them is true: all of the town's neighborhoods are home to various percentages of Roma and, like them, the area known as 'Mahala' is, and has always been relatively mixed, except for a couple of streets, one of which gives Mahala its folk name. Currently less than 2% of all the inhabitants of Oraș declared themselves to be Roma ethnics and almost 10% of whom declared their ethnicity as 'unknown.'[22]' NGOs estimate that the real number of Roma is closer to 10% of the city's population, if not more (Antonio, personal communication).

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[22] Data from 'SocioRoMap – Cartografierea sociografică a comunităților de romi din România pentru o monitorizare la nivel comunitar a schimbărilor privind integrarea romilor' [SocioRoMap – The Sociographic

Even though many ethnic Romanians have moved out of this area, so have many Rom. The reasons and patterns of Rom moving in and out of Mahala and into adjacent areas are not straightforward. Some households moved out decades ago, following major conflicts with other families. Others said the area had simply become too crowded, which means that it is difficult to find a house plot that is not too close to another family. As I explain in Chapter 4, in order to move into an area where other Rom already live, one must ask and receive permission from them, as this may be seen as an intrusion into their territory.

As results from the sketch below, my Rom hosts had Romanian neighbors on both sides: one household belonged to a retired policeman, the other to an elderly woman and her son who lived in complete destitution, without any running water or electricity, and caused my hosts to panic about hygiene. To their left and right, several more Romanian households followed, separating my hosts from the other houses belonging to their relatives.



*Figure 4. Housing sample. Roma households are in red, non-Roma households in green.*

The house I rented later belonged to a couple of foreigners who had meanwhile moved to the countryside. Next to me was an uninhabited house which belonged to a Romanian family who wanted to sell, but as one of the owners told me once, 'not to Gypsies.' Pointing at various houses on the street, the embittered owner of the house next door told me that some 50 years before, when he was still a child, that house belonged to a judge, here was a tailor, there a cobbler, and further down a doctor—not one Gypsy household in sight. Beyond his house was the school, and after that, the large ruin of a former two-story general store which now served as dumping ground. To my left, there was an empty slot, bought by a Rom who was waiting to gather enough money to build a house there. Further two more non-Roma households followed, and then, on a street corner, rose the villa belonging to Armonia's eldest brother. Across the street from his house stood the villa of their elder sister. The same mixture continued up and down the street; the presence of Roma households diluted, but did not vanish, all the way to the city centre.

# (dis)Location

In the previous section, I have stated that the administrative borders of the neighborhood known as *tsiganie* or *mahala* among the non-Roma do not map onto the subjective borders of what the Rom denote by these words. First, let us dwell on the fact that the Rom integrated the Romanian word 'tsiganie,' which is essentially pejorative, into their self-reference as well as into their daily parlance: a Rom (or Romni) approaching a gathering of Roma can greet them by saying '*So kăren, shavale tsigănie*' (How are you, boys, *tsiganie*) or can refer to their family and acquaintances back home as 'amari tsiganie' (our *tsiganie*) or, in order to emphasize that many people migrated to the US, they could exclaim that 'the whole *tsiganie* is in America.' Tsiganie is, then, not so much the physical location where *tsigani* live, but rather the totality of *tsigani*.

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Mahala, on the other hand, is more of a location *stricto sensu*, however blurred its boundaries may be.

Seeing how central the neighbourhood appeared to be to my interlocutors' self-identity, in my early weeks in the field I proceeded to document its history. To this end, I interviewed several elders from across the subgroups who reside in and around Mahala, asking when the neighbourhood had been established, how, what used to be the vicinity relations, and why so many people were both proud to have moved out of Mahala, and nostalgic about the times when their elders had lived there. Throughout these interviews, several contradictory accounts of the Rom's settlement in this part of town emerged. Some claimed that the Brickmakers were the first to settle here, due to the establishment of a brick factory nearby, at the end of the 19th century. People who are now in their 80s recalled their parents had been working there before socialism and the factory owner allotted them plots to build houses in the area. Others say they bought house plots from the landowner in the early 20th century. (It is highly debated whether non-Roma were already living in the area.) And others yet reminisce that the area had been empty when their great grandparents first settled there, which they found convenient because 'Gypsies are always drawn to marginal places, by the waterside, where they can graze their horses,' as one interlocutor put it. Some people had been born elsewhere in the region and came to Mahala as their returned from the deportation to Transnistria because that was where their only surviving relatives lived.

However, it was not their process of settlement that my interlocutors wanted to talk about, but their circulation: while they owned or rented houses in this area, the Rom of Mahala kept travelling the country up until the early 1980s, which makes them one of the last Roma groups to have been 'sedentarized.'

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*The trouble with nomadism*

Roma's circulation, or 'nomadism,' as it was called in official documents, was closely related to criminality. The deportation of Gypsies by the Romanian government onto recently occupied Transnistria in 1942-1943 was done along two criteria: whether they were nomadic or had no occupation/means to support themselves (Achim 2013). 25.000 Gypsies were thus deported, which amounted to approximately 2.5% of the total Roma population in Romania at the time (Ioanid 2008:225). Half of them returned and suffered further persecutions during socialism, for the same reasons. The 'sedentarization' of Gypsies (Rou. *stabilirea*) became one of the utmost tasks of the socialist regime from its onset in 1947. Yet, Andricioaei (2020) rightfully asks, 'what was a nomad, particularly given that many people were displaced and/or homeless after the war?' Based on archival research, she shows that police reports used racial profiling, mixing terms like '*tsigan*,' 'speaks *ţigăneşte*' (Romani), or '*şatră*' (small group of Gypsies) along with suspicions of theft, fraud, public disturbance, and other 'antisocial' deeds.

In 1951, a report was issued on the 'statistical situation of nomadic, seminomadic, and "sedentarised" Roma from the Romanian Popular Republic' by the Department for the Affairs of National Minorities (*Departamentul pentru Problemele Minorităţilor Naţionale*). Without delving much into the causes of 'nomadism,' the report notes with some satisfaction that the nomadic and seminomadic Roma were 'restless' at the time, because they had just been prevented from migrating between regions; the report recommends that people's gatherings and mass organisations should seize the occasion given by their immobilizarion and convince them to join the working class, despite the opposition of the communities' heads (Marin 2017: 105-8). The report is eloquent in conveying the absence of any concern for the Roma themselves, as opposed to the obstacle that they posed to 'building socialism.' It is also an instance of what Fosztó (2018) calls the 'perverse recognition' of the Roma minority during

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socialism: while the existence of any problems regarding the Roma was thoroughly ignored and denied by the regime, the Roma became in practice an outcast population, a social group whose 'handling' had little to do with their ethnic and human rights, and which only became an issue when it seemed to pose an obstacle to socialism.

Reports on the problematic condition of 'nomads' continue in the archives in the early 1950s, but, as it results from the documents collected by Marin (2017), around 1952 the concern for Gypsies goes quiet for almost two decades. A report from 1972 mentions that, although a certain percentage of 'nomads' had been integrated and the authorities continued 'to be concerned about changing the mentality of Gypsies[23] regarding their lifestyle, their respect for norms of living together in society, and for work' (*op. cit*: 157), 'the resolution of the complex problems raised by their integration into the socio-economic life of the country and their enrolment into organised production and cultural activities did not make the object of sustained and efficient concern on behalf of local organs of state power' (*op. cit*: 158). The same report mentions the 'parasitical lifestyle' and the 'vulgar, uncivilised behavior' of Gypsies, and the foremost measure it recommends is to redistribute and settle them in various places, depending on the labour needs; the ninth and last measure is that the police should oversee and control 'the Gypsies who do not fit in the established norms of cohabitation and take firm measures… against those leading a parasitical life' (*op. cit*: 163). Thus, while initially the nomadism of Roma was a problem for the social order that the new regime sought to impose against 'elements inimical to the people,' two decades later it resurfaced as a problem of socialist work ethic and, ultimately, a cultural problem. The authorities proceeded to criminalize 'vagrancy'

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[23] Whereas the reports from the 1950s often used the term 'Roma', the reports from the 1970s onwards are consistent in using the term 'Gypsies.'

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along with its associated activities (begging, prostitution, gambling, and fraud) under the label 'parasitical lifestyle' (Decree 153/1970.).

All of this goes to show that 'nomadism' is a heavily ideologized term in relation to Roma; it does not denote an ecological adaptation and/or a livelihood, as is the case with its usage elsewhere (Rao 1987). In relation to Gypsies, the term is primarily used by the state to signify everything that was 'wrong' with them at given points in time, and the belief of successive regimes that fixing Gypsies into place would also 'fix' them. This does not make Roma mobility automatically into a form of 'resistance,' as some authors have suggested (Engebrigtsen 2017; Scott 2009), but into a perpetuation of exclusion (Ciavolella 2015). Since the ways in which Roma relate to state or gaʒe categories of space are not oppositional, but dialectical and socially embedded, 'subversion' or 'resistance' should not be seen as *the* reasons for nomadism. As the next section shows, being on the move is rationalised equally as the result of necessity and as a choice, as well as representing a continuous effort to maintain *tsiganie*. Movement or circulation in its various forms (including stillness) is not a privileged strategy of maintaining spatial autonomy or exercising resistance to the ever-encroaching state. The state, which is always already the gaʒe state, and its interest in territorial control, is variously folded into Romani sociality, appropriated, and reinterpreted according to the Roma's own values and modes of life[24].

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[24] This section builds on an argument developed with Martin Fotta in several conference presentations, especially *A comparative anthropology of circulation: The sociality of 'nomadism' among Brazilian Calon and Romanian Rom*, co-authored for the 2021 IUAES Congress.

*The dialectics of nomadology*

It is telling that I came across data regarding the Rom's circulation just as I had set about documenting their sense of place and stability. This observation prompts further questions about the way in which the Rom did not imagine stability and belonging in connection to a place, but rather in connection to one another and to their *tsiganie*, hence quite differently from how peasant societies and the state view sedentarism. At first, I found it curious that my attempts to elicit stories about locality would quickly digress into stories about mobility, and in their turn some of my interlocutors probably found my insistence on stability rather hapless. As most of the people I interviewed would give other localities than Oraș as their place of birth, I would then proceed to ask how they arrived here—at which they seemed puzzled, and answered, 'By cart.'

Being born somewhere did not tie the person to that place, although a few had names reminiscent of the localities where they had been born. One man cut through my routine of asking where he had been born and where his parents had been born, and when they had moved to this particular place etc., and spelled it out for me: 'We did not used to be born in a stable place, especially those of us who are older… I was born on the road (Rou. *pe traseu*), in the cart.' This alludes to a form of spatiality that is not reducible to the duality between nomadism and sedentarism—something akin to what anthropologist Florencia Ferrari (2010) has called 'nomadic cosmology' or what Daniel Baker (2018), a Romani Gypsy artist and curator, calls 'nomadic sensibility.'

While the state largely views Romani nomadism in cultural or civilizational terms, and the anthropologists in economic ones, the of my interlocutors' own explanation for their nomadic patterns is decidedly dialectical:

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> Since [the Rom] were not given properties after their liberation [from slavery], [the state] didn't give us any solutions so that we could be prepared for the next day… [And] as we had no possibility to become stable and create a bit of surplus... we took to the road… Gypsies took this route to be wanderers because they had no other choice, they were barely admitted anywhere to work... So they chose to shape their own destiny, in order to live. Every community takes risks out of necessity.

Structural factors and state policies, herein termed 'necessity', are described as the cause for the Rom's 'nomadism' and for their patterns of movement. My interlocutors emphasized that their 'choice to shape their own destiny' was not strictly in opposition to the state but was an adaptation to dispossession. At the same time, the collective dimension of this choice stands out: it is *the community* that takes risks, for example going about *their* business as opposed to working for state collective farms:

> Someone in the community would go for instance to the north of the country, to a farm, and ask the intendent for a paper stating that they needed people to work... With this paper, the Gypsies could travel and wander, using it as their justification. But they didn't go to work [on the farm], they went to do *their own work*, their job. Because they weren't just roaming around for fun, they roamed in order to live.

It should be added here, 'in order to live *in the Romani way*' i.e., continue pursuing their livelihoods in ways that they found meaningful.

The fact that the reproduction of community was central to movement transpires also from the following quote. Recounting how harsh the communist sedentarization policies were, one of my interlocutors recalled:

> One Gypsy man had a beautiful idea, which was beneficial *for the community*: as they were on the road, a woman was due to give birth… They went to the town hall, and… got a [birth] certificate, and this man saw the stamp on the certificate, and said, we can make this as well. He cut a piece of his leather belt and sculpted the stamp on it. He said: from now on we won't be imprisoned anymore. Everywhere we go, we ask for a

certificate and reproduce the stamp… In this way, [the Rom] had a justification so that they weren't *at the whim of fate* anymore… (emphasis mine)

This also illustrates how gaʒe categories of space and the rules that govern them are integrated in Roma sociality and movement to the point of mimicry. For now, we can conclude that, while the Rom of Mahala boast to be among the last nomads to have been settled, largely thanks to their capacity to outsmart the authorities, they neither romanticize nomadism, nor deplore sedentarization (although they do object to some of its harsher measures). The point is, ultimately, not whether they're nomadic or settled, but whether and in what way throughout these processes they could remain Rom.

## Façades



*Photo 4. One of the best known 'Gypsy palaces' in town. Photo source: local newspaper. Photo details have been blurred and the source was redacted to preserve anonymity.*

In Mahala and its neighboring area, especially along the larger arteries, numerous large mansions, often dubbed 'Gypsy palaces,' catch the eye of the onlooker. These are large, imposing structures, sometimes adorned with columns, lions, ornate iron gates, and other details that denote social status. Needless to say, the provoke the outrage of the majority population, ostensibly as an issue of taste, but on closer inquiry, because their owners do not appear to have a clear occupation to justify their income and are part of a disenfranchised minority. Despite the enormous heterogeneity within this minority in terms of subgroups, appearance, income, and spending preferences, the non-Roma public finds the juxtaposition of poverty, criminality, and 'palaces' vexing. Yellow press in particular dwells on this correlation, e.g., an article in the British tabloid *The Sun* writing about a network of Romanian Roma convicted of social benefits fraud in the UK, published photos of their 'flash mansions' back in Romania and dubbed the place 'the Gypsy Beverly Hills' and 'Benefits Boulevard'[25]. From the outside, then, Romani houses are seen as statements, whether as monuments of kitsch, spite houses, or as outright provocations. In this section, I address the question: If 'Gypsy palaces' are statements, what exactly are they stating?

Asked by journalists why he erected such a large house, the owner of one of the most famous 'Gypsy palaces' in Oraș, rising nearby Mahala, answered simply: 'Out of hubris and pride.' Other people had made large houses and he could not bear being second best[26]. Oral local histories recount in very similar terms the erection of 'palaces' by rich landowners and industrialists at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that they even wanted to placate with gold. Meanwhile, these became national monuments, even though in their day and age they were very much 'flash mansions' just like those of the Roma.

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[25] *The Sun* 2011 A gypsy Beverly Hills… built with British benefits (in Romania). 11 May 2011. https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/553017/a-gypsy-beverly-hills-built-with-british-benefits-in-romania/.

[26] The quote appeared in an article published in the local media in 2008. [Source redacted to preserve anonymity]
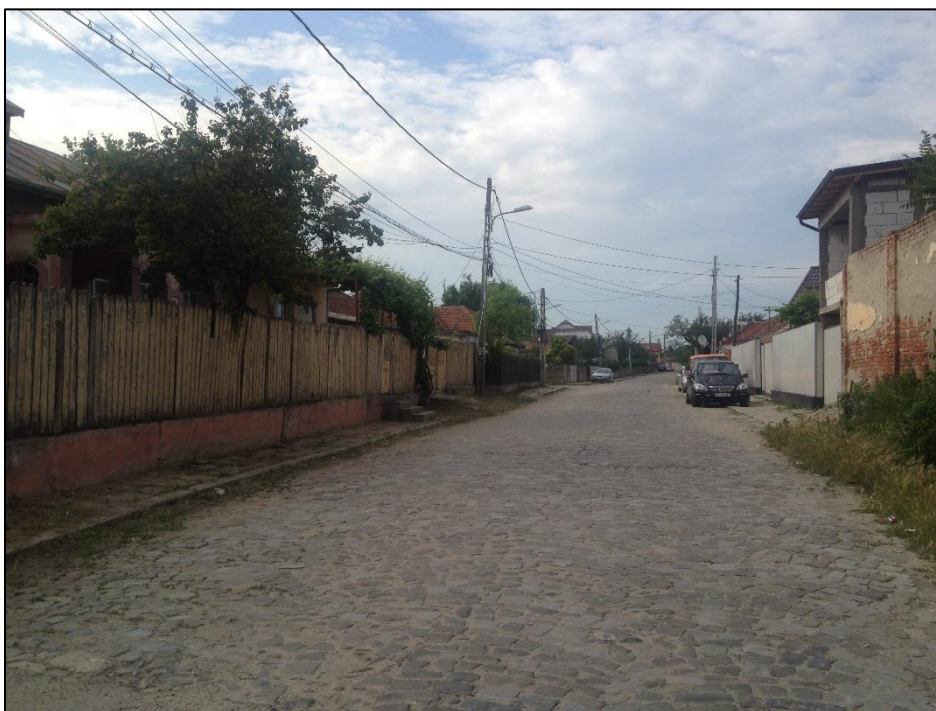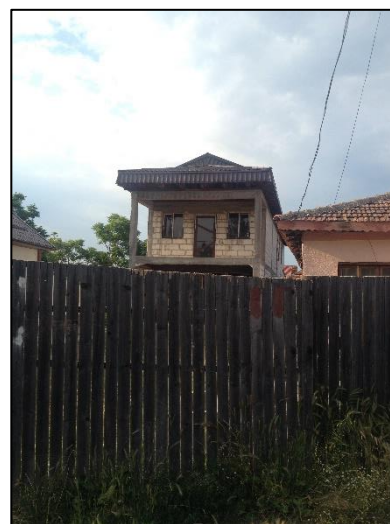
*Photos 5-9: Sample houses from Mahala.*

The consensus among architects who have studied 'Gypsy palaces' is that their utmost raison d'être is representational, rather than functional (Gräf 2008). One answer to the question of what they represent can be fathomed by looking at sheer numbers. A study conducted in the early 2000s (Zamfir and Preda 2002: 313-328) showed that the Roma occupied the lowest positions in terms of employment, income, and education. And yet, 5% of them could boast houses with more than five rooms, which at the time could only be said about 3% of the non-Roma, even though the latter were overall more prosperous. At the same time, 17%, of Roma and 13% of non-Roma lived in single-room housing. There are no updated figures for the last decade, but conceivably, due to migration, the number of people of either ethnicity who have built larger houses has increased. I surmise, however, that the disproportion between the level of income and general wellbeing of the Roma minority as a whole, and the percentage of the population who has spacious houses remained comparable.

The relatively high number of owners of multi-room dwellings in a population that is otherwise known for living in extreme poverty and destitution and which is often subject to evictions (Vrăbiescu 2021) goes well beyond the politics of prestige and should be explained in terms of structural inequality. Because on average the Roma's access to decent housing is unlikely, it is conceivable that some of those who do secure the means to build a house will overdo it, in order to distinguish themselves resolutely from the majority of deprived Roma ethnics living in destitute conditions. For instance, Tesăr (2016) interprets the visibility that large Roma houses ensure as a claim to recognition, formulated in terms that not just the Roma, but also the non-Roma can reckon with.

Indeed, architects have long ago established that the Romani palaces which the media and public opinion construes as 'foreign' and 'tasteless' in fact mimic architectural elements from the surrounding prestigious buildings, such as townhalls or the houses of former notabilities

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which were still incorporated in non-Roma private buildings until the late 1970s[27]. As one researcher succinctly put it, 'Paradoxically, Gypsy architecture reflects a part of Romanian history in ways in which the contemporary architecture implemented by the Romanian state itself has long ceased to do' (Gräf 2008: 14), in the same way that Roma musicians have preserved and reinterpreted elements of Romanian folklore, and that Roma costumes and adornments reiterate details of bygone Romanian costumes.

This patrimonial effect is not necessarily intended as such but is part of a broader improvisational approach that Roma architecture and other elements of public outlook exhibit. As another architect put it, 'Unrestrained by cultural norms, the Rroma (*sic*) assimilate a seemingly unlimited repertoire of identifiable references into a cacophonous but studied monumentality' (Tomlinson 2007: 80). This eclecticism, however, does not preclude the existence of a recognizable Roma architectural style, which can be described as neo-vernacular. The mimetic and improvisational quality of 'Gypsy palaces' was eloquently compared to the trajectory of Jazz music 'from the margins to a sub-species of high music with equal rights: hunger for identity, irreverence for what went before and authority, but an active mimetic spirit, freedom to take control over anything that can be used to realise your own design, the capacity to resonate with a growing audience, but also exclusion, sarcasm and negative publicity—as a vulgar, aesthetically crude, anti-cultural phenomenon. All with the advantages of uproar as a vehicle of fame' (Celac 2008, cited in Pusca 2010: 8-9).

Beyond this eclecticism and the claims for status that these mansions appear to demonstrate, Tomlinson (2007) argues that the buildings called 'Gypsy palaces' are invested with aspirations

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[27] One particularly apt example is a house from the village of Buzescu, known for its 'Gypsy architecture' (in fact, the houses belong exclusively to Tinkersmith Roma), which is a reproduction of the neo-classical building of the tribunal in a neighboring town where the owner of the house was trialled.

that are materially translated into what their owners understand to be prestigious, without reckoning with the constraints of legality and (middle-class) taste. Moreover, she recounts that during field research, one of the owners of such houses corrected her, stating that 'We do not build palaces. We build homes!' (*op. cit.*: 86). This statement argued against the sensationalist interpretation of these buildings, and ultimately made a plea for the shared humanity of house dwellers, regardless of the shape and size of their houses.

At the same time, 'Gypsy palaces' are more prevalent in traditional, compact settlements, like those of the Kalderash (Zamfir and Preda 2002). This suggests that the statement made by these houses is directed not only at the non-Roma, but at fellow Roma as well. Beyond signifying status and economic success, the opulence of houses, much like that of weddings, aims to establish social capital and consolidate hierarchies (Voiculescu 2002), which are crucial currencies in societies based on prestige or honor. In the terms of the Rom tsiganiaki, the people who afford to build large, beautiful houses prove themselves to be 'capable,' and this makes them trustworthy and enables them to enter alliances with strong families. Small houses, worn clothes, and an overall unkept appearance of men or women are signifiers of poverty, which in Mahala is seen not just as a personal failing, but also as a menace to the rest of the social body, because it tends to reproduce itself—in other words, it is contagious. People whose houses are small and unkept are considered either incapable to earn money, or unable to accumulate wealth and, in any case, they are to be avoided.

The investment of all available resources in large houses, rather than in other, more ephemeral priorities, including daily subsistence, is therefore strongly normative. The fact that some Roma choose to prioritize building a large house, even if left unfinished, over more mundane needs of their family members, is embedded in a cultural repertoire where investing in the house is the foremost sign of accomplishment and dedication to the family. A durable investment

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demonstrates durable commitment. Food, bills, and other items for consumption do not qualify, and they are usually purchased with 'extra' money—not the bulk of one's income but side-earnings or theft. This goes to the heart of the distinction between circulatory money and non-circulatory wealth that I discuss in the following section, as the materiality of the house makes this distinction particularly salient.

Beyond their owners' status and priorities, 'Gypsy palaces' also signal the administrative void that rules over the various *tsiganii* ('Gypsy neighborhoods') host to such palaces, where one can hardly encounter elements of infrastructure, utilities, or other instantiations of the state. One particularly famous household in Oraș hosts a mausoleum for a deceased family member; another structure that exemplifies the relation between the owners of large houses and the state is an unfinished four-story villa, that rises next to a high-rise apartment building. Only the first two floors are finished; the other two floors are empty cement structures that had to be abandoned because town-hall inspectors informed a puzzled owner that he was not allowed to build as many floors as he liked without permission from the authorities. Since the house was particularly visible, the man could not obtain permission, but he was also not persuaded to tear it down. Its unfinished skeleton bears witness of the uncertain and irregular relation between the state and the owners of 'Gypsy palaces', which includes public outcry, but also a mutual dependency between the two, of a less public quality.

The inside of houses and the practices of habitation will be dealt with in the next chapter. However, as far as the façades of houses are concerned, they are chiselled by the structural forces that I have described throughout this chapter. In the final section, I turn to the topic of discrimination, as a final instantiation of these forces, and one of the most visible topics that afflicts Roma everywhere.

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# Victimhood and discrimination

## Contra *victimhood*

In the early days of my fieldwork, Antonio and his daughters hosted a public documentary film screening in their family courtyard. The event was organised by an organisation from Bucharest and was aimed to educate the wider public about 'Roma issues.' Consequently, no Roma attended the event—not even Antonio's own sons or his wife Armonia, who, as I found out afterwards, was irritated that Antonio kept organising things for the gaʒe. 'I tended to this lawn every day with my own hands,' she told me later, 'and for what? So that some gaʒe can come here and sit on it and have a good time thanks to my work?' The film was not ostensibly about Romani marginality—it was about two Roma teenage girls, one from Slovakia, the other from Romania, who became friends through a dance organisation—but this topic nonetheless loomed large over the two girls' friendship.

After the projection, as the non-Roma guests were mingling and exchanging impressions, Antonio took me and his daughters to one side and told us he could no longer stand anymore such films where 'poor Gypsies' just 'sit in the dirt' to gather money and to make people pity them (Rou. *să facă milă la lume*). 'We're the first ones to discriminate ourselves,' he said. I objected that this was all factually true—that Roma all over Europe were indeed living in squalid conditions and in poverty, and that the film had shown us how people try to transgress such shortcomings and cultivate good things, such as friendship and dance, into their lives. Antonio shook his head and walked away from the conversation.

Much like with his objections towards the modes of representation employed by the Romani civil society that I detailed in the Introduction, on this occasion of this film projection, Antonio wanted to distance himself from the trope of victimhood that animates the politics of the

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Romani movement and infuses much of recent popular culture around Roma (and which is often created at the behest of, or in cooperation with, the Romani movement). He protested the monopoly of this trope not because he did not believe that Roma were indeed victims, but because he wanted various kinds of Roma to be represented, including 'traditional' groups such as his own, and show that Roma are not always 'beggars' or 'poor' but can be very diverse, resourceful, and proud of who they are. Naturally, this image came with its own contradictions, the starkest of which being that his own group thrived on representations of victimhood and destitution and often made their living by begging.

Later in my fieldwork, I joined Antonio, Armonia, and their daughter Brianna to a cultural festival in a nearby village where the film *Gadjo Dilo* was shown. The film depicts the love story between a Western musician (a 'crazy gaʒo,' as the title says) who comes to a Gypsy settlement to collect music, and a local Roma girl. Towards the end, the film references the anti-gypsy pogroms that took place in the early 1990s in Romania in all their randomness and cruelty (see e.g., Chirițoiu, 2018, 2019). On our drive home, we discussed the film. Brianna was upset that some of the love scenes between the two protagonists had been too explicit and depicted Roma women as loose and vulgar, whereas her life's struggle, much like that of all her female acquaintances, had been to be 'proper.' On different occasions, when discussing women from the Romani movement, Brianna, similarly to Antonio above, also felt that they did not represent her and her cousins, particularly when it came to issues of sexual liberation. Remarking on the appearance of Roma actresses and activists in Bucharest, whom she keenly followed, she often told me, 'A true Gypsy woman would never appear like that in public.' Although she only sought to replace one monopoly (sexual emancipation) with another (sexual modesty), her point remains valid: neither she, nor her mother and father could find themselves in the depictions of Roma circulated by popular culture, whether these were rooted in victimhood or in emancipation.

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Returning to the film, Antonio was impressed with the pogrom at the end and commented that 'this is how Gypsies make their own problems, so that the Romanians end up setting them on fire, because they have a bad behavior' (Rou. *se poartă urît*). Armonia begged to differ: 'The Romanians judge all of us collectively (Rou. *la grămadă*) for what one of us does,' to which Antonio retorted that Gypsies would always end up in the news for doing things that would not make the news if done by a Romanian. Moreover, he offered, Gypsy beggars abroad saved Romanian economy during the financial crisis, because they sent money home, unlike Romanians, who selfishly kept their money in banks. The reasoning can be summarized as follows:

- (all) Gypsies do bad things [all X are Y]

- some Gypsies do bad things [some X are Y]

- non-Gypsies also do bad things [non-X are Y]

- most Gypsies contribute to the collective good [X are non-Y]

At first sight, this looks like a collection of non-sequiturs. On a closer reading, however, the statements that follow after the first one, a generalization that Antonio did not believe in, but launched for us to discuss, as he often did, gradually weaken that initial statement until it can be refuted altogether. The dialogue proceeded to deconstruct all the terms in the first sentence: not 'all,' but 'some' Gypsies do bad things; not only Gypsies do bad things, non-Gypsies do them too; moreover, Gypsies also do good things. This reasoning calls into question the idea of a universal morality: the Rom denounce the fact that certain behaviors only become immoral strictly on the grounds of who engages in them, depending on how the gaʒe choose to define immorality. The implication is then that their value judgments are not necessarily valid, which is why the Rom do not need to submit to them.

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*Discrimination*

The idea that the Rom felt that they were being treated with a double standard by the gaʒe also emerged from the frequency of our discussions around the topic of discrimination, particularly with Brianna and Mirabela, who were less at peace with this fact than most other Romani men and women of their age, including their brothers. For their parents' generation, the topic barely existed. For instance, Armonia rarely denounced the fact that the gaʒe were in charge of everything around Mahala and of many things inside it too (such as infrastructure or prison sentences). She did not want to challenge this order; she just wanted everyone to know their rightful place: the gaʒe should fear the Rom, lest they get all over you (Rou. *ți se urcă în cap*), and the Rom should outmanoeuvre the gaʒe whenever they can. Her daughters, however, were much more vocal about their right to an equal treatment, as I discuss also in Chapter 7.

I rarely brought up the topic of discrimination on my own. For Brianna and Mirabela, it was almost as if they were relieved to have a gaʒi around to witness everything they had to put up with on behalf of other gaʒe. Brianna was especially unnerved by situations when she felt singled out on account of appearing to be Roma; unlike her sister Mirabela, who usually wore jeans to avoid such situations, Brianna often went out dressed in the ankle-long pleated skirts that the majority population associate with Gypsies.[28] She would then come back home and complain that the guard in some shop had been following her closely and sometimes even asked

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[28] I can only give an approximation of when and how an ankle-long skirt becomes a 'Gypsy' skirt in the eyes of Rom or gaʒe, but I have noticed from personal experience that it does. Whenever I borrowed skirts from my friends, the people I interacted with became confused: in their eyes, I looked like a Gypsy, although I did not have the demeanor to do with it. 'You need to learn how to walk in these skirts,' Brianna often told me, as it was not enough to just put one on. The fact that people could identify such skirts as 'Gypsy' is all the more puzzling since, unlike groups like the Cortorari studied by Tesar (2013, 2012) or the Gabor, whose pleated skirts with colourful patterns are widely recognizable, the Rom *tsiganiake* women do not wear particular colours or models. Their skirts are circle cut with ample folds and usually lack elaborate decorations.

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to check her bag. In such moments, she said, she was tempted to steal right under their eyes, just to show them that she was 'cunning' enough (Rou. *șmecheră*) to steal despite their vigilance, just to make a point. Likewise, she complained that the waiters from the pubs where she wanted to go and meet her non-Roma friends often told her that there were no free places, although there were plenty of free tables around. In frustration, she told me she would like to study law for the single reason of becoming the head of 'the biggest anti-discrimination agency in the world,' so she could prosecute the owners of such places. When I told her there is no such global anti-discrimination agency, she said she would at least like to make enough money to buy these places and then close them down.

Another time, when she became nauseous while walking to university and had to be rushed to the hospital, as she returned home, she told me that the hospital personnel hadn't discriminated against her—'maybe because I didn't look like a Gypsy,' she added. This time she was wearing jeans—she did not want to wear her long skirts to school because, she reasoned, she would be singled out: 'Ah, look at this poor Gypsy girl,' she imagined people would say, 'isn't she sweet how she tries to get an education.' And then if she didn't study hard enough, the same people would say it's because she's a Gypsy. Wherever she went, who she was could easily become a burden, unless she took precautions to disguise it.

I was so intrigued by her stories of ethnic profiling that I decided we should do an experiment together: all three of us (me, Brianna, and Mirabela) would wear long skirts and try to sit down in a few pubs in the city center. First, we went to an almost empty one, where the waiter told us promptly that all the tables were reserved; then we found another pub, where we were allowed in, but we drew a lot of gazes in our direction and felt pressured to leave soon. Then, I asked if there wasn't another pub where Gypsy men would go (by then it had become obvious to me that they would not take their wives or sisters along) and Brianna said there was one, but

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we should not go there because we should not be seen there by the men from *tsiganie*. Obstacles all the way down. Antonio's sentence about Roma discriminating themselves came to mind, although that was clearly not what he intended; I just found it noteworthy that the Rom themselves would raise even more obstacles to navigating the city than the gaʒe had already laid out for them. The contradictions between two ways of order-making trickled down onto the most vulnerable group, young Roma women, whose ways across the city came to resemble an obstacle race.

Roma men, on the other hand, had a different take on the issue of discrimination, although they were faced with similar access problems as women. First, in their case it was more difficult for the gatekeepers to guess their ethnicity because their clothes are marked even less than those of women. When they were suspected to be Roma due to their complexion or demeanor, they were denied access in some places but still allowed in others, based on no particular logic. Thus, one of the young men I knew recounted that he had not been allowed into a luxury swimming pool; his defense was that he could afford it alright, but the guards insisted there were no more free places. On a different occasion, a friend of his was denied access to a night club, and his reasoning was more elaborate: he explained to me that the bouncers did not allow him and his friends inside, because, with their readiness to squander big sums of money and their expensive clothes, they would humiliate the gaʒe who just wanted to have fun on the poor.

Similar episodes took place elsewhere in the city, or when calling for a taxi: while the operator usually told the Rom that there were no cars available, whenever I called, using the same address, but my gaʒi diction, cars appeared miraculously to our gate (only for the puzzled driver to see that the passenger was Roma after all, despite the operator probably having told them otherwise). Taxis in fact were a recurrent topic, since neither Octavio, nor the women in the family had cars, and they could not borrow them from the members of the family who did.

(Even if public transport had existed in the area, it was something for 'the poor' [Rou. *săraci*].) Octavio often came home by taxi, and sometimes he'd sneak into the house and leave the driver honking outside; this meant that he had no money to pay for the trip. The driver of course did not dare come into the house. Sometimes his mother or sisters gave him some cash to pay for the trip, but at one point his father decided to teach him a lesson and forbade everyone in the house to give him any money. The result was that we had to listen to the frustrated drivers' angry honks in the early hours of the morning. The girls were critical of Octavio's irresponsible behavior, but they were equally critical of the taxi drivers making such a fuss given that Octavio would tip them liberally whenever he had money. Of course, they knew that not every single driver was familiar with Octavio's generosity, but at such times the gaʒe were a mass to be reckoned with collectively, not individually.

At one time, Brianna tried to order a cab and the operator characteristically told her no cars were available. Brianna insisted, and the operator was rude to her, so Brianna came over to my place in a rage and asked me to drive her to the taxi company's headquarters so that she could complain. It was late at night and it took us almost till midnight to find where the operators worked. Brianna told the woman she had been rude, and the woman replied that she simply meant that no drivers wanted to come to that address. To me it seemed like the dispute was resolved, but even though the woman spoke politely, Brianna started calling her names, so the woman slammed the door in our faces. I did not intervene in any way, which Brianna later said was typical of the gaʒe who just stand by and don't jump in, to which I replied that I did not think she was in the right. 'That's not what matters, you can't know what is right for me, but you're my friend and my sister and if you had been a Gypsy, you'd be on my side unconditionally,' she replied. This was not about justice, but about anger, which, once provoked, needed to be taken out. As Brianna told the operator, 'You insulted me and you disturbed me, and now you need to give me a solution to get rid of my anger.' Once again,

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social equality and inclusion did not sit squarely with these notions of anger, solidarity, and humiliation. Later Brianna said it was people like that who made you want to become part of the mafia, to kidnap their relatives until they apologized.

While factually accurate, labels such as 'inequality' or 'racialization' do not quite capture what is at stake in these situations. What my friends denounced here was a steep *moral* order in which they were constantly being put in their place. It was not inequality per se that bothered them, but the denial of their dignity. This also transpires from the alternate scenarios that they summoned to compensate for this offence: if the issue had been mere inequality, they would then dream about being equal with the gaʒe; instead, they dreamt about outsmarting or overpowering the offenders—reversing the unequal relation, as it were, not flattening it out.

And since they cannot turn inequality upside down, the Rom sometimes turn it sideways. To illustrate, once I drove Armonia and her youngest son to a pharmacy to ask for some disinfectant and plasters because the boy had been stabbed in his arm. Armonia showed Octavio's hand to the pharmacist and asked for something against infections. The pharmacist was visibly intimidated and wanted nothing to do with them, especially since she suspected that the wound was indeed a stab, and not a 'scratch,' as Armonia described it. She immediately said that she had no idea what to give them. Armonia insisted, the pharmacist dug in her heels. Then Armonia became more vehement: 'If I wasn't on probation, I would beat your brains out,' she told her, 'But I don't want to go back to prison just because of you.' Octavio, while aggravated himself, took the opposite route: 'Just give us something,' he said, 'because you went to university, we're illiterate gypsies, we have no schooling, we don't know stuff.' In the end, we got what we wanted, at the cost of some temporary humiliation that felt foreign to me, but familiar to the Rom, who had to play this card often in order to get things from the gaʒe. Armonia's attempt to intimidate the pharmacist and Octavio's performance of subalternity

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were both rhetorical; in my turn, I felt a sense of humiliation, which came from the notion that these rhetorical exercises should not have been necessary at all in order to enact a simple commercial exchange. But then again, very few exchanges, commercial or otherwise, are 'simple' for the Rom. Instead, the Rom are well aware that when interacting with the gaʒe there is often something of a social value-added tax that they need to pay, whether it is violence, submission, or jailtime. The only way to play down the humiliation that such incidents entailed is to evaluate them not on moral grounds but based on whether they get what they want or not. After all, the *real* moralities, and hence the real humiliation, have nothing to do with the gaʒe. But more on that in Chapter 4.

The Rom's view of their relations to the gaʒe were not one-sided, however. They were often critical of other Rom, to the point of exclaiming that it was such behaviors that made them want to become 'one of those gaʒe who hate Gypsies.' This goes to show that morality is not uniquely 'gaʒe' or 'Rom,' and that instead it is contingent, based on who can afford to do what. Most times, nobody could do anything, and their critiques often took the form of 'if X hadn't happened, then I would have done Y.' However, contingency shapes not only morality, but also how it is put into action: it defines how one can react to moral violations and outrage. Hence, it would be wrong to assume that the Rom simply seek to replace one asymmetry with another. Their struggle is not to inverse social hierarchies and even less to achieve equality, but to be afforded dignity. The notion of social justice that these incidents espouse is contingent and relational, rather than redistributive: it does not entail negating hierarchy and installing equality but using inequality as a resource. The problem with inequality, then, is not that it exists, but that it does not work as it should; it only takes but it does not give, and it allows the gaʒe to default on their obligations as social superiors.

*Purity and danger*

We have seen that the social reproduction of the Rom and of 'Gypsyness' is intimately related to their occupation, which, despite their straightforward ethnonym, is not just 'stealing' as such, but can be more accurately approximated as 'outsmarting.' Adding to the arguments about 'nomadic sensibility' formulated above, it should be said that the Rom call their occupation 'going to the village' (Rom. *ʒan and-o gav*) even when this does not imply going to an actual village. Thus, people can 'go to the village' in the same city or abroad, and when they 'go to the village' in the US, it means they go begging outside supermarkets or churches, in the metro, or by the traffic lights. 'Going to the village' is as much a means of procurement as it is a moral and an epistemic statement and, as such, it entails a distinction between Rom and peasants or gaʒe[29] that is what my thesis is ultimately about. This distinction is more often professed than acted upon, and in reality, cooperation between Rom and gaʒe is more frequent than any side would like to admit.

In one of my initial interviews, a young Rom from Mahala was not at all surprised that I had chosen to conduct my research in this neighborhood, because the Rom from Mahala are proud of their origins. 'We're the purest Gypsies in the country,' he said. I thought he was referring to the preservation of traditions or to endogamy, like most other Roma *neamos* do when making this claim. However, when I asked him to clarify, his answer instantly dispelled such myths: 'We're pure because you can't distinguish us from the gaʒe.' I suppose I was visibly confused, because at this point he launched into a digression about the faux pas of pairing trekking pants with lacquered shoes or wearing clothes in strong colours, as 'backward' Roma *neamos* do, all

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[29] The Rom sometimes refer to the gaʒe, derisively, as 'peasants,' with the same pejorative undertones that a city-dweller would use: a category that is supposedly backward, uneducated, and parochial. The Rom, however, use it to signal not just the non-Roma's different ethnicity, but their radically different mode of production, by owning and cultivating land and growing farm animals, which they themselves do not do.

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the while wearing gold teeth and golden coins braided in their hair (but failing to buy decent clothes to wear). 'I'm a Gypsy, and I would still be embarrassed to walk next to such people on the street,' he added. His own *neamo*, the Rom from Mahala, were nothing like that: 'We're a pure race because we move with the times and we adapt.'

This remark goes to the heart of the argument I am making in this thesis, which is that the Rom from Mahala are a rare example of turning the stigma and marginalization around, and making it a central part of who they are, not by becoming 'Romanians,' as the gospel of 'inclusion' preaches, but by 'owning' it, and remaining Rom. My interlocutor said his *neamo* was superior to others because they were able to blend in among the gaʒe, rather than stand out with their quirkiness and allow it to be used against them. Unlike other *neamos* whose ethnicity was visible, and hence non-negotiable, the Rom of Mahala enjoyed the freedom of choosing when to be Rom and when not to be. This skill and awareness of contingency is precisely what makes them 'Rom' when others remain gaʒe or a 'backward' type of Roma, as my interlocutor called them. Thus, being labelled as 'Gypsies' was something that they, and not the gaʒe, could control. This is a reiteration of the themes of mimicry and contingency that I have signalled above and shall work with throughout the thesis. Significantly, my interlocutor did not state that the Rom should or would become 'gaʒe,' but that they could blend in if they wanted to. The distinction is therefore not annulled, but reinforced, with the important difference that being Roma stops being a liability, as it is for those who cannot prevent being labelled as 'Gypsies,' and becomes an advantage. This distinction, with its inherent contradictions, is central to the Rom's notion of who they are. In a certain sense, to say that they are Rom Čor or Rom Tsiganiaki is only a way of saying that they are not gaʒe.

# Conclusions

This chapter has described the structural forces that shape the social existence of the Rom Čor, ranging from adversity to enclavization. At times, the rejection of Roma from the social body took more drastic forms, such as deportation and the criminalization of their mobility. In parallel with this overview of state interventions, I analysed the Rom's responses to these forces and emphasized their dialectical nature. This is important because many analyses of the Rom's marginalization and attempts at assimilation swing uncomfortably between the pole of 'victimhood' and that of 'resistance.' While factually accurate, analytically none of these views tells the whole story. Hence my argument for a dialectical analysis, which highlights how, while the Rom have been indeed victims of various measures, some of them brutal, others of a more subtle exclusionary nature, they never claimed to have 'resisted' these measures but have folded them into their sociality. They continued being Rom *through* these measures, not in spite of them, to the point that being pushed to the margins became part of being Rom, as it posed yet another trial onto their quest for virtue. The adversity that I have recounted in this chapter almost makes being Rom synonymous with the skill—the right mix of situational adaptation and obstinacy that the Rom call 'capability'—of countering the structural forces that sweep over them. What I mean by 'virtue' is then the Rom's capacity to preserve a notion of who they are and cultivate a dignity that is denied to them by the outer world.

# PART II: INSIDE OUT

# CHAPTER 3: HOUSING LIMINALITIES

'This house hates us.'

— Mirabela

At the core of the Rom's domesticity there is a tension between the grand statements that houses are intended to make and an air of improvisation and impermanence that no household I have visited could quite shake off. This is not unusual in itself: everywhere in the world, houses are knots. Buildings, people, objects, aspirations, and the hurdles of daily life come together inside them, more or less orderly. Lévi-Strauss wrote that 'on all levels of social life, from the family to the state, the house is … an institutional creation that permits compounding forces which, everywhere else, seem only destined to mutual exclusion because of their contradictory bends' (Lévi-Strauss 1982: 184). In her work with a Transylvanian Roma group called Cortorari, Tesăr speaks about the contradiction between the 'affluence' and the 'incompleteness' (2016: 126) that Cortorari houses exhibit, and argues that this contradiction is the result of the process through which the Cortorari fold objects and values from the outer world into their culture, making them their own and adapting them to their own purposes, i.e., that of remaining Cortorari. I encountered a similar tension among the Rom of Mahala and analyse it as a representation of the practice of 'making relations' with neighbors, with parent and affines, and with objects. The central tension at the heart of the Rom's house is that between the separations that the house needs to accommodate—kinsmen and strangers, men and women, people and objects—and this is the main topic of the present chapter. To explore this tension, I employ Day's concept (and technique) of 'rendering houses,' that 'illuminates the fastening of state and family, infrastructures and lives' (Day n.d.)

# Interdependence without mutuality

In most of my initial encounters with the Rom of Mahala, my interlocutors tended to emphasize how well they got along with their non-Roma neighbors: they respected one another and never had any problems, they all told me out of their own initiative. At the same time, as I strolled through Mahala and the surrounding areas, I saw numerous fences topped with barbed wire, and could immediately guess that these belonged to non-Roma who were wary of having Roma neighbors. Even those who did not go to such lengths to protect their households did not appear very 'neighborly' to me: in fact, the two worlds, that of the Rom and that of the gaʒe, seemed to slide past each other rather than overlap significantly, and to live in a state of mutual ignorance: the less they had to do with one another, the better. Explicit animosities were rare, but so was collaboration. It was only among young men that some form of friendship might develop, but it rarely went beyond the realm of the street, and into that of the household.

It was unusual for gaʒe visitors to step inside Rom households, beyond service providers such as maids, nannies, contractors, and other helpers, or sometimes young men's non-Roma female lovers. In the rare cases of non-Roma women married to Rom men, the women adopted a habitus that made them indistinguishable from their Roma affines, which included not just dress and bodily dispositions, but also the Romani language. I have noted before that my presence in the various households where my hosts took me along and which I did not visit regularly had to be accounted for: people either assumed I was a driver or a maid, or they asked my hosts, 'What's with the gaʒi?'. This initial awkwardness did not last long, and people grew accustomed to my presence, which goes to show that they were not averse to the idea of having a gaʒi around, just as long as they grew to know her.

At the same time, I never entered any non-Roma households during my stay, or even strike a conversation with the neighboring non-Roma. Seeing that I was hanging out with Roma locals and coming in and out of their households, even after I had moved out into a house of my own, most of our non-Roma neighbors adopted the same attitude of circumvention to me that they had towards the Rom, although it was obvious to them that I was not Roma. The separation between these two worlds was then not outright 'ethnic;' instead, it was a categorical divide, based on essentialized associations and assumptions regarding behaviors and values. It needs to be emphasized, however, that this separation is in no way rendered visible, except through such details as barbed wire on some fences, which were the exception rather than the rule. Roma households are interspersed among non-Roma ones, and while the latter might not seem happy with this arrangement, for the Rom it works quite well, as I explain below.

Since I did not conduct research among the non-Roma, I cannot discuss their views on this vicinity, but my observations lend credit to the notion of 'interdependence' put forth by Engebrigtsen (2007), although its underpinnings might differ in the context of a southern Romanian town from the rural Transylvanian one that she documents. The Rom of Mahala appear less inclined to act as 'clients' of their non-Roma neighbors or play the poverty card with them or expect alms from them; it would hardly be possible, given their high houses, fast cars, and ceremonial displays of gold. I surmise, then, that the basis for interdependence is subtler in the case of Mahala, but similarly rooted in the mutuality and the enduring inequality between Roma and non-Roma. For the non-Roma, it can be a source of status that they live among Gypsies, presumably on good terms, and it can act as a possible resource: people can then claim that they have 'Gypsy friends' to support them in case of conflict, and to testify to their open-mindedness in times of peace; indeed, I have often heard non-Roma boasting that they 'grew up among Gypsies' and even that they understood Romani, with the air that this gave them a rare skill, acquired at the 'school of life.'

For the Rom, it is important to have gaʒe neighbors for reasons of prestige, i.e., to show that they don't live in a segregated, 'Gypsy-only' neighborhood, and that they can 'integrate' among gaʒe, but more importantly and practically, because the non-Roma can serve as buffer zones between Rom households. Contrary to clichés claiming that Roma prefer to live together, the more homogenous the better, I have found that the process of setting up a household in a new place that is already inhabited by other Rom is in fact very elaborate. Before buying a house in a new area, one must ask the permission of the Rom already living there, particularly of the first one to have moved, as the area surrounding their household (a couple of streets in all directions) is conceived of as 'theirs.' The Rom do not like to live in close vicinity to one another, for reasons to do with discretion and the avoidance of conflicts. Thus, a Rom that already owns a house or a plot can expect other Rom to not purchase the immediately neighboring property. If they do, they are asked to move out.

## Where fences make good neighbors

Valentin is a man in his early thirties who, like many Rom of his age in Mahala, went to the US along with his wife and four children several years ago to make money for a house of their own. While abroad, he caught word that another Rom bought a house just behind his parents' house, and because he could not come home to talk to this person, Valentin made a live video on Facebook in which he asked the new owners to move away asap. 'I have heard that someone bought a house just behind mine. That person—maybe they didn't know, or nobody told them—I ask them nicely to pack up and leave just as they came.' The rationale? First, primacy: 'I've lived on that street for over 30 years, and my parents have been living there for over 50 years.' Second, absence of precedent: he went on to state that he would not accept 'any race

(Rou., Rom. *rasa*) of Rom' there, 'because you know very well that no other Rom live next to me.' He suggested to the Rom who bought the house to sell it back to the gaʒe from whom he had bought it, or to some other gaʒe. Valentin also took this occasion to delimit the area that he considered his vicinity, where he would not 'accept' other Rom, not just for his parents' house, but also for the new house he had just bought for his family, several streets away from that of his parents. Why this obstinacy? 'Because I have a large family,' Valentin said, also pointing out where his father-in-law and brother-in-law lived, 'So that nobody can say they didn't know.' The conclusion: *N-ai kaj te shon-pe oce pasha amende konik*, 'There is no place for anyone to put themselves[30] near us.'

Valentin did not explain the logic behind his spatial exclusivism any further because he was addressing fellow Rom, who were aware of the rationale behind his restrictions. One of his friends joked in a comment under Leonard's clip that the Rom who bought the house behind Valentin's was a handsome man, and Valentin's wife and daughters might fall for him. Albeit in a reductionist, caricatural manner, this joke gives a sense of where the logic of Valentin's prohibitions lies: direct proximity raises problems that distance could prevent. Children might fall in love and form alliances that are difficult to manage because of proximity, people might overhear things that were not meant for them, scandals might ensue. This is in line with the avoidance rules observed elsewhere, e.g., by Radcliffe-Brown (1940, 1949) in his discussion of avoidance relations, which occur between two parties whose relationships are potentially hostile, but who are obliged by social structure to avoid conflict. In brief, it is a way of managing ambivalence and antagonism. Structural-functionalist explanations of this dynamic

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[30] The Romani phrase 'shovel-pe' literally means 'to settle or place oneself,' and suggests a distinct imaginary of place-making whereby one does not merely go *to* a place, but *onto* it. By comparison with the verb 'to go to a place' (*ʒal ka-o than*), *shovel-pe* entails not just the action of going, but also a mode of being there and making the place your own.

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have been rightly criticised for their reductionism and irenic overtones, e.g., by de Vienne (2018); however, avoidance remains a process whereby status can be manipulated and contested (Canut and Smith 2006). This indicates that 'spatial order is not only perceived as an expression of social relations but is also used consciously as a means of social and political control' (Dafinger 2001:2201). Unbeknownst to the gaʒe, the Rom's politics of vicinity draw a completely new map over the same shared territory, asserting supremacy over an area, strengthening some relations, and weakening others.

I learned more about neighbourliness from Armonia's complaints that Antonio had bought their house close to her siblings, for the sake of cultivating his own belonging to her *neamo*, but very much to the detriment of her own interests. She complained that she had to see her relatives walk up and down the road even when she was not talking to them, and they could know more about her household than she would have liked them to, e.g., when there were fights, or the times when Antonio left home, or how often her daughters went to town wearing jeans. The inconvenience of living among relatives also emerged from an incident when a married couple had a fight in the street before their house; the man swore at the woman's *rasa*, which in this context means her extended family, who not only lived nearby, but were even hanging out at the time outside their own houses. Upon hearing the curses, they stood up abruptly and went inside, so as to pretend they had not heard the offence. Had they acknowledged it, they would have been obliged to act on it and retaliate. This would have started a conflict with their sister's husband, which would have only escalated things between the two spouses and their respective families.

It is clear that avoidance is in fact a mechanism of preserving social cohesion and de-escalate probabilities of conflict. In his semiotic analysis of name avoidance occurring between dyads of individuals among the Korowai of Western Papua New Guinea, Stasch (2009) shows that

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avoidance names work alongside kinship names to create relations, rather than disrupt them. Avoidance signals 'relational otherness' (*idem*: 84), Stasch offers, insofar as 'partnerships conjoin relatedness and estrangement by underlining that a bond is also a boundary' (*idem*: 82). In heavily regulated societies where kinship and alliance overlap, as is the case with the Rom, antagonism can easily emerge from conflicting loyalties and breeches of hierarchy, as I explain in the next chapter. For now, it suffices to conclude that avoidance is managed through the presence of gaʒe, lending more credibility to the theory proposed by Zatta and Piasere (1990) that Roma view the gaʒe as a natural environment to which they adapt and which they manage in order to constitute their own sociality.

# Liminal spaces

It was not just Mirabela who taught me to call out her name loudly when I entered the courtyard when I first started visiting her parents' household. After I moved out of their house and continued to visit them daily, Armonia gave me the same advice: 'You need to shout when you arrive so that we know you're here and that you didn't come to steal. Only thieves sneak in silence'. Thieves and men, as I would notice later, except men did not sneak. And they did not need to shout to make their presence known, either. Their bodies, moving confidently and with ease across streets and courtyards, were signal enough of their presence.

Visitors usually made their way uninvited to the back of the courtyard, where the kitchen was, especially if they were relatives and/or women. They would march along the courtyard and shout the names of people in the household, expecting to be asked 'Who's there?' (Rom. *Kon sî*), and to answer by their name, plus a family connection, if they were not the usual guests.

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Sometimes 'Who's there' would be asked both in Romani and in Romanian and would be followed by the question '*Rom san*?', 'Are you a Rom?'—for men, as for women such additional questioning was unnecessary, since their long, richly pleated skirts and their headscarves would be sufficient indication of their ethnicity.



*Photo 10. A view of the backyard in summer, as seen from the house.*



*Photo 11. A view of the backyard in winter, as seen from the kitchen.*

Unknown people of either gender would just call the name of Antonio from the gate; few would dare to come in without following this protocol. But the practice of calling the names of people inside the house was consistent even among women related to the family, and in her turn Armonia called my name out loud whenever she visited me, even though she knew that most of the time I lived alone, as my housemate was often away. Calling out your host's name was a token of good intentions. That these intentions need to be called out loud indicates that they cannot be taken for granted in the world that the people I worked with inhabit.

For the Rom, the kitchen constitutes the sort of 'liminal' space that Beckham (1988) ascribes to the American front porch, a buffer zone between the street and the house. The contradictory aspect to this particular setup, which was by no means restricted to Antonio and Armonia's household, was the fact that this liminal space was not located in front of the house, but way behind it, sometimes—like in this case—all the way at the back of the courtyard. Despite this spatial contradiction, that might take visitors through the private parts of the house before reaching the more public one, its function remained the same: to welcome visitors and provide a space for the household personnel, especially women, to hang out. After I moved in, this became the room where I spent most of my time, and not just because the house was crowded, and I had no room of my own. The kitchen helped me navigate between the rhythms of the other members of the house and my own tasks.

I began most of my days there. While the girls slept or went on to other activities, I snuck out of the house and went into the kitchen, started the fire, made coffee, wrote my fieldnotes and finished the washing-up if others were away. Almost nobody in the household felt compelled by a circadian rhythm, and it was not unusual for people, especially young men, to sleep throughout the day and go out at night. When the girls did so, following some late-night visits

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or housework, their mother would sometimes remark that 'they sleep like men,' during the day. She only found this upsetting when they were lagging behind with their chores.

Likewise, the kitchen was less impregnated with the presence and needs of the men of the household than the house. Even though the kitchen was where cooking, cleaning, and serving happened, it did not feel like a place of female oppression. Being there was not a restriction or a burden, but often a liberation; the girls, especially, were more at ease there than they were inside the house, under the gaze (and at the orders) of their parents and brothers. The liveliest conversations we ever had took place in the kitchen. They told secrets there, made secret phone calls, laughed, and behaved more casually than they did inside the house. Dancing occasionally happened in the kitchen too, and sometimes when close visitors came over—a younger aunt or some cousins—a small party would ensue. We'd be eating, dancing, and singing until late at night, something that was unimaginable inside the house.

When the girls' father came to eat in the kitchen, our conversations and even bodily postures would lose their spontaneity, and if he made some remarks that the girls found upsetting, they became stiff to the point of leaving the kitchen after setting the table, thus leaving their father to eat alone. The boys came more rarely into the kitchen, for fear that the smells of food would impregnate their clothes, and when they did, we were all similarly stiff, and always ready to serve them. So, the kitchen was neither a space of female subjugation, nor exactly a 'female space' of freedom, but more of a transit zone with imprecise boundaries, rules, and personnel, which allowed for improvisation.

In the warm season, the kitchen would extend into the courtyard, as chairs and sometimes tables were brought outside, and people would sit around having coffee or wine, and making barbecues for guests or just for themselves. The plants that had spent the winter crammed into the kitchen were finally brought outside, and visitors came by more frequently. After spending

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the warm half of the year mostly in the courtyard, with the kitchen as a dark, crammed annex, I understood that I had reversed the relation between inside and outside: it was not that the kitchen extended into the courtyard; instead, the kitchen was a makeshift substitute for when outdoor living, which increasingly felt like the default mode of living, was not possible. In other households, during the summer months the stove and its gas container were brought out into the courtyard, and people would just gather there, instead of the kitchen. The kitchen, then, was as a courtyard turned inwards; this interpretation mitigates the awkwardness of its position deep inside the household relative to its function as a transition space between the house and the street.

The kitchen and the courtyard were the preferred, but not exclusive, spaces of conviviality. It was rare that guests were invited inside the house, although there were no explicit rules against it. In most other houses I visited, I was invited into the kitchen, which was also a dining-room and where someone invariably slept despite my presence, or into some large hall that served all of these purposes[31]. As for our household, my hosts complained that there was not enough space, and often in all the rooms someone was sleeping at various hours. At other times, the family feared there was too much mess for visitors to see, and they did not like to have guests in the same room where they kept their gold and money. For this reason, the kitchen and the courtyard had to be kept tidy at all times, but this was not always manageable, given the different needs and rhythms of all the household members, which resulted in cooking, warming up, serving, and dishwashing going on at various times of the day and night. The girls could often be found in the kitchen way past midnight, doing the dishes and hoping that their mother

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[31] In his popular history of the house, non-fiction writer Bill Bryson recognizes the importance of halls in the history of human habitation: 'No room has fallen further in history than the hall. Now a place to wipe feet and hang coats, once it was the most important room in the house. Indeed, it *was* the house.' (Bryson 2010:54)

would find the kitchen in order the next day, only to realise that during the night their brothers had been eating and left a mess when they returned from town.

## *Layout and amenities*

My hosts' house consisted of one main building with three bedrooms, one living room, two bathrooms, a kitchen, and several annexes lined up towards the end of the courtyard. The main entrance led into the living room, that also doubled as a bedroom sometimes. In the months that I lived there in the winter of 2017, we were eight people in the house. Sleeping arrangements often shifted, based on the relations between the inhabitants. Usually, the youngest son slept in the living room, but when Armonia and Antonio were not getting on, Antonio and his son swapped rooms; then the son would sleep in the bed, and Armonia would sleep on a mattress placed on the floor in the same room. However, Antonio's clothes remained in the wardrobe located in the room that was now shared by his wife and son, while some of Armonia's clothes were in the room of her elder son, where he lived with his girlfriend. The girls' room, where I was hosted, seemed the one with the most stable occupancy in the house, but after I moved out the younger son claimed it for himself, pushing his sisters out. Most of the girls' belongings were stored in the attic, as were the clothes and shoes that were not in use, so that only the most immediate necessities were kept in the insufficient wardrobe. When they had some more serious fights with their mother, the girls purged their room of all their belongings that she had given them, and made it look like it did not belong to anyone in particular, as if to erase their traces from this house. Their younger brother, who stood to inherit the house according to tradition, was fond of reminding them that girls were only 'guests' in their parents' household, and it was timed they moved on to find their 'real' families, i.e., those of their husbands.

The house had been repaired several times and was still undergoing some maintenance during my fieldwork. The heaters were mended, the roof was changed, some rooms were painted, the courtyard was paved, and furniture and new curtains were bought for the living room. Most of these changes were paid for by Antonio, not just because he was the head of the household, but also because he was the only person who had a stable income from his work in the local administration. Armonia pointed out that, back when she had made money, she had also paid for improvements. The furniture and curtains were chosen by Armonia, upon consultations with her sons. They all agreed they should buy something 'luxurious' (Ro. 'luxos'). When choosing the couch, she asked me to measure the room and make sure they were buying one that would fit. I looked up the couch on my phone, but they wanted to get it right away, except it was night, and the store had closed. Reluctantly, they waited until the next day, but then something came up; several days later, when they went shopping for the couch, they bought a completely different one, for which they had not taken measurements, so it did not fit in the place they were hoping to put it. Nonetheless, it fitted in the nearby room just fine. This example is meant to showcase the dissonance between aspirations and the practicalities that hinder them. Daily life was replete with such instances.

For Antonio and Armonia's household, and for many others I have visited, the area of the house begins in the street, right in front of the gate, where the men's cars are parked and where people gather in the warm season, bringing chairs and tables from inside the house. It is also where marriage ceremonies begin, with live music and dance. The women sweep the pavement in front of the house whenever they sweep the courtyard and treat it as their own space. When I lived in my rented accommodation, however, I did not extend my space onto the street, and the owner of the house warned me to park my car in the courtyard, because he had his tires cut twice. I had no such nuisances, but my car was broken in twice as well. (I should add that it was seriously broken and very easy to break into.)

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The courtyard runs in front of the house and on one of its sides, all the way to the back; it is more long than wide, and less well kept towards the end. Behind the front gate, there is a manicured lawn that Armonia waters all summer long, and roses curl up on a wooden ornament. Next to it, for the length of the house, there is cement. The house next door is only a couple of meters away, and my hosts were often distressed that the people living there, a very poor Romanian woman and her son, never cleaned and brought to their house things from the garbage, as well as numerous dogs and cats. The girls recounted that their mother beat up the woman a few times on account of keeping such mess so close to their own house. They hated that they were supposed to help her in this, even though they did not think it was right, but their own feelings of justice mattered less than their obligation to stick to their mother's side no matter what.

The courtyard continues behind the house, with the kitchen at its back. Beyond the kitchen, there is another, smaller courtyard, separated from the main courtyard with a fence. When the family has dogs or chicken, they are usually kept here before they disappear or are given away or, in the case of chicken, eaten by the neighbours' dogs, that enter all open courtyards without restrictions. Behind the kitchen there are two storage rooms, where foods, wine, and wood are stored, and to the right there is a toilet that the family built for their daughters-in-law, who would be embarrassed to share the toilet with the men in the main house. On occasion, this bathroom was also used to house dogs. Behind these annexes, a small gate opens onto the neighbours' backyard, which the family is trying to get property over, on account of occupying it for a certain amount of time. Much like the neighbours' entire courtyard, this back side is unkempt and full of discarded household items, such as clothes, old toilet bowls and sinks, children's bikes etc. There is no gate allowing access to the courtyard of the neighbors to the right of the house. Armonia sometimes beat up these neighbors too, on account of playing loud music late at night.

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Throughout the households I was familiar with, I noticed a preference to maintain some autonomy from infrastructural provisioning from the state and companies (that the Rom also dub 'the state'), mainly because the frequency of their income does not match that of the bills, but also because they find it a very gaʒe thing to do to pay for things that you could also get for free. Thus, instead of connecting their houses to the city gas pipes, most households preferred to use gas cylinders for cooking, and wooden stoves and/or electric radiators for heating. Similarly, instead of using the city water supply, many households preferred to dig their own wells. Electricity was the one sore spot in this attempt to maintain autonomy, since it could not be replaced, at least not by legal means, and at the time of my fieldwork, many households were tapping into the power grid illegally, as I showed in the previous chapter.

Because of this arrangement, a car of the electricity company, often accompanied by police, toured the area every few months, cutting off irregular cables. The police also descended into Mahala when they had suspicions that someone had been making money illegally, although this did not happen as often as one would expect, given the occupation of many Rom. Once, when Mirabela and her sister Brianna caught word that their uncle's house was raided by gendarmes, they were furious: 'That's all that the gaʒe do,' they said, 'they break into our houses and search us.' Of course, there was no use pointing out that their uncle's wife was a famous and very active thief. The point about the gendarmes breaking into their house was that this was a gaʒe institution removing things from them by force, i.e., essentially abusing its power to steal from them. The fool-proof defence against raids, and other forms of theft, was to bury gold and money at undisclosed locations, often not on their own property. One family might use an abandoned plot nearby their house, while another would bury its money in front of their courtyard, on the state property, where the police did not have a mandate (or an initiative) to search. In any case, it was common wisdom that valuables should be kept buried—'we aren't gaʒe to keep our money in the house,' several Roma women commented when one woman's house was broken into.

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*Ownership is presence*

Although visitors were rare, and usually from a fixed circle of acquaintances, family members warned me insistently against thefts and instructed me not to leave my belongings unattended at any point. I took their advice lightly; what might happen, I thought, if I left my phone or laptop on the table outside while I quickly went inside the house? After all, the courtyard was empty. Seeing how I neglected to take my belongings with me, one day Antonio told me in a serious voice: 'Maybe some Gypsy woman comes and puts it by her [expletive for female genitals] (Ro. *îl pune la pizdă*) and then there's nothing we can do, because nobody can put their hand there. That's how you lose your things.' There was never any warning about men stealing my belongings to put them by their genitals, but the notion that unattended objects were fair game was reinforced by the fact that people, especially women, always kept their possessions with them, on their bodies. They stored phones and money safely in their bras, while other things were kept in their *pusuchi*, the pocket that women wore under or on top of their skirts (whether this should be kept secret or not depended on how legitimate its contents was). In time I also bought a *pusuchi* because it would have looked silly to carry a purse on my shoulder around the house. When I started wearing it, the women I visited congratulated me on becoming a Romni (Rou. *te-ai făcut țigancă*) and told me to keep it a secret from non-Roma. However, these purses were manufactured by non-Roma tailors who knew very well that some of them, the smaller, adorned ones, were worn on the outside, while others, the larger ones, were worn under the skirt, when women went *and-o gav*. Even though women carried handbags when they went to the city, in their daily life they stored their belongings onto their bodies, in places where nobody would have access.

For all these cautionary remarks, my things almost never got stolen, save for the thefts from my car, which everyone (including my mother) saw as my fault, for failing to lock my car

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properly. However, members of the household made a point of keeping their most prized belongings under lock and key; leaving things unattended was almost like saying they did not belong to anyone. The same goes for the house. When leaving for a wedding in another town, after I had moved out, the family asked me to sleep at their house with the lights on, so that people could see it was inhabited and would not break in. I found their worry excessive—people leave their houses all the time, I said, to which they replied that this is precisely when burglaries happen and gave me the example of a relative whose house had been recently broken into while she was away (on a stealing trip, no less). Armonia often complained that she could not leave the house because she was mandated by her children to guard the money they had sent home from abroad.

'Guarding the house' meant more than guarding the possessions inside it, however. It meant deploying human presence, because this is what gives weight to ownership. Empty places cease to belong to anyone. One of the girls told me how she got up one night only to find a gathering of women in the kitchen, eating away and having a good time; they were relatives—as almost everyone is—and they had come because they knew the family had sour cabbage and wine in their barrels. Neighbouring or stray dogs roamed the courtyard at night, and, according to the girls, so did evil spirits: they often complained that they were uneasy (Rou. *mi-e urît*) crossing the courtyard at night alone to get someone water or food, lest they might run into ghosts. Armonia never left her precious skirts hanging on the drying line at night, as she did during the day, when she could 'guard' them, and when I left my slippers outside the house entrance at night only to find the next day that the neighbors' dogs had taken them, my hosts simply rested their case.

From all of the above, it results that, for the Rom, presence equates ownership. The principle is similar to arguments made by Hume, Rousseau and Kant to the effect that occupation is the

basis of property (rather than labor, as Locke had suggested previously); while the three philosophers were mainly referring to the possession and use of land, the point remains that ownership needs to be conceived of as a sum of processes through which rights are asserted (or contested), rather than a bundle of rights (Rose 1985), and as a set of relations between people, on the one hand, and between people and their environment, on the other hand (Busse and Strang 2020). In Mahala, like elsewhere for the Rom, spaces become something akin to a no man's land, and all possessions are up for grabs without their inhabitants in sight.

# Spaces of ownership

Anthropologists have been interested in property almost since the inception of the discipline, with Lewis Henry Morgan equating property with civilization, and with Mauss's *The Gift* (2002 [1925]) as a history of changing ideas about property (Hann 2005:112, 2007:291). More recently, Hann (1998) and Humphrey and Verdery (2004), among others, sought to articulate the complexity of property relations and the implications that property has over personhood. In her pivotal essay, Rose (1985) defines ownership as a system of symbolic communication; it follows, then, that attention is due not just to the message, but also to the environment, or code, and to the actors. For the Rom, the stability and legitimacy of property are not immutable, but contingent upon whose property it is, how it is maintained, and who can lay claims to it. In other words, the trajectory of valuables around the household is indicative of the relations between the people who have rights in them, and those who are excluded from such rights. Rather than focusing on property as such, in this chapter, and in the remainder of the thesis, I discuss 'notions and acts of owning' (Busse and Strang 2020), looking at personhood, symbolic

communication, materiality, and the political and economic structures in which these acts occur.

In this section, I describe how objects exercise ownership over certain spaces, which then become restricted to visitors and even to some members of the household. For instance, when the family's youngest son took to stealing money, jewellery, and other valuable items from the house (on account of being angry that his mother did not buy him a car—on which more in Chapter 6), the family locked the room where the safe with his siblings' money was, and changed the code to the safe. The girls also started locking their room, and their father gave them whatever valuables or money he had on him to hold onto. When their brother stole them anyway, it was the girls' fault that they had not guarded the objects properly. Clearly, blame and entitlement were calculated on the basis of gender and relative position in the social hierarchy, and not based on absolute principles of ownership. This results also from the observation that later on, when one of the girls later stole money from the house (which she replaced almost immediately), her brothers battered her for weeks and stopped talking to her. While their younger brother's transgressions could be tolerated because, conceivably, he had rights in the property of his siblings, her own transgressions against her siblings' property were anathema because she had none.

Women are not only the producers of valuables, but also their custodians, and are not supposed to spend money except on gifts and ceremonial exchanges. Men are expected to circulate money, ideally as investments, which would produce more money, and less ideally (but more frequently) in gambling and other high-risk enterprises, which often result in debt. Women pay men's debts and finance the acquisition of cars and other luxury items, as a proof of their commitment. Equally, they are expected to acquire cars for their male sons and provide gold to their daughters when they reach marriageable age. While expensive clothes (especially

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women's), perfumes, coffee, and other luxury items can count as valuables and demand guardianship, it is mostly money (in cash) and gold that constitute wealth. In my analysis, I follow the cautioning formulated by Rakopoulos and Rio (2018) against equating wealth with economic transactions.

Wealth is not money, but gold. Gold is stored either in the form of jewellery, which can be worn, bought, and sold according to its weight and karat, or in the form of coins, which are bought and sold among Rom 'for value' rather than for their weight, i.e., as prestige items among Rom who know the true value of such coins and are willing to pay well beyond their market price to acquire them. The circulation of prestige items and the social hierarchy that it espouses was studied by Berta (2019) among Gabor Roma in Transylvania, who inherit, pawn, and exchange silver beakers and tankards to consolidate marriage alliances. Berta shows that beaker transactions among Gabors can be manifold the beakers' initial price on the antique market where the Gabor acquired them from, depending on who is selling, who is buying, and what their social status is. Unlike with the Gabors, where beakers are strictly the business of men, with the Rom of Mahala it is women who wear the golden coins around their necks, and it is their job to hide them when they are not on display. While money is stored in safes, and around the house (never in banks, for fear that the authorities might question its provenance), gold is generally buried, so that it is beyond the reach of intruders and men alike. Women's overlapping roles as providers, givers, and guardians of wealth encapsulates what Weiner (1992) calls 'the paradox of keeping-while-giving' and forms the crux of social praxis for Rom and Trobrianders alike, and for many other populations where women control highly valued possessions. This gendered control over wealth is highly consequential, in that 'Intricate symbolic meanings semantically encode sexuality, biological reproduction, and nurturance so that such possessions, as they are exchanged between people, act as the material agents in the reproduction of social relations' (*op. cit.*: 3).

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In what follows, I will address these two aspects: the material one (which includes spatial organization) and the reproduction of social relations.

As regards materiality and space, the existence of wealth and the obligation to guard it ordain domestic spaces according to what they contain and to whom is entitled to these contents. Seeing the house from the point of view of what various spaces are supposed to keep out of sight and out of circulation, the room occupancy and ordering take on different meanings. First, the house itself keeps unmarried girls out of reach; the courtyard, along with their attendance of community events such as weddings (in the company of family) mitigates this isolation, but in essence, marriageable girls and wealth can only be protected from kidnapping or theft by being kept securely at home. At the same time, their existence needs to be advertised, and it is not incidental that both are displayed on ceremonial occasions. It is unmarried girls who tend to the family wealth, hide the gold, and pick up the money sent by their siblings abroad, under the watchful eye of the household matriarch, who has the ultimate responsibility in guarding wealth, and who is the rightful owner of gold. Lately, elder women who guard the money that their children send from abroad have started to lend money at interest, but it can only be women whose sons and nephews are renowned for being able to recuperate the money by any means.

The association between unmarried daughters and wealth is not without its perils, since daughters do not inherit gold, except if their mothers gift them jewellery so that they do not appear 'poor,' and their loyalties towards their parents' possessions are often ambivalent. Many girls are persuaded to steal money and gold from their parents, as a way to probe their commitment to their future spouses. If the liaison ends in marriage, the girl's transgressions can be forgiven, although the injunction against their potential disloyalty remains in place. At the same time, unmarried men can almost never be trusted with wealth, since non-circulatory wealth is simply not among a man's duties, and they could not be blamed if they wasted it;

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indeed, it is their privilege to do so if it falls into their hands. This of course changes when men become fathers, and they are expected to be more judicious in administering resources. This expectation does not always turn into reality, however, so it is still incumbent upon women to have the last word in dealing with family wealth. When there are no unmarried daughters in a household, the duty of guarding wealth falls upon daughters-in-law, who need to conceal this knowledge from their husbands, lest these might pressure them to put the wealth into circulation.

The eldest married couple usually resides in the room where money is kept (and some smaller gold pieces that are worn more frequently and that for this reason do not stay buried), and that is usually the best room of the house. Other wealth is given to the daughters for safekeeping, and other yet is hidden in places such as the attic, where only the women in the household have access, ostensibly because that is where clothes, blankets, and other household items are stored. While there are no male-only or female-only spaces in the house, female presence and usage of certain spaces, however impermanent, can restrict men's access not just to those spaces, but also to what they might contain. Women and the spaces they inhabit are always assumed to be hiding something, and this engulfs them in an air of taboo, with the implication that any attempt to get too close constitutes a transgression. As already noted, women also keep valuables on their bodies, and it is not infrequent that men give their money to wives and daughters for safeguarding even during small trips to town.

From a functionalist point of view, the association between unmarried daughters and wealth, with all its ambivalences, owes to the fact that they are both coveted goods: thieves might attempt to steal a family's belongings, and men's families might kidnap a good girl, to avoid paying bride wealth. Both of these are ways to deprive a family of what is rightfully theirs, and both are punished, but mostly desisted through making the objects of desire unattainable. It

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bears repeating that it falls upon the owners of wealth and/or marriageable girls to safeguard them, and that those who manage to break through their defences are less to blame than the owners who failed to guard them properly. In this sense, the capacity to amass wealth and the virtue of young women both testify to the capabilities of the household males. I suggest that guardianship over goods and women testifies to one's ability to maintain one's autonomy from the encroaching society, and not become a victim of the others' desire for expansion and domination. This autonomy ultimately stems from solving the puzzle of keeping-while-giving in the plane of materiality and reproduction, rather than in the symbolic realm. To quote Weiner once more: 'As a generic concept, reciprocal exchanges are only the pawns on the chessboard of culture preserving inalienable possessions and fending *off* attempts by others to claim them. This approach changes the way we theorize about kinship and politics by centering women and reproduction into the heart of the political process where they ethnographically belong.' (Weiner 1992: xi)

Men, whether fathers or brothers, do not go into women's rooms, but sisters, sisters-in-law, mothers, and mothers-in-law do. Sometimes people put locks on their doors, but as I soon learned, this was not to do with people's privacy, but with safeguarding the objects or valuables stored in the room. Privacy as such is also not the reason why people need separate rooms: it is because of the separation of genders. When people complained about the lack of space, they would not invoke comfort or privacy, but practicalities: unwed brothers could not sleep in the same room as their teenage sisters; married couples could not live next to their parents-in-law; and unwed girls could not live next door to a recently married couple. These motives have not to do with intimacy, as it might seem, but with unholy vicinities that become dangerous through the risk of contagion. In other words, people's movements are restricted both by the objects that they need to guard, and by their attempts to avoid violating moralities.

## Women's guardianship

As I already mentioned, in the household of my hosts, it was the front bedroom where most family valuables were stored. This meant primarily the wardrobe with the safe where the matriarch kept the money sent by her elder children who were abroad, but also where she kept her most expensive clothes, skirts and scarves, as well as whatever Antonio brought home from work. Most space in the large wardrobe was taken by these items, so whoever occupied the room would have to store their belongings in the little space that remained. During my fieldwork, this room was occupied by three couples in turn, and at all times it was locked. First, it was the middle son and his girlfriend who lived there. One of the family daughters, or both of them, would sometimes also sleep over, ostensibly to keep their brother company, but also not to disturb me, since I was sleeping in their room where there was only a small couch available. Their mother, however, was dissatisfied that they stayed overnight in their brothers' room, because she was afraid the girlfriend would hesitate to hug her man at night in the presence of his sisters, whereas the mother was hoping she would keep him warm, to make up for the fact that there was no bed in the room and the young couple were sleeping on a mattress on the floor and her son might catch a cold.

The family was not content with their son's girlfriend. At first, I thought this was just because she was a gaʒi, a non-Roma woman. Her parents sometimes came to visit and, even though Armonia treated them with the condescension that she usually manifested for the gaʒe who did services for her, she would refer to them as her 'friends.' The girl's parents, on the other hand, behaved with the familiarity and helpfulness of in-laws; sometimes they helped clean the house (in exchange for money), or performed other minor services and were then invited to stay for dinner. Armonia told me that initially she liked the girl, and they were close, but later on, when her son got married to a Romni, he kept in touch with his girlfriend and ignored his wife. This,

Armonia reasoned, was the fault of the gaʒi, because a proper woman should have known better and cut him off so that he could focus on his marriage. After the marriage dissolved— not because of adultery, as men's adultery is rarely a reason for separation among the Rom, but because of other incompatibilities and conflicts—Armonia's son continued to see his girlfriend, but his mother said she did not want to see her around the house. Because the son did not want to give up on her, and they did not want to waste their money renting a room elsewhere, a compromise was reached: she had to become invisible. Thus, the family pretended not to see her, even though she practically lived there, and she pretended not to live there, meaning that she mostly came out of the room at night, when everyone else was asleep, and then only to sneak around quietly to the bathroom and back. Because of the girl's presence, Armonia would not go into the front bedroom when the couple were at home, even though most of her belongings were there. The daughters, however, were free to interact with their brother's girlfriend, so in practice they tended to the safe and to their mother's items that were stored in the couple's room. They were also the ones who picked up the money that their siblings transferred from abroad via services like MoneyGram.

The fact that the girl's movements were restricted meant that she could not make food for her boyfriend, so that his mother or sisters had to perform this service which normally falls among the duties of the man's partner. In order to compel him to get a proper wife, Armonia often vowed not to cook for him ever again, which practically left his sisters in charge of feeding him. The mother would also criticise the girlfriend for failing to perform her duties, despite the obvious impossibility in which she found herself. When I pointed this out, Armonia retorted that a 'capable' woman would sneak around and get things done under any circumstances, recalling how she herself had to perform various household chores in spite of the interdictions or scarcities she had been up against when living with her mother-in-law.

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After the son and his girlfriend went abroad, the room was taken over by the parents, Antonio and Armonia, which Armonia found practical, because she was then able to keep an eye both on the street, and on the courtyard, as well as the valuables in the wardrobe. She did express some occasional distress that her activity was now restricted to guarding valuables, as opposed to making them, but she readily acknowledged how important this job was, and that someone trustworthy had to do it. Then, when the youngest son, who will inherit the house, got married, the young couple was immediately given the front room, with all its valuables, even though previously the son had little access to the room, for fear he might gamble away his siblings' gatherings, and his wife was practically a newcomer. Nonetheless, much with the unacknowledged girlfriend before her, it was in her own interest to preserve the family fortune, and she was promptly assigned this responsibility.



*Photos 12-13. Women display their gold coins at ceremonial occasions. [Faces blurred to preserve anonymity.]*

# The gender of the house

'When I get married,' Brianna would say while we cleaned the kitchen together, 'my house will be simple, all white, with mirrors all over the walls, and incredibly simple and elegant.' She said mirrors were necessary because seeing yourself at all times compels you to be more elegant, to check your posture, and to behave better. I was always struck by the energy that my Rom interlocutors put into beautifying their circumstances as aspiring to more beautiful lives. Brianna's imaginary of a clean simple house with white walls is nothing out of the ordinary, and yet for her it was (and remained) an impossible achievement. The walls in the kitchen where we talked were stained by mould and smoke; however often they had them repainted, the stains would return unabated. The house into which she later married belonged to her parents in law and she could not have it redone. Currently she lives in an overcrowded, cockroach-infested house in the US, where with her husband and two children they hope to make enough money to finally buy their own house with white walls someday.

Mirabela too was discontent with their house. She also longed for a simple, tidy house, in counterpoint to the cluttered, busy rooms that she now had to clean every day. She kept remarking about all the objects getting in the way – the carpets, the numerous blankets necessary for all family members that had to be stored away during the day, the clothes in disarray, the pieces of furniture that did not match, shabby tables and chairs, broken handles, and other 'poor' household items that cluttered the rooms and caused the house to look miserable and unkept, despite her best efforts to the contrary. One of the recurrent disagreements between her and her mother was that she regularly threw things away when she was cleaning, which her mother then recovered from the garbage bin, thinking that some of them were still marginally or potentially useful, such as old phone chargers or pillowcases.

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Mirabela found no place for these useless items, and if she left them where she found them it would have looked as if she hadn't cleaned at all.

'This house hates us', she would exclaim in frustration, whenever she did not manage to tidy the house to her standards. 'It takes its revenge on us and gives us all what we hate, or what we don't want.' She wanted an orderly house, Brianna wanted lots of light, Octavio wanted to entertain his friends in the living-room, Armonia wanted to store all her belongings safely somewhere, and Antonio wanted a house with a clear, tidy schedule; nobody had any of these things. Because the house was so averse to their wishes, Mirabela said it was a 'poor' house: it did not look poor, but it felt that way. She also said that the dirt and the mud in the backyard represented them: their house was beautiful on the outside, she said, but when you got closer, it got ugly: poor, disorganised, unnecessarily cluttered. Her parents were unable to organise their space better, not because they didn't have money, but because they did not cooperate and did not know how to use it to beautify their house and their lives, they just wasted it without leaving anything behind.

Brianna's approach was decidedly more materialist:

> I can't stand poverty things (Rou. *sărăcismele*), to make the fire, to slaughter pigs. You need a house where you have some limited conditions, the bare minimum, and where you don't suffer. At first, we didn't have a kitchen, then we didn't have kitchen furniture, we only had two cupboards, and how to fit everything in them? We suffered a lot for this, we had to take turns eating, my sister and I always were the last to eat. Then they made this kitchen but there was no warm water. We had to make the fire. … And I was praying to get out of here because I couldn't stand these poverty things anymore. Better to stay in one room, have a heater, and pay 100 euro than to make a fire. We didn't have newspapers [to start the fire], the wood was moist, you just waste your life in vain on ugly things.

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Most women in Mahala see housework as their service to their families; young daughters-in-law and even fiancées routinely go to do housework in the houses of their husbands' or future husbands' extended kin to signal their servitude, the fact that they are 'at the feet' of their future families. The significance of domestic labor does not merely stop at the fact that it is done: it becomes significant when it is done for others, and, as we have seen from Brianna's complaint above, especially for others with whom one hopes to cultivate their belonging. Hence, the act of cleaning their parents' household was pointless for Mirabela and Brianna: they reasoned that a better use of their time would have been to clean their own houses or the at least the houses of their parents-in-law, had they been married. That would have been an investment into their future as wives and daughters-in-law; cleaning their parents' house had no sense of the future to it, in fact it felt oppressively like being stuck. It is said that daughters are mere 'visitors' in their parents' houses and that they belong to their husband's family more than to their biological one. Hence, Brianna's sense of 'wasting [her] life for no reason at all' owed not so much to the shortages of her parents' house, but to the fact that she put up with hardships in the wrong place.

Not that owning a house would change everything. Even though women make most of the money that is invested in houses, often it is not up to them to invest. Apart from making money, as we have seen in the previous chapter, women are responsible for storing and guarding valuables, not for consumption. A woman in my fieldsite told me she saved money to restructure their family home, and she discussed the idea with her husband. However, when she contracted the workers and they started digging the courtyard, the husband came home and sent them away. He battered his wife for taking this initiative, telling her that she did not have male genitals, hence she could not be in charge of building house. Building houses is a man's job; a woman's job is to finance and maintain it.

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The woman who told me this story vividly depicted the house she was dreaming to build, and how life would unfold in it. She wanted to have a large hall attached to the house, which would serve as a kitchen and living room. In time, she and her husband would go and live there, once the other rooms of the house would be filled with their sons' wives and children. In this way, she explained, they would manage to be both in the house, and outside of it, so that they didn't intrude upon the newlyweds, but would still be close enough to lend a hand with raising children and housekeeping. This vivid fantasy, made futile by her husband's assertion of masculinity, was not only an improvement to their current living situation—it sounded more like a compensatory narrative, in which all her sons would be home, which was not the case when we talked, mothers-in-law would help, rather than control, their daughters-in-law, and life in general could be orderly and easy. As I expressed my disapproval of her husband's violent ways, she said the beating that she was upset about: it was that she got beaten in vain and the house she'd been dreaming of did not get built anyway.

Women would often formulate their aspirations about their future lives through I imageries of houses. What is perhaps most striking is just how average their aspirations were: a quiet life in which one always has some food in the fridge, can go on holidays, or go out to a restaurant once in a while; a tidy house, or even an apartment, with simple furniture that is easy to clean and heat; a house with a garden etc. While they were fully aware that, for a number of reasons, these dreams would not become reality, the women engaged in voicing these vivid imaginaries centred around the house as a way of keeping the possible within sight. Their imaginative labor about future houses made present houses more liveable and enlivened them too.

# Conclusion

This chapter described the Rom's houses as knots of people and objects and as liminal spaces that contain and manage dualities: strangers and neighbors; alliance and descent (daughters who will leave, daughters-in-law who will come in); men and women; exogamy and endogamy; people and objects; degrees of separation. The house accommodates all these tensions to the point where it becomes itself a contradiction—or, as Lévi-Strauss (1987) described it, unstable and illusory, a kind of 'fetishism.' The house is under contradictory pulls: it puts up a façade for the rest of the world but it also needs to ensure the comfort of its occupants. It negotiates neighborliness. It may be too close to other Rom or too far from them, in which case nobody comes to visit and you feel cut off from the *tsiganie*. The kitchen might become a bedroom; the bedroom, a vault. People change sleeping places and nobody has their own room. Women fantasize about better houses, but it is men who must build them, and often they don't. But the contradictions that the house embodies are perhaps most visible in their inhabitants' discontents: the house may be scanty, cluttered, insufficiently repaired, or simply not one's own house to invest in. And yet, all of these contradictions that risk breaking up the house are also what makes it come to life. Taking up Hoskins' metaphor (1998) of houses as 'biographical objects' (Carsten 2018), the houses of the Rom appear as hyper-biographical; without people in them, they feel deserted, emptied out. It is only liveliness (Allerton 2013) that makes things with their people into houses; when this is gone, houses become like empty shells and return to the wasteland of bricks, mortar and random objects from which human occupancy momentarily elevated them.

In the opening of her recent book *Relations*, Strathern (2020) recalls the assessment made by Gell: 'if anthropology has a specific subject-matter at all, that subject-matter is "social relationships"' (Gell 1998:4 cited in Strathern 2020:1). The same holds true for this thesis: even though it swarms with people, its focus are the relations between them. A large part of these concern about the back-and-forth between the Rom and the gaʒe; a smaller part concerns relations amongst the Rom. By way of examining relations inside the *tsiganie*, this chapter provides a peek into the camera obscura of relatedness, by which, following Carsten (2000) I mean not only the two pillars of kinship theory, alliance and descent, but also the manifold relations that fall in-between them or emerge at their conjunction. In the Introduction, I quoted Antonio saying that the Rom Čor are all related, accounting for the fact that his wife's mother's sister was the wife of his grandfather's first cousin. Such overlaps are not rare, in fact it is very common for alliance to coincide with descent somewhere along the line and to override it. This agglomeration of ties cutting across the group was conceptualized as 'kinship blocs' by Piasere (2015:125–28), who interprets it as a response of Roma populations to their living situation dispersed among (potentially) hostile non-Roma majorities.

This overlapping of multiple forms of relatedness does not translate seamlessly into unity or brotherhood, because cohesion is accompanied by the fragmentation brought about by status and social order. In this chapter, I will examine these contradictory pulls across three areas of relatedness: marriage, which the Rom of Mahala (like many other groups) view as central to the social reproduction of their identity as 'traditional' and 'true' Roma; the affective dimension of relatedness, focusing especially on 'pity,' which mitigates the divergent pulls of

kinship and gender hierarchies; and the realm of control over others, as it transpires from oratory and ceremonial language, particularly oaths.

## Brick by brick: The marriage process

About one year after leaving Mahala, I caught word that Antonio and Armonia's youngest son, Octavio, was getting married (engaged, in fact; two children later, the marriage did not take place yet, so I will refer to the event as a 'betrothal'). I could not make it to the event, but thanks to the Rom's new habit of livestreaming their celebrations on Facebook, for the benefit of the many family members who find themselves abroad, I watched the ceremony live. I describe it below, as it gives a preliminary illustration of the negotiations of hierarchy that alliance entails.

Filming started as the wife-takers approached the house of the wife-givers. Senior men and women in ceremonial dress assembled on both sides. As soon as the hosts spotted the wife-takers approaching, the band started playing a marching tune titled 'the presidential march' that I heard on this occasion at other betrothals too. The marching of the wife-takers to the wife-givers' household is seen as the first and most important impression the wife takers make on the family of wife givers: the bigger the number of kinsmen show up, the more respected their *neamo* is, since respect in Mahala is measured by how many people one particular *neamo* can mobilize in case of conflict to overwhelm their opponents. In the context of a betrothal, showing up in great numbers is a form of demonstrating that the wife-takers have numerous loyal associates, so the bride will become part of a protective environment.

The wife-takers brought along a bottle of liquor decorated with the golden coins which would be placed around the neck of their future *bori*, or daughter-in-law. As they approached the

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household, they stopped at before the gate, where the bride's family came out to greet them. At other betrothals, someone from the group of the wife-givers drew a line in the ground with a sword and asked the wife-takers not to cross it before they declare their intentions. This is very likely an enactment of a previously hostile mode of getting wives, which exists among other populations as well, and of the initial antagonism between the two families, which was resolved through prior negotiations. All of this spectacle is of course the enactment of negotiations that have already happened, and that made this ritual possible. However, the scene played out as if no prior negotiations had taken place. The host invited the wife-takers into his courtyard, which was festively laid out with tables, chairs, and foods. Once everyone was in the courtyard, the music stopped and the father of the future groom made a short speech:

> Once again, we are happy to be here (Rom. *Mishto araklem tume*.) May God give you luck (Rom. *baxt*) and happiness and health. It's clear it's a beautiful day because the sun is out. I am asking you to pay attention so that I can speak. I don't want to upset anyone, but in such situations, I am a parent even though I have many roles in my life, among the gaʒe, among the Rom, but this time I have very big emotions and I want to control myself and speak exactly what I must before your highnesses (Rom. *rajmos*[32]).

The wife-givers then gave him permission to place the bottle on the table.

Then came the turn of the father of the future wife to speak, and he spoke briefly. He praised the 'good' family of the wife-takers and said he only had two requests from the wife-takers as a condition to allow the betrothal: that they pay 30 thousand euro for the 'honor' of the bride and that they organise a wedding party at their best convenience. Then the grandfather of the bride took the word, emphasizing the long political cooperation that he had with the father of the groom, and added that Antonio's family deserved to become related to his own. It is quite

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[32] *raimos n  m*-ata/-as- *1*. grandness *2*. lordliness, nobleness, nobility. Source: Romlex Lexical Database. Available at: http://romani.uni-graz.at/romlex/lex.xml. Retrieved 19 July 2021.

remarkable that politics made such an explicit appearance in the negotiations, and this substantiates my claim regarding the quintessentially political nature of these alliances.

Then the groom's father took the word again:

> – I said some things and I will repeat them again and as often as I must, he said, as he took out a pile of money from his wife's purse.
>
> – Don't film when he gives the money, someone else intervened.
>
> – Please do film because it's our tradition, said Antonio.
>
> – I was just joking, the other man replied.
>
> Antonio continued:
>
> – …And I ask you again to allow me to finish no matter what because I prepared some words and I will forget them and I want to control myself. I came into the courtyard of the family of X, which is the supreme family among our Gypsies for centuries. May the devil reach me (Rom. *te arasal ma o beng*) and may God bless your house and your children and grandchildren if I am not proud that we are the only family in the *tsiganie* who can afford to talk to you about your daughter.
>
> – That's true, added the grandfather of the bride.
>
> – It's not about 30.000 EUR, I am [Antonio], and my brothers and brothers-in-law, and my *neamo* who are here, we are yours for life, although until now we have also been. This whole *tsiganie* should hear this. You asked for little, my cousin, and I don't want to negotiate for one second because it's not in my character, I don't want to upset you for one second, I don't want for one second to tell you 'give some, add some, cut some'. Here's your 30.000, may you be lucky (Rom. *te aves baxtalo*). Here are dollars equivalent to 30,000 euro. And we continue to sit in your conditions.

Then, the groom's father thanked all the relatives who laid the foundation for this alliance to happen ('to make ourselves relatives,' as he put it). He warned the bride's father against giving back the money, as most families do, and offered his son, the groom, to him as a son and a brother to the wife-takers. 'Life is imperfect,' he said, 'and so is marriage, you always need to

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lay another brick, to paint it, to maintain it. But my children did not cause damage in the *tsiganie* and did not embarrass us.' At the end of his speech, Antonio offered the bottle to the bride's father, who drank first from it, to show that he agreed to the betrothal, then offered it to his father. As they exchanged wishes, the bottle was passed back onto the groom's father and onto the groom, and to other (male) relatives.

As the music started again, to signal that the proceedings were coming to an end, the bride (Rom. *bori*) was called (notably she did not participate in the ceremony thus far): the groom's mother put a necklace with golden coins around her neck and they exchanged kisses. The bride also kissed her future father-in-law and her future sisters-in-law. The groom offered her a bunch of flowers, whereupon his father commented that this is a gaʒo habit but perhaps it would be good if the Rom adopted it too. She took the flowers as she lowered her gaze, and this is the only contact that she had with Octavio throughout the entire process. The groom's sisters then took the bride out to dance. The men would 'dedicate' songs to one another, and the groom's mother danced with her daughter-in-law. The groom's sisters and other female relatives joined them, so that while in the beginning of the dance the *bori* was surrounded by her own family, later she found herself in the middle of the groom 's relatives, while her family of origin continued to dance outside this circle.

## *The costs of 'audacity,' aka brideprice*

The marriage process, as described to me by my Rom interlocutors, usually begins when the future groom expresses his interest in a girl and he consults with his parents, who weigh in about her qualities and the profile of her family. Both girls' and boys' families are socially active when their children reach marriageable age, to gather information on potential spouses.

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The Rom are emphatic about *not* marrying their offspring off to families with whom they 'collaborate' closely, as they put it, meaning relatives they stay in touch with, or see frequently, or do business together, or with whom they simply cultivate friendships. This is because the marriage is a tense affair, that would endanger this pre-existing collaboration, regardless of whether it works out or not. But it is also because marriage extends the circle of kinsmen (affines), or at least strengthens pre-existing loose ties. Potential partners are to be sought then among people they do not know that well. Once interest is expressed, the groom's family starts visiting the family of the bride, and mutual relatives are sought to mediate their rapprochement.

Before negotiations around the future marriage can take place, however, it is expected from the wife-takers to gain the trust of the wife-givers. There is even talk of 'audacity' in their coming round to inquire about a girl and of whether a man or a family has the 'right' to dare to ask the hand of a certain girl in marriage. A woman who wanted to convey to me her criticism of her husband's relatives, said that they 'dared' to come and ask for her daughters in marriage, while her own relatives never did, out of respect for her. Although marriage as such is an accomplishment, indeed it is when the Rom become full-fledged persons, initiating marriage is a venture into hostile territory, and is regarded as an offence. As a way of bridging this initial antagonism between the two families, the wife-takers 'humiliate themselves,' as the Rom put it, and promise to accept any 'conditions' or 'pretensions' that the wife-givers might have, such as organizing a lavish marriage, inviting famous musicians, and of course the sum of money to be paid in exchange for the girl's 'honour.'

This money is in the order of several tens of thousands of euros and is taken to mean how much the wife-takers value their son, his future children, and their future daughter-in-law. This helps dispel the popular myth that the bride is 'bought': first, the Rom use a different word for this situation (Rom. *pokinimos*, meaning 'payment,' is used here in the sense of paying for the girl,

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as opposed to Rom. *chinimos*, which simply means 'buying'). Second, the money pays off the initial 'audacity' of wife-takers and stands for the ethical project in which the two families become engaged. And third, it is almost always returned to the wife-takers (in secret), as this will make the woman's life with her in-laws significantly easier.

Brideprice has generated an ample literature in anthropology at the height of structural-functionalism, much of which was dedicated to dispel the notion that women were being 'sold' and 'bought' as commodities. Hirschon's argument (1984) that marriage payments are indicative of a view of women as property, along with Collier's analysis (1993) of how marriage and bridewealth contribute to the reproduction of inequality in classless societies are among the best known in this latter line of argumentation. Conversely, Strathern (1984) writes about the impossibility to generalize the distinction between subject and object beyond the West. She points out that the western notion of 'property' encompasses rights exercised by persons over objects—hence the (Western) discomfort with the notion of 'exchange of women' proposed earlier by Lévi-Strauss (1969a), which was later rephrased as 'rights in women,' lest women should appear as objects. Strathern shows that this approach, however well-intended, does not explain the cultural equation between women and wealth that is operated, for instance, in Melanesia, and that 'is not tantamount to a conceptualization of women with "objects"' (*op. cit.*: 164), because, as Gregory (1980) argues, what is at stake in gift exchange is the social relation between subjects, not between the items of the transaction. Things, then, are not opposed to persons; rather, they are aspects of the person, if we understand personhood as metonymical: while land stands for men, wealth is associated with women, who depart from their clan to reside and reproduce elsewhere, and thus stand for labor and 'detachability.'

A compromise is reached by Comaroff (1980:44), who reflects on the difficulty to correlate between social differentiation and particular modes of marriage transactions and argues that

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meaningful comparison can only arise if we conceptualize 'socio-cultural systems as involving a dialectical relationship between their constitutive and lived-in orders.' Arguing that Western jural notions of marriage cannot account for the multitude of conjugal relations existing in everyday conditions, and even less for their equivocal and negotiable nature, he shows that in practice conjugal strategies frequently encumber a manipulation of the categories that the anthropologist tends to reify. Local actors manipulate ambiguity because, through it, they manipulate the kin and affinal ties and resources organized around marriage. Hence, for a long while, marriage stands for a potentiality, rather than a completed state or a category; whether it endures, and future negotiations stop (which is marked by the transfer of bridewealth) depends on whether its actors see their expectations met or not. Comaroff correlates the logic of marriage strategies, defined by the control of ambiguity and negotiation of potentialities, with the wider Tshidi conception of the social world, which requires that individual actors maximize their resources, but also keep their actions in check with existing hierarchies. By the same token, Peletz (1995:360) suggests analysing kinship and gender 'as components of more encompassing systems of distinction and hierarchy that are variably grounded in cosmology and political economy.'

Among the Rom of Mahala, marriage negotiations are conducted in utmost secrecy (inasmuch as secrecy is possible in such a small group, where people's main preoccupation is to survey what the others are up to). Wife-takers can put some pressure onto wife-givers by spreading the word that they are now engaged in negotiations, so that other potential wife-takers are discouraged from pursuing the same girl. It is not unusual, however, that several families express their interest in 'taking' one girl and such competition can easily results in feuds. For this reason, tactfulness is of essence in marriage negotiations. What further strains the negotiations is the fact that, in case they are unsuccessful, both families emerge with their reputation shattered: people then believe that either the wife-takers are not amicable and failed

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to accept the 'conditions' formulated by wife-givers, or that the wife-givers are unreasonable in their conditions, or simply that there is something wrong with either of the wannabe spouses. For all these reasons, secrecy is paramount to the undertaking. My observations suggest that, once they are initiated, marriage negotiations tend to be concluded rather than abandoned, even when not all sides are in agreement.

## *The problem with consent*

One woman told me how unhappy she was with the negotiations for her daughter. The people who came to ask about her come from a *neamo* that is known to be extremely strict with their daughters-in-law: not only are they routinely beaten and asked to do all the work, but they are also forbidden from visiting their parents and often even from leaving their courtyards. There had been one suicide and one suspicious death among the daughters-in-law in this *neamo*, so the future *bori*'s mother was understandably concerned. It would have been offensive to confront the potential wife-givers with these rumours, but thankfully they brought it up themselves, saying that they were aware of their *neamo*'s ill fame, and they pledged to treat their future *bori* better. The girl's father was convinced by their good intentions, and even though the mother hesitated, he agreed to the engagement. The woman was furious as she told me this: 'It's good that you don't have children yourself,' she said to me, 'because if you do, your husband is in control of them, and you don't have any say in whom they marry.' Ironically, the woman who narrated this was herself known as a harsh mother-in-law.

A younger woman, Sofia, told me how the negotiations were when she got married: she was 14 when she saw that one of her father's female cousins started to come round and inquire about her. Her father pretended nothing was happening, and the woman kept coming for

months and months, sometimes together with her son. Other families came round as well, knowing there was a girl of marriageable age in the household. Sofia's parents were arguing all the time about whom to choose but Sofia herself didn't know if she wanted to get married. She was still playing with her dolls, she said, and she felt ashamed to even think which of these boys she wanted as a husband. But to stop all the fights and the *belele* ('trouble') in the household, she consented to take the son of her father's cousin. On the day of her betrothal, seeing that she couldn't stop crying, one of her younger uncles took her to the side and asked: 'Do you really want to take him? Because if you don't, we make *beleaua* with him, it doesn't matter (Rou. *nu ținem cont*).' She felt reassured that her uncle cared so much about her, but she didn't want to make *beleaua* or disobey her parents, and she reasoned that, if she refused this guy, she would then maybe get stolen by some other guy whom she liked even less, so she resigned herself, thinking, 'if this is the man God sent to me, then let him be the one.' Besides, she just wanted to get away from her house with all the beatings and the scandals.

Humanitarian literature call such marriages 'arranged' and compares them to forcing women into prostitution. The European Parliament's "Resolution on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality" 2013/2103(INI) that continues to define institutional approaches to arranged marriage equates this practice to human trafficking, defining it as 'the prostitution of under-age females or females who have only just reached majority in exchange for luxury goods or small sums of money.' The ethnographic examples above suggest, however, cannot easily be fitted into the straitjacket of 'consent' or 'exchange,' and the pretence that they can or should has been amply criticized[33].

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[33] Parreñas et al. (2012) argue that laws on human trafficking reinforce the very categories that they regulates and that by codifying evanescent notions like "consent" and "victimhood" into policies, institutions end up taking inefficient, if not directly harmful measures to those they try to protect or rescue. Similarly, Agustín (2008) shows that 'the rescue industry' undermines the autonomy of migrant sex workers by refusing to engage them on their

To illustrate this logic further, in none of these narratives about marriage practices that to my ears sounded abusive did the women use words such as 'rape.' The only time I encountered this word was in the case of a young woman who was rumoured to have slept with a married man: 'he raped her the first time without her will, and the second time with her will,' someone reported. For non-Roma, the phrase might sound paradoxical; what my interlocutor meant by 'rape' did not have anything to do with consent or abuse, but with the legitimacy of the act. Because it could not be conducive to any acceptable relationship, it was labelled as 'rape' for my understanding, but as a representation of its seriousness, not of the agency of the woman in question.

Beyond the thorny issue of consent and appropriate age for marriage—and Stewart (2018) demonstrated just how thorny it gets when the ethnographer is called into the courtroom to account for the 'cultural' practice of underage marriages—the fact remains that in the betrothal proceedings described above, as well as in the marriages that I describe further, these issues are beside the point. In betrothal negotiations, the emphasis is not on the spouses but on the families that the marriage brings together and on how this alliance will strengthen the links between various kinship blocs. Indeed, even though the families involved in the negotiations do not have strong ties, the alliance does not happen on a blank slate. Despite the interdiction to pursue families with whom one already collaborates, paradoxically, as we have seen in the speech given by Antonio at his youngest son's betrothal, the two families cite their enduring cooperation and emphasize that the betrothal negotiations have been mediated by people who are important and respected by both sides.

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own terms. Weitzer (2007) speaks of a 'moral crusade' set in motion by a conservative political agenda, Vance (2011) demonstrates that anti-trafficking campaigns frequently resort to a rhetoric of melodrama, and Soderlund (2011) shows that media and policy representations of sex trafficking employ a 'rhetoric of revelation,' imbued with moral outrage, with the purpose of 'establishing belief' rather than demonstrate facts.

I interpret this contradiction through the necessity for the wife-takers to appease the wife-givers and find commonalities with them even where these do not exist. The same purpose is served by the displays of wealth, which underscores the 'honor' of the groom, as it shows that his parents cherish him and his potential offspring, who will carry on their 'name.' The display of wealth also signals that the wife-takers are 'capable' people, who are able to amass such large sums of money (or debt, because sometimes the money is borrowed, in which case it signals they are trustworthy). This is even more significant when the wife-takers do not have such sums at their disposal, but they borrow money on short notice and even at high interest to be able to follow the requirements of the wife-givers without complaints or bargains. This shows not only that they respect their son, but also that they are eager to fulfil the 'conditions' of the wife-givers and, ultimately, that they abide by community standards—they're not poor, incapable, or, worst of all, miserly (which in Romani is the same word as 'poor').



*Photo 14. Anthropologist with young Roma woman at her betrothal. [Her face was blurred to preserve anonymity.]*

## The ritual of oratory

Apart from the display of wealth, oratory plays a crucial role in the betrothal. In a certain way, oratory *makes* the betrothal, since there are no further ceremonies except the verbal exchanges between the father of the bride and that of the groom. As I mentioned, the betrothal proceedings are called 'coming with the word,' (Rom. *avel la vorbaia*), which already signals how important speech is to the proceedings. And, more than any other exchanges—of money, golden coins, dances, or musical dedications—it is the speeches that men give that consecrate the engagement, particularly the speech of the groom's father (notably, the groom does not speak). According to the Rom, his speech has to be sincere, articulate, to the point, and modest, as it is meant to navigate the antagonism that exists between the two families. A man's capacity to speak eloquently is a key resource in such ceremonial situations and gains him the respect of his future in-laws and of the audience.

The central trope in the speech made by the groom's father was the fact that he puts himself and his entire family 'at the feet' of their future in-laws. The observation that marriage exchanges are hierarchical because the broom and the bride are not equivalent, has long ago been formulated by Lévi-Strauss (1969). He also argued that the inequality between the two parties evens out because wife-takers are also wife-givers to other people and, in a limited pool of families, everyone eventually arrives at reciprocal relations. This structural reciprocity exists, of course, and the Rom have often pointed out to me that many marriages endure merely because, were a husband to send his wife home to her parents, his sister, who might be married to a cousin of his wife, would also see her marriage fall apart. This dormant reciprocity, however, does little to attenuate the intensely hierarchical relations enacted at betrothals.

Bloch (1978) refutes Lévi-Strauss's argument of reciprocity and points out that Mauss and Malinowski have shown that even reciprocal gift relations are made up, on closer scrutiny, of

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a series of short-term instances of inequality between the parties. Whatever other relations and marital exchanges might exist between the wife-givers and the wife-takers, at the time of the betrothal there can be no confusion about which party loses a daughter, and which party gains a daughter-in-law (along with her labor and her children). Hence the Rom's talk of 'audacity' when asking for a girl's hand in marriage, or about their 'right' to make this request. This is a space of ambiguity that the wife-takers' emphatic expressions of submission are meant to mitigate.

These dynamics, however, do not stop at this. The wife-takers' submission is also a rhetorical inversion of the way the relations between the two families will be carried out in reality after the marriage is consummated, when the young wife will have to work very hard to earn her status in her new family. And since for the Rom the amount of members of a given *neamo* signifies its worth and social standing, the wife's male relatives, too, will be counted on as loyal to her husband's extended family, in ways in which the groom and his male relatives are not expected to reciprocate (although they might, occasionally). This inversion of submission at the time of the betrothal is also important in this regard, because, once again, it stands for the mutual recognition as 'worthy Roma' of the two families, and the shared ethical project on which they embark together through the alliance.

There is a broader meaning of these speech acts of submission that pertains to the assumption of egalitarianism among Romani populations. I surmise that insofar as this egalitarianism exists, it rests on multiple hierarchies and acts of subordination, as the snippets from the speech given by the groom's father have amply demonstrated. The social relations of the Rom, both in their everyday aspects and in the ceremonial dimension that we have followed here, are saturated with hierarchy, whether real or rhetorical.

Betrothals, more than any other life-events or rituals among the Rom, showcase two contradictory modes of representing the social world: the egalitarian one (with an emphasis on brotherhood, harmony, and cooperation) and the hierarchical one (whereby people lavishly express their subordination to one another). While in everyday life either one or the other of these modes prevails, depending on the context, betrothals are one of the rare occasions where egalitarianism and hierarchy are in a 'structural oscillation' of the type described by Leach (1970 [1954]) among Kachin groups, who shift from egalitarian to hierarchical imaginations of their society. What betrothals show is that it does not matter which of these two modes ultimately prevails, because it's the dialectical relation between them, their permanently oscillating equilibrium, and the (temporary) navigation of the antagonism and ambivalences espoused by the marriage process, that helps reproduce Romaniness.

## *Elopement and its discontents*

Not all marriages, however, follow this neat script, because not all of them are concluded by betrothal. Some (perhaps as many as one third) take place by elopement, which is seen as a grave offence to the wife-givers, who might refuse to talk to their affines or even to their daughter for many years, and no ceremonies are arranged. Conflicts can emerge between the two families, and even though they do not take the form of open confrontations, they are enough to cause the girl's parents to feel disrespected, and the groom's parents to prevent their *bori* from talking to her parents (on the grounds that the latter offended them). Elopements that do not end with marriage are rare; the whole purpose of elopement is to force a girl's parents to give her to the man who steals her, and it is this element of force that the wife-givers react strongly to, since it circumvents the entire negotiations of hierarchy and temporary submission that I outlined in the previous section. This is why girls reaching puberty and even young wives

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are closely guarded by her extended families, because if they were to be abducted, their families would hardly be able to claim them back.

A clear violation of authority, and in many ways the complete opposite of the submissive rhetoric of the wife-takers that we saw in the previous section, elopement is an affront that requires years of women's sustained 'phatic labor' (Elyachar 2010) to mend. The essence of the affront is that it lays bare the hierarchical relations between the two families, without the pretence that betrothal proceedings put up to spare everyone's dignity.

One exemplary elopement that was narrated to me was that of Constantina, who was in her 50s at the time of my fieldwork. It was exemplary because of how she handled it, 'like a real *Romni tsiganiaki*. Constantina was 14 when she was captured by her current husband, then a man in his late 20s who had already been married. She was living with her parents in a different county, some 400 km away from Craiova, and had hardly seen the man she was going to marry (people sometimes find out about marriageable partners elsewhere while they are in prison). A group of men broke into her parents' house in the middle of the night, beat up her parents, and took Constantina away. Her parents wanted to file a complaint with the police, but she told them not to, because the man was her lover and she wanted to go with him. This was of course not true, but it was something she did to save her husband from going to jail. Had she agreed to imprison the man, her chances of getting married after having been associated with him would have been dim, and in case she eventually caved in and married him for lack of options, her married life would have been hell. It was not great anyways (the story was told to me in protest about the beatings that she still endured despite her old age and her loyalty, and she herself told me once that men should realise that 'women aren't dogs').

Another story of eluding the betrothal was recounted to me by Hunedoara. She was also in her teens when she got married. She was 'talking' to her current husband, who was also a distant

cousin of hers. He lured her to his mother's house one day and locked her up in one room, asking his cousins to guard the door lest her parents came looking for her. As the man's cousins were shouting at him from outside the door to hurry up, he could not do 'what had to be done.' Hunedoara took 'pity' on him and she let him do it. The man's mother advised her that, if she were a true *shey tsiganiaki* ('Roma girl'), she would tell her parents that it was all her own doing, lest her future husband landed in trouble. She did just that, was banned from her parents' home, and thus her marriage of 35 years started.

Along with the story of Sofia's betrothal recounted above, the stories of Constantina and Hunedoara blur the lines between elopement, capture, and betrothal even further. And the narrative of Printesa's capture, which I recount below, indicates that there are broader societal forces at play in the marriage process.

During my field research, Printesa, one of the daughters of Armonia's eldest brother, Rubin, was abducted by one of her numerous suitors, despite being accompanied by her sister-in-law and several children. The two women were walking to the nearest shop, some 300 meters from their house, when a car slowed down behind them, and several men emerged, took Printesa in their car, and drove away. Tens of relatives assembled in front of her father's house within the hour and several police cars remained in the area for fear a confrontation might happen. Through intermediaries, Rubin got in touch with the abductor, who had already left the city with Printesa, and negotiated terms to return his daughter. Printesa had to swear that her abductor had not laid a finger on her—if he had, she would have had to marry him without further ado. Rubin had to promise there would be no repercussions and his relatives would not make *beleaua* (trouble) if his daughter was returned safely. The man who abducted her (who was a relative of Printesa's mother and of Antonio) brought her to the entrance of the city and

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handed her over to a cousin. There was a barbecue party for her return. A few months later, Printesa married another man.

When Printesa married her lover instead of her abductor, the *tsiganie* commented that, if Rubin hadn't been from such an important *neamo*, the father of the man who abducted his daughter would have had every right to make *beleaua* when hearing that she got married to someone else. A man who steals a girl has rights over her, it was explained to me, and Printesa's abductor would have been in his right to break into their house and beat up everyone. This is why Rubin gathered all his relatives at his house the night when he announced, on Facebook, that his daughter was getting married. As he explained (in a Facebook live), in earlier times Printesa would have been forced to marry her abductor, and there was nothing he could have done about it. Thankfully, times change, he said, and our *tsiganie* changes with them. The more they change, the more they stay the same.

Not all elopements go smoothly, let alone remain without consequences. The further detailed story of an elopement, told to me by one girl about one of her cousins, evinces the broad adversities involved in this process:

> When Stefania and Giovani first met, she was young, 12-13, and had not met him before, even though he was something of a cousin. He liked Stefania and started to inquire about her, when he saw her again on the street he asked her whose she was, but she told him to go to hell, so he asked a little girl and she said she was the daughter of Maria. Giovani misunderstood the name and kept looking everywhere; some people even told him to go to villages around and ask. Then he saw her again at a birthday party. The girls were staying inside, because they were already old, 14-15, they had no business being too much outside, but they had a fight with birthday cake and Giovani came and put cake on Stefania's face, because she didn't get out of the way quickly enough, and so she retaliated put cake on him, and then he took off his shirt and went to wash himself at the fountain in the courtyard and she went to wash her face, maybe she didn't realise that he was there, or maybe she did, and so Giovani found out whose

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she was and spent five years following her (Rou. *a umblat dupa ea*) until he got her, and they ran away together.

Meanwhile his younger brother got married and it's very ugly that he got married before his elder brother, to a girl who had slept with him already before marriage, so she was pretty 'worthless.' Nonetheless, the girl's parents made a big *belea* when the brother of Giovani went to steal her and they beat him up, but that's one thing, because he's their son-in-law, although they should have thought about the future of their daughter, since she wanted to take him, but they also beat up his brother, Giovani, and they broke the windows to their cousin's car, who went there to support Giovani and his brother, but later Giovani paid for the windows.

Anyway, there was a betrothal between Stefania and Giovani, but they didn't have sex yet, because Stefania was a serious girl. And then she ran away with Giovani, because he was older, 23-24, and his father kept pushing him: you're old, you need to get married, why should they all wait for Stefania, what is she, some sort of queen, we can go somewhere else and pay three thousand euro and get you a girl and that's it. He was saying this because he felt he was getting old and he wanted grandchildren, so he was pushing Giovani, and Giovani was pushing her. So that's why they eloped. Giovani told her: if you don't run away with me now, I won't take you (as a wife) anymore. So what was she to do, she loved him, he loved her, and her father beat her up all the time, her siblings were young, her mother was in prison. And she also went to Giovani's father to do the housework, because that's what a *bori* does, and her father didn't let her go there, Giovani's father reproached her that she did not come often enough and threatened he would tell Giovani that she was not helping him and said she would have a nasty life when she came to live there. Once she had to make a package for her mother in prison and her father saw that she forgot to pack the meat, and said, 'You whore, you're thinking of Giovani, you went to do the housework for his father,' and he beat her up and broke her arm. Meanwhile, Giovani's father kept pressuring his son, saying that Stefania would sleep with someone else until he got her. But the thing is, she didn't want to elope because her siblings were young and she cared for them while their mother was in prison. But Giovani is a man and he has his ambition, like, 'Why do I have to wait for her father, is he some sort of a bigshot (Rou. *şmecher*).' So, they eloped.

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Several conflicting lines are at work here: one the one hand, the girl who told me the story emphasized that this was a 'beautiful' marriage story, because the spouses loved each other very much. This love is not at the forefront, however, and is not the reason why they elope. On the other hand, there is the rivalry between the spouses' parents and their conflicting interests, materialized here quite concretely in the way they vie for Stefania's labor power. Her father reminds her of her obligations towards her siblings and the household, especially since her mother is in prison. Giovani's father references the future: if she does not behave like a good *bori* now, her life in his household will not be easy. The two men do not confront one another (at this point) but fight by proxy through the diverging pressures they put on their children. Giovani does not want to be seen as a weak man, dominated by his wife's father; Stefania wants to be a good daughter and a good *bori*, and to ensure Giovani that she loves him, after he did the same for her before they got engaged. As contradictions accumulate, the only way out is to elope (i.e., for Stefania to renounce her family ties and invest solely in her future life with Giovani).
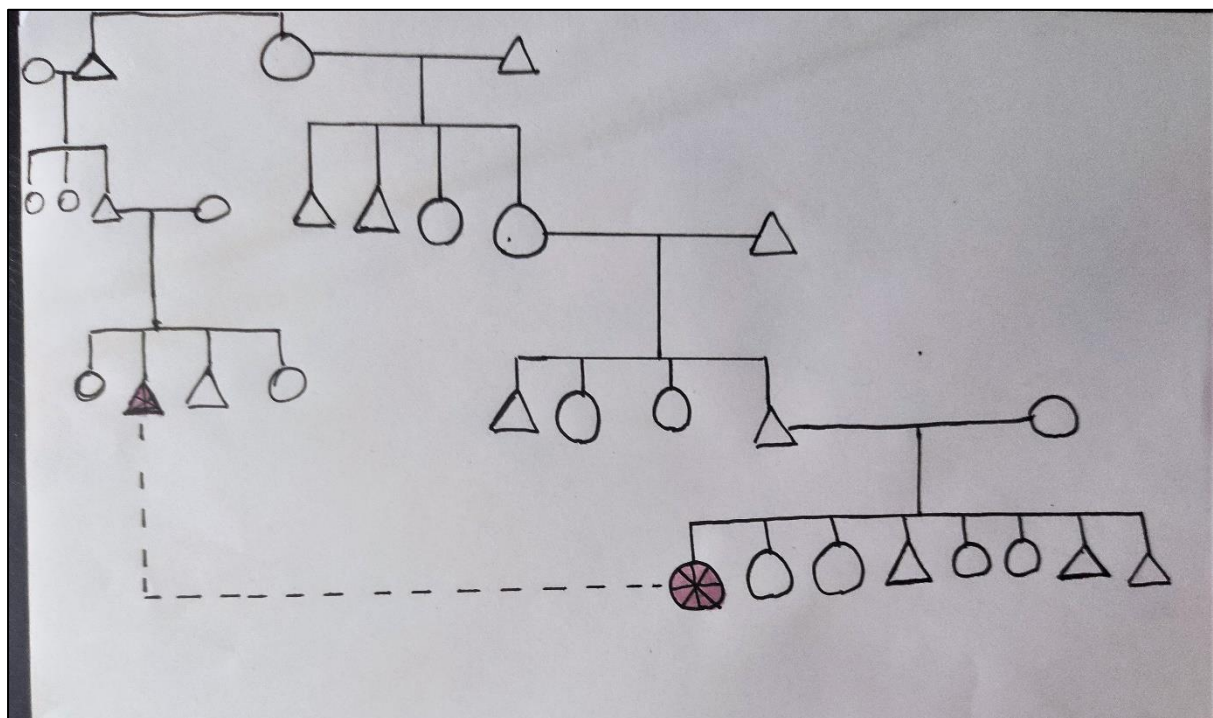


*Figure 5. Diagram showing how Stefania and Giovani are related.*

The girl who told me the story went on:

> Her father didn't even know she eloped, he thought she was *and-o gav* (stealing), because she had to make money, they had sold all their gold to get their mother out of prison, and the children didn't even have clothes. So, she often went *and-o gav* because she was marked (Rou. *însemnată*), she made good money.

> Her father called me the next day, because he knew she sometimes slept over at our house, and he asks me, 'Is she there?' 'No, she isn't,' I say, because I knew she had run away. 'Ok,' he says, 'when you see her tell her to come home.' Meanwhile she had called me that she was already in Ireland and asked me to go and check on her brothers. Her father says to me, 'Tell me now if you know where she is, because if I find out later that you knew, I will beat you up until I destroy you.' 'I truly (Rom. *ceaces*) don't know,' I said. If he had made me swear, like *bengoav*, I couldn't have said a thing. The whole *tsiganie* gathered at his house. And he found out that she had eloped with Giovani, so he called Giovani's father and cursed his dead (Rou. *l-a înjurat de morți*). And this is ugly, because Giovani's father is first cousins with the mother of Stefania's father. So basically her father and her husband are second cousins. So Giovani is older, and many people around him had died, may God protect us: a brother, a nephew, his parents… And Giovani's father fell off his feet when he heard Stefania's father cursing his dead, so he said that from that moment on Stefania would not be allowed to talk to her family for ten years.

> Later he lost his anger because she saw she was a good *bori*, she made him a granddaughter, but Giovani remained upset because her father insulted his father, he was ambitious, and didn't allow her himself to talk to her family. He doesn't even let her walk on her parents' street. Her mother went to see her secretly, because mothers get over anything, but did not tell her husband. And we were not allowed to see her, we also went in secret. Her father does not talk to her to this day, and he said to us: 'If I catch any of you from this *neamo* that you talk to her, I kill you.' Then her mother made in such a way to restore relations with Giovani's father, so now the families talk.

Stefania's elopement with Giovani clearly disrupted a whole social order. On closer analysis, however, the real disruption is caused by the confrontation between the two men, each of whom

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broke through several restrictions: on the side of Giovani's father, the obvious offense is that he did not wait for the marriage, and deprived Stefania's father of his eldest daughter who helped him take care of several young children while his wife was locked up; on the side of Stefania's father, the gravest offence is cursing his in-law's dead; another is that Stefania's father was junior to Giovani's father in terms of family relations, so he was not supposed to curse him at all; and the third is that he did not consider the consequences that this confrontation would have upon his daughter's relations with her new family. The elopement was not entirely the cause of all this, but a catalyser for confrontations of rank between men. These confrontations eventually translated into interdictions for women which they ultimately overcame among themselves and into demands that they prove themselves 'capable' (once more).
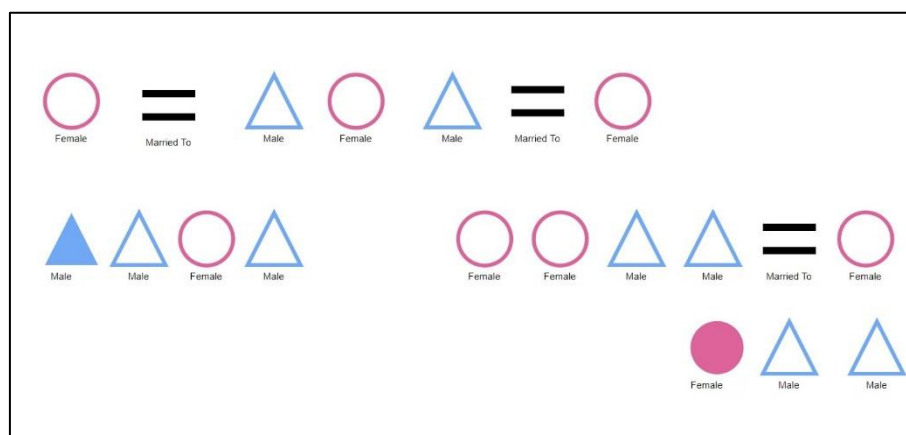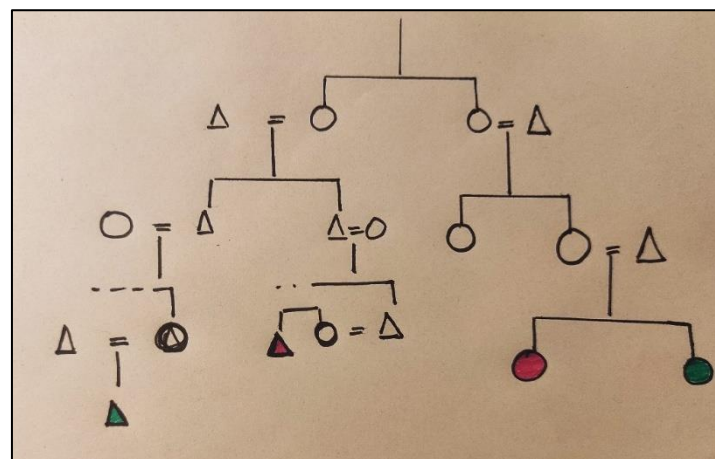


*Figures 6 and 7: Two more examples where alliance and descent overlap.*

## *Men's views on marriage*

Despite the very different ways in which they experience the marriage process, men's perspectives on marriage are remarkably similar to those of women. Early in my fieldwork, I would spend many hours debating the notion of 'arranged marriages' with Octavio, the young man whose betrothal I recounted in the first section. In our chats, I posed him with a query between 'free choice' and 'marriage by arrangement,' which he promptly contested: love does not precede marriage, he said, but is a by-product of a good marriage. He did admire the notion of love, and had been in love himself, albeit with a gaჳi that he was never going to marry, not because she was a gaჳi (several non-Roma women were successfully married into Rom families) but because she had not been a virgin when he met her, and, as he said, it is a matter of pride for a Rom to not go (in marriage) where other men have been before. It would damage their prestige, as if they sold themselves cheaply, Octavio said.

On another occasion, he picked up a book I was reading in my brief solitary moments, *Love Is not Enough*, by cognitive psychologist Aaron Beck. Octavio found it lying around, leafed through it, and later on told me: this man is right, love is not enough for a marriage. This served as a reference to my questions about 'love marriages', and Octavio found Beck a good ally in this. 'Why is love not enough?', I prodded him. 'Because you also need respect,' he answered promptly. Some people might see 'respect' as the by-product of love, but for Octavio the two were opposites: as he explained, if you love your wife, you are too kind to her, you indulge her, and she soon forgets her place and dominates you. Then the marriage is compromised because you spend your life fighting about control. The normal course of things, he said, is that a wife needs to obey, and to get her to do that you need to show an intelligent mixture of love and harshness, lest she becomes used to either of them. If you only love her, she gets all over you; if you're always harsh, she leaves you. To achieve this, men need to possess self-control, so

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that they 'don't go in headfirst' (Rou. *să nu-ți pierzi capul*). Even if they feel like showing their wives some affection, they must refrain from doing so all the time. Very similarly, some other time an elder man explained to me that if a Rom who is imprisoned wants to see his wife, he would never say so, but would ask her to bring the children so he could see them. Of course, he said, they want to see their wives, not their children, but they don't want the wives to get too confident.

Incidentally, this pattern of behavior that Octavio described as self-control is also the way he described that men who pimp their girlfriends behave to keep them in prostitution: they 'mess with their heads' (Rou. *le zăpăcesc*), so that the women no longer know if the man loves them or is mean to them; just when they're about to leave, the man is kind and loving, and when the women get used to the kindness, the man becomes harsh, to remind them who is in charge. I suppose he made this comparison between keeping women in prostitution and keeping them in marriage in order to outrage my gaʒi sensibilities, as he often played such games of 'puzzlement' or 'controlled equivocation' with me. However, at the time I found it rather harsh, and told him so. He laughed, and said something along the lines of, marriage is the one most important thing you do in your life, you certainly don't want to mess it up and keep exchanging partners like the gaʒe, because your whole social standing depends on it. And why would women put up with this, I asked him. Octavio answered, it's because they grew up their whole lives knowing they would be wives, that's the only thing they're supposed to do with their lives, and they see all around them that being a wife is not easy, so they do not expect anything else. Unlike a gaʒi that runs away or calls the police at the first beating, Roma women are resilient and put up with anything, because they know this is their purpose in life. What else are they going to be, if not wives, he asked rhetorically.

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My female interlocutors seemed to agree. Whenever we discussed non-Roma acquaintances or movies, they felt that non-Roma women complained too much for no reason at all, and would retort something like, 'My aunt got caught by the gaʒe *and-o gav* and they beat her up and broke her arm, and even so with a broken arm she had to nurse her infant and cook for her children and husband and clean the house because her husband was very demanding and did not like the house to be messy even though they had eight children.' Why put up with these hardships, I asked myself loudly after such conversations. My interlocutors would just answer, 'this is how it is.' Roma women are plenty aware that non-Roma women have easier lives, but the women I asked said they would not consider marrying a gaʒo just for this reason. Perhaps Octavio was right: marriage is not supposed to be easy. Or perhaps when everything is considered, the hardships of marriage are a reasonable price to pay in exchange for belonging, as opposed to being disattached. Leaving aside the perspective of hardships, it is a woman's role to make relations, through affinity, brick by brick—as Antonio said in his betrothal speech, although his statement was not gendered. In this sense, too, Octavio was right: women *are* brought up to be wives. This is not as reductionist as it may sound at first sight, if we consider that marriage is a whole enterprise in which a few tens of people have stakes. Women do not just get married: they also marry people who are kin, and for that they master the kind of tightrope walking that this process requires. Their movement between families and houses, whether it is agreed upon or not, the resources they bring, and the children they bear all actively contribute to reproduce the *tsiganie*.

# The axiom of pity

The marriage process, as it emerges from these stories, seems to be mostly about people knowing their place and doing their utmost to fill the roles that are expected from them. This is what the Rom of Mahala variously describe as 'respect,' 'Gypsy law,' doing things *romanès*, or being 'real Rom *tsiganiake*.' But there is more than the obligation to respect and obey their husbands (along with their extended families) that moves women to perform these roles, and that is pity. The Rom use the Romanian word for this, *mila*, across a wide variety of contexts. I shall describe a few of these in the next paragraphs.

When I asked one of my friends who had been complaining about how hard it had been for her to go begging in Canada while she was pregnant (and miscarried) why her husband did not join her begging, she smiled gently and said she felt 'pity.' He tried to beg once, she said, but when she saw him with his hand stretched out, so wretched and awkward, her heart ached. I found her choice of words surprising in association to her husband; she had expressed 'pity' before, just like many other people, in order to convey some basic human compassion, or a moral sentiment. But in this context it signified more than that: a sense of care, of wanting to protect him even at the cost of her own wellbeing. To me, this sounded rather maternal. Fenella Cannell writes about the feeling of 'pity' or 'compassion' (*herak*) that a wife starts to feel for her husband in the context of 'learnt love', an approximation for the feelings that appear in 'arranged' marriages in the Philippines (1999: 42). In her account, pity is felt by women after having children, and then it is primarily a way to 'acknowledge a little more connection with their husbands' (*idem*) than previously. In my fieldsite, women often said it was 'pity' that made them enter a marriage with a man, and especially consummate the marriage. For instance, one woman had confessed to me that she could not bring herself to have sex with her fiancée for a few weeks after their engagement, despite sharing his bed; she just didn't feel close

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enough to him. But one evening, seeing him so distressed that their engagement was not being fulfilled, she took 'pity' on him, so she downed a bottle of wine and 'let him do it.' Another woman told me how her present-day husband 'stole' her from her home with the help of his cousins, more than three decades before. He took her to his mother's house and locked himself into a room with her, his cousins waiting outside the door to watch out in case her relatives came looking for her. The man was supposed to deflower her so that the girl's parents would be forced to accept their marriage, something that his cousins kept shouting at him through the door, but in the event he could not bring himself to do it. Seeing him in distress, the woman felt 'pity' towards him, so she willingly let him have sex with her and thus became his wife of thirty plus years.

Conversely, a man is supposed to show 'pity' towards a woman when she is in exceptional circumstances: if she gets into prison, or is severely ill, or after he battered her. Stories of domestic violence told by women rarely focused on the violence itself but on its aftermath: was the man sorry? Did he take care of her? In short: did he show pity? The aftermath of a domestic conflict could be an occasion for the couple to reaffirm their binds, let go of the tension that led to the conflict and almost start over; in reality, this does not work out: men rarely show enough 'pity,' and then women cannot forgive. In daily life, however, pity is the prerogative of women and is what moves them to perform their roles, beyond norms and obligations. It's also what gives them power, or a resemblance thereof.

Anthropology, however, tells us that what holds families together not pity, but amity. Meyer Fortes (1969) famously defined kinship as 'the axiom of amity,' i.e., a system of mutual obligations and trust governed by equity; he distinguished this from the jural domain of strangers which can only be trusted on the basis of contracts. 'Amity,' he explained, 'means consensus in accepting the value of mutual support in maintaining "a code of good conduct" for the realization of each person's "legitimate interests"… Non-amity implies non-

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relationship.' (*op. cit.*:110) And further: 'kinship is binding; it creates inescapable moral claims and obligations' (*op. cit.*: 242), which distinguishes the realm of kinsmen from that of 'others.'

Fortes' insistence on the inherent morality of kinship has been criticised insistently, most notably by Edmund Leach (1961), who maintained throughout his entire oeuvre that kinship was nothing more than 'a way of talking about property and class relations' (cited in Kuper 1986:380). The debate whether kinship is a *sui generis* relation, a thing in itself, or a way of talking about political and irrigation systems, *a la* Leach, was discontinued: the critique of kinship studies by David Schneider (1968) was already well underway. The following decades would witness an ample reconceptualization of kinship as a symbolic system rather than a system of functions and roles that keeps social order in place. This symbolic turn in kinship studies culminated recently with Sahlins' essay (2013b), 'What Kinship Is… and Is Not', famously defining kinship as 'mutuality of being.' Sahlins' collection of 'believe-it-or-not ethnographic examples' (Kuper 2018), selected from areas he had previously called Stone Age Societies and purged of all and any functionalist heresies, does not seek to account for the concrete ways in which kinship matters today to people all over the world. However, as this chapter shows, for the Rom, and probably for other people too, kinship is less a matter of contemplation, and more one of strategic action.

Fortes' explanatory model of how people do things with kinship rests neither on ontological nor on affective arguments. He postulated that the 'substance' of kinship amity is care or trust— 'there is a fiduciary element in kinship,' he insists (*op. cit.*: 249)—which is decidedly distinct from feelings: 'We do not have to love our kinsfolk,' he summarised his argument, 'but we expect to be able to trust them in ways that are not automatically possible with non-kinsfolk' (*idem*). This 'fiduciary element' tells us little about how these claims and obligations are distributed among kinsmen, or what is the logic by which some people make claims, and others

fulfil obligations, or who gets to not fulfil their obligations and get away with it. My proposition is that these questions are elucidated by a closer inspection of the hierarchies that organise kinship relations, and it is these hierarchies that I turn to in the next section.

## Controlling others

Having discussed the power of oratory in the first section, it is now time to examine the ways in which everyday speech evinces hierarchies. As I tried to pick up the Rom's way of talking to each other I noticed a multitude of restrictions which they did not seem to have formulated explicitly, but that were nonetheless couched in their address. The most relevant example is perhaps that of swearing, oaths, and ritual formulas, such as 'I eat your hands/[genitals]/intestines/blood etc.' The frequency of these formulas, added to the fact that they deliberately replace some known words with others, in a relatively random manner, so that only some people in the audience would know what they mean, makes the dialect spoken by the Rom Čor highly illocutionary. This means, first, that context is of essence, as certain words do not mean the same things in different contexts, and second, that in order to address others the speaker needs to know her position (or place, more simply put) relative to them. The same phrase spoken by a younger woman, in a context where she is asking for help can be as an interpellation when said by an elder woman asking for explanations.

Many formulas are gendered, so that only women can say *xap-ke mij* ('I eat your [expletive for female genitals]') to one another; in fact, only women of the same age, who are friends or cousins, exchange this frequent formula, or older women to younger women, and never the other way around. Men can only use this formula towards a female interlocutor if the said

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female is a closely related young girl. Women are freer with the opposite expression, *xap-ke [expletive for male genitals]*, and a mother can use it to address her sons even when they are adult in ways that fathers cannot use the 'female' one to address their daughters. On the face of it, these formulas, much like the most frequent one, *xap-ke vast* ('I eat your hand,' equated in Romanian along the lines of 'I kiss your hand'), conveys the speaker's humility to their interlocutor. When it is used by people in a higher position to those below them, it can work as a temporary suspension of hierarchy, which only works to reinforce it. When a man says *xap-ke vast* to his wife, he conveys respect, but he also reminds her that he is in charge—which is why he can humiliate himself in the first place. When a woman says the same formula to her husband, she also conveys respect, as well as the fact that she knows her place.

I was surprised to learn the content of these formulas, particularly the ones referring to genitals and internal organs, since I knew the Rom to be very squeamish about any topic related to sex, and to berate the gaʒe for being 'vulgar' and for talking freely about intimate topics. At the same time, non-Roma friends were scandalized by the frequent usage of phrases like 'I eat your [genitalia]' that they would hear, for instance, from Roma beggars. These formulas, however, are the very opposite of swearing with reference to genitals: it is almost as if the Rom 'forget' the real-life referent of forbidden words and use them as homonyms: words that may sound the same like the 'vulgar' ones, but mean completely different things. This is an appearance, or one level of semantics; on another level, the referent is not forgotten, given the restrictions that regulate these forms of address, or the fact that the Rom use it to address non-Roma not only in order to convey humility, but also for the shock effect they know these words will have.

Oaths and swearing are an even subtler business, due to the fact that in them taboo topics do not get 'lost in translation:' they are their very vehicle. Oaths are distinguished not only by context and the status of the person making them, but also by whom they concern or on whom

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they are placed. The most frequent forms are first-person oaths, and the most frequent among these is *te bengoav*, which can either be used on its own if it is clear from the context what the oath is about, or even as a conversation filler, or can be followed by a conditional verb. An approximation would be 'may I be bedevilled if I did/do this or that.' It is translated into Romanian as 'may the devil strike me…' Unmarried girls are never in a position to use it—their behavior should not leave anything to be suspected, so they should not need to swear. This also shows that ritual language enacts hierarchies. First-person oaths can extend onto one's children or dead relatives, if the oath is important, but there are many other ways to place an oath, such as by touching raw pork meat, holding a tray above one's head etc. These are modes of persuasion and convincing the interlocutor that one is truthful. The more elaborate the oath, the higher the status of the person making it. Parents can place first-person oaths onto their children ('may I be bedevilled if *you* do this'), and social superiors can similarly direct the behavior of subalterns. This means that the person uttering the oath is in a position to sanction non-compliance.

Second-person oaths are an even stronger imposition into another person's autonomy: a formula like 'may you/your dead be bedevilled if you do something' immediately causes the other person to stop what they were doing. The power of such oaths comes not only from their taboo content, but also from the fact that they are an undisguised demonstration of raw power. They lay bare who is a sovereign person (relatively speaking) and who is not.

These oaths do not 'work' on the gaʒe (although curses might), because the latter do not share the same taboos and fears and cannot be held accountable. Among the Rom swearing falsely can attract the label '*solaxado, -i,*' which means 'sworn' but signifies that the person in question cannot be trusted. And yet, in conversation with non-Roma, the Rom may use oath-like formulas to establish trust or gain benevolence, even though they do not bind the speaker in

the same way they do when uttered in Romani, and it is well known that the non-Roma fail to appreciate them. In a way, they become decorative, mere elements of style meant to remind the interlocutor that they are talking to a Rom. In conversation to me, it was only when Armonia made sure that I understood the meaning of oaths that she started to use them in earnest, and then for minor matters (e.g., when visiting her and trying to help with cooking, she told me it was not necessary; as I insisted, she said '*zău*', 'really, which in Romanian conveys the meaning of 'te bengoav' in Romani).

Even though oaths are strictly an institution of the Rom, they need a gaʒo to be 'untied,' namely a priest. Since the Rom are largely Orthodox (those converted to Evangelical faiths cease making oaths), the priest should not be seen necessarily as a gaʒo as a representative of the sacred realm and hence someone who understands the severity of oaths among the Rom and is willing to help them undo their oaths. In any case, the presence of a non-Roma in such a deeply internal affair as oaths reiterates the idea of the Rom's complementarity with the gaʒe, despite claims of radical otherness and antagonism.

# Conclusion

In his examination of political language, Bloch (1975) showed that formal speech becomes a means to condition the interlocutor's response—in short, a means of coercion. The highly ritualized language of the Rom shows that they do *a lot* with words and that language is a medium of social order as much as marriage or descent are. This is why I analysed these topics together in the same chapter: they are facets of social order and the most prominent ways in which it is reinforced. In that, they are both political (Strathern 1985) in principle; this chapter

has also shown that they are political in practice. Betrothal proceedings, peaking with the discourse of the groom's father and the handing over of brideprice, are teeming with political references, sometimes explicitly, but more often in an implicit manner. None of this process would be possible if actors did not have a very clear map in their mind of who is who, who gets to do what, and whose place it is to speak, dance, or shut up. Consequently, I proposed that elopement is in a sense the counterpoint to these proceedings, as it circumvents them. Rather than allow for negotiation, roleplay, and exchanges, elopements (like third-person oaths, which they can sometimes trigger) lay bare the hierarchy that rituals disguise.

But the process of making relations is not all domination, roles, and obligations: there is also room for initiative, good will, and 'grace' (Pitt-Rivers 2017)—on which more in Chapter 7. This is what I called, with an emic term, 'pity.' In such a rigorously normed and ordered social landscape, pity is doing something more than you are expected to, or doing it not because you have to, but because you want. Much more than a sentiment, it is a vital impulse—being moved to do something—that makes people into much more than actors who fulfill social roles. If they fulfill them, i.e., behave *Romanes*, like proper *Rom tsiganiake*, it is then recognized as their personal merit, and not the merit of the script.

> [W]e respect this Gypsy judgment with its separate laws, whereby a
> sentence and a decision taken among Gypsies is stronger than the
> legal sentence of the police or of the [gaʒe]. It is more legal, meaning
> it is taken into account more.
>
> — Roma judge

The notion that Romani groups conduct themselves by their own code of law has prompted intense speculations among scholars about the nature and contents of this code. For almost a century, the phrase 'Gypsy law' has been something of 'a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma' and one of the most enduring forms of exoticization. The assumption was that, if Gypsies have some code of laws or rules, it must be a very secret one indeed. Early 20th century ethnographies in particular treated the phrase 'Gypsy law' as an inscrutable cabbala and paid far more attention to the values it supposedly espouses (sexual purity, obedience to the elders, respect for the dead etc.), than to how it is practiced, how it contributes to social organisation, and what makes it distinct from the state laws. In what follows, I suggest that 'Gypsy law' should not be taken to mean substantive law, but procedural law, as the values it enshrines are contingent, and are to do with the maintenance of social order rather than with abstract notions of right and wrong. Moreover, I will argue that 'Gypsy law' does not evaluate persons, but relations; it is, therefore, a thoroughly relational, rather than substantive, social process. This claim speaks to the overarching argument of my thesis, namely that virtuous personhood is necessarily socially virtuous, rather than virtuous in an individual and subjective manner.

This chapter offers an ethnography of 'Gypsy law' as a mechanism of maintaining social order, and of its relation to state law, as seen by the Rom of Mahala. First, I discuss what notion of

'law' is implied by the phrase 'Gypsy law' as previously used in the literature and show that what the Rom call 'law' amounts to a set of contingent mechanisms of conflict resolution, social organisation, and distribution of responsibility. I unpack the Rom's notions of virtuous personhood that emerge from their distinction from the non-Roma (gaʒe) and from other Roma groups, by looking at how these distinctions play out in their practice of communal law. These practices range from the 'Gypsy court' (Rom. *judecata țigănească*) to open conflicts or feuds, or 'making trouble' (Rom. *kărel beleaua*). Second, I build on a case-study of conflict resolution to examine why the Rom deem their legal system to be central to their notion of who they are. This enables me to explicate the overlap between law and morality, especially with a view to the moral distinction that the Rom maintain from the surrounding populations and to their aspiration to virtuous personhood. And lastly, the chapter goes on to argue that vernacular justice is not autonomous from, or opposed to state institutions and practices of justice, but are largely shaped in relation to state legal practices. To this end, I explore how the two legal systems are practiced, where they overlap, and where they differ. While research and public opinion alike maintain that the two legal systems are in conflict, I show how their contradictions are resolved in practice and argue that they are complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. I then conclude the chapter by reflecting on the contingent nature of 'Gypsy law' and its associated moralities

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## The scholars' view

Two sets of contributions helped shred the mystery around 'Gypsy law' and bring it closer to jurisprudence than to magic: one was the study of Romani practices of conflict regulation and the other was comparative jurisprudence. The former owes especially to the work of Grönfors

(1986), who researched blood feuds among Finnish Roma.[34] The latter owes to the work of Weyrauch (e.g., Weyrauch and Bell 1993; Weyrauch 2001) who suggests that the legal culture of the varied Romani populations is probably responsible for their cultural survival 'under conditions of often ferocious persecution' (Weyrauch 2001: 2), and dedicates several publications to figure out how it achieved this. Discussing 'Gypsy law' as a case of autonomous or private lawmaking (and thereby elevating it from the status of 'tribal law'), Weyrauch and Bell (1993) note that 'Gypsy law' 'has evolved to insulate Gypsies from the host society, and thus to maintain its own insularity from the host legal system' (Weyrauch and Bell 1993, 340).[35]

However, Weyrauch and Bell dedicate a large part of the article to the description of rules concerning purity and *marime* (impurity) taboos, before moving on to describe the role of eloquence, strategy, oaths, ritual, and audience in Gypsy courts, noting that 'there is no clear demarcation between procedure and substance in Gypsy law' (*op. cit.*: 385). In conclusion, they write,

> The vindication of individuals' rights, as understood in a non-Gypsy context, is not of the utmost significance in a Gypsy *kris* [trial, judgment]. Instead, the reestablishment of peace in the group is the proceeding's prime objective; because all participants share essentially the same social values, the proceedings of the *kris* can easily be accepted by the entirety of the concerned population. Individuals will view themselves as members

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[34] In my approach, I also build on the work of Boehm (1987) on the topic of conflict regulation, specifically through blood feuds among Montenegrin tribes, whose observations, although made over four decades ago among a non-Roma population, are consonant with mine.

[35] A similar argument is made by Scheele (2014) with respect to Berbers in Algeria. She notes that Kabyle village laws are meant to establish and maintain the village as a community 'bound by assumptions of equivalence and reciprocity' (*op.cit.*: 194). Community is not a given, but an achievement, she writes, and legal codes incapsulate this sense of process and the effort to maintain it.

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of a larger group that has been treated in accordance with the law, even if they lose the case. A feeling that justice has prevailed pervades. (*op. cit.*: 390)

While Weyrauch and Bell refer exclusively to courts (*kris*) and forms of communitarian counsel (*divano*), Acton, Caffrey, and Mundy (2001) argue that the *kris* and the blood feud should be considered together, even though the former is more specific to settled groups, and the latter to nomadic ones, because they constitute polarized versions of a common structure and 'alternative ways of expressing and embodying Romaniya [Romani values] in social action and organization' (*op. cit.*: 238). Equating feuds with civil law (whereby individuals are bearers of law, and vengeance is private, rather than public) and tribunals with criminal law (whereby the community as such becomes a fictitious bearer of rights), the authors hypothesize there might be a connection between the evolution of the *kris* and the Gypsies' slavery in the Romanian Principalities, where the avoidance associated with feuding was not possible.

Furthermore, Grönfors (1986) correlates the prominence of blood feuds among Finnish Gypsies with the primacy of the kinship unit as the main political unit in these groups' social organization but he argues that in blood feuds too crimes are treated as offences against the community, not against the individual person. The existence of blood feuds (which rarely entail any bloodshed, however, mostly due to the role of women, who are considered less emotional than men and can therefore temper them) indicates that 'Gypsy law' prioritizes individual responsibility (and freedom, concomitantly). Moreover, Grönfors defines feud as a state or a condition, rather than an act, which can only arise 'between kin groups who have some mutual rights and obligations binding them together in some way in times of peace' (*op. cit.*: 111). This precondition of reciprocity explains why gaʒe can never be called in Gypsy courts, and also why the Rom do not feel that state law, or gaʒe law, is also their own. Grönfors goes on to show that the reason why feuding needs to be understood as a state, or process, is that its

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purpose is not to solve the initial conflict, but to retaliate by a demonstration of power. This is meant not just to save honour, but also to deter further assaults. In other words, the purpose of feuding is to maintain social order and control, by affirming supremacy, or re-establishing a hierarchy that was challenged.

Indeed, among the Rom of Mahala, failure to retaliate for a wrongdoing denotes weakness. What's more, people who could afford to do so might even initiate a conflict pre-emptively, to make sure that their potential opponents did not make an attempt on their honour. This can be read as an attempt at preserving social order, not just personal honour, although the two cannot be readily distinguished. Boehm (1987) too concludes that blood feuding among Montenegrins, with all its associated rules, symbols, and sanctions, should be understood as an effort to maintain the predictability of social behavior on behalf of a people living under permanent siege (*op. cit.*: 245).

In a memoir where she recounts her family's migration to France from Mahala, a Roma author discusses the 'special' judicial system of her community. She writes:

> In parallel, our community has its own 'laws'. Indeed, even though the Rroma do not have a written code of laws as such, they nonetheless have their own rules, traditions, customs that must be respected. (2014:116)[36]

She then goes on to state that 'we only rarely turn to the public justice system' (*idem*) and that the community organises a trial, or a judgment, where the wisest and most respected elders serve as judges—'who are also good orators', she adds (*idem*). The judges go and meet the accused party to discuss the accusations and hear their version of the truth; if the two sides that

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[36] Author and title redacted to preserve the anonymity of Mahala. The book was initially written in French, but the quotes I use are from the Romanian edition (translated from the French by Ana Antonescu). The translation to English is mine.

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are in conflict cannot work out an agreement on their own, which usually entails that the guilty party pays a financial compensation, then a trial takes place. The judgment or trial is public, and paramount in the proceedings are vows: 'when a Rrom swears, you cannot doubt his words' (*op. cit.*: 117). Then the judges deliberate and pronounce their sentence publicly, which is an occasion for them to demonstrate their knowledge and oratory. The guilty party usually needs to pay a fine and to make a public apology. 'It must be said that humiliation is a serious offence among the Rroma' (*idem*), the author explains, and since most misgivings eventually amount to humiliation, the compensations are 'considerable.' The guilty party also pays the judges 'for their wisdom, which served everyone' (*idem*), but often the injured party pays them too, 'to attract their favours' (*op. cit.*: 118). And the conclusion:

> It must be known that to be dragged in front of a Criss [tribunal] is very humiliating and dishonouring for a Rrom. The public sentence is truly felt as a punishment, humiliating and discouraging. (*ib.*).

The communitarian and autonomous dimensions of Gypsy law should not be overstated, however. These attempts to distinguish between legal/formal and extralegal/informal strategies do not reveal much about how the informal was shaped by, and reflected, the formal. This distinction repeats the fallacy of early anthropologists who looked for different meanings and functions of the law in 'status' and in 'contract' societies, or in centralised and 'stateless' societies, respectively, without tracing comparisons in how authority, or the political are constituted. Examining the role of outsiders—whether individual non-Roma or police forces— onto the Gypsies' justice system, Okely (2005) shows that Gypsy law cannot be understood outside of the hegemony of gorgio (non-Roma) law, and this includes the manipulation of gorgio law by Gypsies, with a view to preserving their distinction from them.

As for the communitarian dimension, Gay y Blasco (2011) is rightly critical of assuming that the person is merely an exemplar of Gypsy/Roma distinctiveness. Citing the story of Agata,

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who broke 'Gypsy law' and refused to repent, she talks about 'the metonymic link between the person and the ideal of the group [being] stretched, fought over, and perhaps broken' (p. 459). In a later publication (Gay y Blasco and Hernández 2020), we witness however the full force of *ley gitana* upon the life of the woman who broke it, resulting in the choice between being ostracized or being always placed under surveillance. Since she chooses the former, she must renounce all family ties (including those with her children). The metonymy is damaged beyond repair.

This overview of how Gypsy law works, what purposes it serves, and its impact not only on the maintenance of community values, but also on individual lives, serves to contextualize the data I present in the remainder of this chapter. Unlike in most of the cases from the works summarized above, the Rom of Mahala practice justice both in the form of courts (Rom. *judecata*) and in that of feuds (Rom. *beleaua*). The two are complementary: while some situations demand *beleaua* without further ado, others can be solved in courts, making *beleaua* a permanent threat, but a last resort solution, to be attempted only when courts fail. What needs to be emphasized is that neither of these forms of justice are strictly speaking about justice, as much as they are about preserving honour. Therefore, they are conditioned upon who can make *beleaua* or who can call others in court. The person who initiates either of these processes does not need to be in the right by any conceivable criteria, and sometimes can be blatantly in the wrong; what gives them the right to start and carry out 'trouble' is their position in the social hierarchy relative to their opponent.

Describing Romani jurisprudence is therefore an exercise in equivocation. The trespassing of rules, punishment, justice, and value judgments are frequent topics for discussion, as people closely monitor one another's behavior with a view to virtuous personhood by Romani standards. The frequency with which these topics occur in daily speech, however, does not

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make them in any way precise or immutable—if anything, it makes them even vaguer. When discussing the behaviour of others, the Rom can be heard invoking and agreeing with notions of right and wrong that in the moment appear to be beyond scrutiny; when, days later, the puzzled ethnographer attempts to apply the same principles to the same interlocutors who had only recently stated them so unambiguously, she finds out not only that they had mutated, but also that she is in no position to demand explanations. A closer examination of the phatic function which predominates in the speech of the Rom reveals that rules of right and wrong are less immutable than the relation between the person who utters them, and those who listen. Slights and offences do not occur in relation to an established code, but rather represent violations of hierarchy: it is not universally held that someone cannot talk or behave in a certain way, but it is highly contingent who talks in what way to whom, or whom one 'upsets' with their deeds.

## The judges' view

The same vagueness that wraps Gypsy law as an entity also spreads onto its practitioners. It is not immediately clear to an outsider who can become a judge, and what qualifies one for such a prominent role in the community. Nor do the Rom have very explicit criteria: the universal answer that I received for this query was that the men in question have to be 'respected'. A couple of Roma judges sympathised with my predicament—a gaʒi trying to grasp the subtle notions of right, wrong and justice among the Rom—so they offered me some explanations. I expose these explanations not because they elicit the contents of 'Gypsy law'—if anything, they befuddle it—but because they demonstrate rather eloquently the role of justice-making for Roma politics and sociality.

This is the synthetic description of 'Gypsy judgments' made by one judge:

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Maybe your nephew makes a mistake, or your child, or your brother, so we say thus: we don't go to the police, to jail, if there is something between us or with a neighbour, even with a Romanian, we don't go to court until we make our Gypsy counsel (Ro. *sfatul nostru ţigănesc*). So as to avoid bigger punishments, and all the punishments given by Gypsy judgments throughout history were monetary, paying a fine in cash. So, we thought: we respect this Gypsy judgment with its separate laws, whereby a sentence and a decision taken among Gypsies is stronger than the legal sentence of the police or of Romanians. It is more legal, meaning it is taken into account more. For instance, if you give a suspended sentence, so that he doesn't do it again, he still makes a mistake (Ro. *greşeşte*), thinking he wouldn't get caught. But on the Gypsy side he cannot make a mistake twice, because the monetary sentence comes. And they understood this that whatever happens, we first discuss it in our Gypsy council, and take the elders' advice into account, not the youngsters'. We judge him in our own way, and we are not allowed to make mistakes, only after we think how it is good both for one side, and for the other, so we bring him to make peace with you or not to make the same mistake twice.

A few things stand out from this condensed description: first, the idea that the judgment is in fact a counsel, a piece of advice given by elders, and not the mechanical application of an inflexible standard invested with civilizational value: to each situation its own counsel. Second, the purpose of this counsel is not ideological (the creation of a better/fairer society etc.) but practical: to avoid having the same incident repeated. This pragmatic quality of the judgment emerges clearly from the description: people are bound to make mistakes, and in order to reduce this risk they need to receive a punishment. The punishment, however, should be as practical as the purpose of the sentence is, neither too harsh, nor too lenient, and in any case not symbolic: the culprit should lose some money. Third, the judge mentions that 'Gypsy law' is 'more legal' than state laws and clarifies that by 'legal' he means 'taken into account,' i.e., 'respected,' or more legitimate. This is not because it might embody some mysterious 'separate laws,' but because the judgment itself, as a process, involves the whole community, and no Rom, confronted with the more or less manifest, but always imminent hostility of the

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surrounding non-Roma majorities, can afford to lose their network ties. I shall return later to the notion that the meaning of 'legal' is legitimate or approved by society.

The notion that the judgment is a practical matter was also emphasized by another judge, who narrows down the quality of being a good judge to having had experience with the state legal system and time to reflect on it. In a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner, the judge told me that spending time in prison helped complete his education and ultimately made him and his peers better and famous judges:

> The cleanest judgment is ours in this neighborhood, all Gypsies from all over Romania would recognise our value. We have also been at odds (Ro. *certaţi*) with the law, but the jail time and the sorrows we've been through gave us the possibility to analyse situations, so jail was like a Faculty of Letters. Because there we sat and thought, why did I make this mistake, who was involved in this issue, why did I trust X, why did I copy Y, and so on. And since we had time there, because the sentences were long, we could analyse things in detail, and we came back more experienced. Also having to do with many people who had problems there, we learned something from everyone and in this way, we completed our education.

While this practical and experiential dimension of the judgment is certainly defining, the most striking aspect among these three enumerated above is the idea that the judgment is synonymous to counsel, or advice: not in that it lacks institutions for reinforcement, but in that it is seen as paternalistic (it is emphasized that only elders can be judges) and consensual—a family business, at the end of the day, as opposed to the neutral and 'bigger' punishment imparted by the state system. This familial air can be approximated by Gramsci's notion of 'hegemony,' although it is probably more productive to speak of 'the allocation of responsibility' (Gluckman 1972) or social accountability, since the ultimate reference or beneficiary, and the means of reinforcing justice, is the social group, not the injured party or the judges of the tribunal. This is not to say that 'Gypsy law' is democratic (although judgments

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are public, and various people can voice their opinions), or dedicated to the greater good: social hierarchies are visible in how justice is imparted, and one of the core arguments I make in this chapter is that 'Gypsy law' is in fact the means through which hierarchies are maintained. Inasmuch as any rules of living together exist, they derive from hierarchy ('respect'), and law is the instrument to preserve hierarchy.

Age hierarchies are obvious from the judges' insistence that it is only elders who can become judges; youngsters' advice is explicitly excluded. Hierarchies in status are also clear: judges are supposed to be 'respected,' and to that end they need to have 'accomplished' something in their lives. They must also be good speakers, i.e., have some education or at least some experience in the wider world, and since for the Rom it is important to know how to speak in various situations, oratory amounts to a praised form of cultural capital, as we have seen in the section on betrothal speeches in the previous chapter.

It is no surprise, then, that Roma judges laughed off my question whether women might ever be judges: 'Maybe one day', one of them conceded, indulging my gaʒi expectations, 'but that day has not come yet.' Women can and do participate in judgments, as these are open and both sides are encouraged to bring their relatives for support, and they are even consulted, especially if they are older, since young women are not expected to talk in gatherings of older men and women. The final judgment is delivered by male judges, in the shape of a long, winded soliloquy, that the Rom call 'čači vorba', *true speech*[37]: soliloquies that are meant as cautionary tales, narratives imbued with lessons, vows of truthfulness, and wishes bestowed upon the audience.

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[37] For comparison, Stewart (1989) analyses 'true speech' in the songs of Hungarian Vlach Gypsies, as an imagined alternative to their daily lived realities, emphasizing their egalitarian and communitarian ways of enjoying songs in parties, against Bloch's emphasis on hierarchy in his work on political language (1975).

Another indication that the law is gendered in nature comes the fact that most judgments are concerned with marital issues, mostly separations (which entail elaborate financial negotiations), or failed marital attempts (kidnappings, elopements). A less frequent topic are feuds between individuals (and their families), although these occur as well. The extended case study that I present in the next section in fact deals with such a feud. In general, people try to contain their fights within the family group, as it is a source of 'shame' to be called out in Gypsy court. Marriages, however, cannot be dissolved simply between families, since the stakes are too high to be judged by relatives, who are by definition biased.

If right and wrong are contingent, and subsumed to the maintenance of sociality, what do 'good' and 'bad' even mean anymore? If there is no absolute, canonical meaning of 'right' and 'wrong', how do people navigate moral dilemmas? As we shall see, the main achievement of a judgment is not to make justice—indeed, very few people felt that the judgments they had been part of ever did them justice—but to restore community ties that risk breaking on the occasion of a conflict, when people are expected to take sides.

Returning to the topic of judgment as advice, one of the judges I interviewed was especially adamant that the Gypsy judgment is a venerable institution; while others tried to draw parallels to state law, as if to make it more legitimate, this man was convinced that Gypsy judgments are a different matter altogether, of biblical origin:

> How did it come to be that this Gypsy council should be respected, taken into account? Because it dates back thousands of years. Yes, we chose this Gypsy judgment because it does not originate with us, it originates with Christ, he taught us to give advice or to judge. When Christ was called Teacher, someone came to him who had to pay a tribute to the Caesar and saw the Teacher coming to the temple with his disciples, and asked: if you really are a Teacher, can you give us advice: tell me, whom do I need to pay tribute, to you or to Caesar? And then Christ says: Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's (Matthew 22:21). This is where the

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judgment comes from. If Christ gave us this teaching of judging, of giving advice, let us give it then, but let it be clean. So not even Christ went over this justice that was due. Because to Caesar, because he created workplaces, land plots, and many others, it was decided to give to him, and also give to the God was is due. The same for us: if you cause some trouble and you are guilty, you pay money, this is how much this trouble will cost you, this mess, so that you don't end up in prison or to not do it again, to learn your lesson.

The phrase 'render unto Caesar' is usually cited in debates concerning the separation between church and state, and the obligation of Christians to submit to earthly authorities as well as to God. My interlocutor's intention, I believe, was not so much religious as it was moral: even though state laws need to be respected, they are not to be confused with true morality. Virtue is not equivalent to obeying rule-bound systems, and in fact can be its very opposite:

> The exercise of virtue requires… a capacity to judge and to do the right thing in the right place at the right time. The exercise of such judgment is not a routinizable application of rules… Hence judgment has an indispensable role in the life of virtuous man which it does not and could not have in, for example, the life of the merely law-abiding or rule-abiding man. (MacIntyre 2007: 150, 154)

This can be illustrated by the topic of theft, which is never justified in itself, but can almost always be justified situationally (people have too much, or are gullible, or unable to guard their possessions etc.). As we have seen, this applies not only when stealing from the gaʒe, but also when stealing from other Rom, especially within the family. Virtue accrues from the capacity to discern what rules apply in various situations and act accordingly.

Lastly, the notion of justice as counsel can be explored through the lens of oratory—what White calls 'constitutive rhetoric', describing law as an essentially rhetoric activity (as opposed to a system of rules) with an 'ethical or communal character' or a 'socially constitutive nature' (White 1985: 690). This constructivist view of law as *made*, and not just realised, in practice,

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emphasizes the voices and relations that constitute the legal exercise, rather than the distribution of goods (or principles) that the law purports to effect. Then, just as the law is made as it is exercised, sociality is made (and not just guarded, or preserved) by law. However, despite of White's emphasis on whose voice is heard and in whose name it speaks, his understanding of the law as socially constitutive does not account for the political processes at play: the relations of power, the creation of respect or prestige, the containment of antagonism; nor for the moral notions in reference to which power is exercised. If the law is an exercise in oratory—as my interviews and impressions from the field indicate—then it is an exercise in political oratory: it constitutes the social and governs it at the same time.

## Antonio's trouble

One early Sunday morning, I woke up to my phone ringing insistently. It was Brianna, who told me in a rushed voice to go to their house (across the street from mine), wake up her brother, and pass him the phone. I did, and within seconds he emerged from his room and bounced out the door without saying a single word. His mother and I followed him, barely catching our breath. Less than one kilometre further, close to the city centre, a few riot policemen were stationed, while regular policemen were talking to onlookers. We saw in an ambulance, talking to whomever listened as a nurse was tending to his arm. Further on the pavement was a baseball bat that the policemen had circled with white chalk. Mirabela and Brianna were standing aside, talking animatedly to a couple of relatives who had arrived at the scene before us. They left it to their father to talk to the police: despite being hurt, he was very eloquent.

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When we got a minute to ourselves, the girls told me a rushed, sketchy version what had just happened. With every newcomer, they had to tell the story again and again: they had just left the house together to go to the market, when Antonio saw in his rear mirror a car coming at high speed from behind; he drove towards the side of the road to let the other driver pass, but to his surprise the other car crashed right into them, and out came a man yielding a knife and cursing Antonio. The girls jumped to their father's defence—one of them managed to call the police, while the other was pulling the knife from the attacker's hands. The attacker shouted at them not to call the police, because he was conditionally released from jail—he'd go right back if he got arrested. Meanwhile, he grabbed a bat from his car still trying to hit Antonio, but as soon as he heard the police sirens, he dropped everything and fled. Antonio's car stood severely damaged on the side of the road, its windows smashed, and its left side doors crushed inside.

As soon as more relatives and acquaintances gathered at the scene, it became clear to me that Antonio was telling two different versions of the event for his two audiences: to the Romanians (policemen, mostly) he told he had no idea who had attacked him—lots of youngsters grew up abroad, he said, and he had no way of knowing who all of them were: some young maverick looking for provocations. The Rom knew who the attacker was, and arrangements were already underway for a set of judges to be assembled and go to see the attacker's father, to discuss about how to settle things. The ethnic Romanians who lived nearby and had come out by their gates to watch the scene refused to be interviewed by the policemen who had come to investigate the accident, saying that they had not seen anything and that anyway these were 'their Gypsy matters' (Ro. *treburile lor țigănești*) in which there was no point getting involved. The girls told me that a high-ranking civil servant had just come to the scene—he was a member of the same party as Antonio—and upon seeing that this had been no accident, had asked Antonio reproachfully, 'Why don't you children play in your own neighbourhood?' (Later, Antonio told me with pride that this man himself had come to the scene of the accident to

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inquire into his wellbeing but did not mention his question.) After Antonio got his arm bandaged and finished giving his statement to the police, we left the policemen at the scene of the accident, uselessly trying to get something out from the non-Roma locals, and went to Antonio's house, where people kept coming and going.

Later, I understood from the discussions going on across Antonio's courtyard that the attack occurred because Antonio owed money—some 12 000 EUR—to the father of the man who crashed into his car. The man had started to vociferate across the neighbourhood that he wanted his money back, and some of his relatives in the US had been teasing Antonio's eldest daughter, who was also there, and who called Antonio to report the indignity. Antonio retorted that he had paid his debt in various instalments across time; his creditor, Ionel, said the money Antonio had paid had merely covered the interest rate; the debt to him had remained intact, in his understanding. Antonio was furious and forbade the man's wife to come selling at 'his' market anymore. This went on for about one week, after which Antonio's children suggested he should allow Ionel's wife to make a living and let her resume her commerce at the market. The evening before the incident, Armonia had in fact sent word to the woman that she could resume her commerce, but the word did not reach her in time, Ionel's son took matters into his own hands, and the 'trouble' was made.

At Antonio's house, men gathered outside in the courtyard, the elders seated on chairs, to discuss the matter; the younger men stood grouped together in a corner, listening. One man sent a boy to go buy some refreshments. One by one the men held speeches in grave voices, replete with vows, while the others nodded and commented from the margins, *kadea sî*, 'it's true.' The women were gravitating around the seated men, pouring water and drinks, and whispering among themselves in hushed voices, covering their mouths with their hands. Soon

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enough the envoy of judges arrived on behalf of the attacker's family, to communicate Ionel's good intentions regarding the proceedings.

In parallel with these events, a few non-Roma men also came to discuss the matter with Antonio in private. The scene seemed tense, and I soon learned from Antonio's daughters that these were policemen from nearby precincts, but they were dressed in civil clothes, as they had ostensibly come in private capacity. Their manner of talking with the Roma 'big men' who were gathered around implied a certain familiarity. One of Antonio's brothers-in-law, Rubin, even dropped the subject at hand and proceeded to criticise one of the younger policemen in a convoluted, patronising manner for failing to act when his daughter had been abducted, a few weeks back (an incident I described at length in the previous chapter). He insisted he did not want to take revenge 'the Gypsy way', i.e., to go breaking windows and beating people up, but he also did not want to file a complaint. The policeman seemed hurt by the critique, and replied he heard that Rubin had complained that the police did nothing, but it was not true, he had personally sent a car to be stationed in front of Rubin's house until his daughter was returned by her abductor. Rubin swore on his life he had never criticised the police, but since he was happy his daughter was returned to him it was not the best time to go and file complaints at the police. The policeman described how he grew up in another Gypsy neighbourhood among a different type of Gypsies, who were 'worse', 'beyond comparison'—'You are civilised, we can talk, we can discuss things', he said. Rubin continued to patronise him: 'Perhaps you are not aware of Gypsy laws, they are not written but they are respected, anyway you will learn them in due time. In any case, what we want is cooperation'—'So do we', said the young policeman, eagerly. They shook hands.

After the policemen left, the topic remained whether Antonio should 'make trouble' (*beleaua*) or not. He first went to the market he administers to do the rounds between the stalls so that the

people selling there could see he was alive and well and spread the word. I stayed home with the women, who after the men left, took their places on the chairs and engaged in their own *sfato* (advice, consultation). Armonia, was upset that Antonio did not use his power more effectively: he should have asked at least 1,000 EUR for each stall at the market, she reasoned, let alone that Ionel's wife sold perfumes, which meant she made good money, and she should have given Antonio a good share of that. In 12 years, she calculated, the debt would have been long erased; if anything, Armonia reasoned, Ionel owed them money in fact. The other women nodded in agreement.

The rest of the day was spent talking about possible courses of action, and the one that figured most prominently was making trouble (*facem beleaua*), i.e., a feud. Young men readily produced knives from their boots and bats or crowbars from their cars and fidgeted with them while the elders weighed the options. Violence is always a likely course of action, but what is more notable is how often people prevent it. To avoid losing face, however, they need to find legitimate, considerate reasons why violence would be too costly—not for themselves, but for others. Words like 'attack' or 'crime' were rarely uttered to describe what had happened to Antonio; people preferred words that, rather than assign responsibility, emphasized the consequences of the act, and *belea* was the most frequently used to refer both to the accident, and to the ways of tackling it. Similarly, the verbs gradually became plural, as if referring to an ever-growing body of people: we'll see, we'll talk, we'll do, we'll solve it. The problem was no longer on Antonio's hands alone but quickly became communal: tens of people, young and old, were now ready to support him in whatever way he chose to act.

Physical violence was thus avoided by being performed symbolically. On other occasions when violence could have ensued, people rationalised the fact that they did not resort to violence by mentioning some details that prevented them, along the lines of: 'if it hadn't been for this

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person who was there, and whom I respected,' or 'if my cousin hadn't stopped me, I would've…' But the deeds of violence that the situation requires are still necessary to mention, in a phatic manner, which amounts to a way of consuming them. This maintains the social structure by upholding principles while at the same time preventing relations from tearing apart. The group's values are acknowledged but putting them into practice would be too costly; the middle ground is then to consummate them in declarations and performances.

In parallel with men's negotiations about whether and how to make 'the trouble', the women started preparing a barbecue, at Armonia's initiative, as she wanted to show her joy that her husband and daughters emerged unharmed from this attack. The scene was disorderly, older women shouting demands or suggestions at younger ones, the younger arguing amongst themselves. The men remained in front of the courtyard, debating loudly. I was frustrated to be relegated to women's quarters, helping around with the preparations. To my surprise, whenever I found a pretext to get somewhere near the men's table, they did not seem to be discussing anything substantial. I only heard them narrating the incident again and reiterating their commitment to set things right—but how that would happen exactly was still vague. The judges kept coming and going, transmitting messages back and forth between the two households, Antonio formulated his 'conditions,' after consultations with the judges and a few other men behind closed doors, and later on found that Ionel had agreed to his conditions.

Through these negotiations mediated by judges, the drive to retaliate soon gave way to more complex approaches, that eventually resulted in a party, a celebration of being together. The men's raised voices continued to sound until late in the night, the initial commotion replaced with laughing from their table in front of the house, and by the time some of them had left and the women could join in, they were telling stories from their turbulent youth, when they felt strong and would 'beat people up': just because they had numerous brothers and cousins, a big

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*neamo*, they would pick on anyone just to prove who they were. Now that the spectre of actual violence had been dispelled, representations and narratives of violence could be consummated, and found entertaining. The young men listened and smiled.

In a sense, much like the men narrating their 'crazy' deeds from youth, the young man who attacked Antonio also wanted to prove who he was, but he failed. What the men were now disentangling in their speeches and in the judges' proceedings with was not the attacker's intention but its consequence and especially its failure. Judges' envoys travelled back and forth between the house of Antonio and that of Ionel, and since Ionel was willing to settle, Antonio and his daughters went to the police precinct for declarations the second day and said point blank that they had no idea who the attacker was. The investigation was stalled in the absence of a suspect, and if one would somehow be produced, it could not be held against Antonio to have turned him in. The attacker's previous sentence turned out to be an extra bargaining chip in the whole affair, since Ionel was now particularly interested that his son should not end up arrested.

In the evening, after everyone had left and we had finished cleaning after the feast, Antonio sat me down and asked me what I would have done if I had been in the car with him when the attack happened. Before I had time to open my mouth, Antonio he answered in my stead: 'You would have frozen.' I nodded hesitantly. 'You see,' he went on, 'I don't want to denigrate Romanians [gaʒe], but us Gypsies, we have a more agile, more enterprising spirit, we do this, we give that, we help, we don't just sit around watching.' It was not my place to contradict him, so I nodded again, frustrated that he would launch into this discourse after I had spent the entire day running around and serving his guests. Later, when Brianna thanked me for my help, I told her about her father's remarks, expecting she would sense that I felt offended. She didn't. Instead, she agreed wholeheartedly and said how annoyed she had been when all the

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Romanians on the street just sat looking on; Gypsies are different, she said, they 'jump' (Rou. *sar*) for one another. I pointed out that Romanians preferred not to get involved because, just like they did with the police investigation, the Rom would instrumentalize their involvement according to their own needs, and people would find themselves between warring factions to whom they had no connection. To my mind, I explained, the Romanians' reluctance to get involved or 'jump' into such a situation was not due to an innate lack of solidarity, but to experience that involvement in 'Gypsy matters' does not work as they imagine it would or should. Mirabela was visibly annoyed with my defence of gaʒe passivity, as I was with her bias, but we both let it go. It was very likely that our different inclinations to act, or 'jump,' were shaped by different notions of what society is, and what rules should govern it: for her, involvement was a matter of family (in that we agreed) and commonality (in that we did not); its consequences would also play out within a world of relatives and shared moralities. For the non-Roma witnesses, however, none of this was true: what they witnessed was a fight of strangers, with unknown rules and unpredictable stakes. One can understand why they might think it was better to stay out of it.

Within a few days of the attempt on his life, Antonio clarified that the attacker's father, Ionel, would pay him 20,000 EUR for the trouble and for damaging his car (and so that Antonio would not disclose his son's identity to the police). Ionel obliged: he came to Antonio's house and knelt before him as he handed him the money. When Antonio told me this scene, he said he had insisted that kneeling was not necessary—it was a habit from the past, he said; now we're modern people. Armonia retorted that it was very good that Ionel kneeled: he should know 'who the boss is'. For Armonia, the hierarchy that resulted after the conflict resolution was harder and clearer than ever, without any ambiguities; for Antonio, more 'enlightened' as he said he was, hierarchy was often implicit, subtle—no less compelling than it was for his wife, just less visible, and more internalised: hegemonic, or exercised with the apparent consent

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of its subject, rather than through violence. Ionel's wife was then allowed to resume her commercial activities at the market, and the incident did not receive any further mention. The police case was probably closed after a while. Antonio's car lay wrecked in a neighbouring garden until it was sold for parts. There was a heated debate in the family as to what car Antonio would buy with the 20,000 EURO that Ionel had paid, but before long it turned out Antonio had 'eaten' it (Rom. *xalea*).

## Autonomy, commonality, hierarchy

This incident amply illustrates that 'Gypsy law', while guided by different values than those espoused by state courts, does not develop autonomously of state law, or of the people who exercise it. The prefect and the policemen who came to consult with Antonio allegedly in their private capacities, all contributed to the exclusion of his incident from the normal proceedings of state law (inasmuch as those exist), and to rendering it as a 'Gypsy issue', to be tackled privately by 'the community'. It cannot be emphasized enough that the shape 'Gypsy law' takes, and the way justice is made, are contingent upon how state institutions function. Rather than an arcane set of ancestral rules or a 'survival' from times bygone, 'Gypsy law' is a perfectly contemporary phenomenon, which proliferates at the margins of state-sanctioned legal systems—not in the absence of the latter, but in their interstices: in the empty spots they fail to fill, for lack of capacity or interest.

As already noted, the Rom often repeated to me that it would be 'a great shame' and completely un-Romanes if they went to 'the Romanian police' to sort out their complaints before they sought out solutions among themselves. Indeed, they do not see state institutions as neutral, or

catering for all citizens, who are purportedly equal in the eyes of the law, but as gaʒe inventions meant to serve their own interests; needless to say, the interests of the Rom and those of the gaʒe do not always coincide. It is then no sacrilege to treat institutions so instrumentally, especially when they allow themselves to be treated thus. I was not able to conduct interviews with policemen because this would have raised suspicions among my interlocutors, but from the interactions I saw during the consultations in Antonio's courtyard, or from the prefect's reaction, it seems quite clear that the consensus among policemen at least (if not also judges) is to let Gypsies sort out their own mess: as long as the community heads are pacified and 'consulted', they will regulate their subjects.

An incident that occurred elsewhere long after my fieldwork speaks to this absence of the state wherein autonomous law-making proliferates. In the summer of 2020, a series of street confrontations between two extended Roma families took place in the north-east of the country over a couple's separation. the town was declared a 'special area for public safety' for a few weeks and guarded by increased effectives of policemen and gendarmes. The town's mayor offered that this conflict was the result of 'Gypsy laws' that permitted arranged marriages between children. (It later turned out that the couple who separated had not been 'promised' to each other since childhood.) On the one hand, this was an occasion for the public to conclude that Gypsies follow their own laws regarding child marriage and conflict resolution; on the other hand, the conflict exposed the tensions between state law and 'Gypsy law' when one of the protagonists of the conflict revealed that it was the prosecutors who encouraged him to make peace with his opponents in a 'Gypsy judgment' and not resort to state institutions. So the man had to urge the authorities to 'do their job': 'The more we make peace the Gypsy way, the more clans are being formed. When Gypsies see that Romanian justice does not do anything to them, they get more brazen and mean… Enough with Gypsy judgments. There are laws in

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this country and there are people who can apply the law… We live here like in the Wild West because the authorities won't do their job.'

Antonio's 'trouble' also supports the idea formulated before, that *judecata* and *beleaua* are not substantially different notions, and can easily complement or even replace one another, depending on how the situation is handled, and whether 'respect' is enacted. *Pace* Acton et al (2001), the choice between engaging in a feud or calling a court is not determined by a group's identity or by its propensities to 'autonomy.' Rather, as we have seen from the case of Antonio, it is a tactical choice shaped by local hierarchies, odds of winning the case, and ease of access to state institutions. Had Antonio been a less important man, or someone who was not held in high regard by his community (and who did not have good personal relations to judges), he might have well resorted to a blood feud, like his attacker did instead of calling a tribunal. Access to justice and the way in which this is achieved is very much incumbent upon power relations more than on any other 'innate' or group-specific traits, and this makes 'Gypsy law' a thoroughly situational process, that not only conserves, but also succumbs to hierarchy.

# Coda

Gaʒe law is not the only referent against which the Rom define 'Gypsy law.' More than once, people insisted that what sets them apart from *Tismănari*, or assimilated Roma, is the fact that the latter 'have no law': neither Romanian law, nor Gypsy law. They are 'lawless people' (Rou. *oameni fără nicio lege*). Unlike them, Rom and to some extent the gaʒe too could be described as people of the law, who at least submit to a set of rules, whether right or wrong; at the very least, they are predictable, as Boehm (1987) would put it. This idea of a guiding set of values,

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however, is difficult to corroborate with just how situational those values are. What moral order does 'Gypsy law' invoke? And what community does it create and regulate?

A couple of years after this 'trouble,' on a different occasion, Antonio wrote on Facebook about one of his conflicts: the director of a cultural institution in town, a non-Roma man, threatened him and swore at him. Antonio made the point that, while he could have summoned his cousins to punish the culprit, he refrained from handling things 'the Gypsy way,' for which his community is known and feared. Instead, he deferred his opponent to the authorities. He wrote:

> I resorted to court because I demand respect by acting in the right way on a social problem. I understood that, since I am a Romanian citizen of Roma ethnicity, my chance to find an honourable place in society is given by education. Every day I advise those whom I represent to take care how they behave, to be civilised, to respect the laws of the Romanian state and to bring their children to school. … I don't engage in public fights; I don't beg for respect. I try to be myself, and this is why I only seek justice in the legal way. Regardless of what the verdict will be, I will never resort to verbal or physical violence. I want to be dignified before everyone, with full trust in what it means to respect one another. When I happen to be in the wrong, I regret and I try to make it right. But above all, I love people, I respect them, and I demand respect. And I trust the law.

One day later, he reaffirmed his trust in state justice:

> Justice will give its verdict, and we are not hajduks … I launch an appeal, that we leave aside verbal violence and of any other nature. Years ago, I broke with everything that means revenge and I went to Law School. Please, understand that I want respect, by respecting the law and advising everyone to do so. … Dear sir, we are not hajduks. It would have been easy for me to do justice for myself, but I would have then stooped to your level. … Today even in [Mahala] we find the rule of law of the Romanian state.

The statement ends with an invitation for 'anyone who wants' to join a discussion about laws, justice and education organised at the local headquarters of the Roma party.

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One year after these statements, I was surprised to find Antonio had made the local headlines because, in a public place, in plain sight of uncountable witnesses, he had punched a fellow Rom. According to the statements they both made in the media, the incident happened in the courtyard of the county hospital, where Antonio was waiting together with tens of his relatives in solidarity with a kinsman who had been hospitalized. The man he punched had just visited his wife who had given birth. The two men exchanged a few words, then quickly arrived at politics: Antonio's victim was from a different *neamo* (Antonio would comment he was not a true Rom, especially because he reported the incident to the police) and said that he no longer supported the Roma Party under Antonio's leadership. Without much debate, Antonio went up to him and landed him a punch. He later explained for the media that punching his opponent was a way to save him from the fury of his 'interloper' relatives, who would not have left such an offence unpunished. In a sense, he explained, his act of violence was preemptive: it was meant to protect the man from something far worse.

There seems to be a wide gap between Antonio's handling of the incident related before, with the cultural director, and the one with his political opponent. They do not appeal to the same system of rules, values, or laws; the only common element is the attempt to rise above the situation, even if that requires appealing to contradictory prescriptions. Their morality is contingent. If I confronted Antonio with these inconsistencies, he would reply that I did not understand what being a Rom is all about. As I argue in the next chapter, and as these vignettes amply show, for the Rom of Mahala, true virtue is to know when to be a Rom, and when not to be, or when to act *romanes* and when to act *gaʒikanes*, and try to be on the winning side of whatever situation you might find yourself in.

In the case of 'Gypsy law,' justice is not something that pre-exists judgments, or something to be deployed according to established principles. Instead, it is something born in a gathering of

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people, meant to act in that given situation morally as well as politically. In 'Gypsy law', justice is achieved not when a principle is applied, but when the community is pacified, violence is played out, and broken sociality is remade. The fact that the ultimate reference as well as the contents of the law is thoroughly societal, rather than 'moral' in any substantial or normative sense of the word, indicates that for the Rom, as for others (Piliavsky and Sbriccoli 2016), legalism and its associated moralities are not abstract attributes of the virtuous self or the means to attain one, but amount to modes of being and acting in the world.

# PART III: DIALECTICS

'She is like the merchants' ships;
She bringeth her food from afar.'

Proverbs 31:14 King James Version

## Introduction

The Rom I have worked with derive their ethnonym, 'Čor,' from their occupation, which is stealing or otherwise 'outsmarting' others. They maintain that this skill goes beyond mere procurement and is in fact central to their identity. In this chapter, I analyse the practices that the Rom Čor describe as 'outsmarting' beyond the explanations of economic necessity and methodological moralism that typically frame them. I argue that outsmarting is driven by a relational logic, whereby the Rom seek not only to fend for themselves but also to demonstrate their 'capability' and to pursue good lives. Moving beyond the criminalization of theft and its interpretation as an antisocial practice, I show that, by enacting the stigma projected onto them by wider society, outsmarting enables the Rom Čor to assert their belonging to the social body by virtue of what they call their 'talent' to outsmart others. Second, I analyse outsmarting as an occupation, a type of labor as it were, that the Rom Čor designate as 'going to the village' (Rom. *Ʒan and-o gav*), and the imaginaries of mobility, 'capability,' 'risk,' and 'luck' that qualify this practice. The chapter proposes a dialectical understanding of outsmarting as a

practice that not only challenges but also reproduces the existing inequalities between the Rom and the surrounding majorities.

In terms of theory, the chapter disputes the definition of theft as 'negative reciprocity' that Sahlins (2017 [1972]) institutionalized long ago and, by way of setting the 'outsmarting' occupation of the Rom Čor in a comparative framing, revisits classical ethnographies of theft by Campbell (1964), Pitt-Rivers (1954), and Herzfeld (1988). As such, it advances a theoretical discussion of social reproduction and virtue at the nexus of economic necessity and social belonging. In this, I build on previous ethnographies of Romani populations showing that Romanies respond to social exclusion by creating their own moral communities, which they imagine to be superior to the majority population who encroaches upon their existence (Gay y Blasco 1999; Okely 1983; Stewart 1997; Sutherland 1975).

Perhaps the most compelling demonstration of this argument remains Stewart's (1997) now classical ethnography of Hungarian Vlax Roma and of their attempts to subvert, ignore, or otherwise resist the socialist state's attempts to proletarianize them. Stewart argued that the Rom maintained their distinction by economic hustling, cultivating notions of bodily purity, and by cultivating egalitarian relations within their own society (as opposed to the hierarchical ones that the non-Roma imposed upon them and onto one another). Gay y Blasco (1999) also shows that Gitanos elaborate their difference from *payos* in moral terms, and that this difference is thoroughly contingent, as it amounts to a 'way of being' (*manera de ser*) that needs to be permanently performed (demonstrated). Other authors, e.g., Williams (2003) and Tauber (2008), have offered more transcendental explanations of the distinction that various Roma populations cultivate from the world around them, having to do with the ways of remembering and respecting the dead.

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Whether they are concrete or transcendental, what all these different manners of formulating *moral* difference from non-Roma have in common is, first, that they need to be seen (and certified) by people who understand them, very much like a competence or a skill and, second, as Gay y Blasco (1999) emphasizes, that it is individuals, not groups, that perform them. These can all be read as variations on the theme of virtue that various Roma populations have elaborated as adaptive responses to the outside world, and therefore it is not surprising that the Rom in a southern Romanian town in the 2010s view and practice virtue differently from how Stewart's Rom imagined it in late socialist Hungary. The argument that I lay out in this chapter is that this difference is not substantial but relational and contingent because the Rom's notion of virtue is always a function of their relations to broader society.

Most broadly, the chapter seeks to contribute to the 'anthropology of the good' laid out by Robbins (2013), which complements rather than displaces more structural analyses of power, suffering, inequality, or violence. There are ample illustrations that all of these things occur in the lives of the Rom, but my intention is to show that they do not only suffer the brunt of these relations but also turn them around. It might seem counterintuitive that the response to stigmatization would be to embody the stigma and to enact it, and yet my chapter shows that, through their seemingly 'antisocial' occupation, the Rom have created a way of asserting their belonging to the social body and a space of freedom for themselves, despite their grim prospects to do so.

# Moralities of theft

## *Stealing to be different*

In the Introduction, Antonio presented outsmarting as a substantive descriptor of who the Rom are. His wife Armonia gave a similar explanation: 'we [Gypsies] live out of trickery, we outsmart people.' Another woman once told me that she had made money by stealing her entire life, 'because this is [her] race, [she] was born like this.' These accounts appear to present trickery or outsmarting like an innate predisposition—a type of essentialism that comes dangerously close to that professed by anti-gypsyism. However, the Rom's invocation of 'race' and 'genes' as an explanation of theft do not portray stealing as an innate predisposition, but as a skill that was perfected throughout generations.

Outsmarting is also an adaptation to the Rom's material conditions as shaped by the gaʒe, as per Antonio's account that stealing became a mode of procurement because the Rom did not have lands or other possessions that would enable them to make a living. Similarly, when discussing itinerancy in Chapter 3, one of my interlocutors emphasized that the Rom forewent the seasonal employment that the socialist state expected them to take up not in order to roam around 'for fun' but to 'do their own work,' i.e., to get by in the ways that they knew. But the Rom did not draw a direct causal relation between the absence of other modes of getting by and stealing, and nor shall I. Most of my interlocutors who elaborated on the history of theft correlated it not only with the Rom's material deprivations, but also with their subversive rapport with state authority in particular and with gaʒe more broadly. This indicates the social and historical embeddedness of 'theft,' the implications of which extend far beyond its legal definition as the appropriation of someone else's property, and bring up issues of social reproduction, material as well as symbolic.

To start with the latter, Zatta and Piasere (1990) argue that the question 'why the Roma do not hold stealing a dishonour' cannot be answered without taking into account the 'dichotomy' between the Rom and gaʒe. The question in fact is somewhat misguided, the authors remark, because the Roma *do* acknowledge that stealing, while perhaps not dishonourable, given that their notions of honor may diverge from those of the non-Roma, is nonetheless 'wrong.' The authors unpack the paradox that 'to continue being Roma, the Roma must live scattered among the Gaĝe: this is the struggle that engages each Rom on a daily basis' (*op. cit*: 165). Zatta and Piasere emphasize the symbolic dimension of this antagonism rather than its structural and material dimensions, showing that the Rom's system of representation tends to invert the value sign of elements imported from the gaʒe world. Their relation to wealth in particular needs to be discontinuous, unlike that of the gaʒe, who so carefully preserve their earnings and savings, lest money divides and stratifies the Rom society in the same way it preordains the gaʒe: 'A preoccupation with work and money, so characteristic of the Gaĝe, is considered [by the Rom] a form of moral degeneration, an illness to be feared in the same way as alcohol or drug addiction' (*op. cit*: 166). This goes to explain why prestige is ensured not by accumulating money, but by spending it. In this logic, 'the role of theft… is not that of accumulating wealth, but of distinguishing Roma from Gaĝe' (*op. cit*: 167), as the counterpoint to (professed) gaʒe virtues of honesty and industriousness. Stealing is not only a means for the Rom to reassert their distinction from gaʒe and 'a litmus test of who is Rom and who is not' (*op. cit*: 169), but also 'a form of submerged revenge' for the gaʒe's attempts to assimilate, persecute, or dispossess the Rom.

For other authors, too, the notion of deceit appears to be firmly rooted in a sense of relational morality, which tactically and contextually distinguishes between the Rom and the gaʒe. This is discussed, for instance, by Okely with reference to the 'Calling' performed by Traveller-

Gypsy women (1983), i.e., the practice of obtaining goods or money from Gorgios[38] instead of buying them: 'The ability to get by with minimum cash expenditure is highly valued and seen as part of a Travellers' identity,' as she notes (*op. cit*: 64). A parallel analysis is provided by Tauber (2008) with a view to Sinti women's begging and selling activities, which she relates to the central tenet of Sinti identity, namely respect for the dead, much like in the case of the Manuš studied by Williams (2003). Most ethnographies of Roma in fact discuss these groups' economic strategies and social reproduction as functions of the various ideologies of 'Gypsy distinction' and as relational practices whose ultimate referent is the world of the gaʒe, whose moralities the Rom turn around before they make them their own.

*Stealing to relate*

Beyond the literature on Roma, theft is discussed in similarly antagonistic terms, most famously by Sahlins (2017 [1972]), as 'self-interested seizure, appropriation by chicanery or force requited only by an equal and opposite effort on the principle of lex talionis, "negative reciprocity" as Gouldner phrases it,' which he sees as 'negative in a moral sense' (*op. cit*: 173). Certainly, when compared to what Sahlins calls 'generalized reciprocity,' theft does appear as 'the unsociable extreme:' in the author's words, 'it is a long way from a suckling child to a Plains Indians' horse-raid' (*op. cit*: 177). By Sahlins' own admission, however, the comparison is too broad (and too disembedded, I would add) to be tenable; it can only be operationalized by bringing in the variable called 'degree of sociability' (*op. cit*: 193) and asking what impels reciprocity in some contexts and not in others. Sahlins' answer is kinship. Some 40 years later,

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[38] The word is used by British Travellers in a similar way to how 'gaʒo, -e' is used by Romanian (and other) Rom. When citing other authors, I use their own transliterations of 'gaʒo, -e', like in the example above from Zatta and Piasere.

Sahlins (2013) turned the question around and asked what kinship is; unsurprisingly, he concluded it was 'mutuality of being,' which is just a more ontologically informed way of phrasing 'generalized reciprocity.' As some of the critics of Sahlins' essay on kinship pointed out (e.g., Kuper [2018]), and as I discussed at length in Chapter 4, this ontologically-oriented view of kinship and the mutuality it becomes synonymous is flat: it leaves out the power relations that, for lack of a better notion, we can approximate as 'the dark side of kinship:' obligations, inequalities, exploitation, etc., that used to be what the study of kinship was really all about (for an overview, see Peletz [1995]).

Returning to negative reciprocity and its correlation with the lowest degree of sociability, Sahlins makes two claims that several ethnographies of theft, as well as my own data, dispute: one is that '"Negative reciprocity" is the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity' and the other is that it constitutes 'the most impersonal sort of exchange' (Sahlins 2017: 177). The following two sections bring these claims into question.

- *Is stealing impersonal?*

Campbell (1964) explains the thefts of Sarakatsani shepherds in the context of their hostility towards Zagori villagers, showing that theft is not only (or even primarily) a means of procurement, but is intended to demonstrate the moral contempt of the Sarakatsani to the villagers and their criticism of the fact that regulations concerning land and grazing are shaped by the latter, according to their own interests:

> 'Since [the shepherds'] rights are entrenched by the decrees passed in the village council and because the executive administration of village affairs is necessarily in the hands of villagers who are in residence all the year, the villagers are almost always in a legally secure position in differences with Sarakatsani. It follows that the villager

appeals to the law which happens to favour his interests, the Sarakatsanos more often turns to self-help and violence. Justice is not a question of the impartial administration of the existing law, although this, too, may be lacking in the view of the Sarakatsani. If the law does not allow a man to protect the interests and dignity of his family, then it does not represent justice.' (p. 215).

Elsewhere, Campbell (1992) discusses the endemic brigandage among young Greek mountain-dwellers and shepherds during the Ottoman administration as memorialized by klephtic ballads in parallel with the Homeric warriors of the *Iliad*. Campbell shows that the antagonism between brigands (Gr. *klephts*) and their local victims did not stem from a clash of values; indeed, the two groups shared 'the same social values predicated on notions of honor, pride, and shame; and the same social institutions which protected the interests and reputation of the family' (*op. cit*: 129). The social role of brigands, much like that of ancient heroes, was to defend the physical and moral limits of the community. Campbell delves into the mechanics of honour, showing that this guardianship entails risk, but also that the self-interest of any given household is delimited by its honour.

Similarly, Herzfeld (1988) discusses theft among Cretan shepherds as a demonstration of personal worth incumbent upon any young man when coming of age, and also as a way to deter other potential thieves: 'With the kind of people we've got around here,' one of his interlocutors says, 'if you're going to keep sheep, other people have got to be afraid that you'll take [animals from them]. Covillagers as well as outsiders, let's say!' (*op. cit*: 167). Moreover, boys see stealing as part of their procurement duties: 'Only a weakling would eat his own animals when there were others to be had.' (*op. cit*: 170) Despite these underpinning logics of stealing, parents never actively encourage their teenage sons to take up stealing, in some cases they even profess threats, but they may well admire the deed retrospectively. Boys are initiated into stealing by slightly older peers, and accounts of this process illustrate the rich context around stealing: the avoidance of inexperienced youngsters, the errors, and the oath-taking all show the importance

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of knowledge and especially of being able to exhibit it convincingly (*op. cit*: 171). Acquiring the art of stealing, along with that of shepherding, is a manifestation of a man's autonomy as someone to be reckoned with (174). To this end, aggression must be more sustained, and preferably directed against a reputed opponent, who will then go on to become an ally and a friend (*sindekni*), at the end of an elaborate process of raids, counterraids, and mediation. This is what Glendiots call 'stealing to make friends' (*op. cit*: 175), i.e., entering 'the morality of reciprocal theft' (*op. cit*: 183) by demonstrating skill and abiding by the cannons of theft. The argument of the chapter is that raiding, with its imperatives of style and timing, should be understood an exercise in the poetics of manhood rather than an economic act of procurement.

Pitt-Rivers (1954) discusses banditry in the Spanish Sierra as a token of the villagers' distrust of state justice and cultivation of morality. In parallel, he discusses the case of beggars, who tend to be *gitanos* or gypsies [*sic*], and who, unlike bandits, are emphatically outside the moral community, being seen as *sin verguenza*, shameless. This appears to confirm Sahlins' postulate mentioned above, that 'negative exchange' is impersonal, but, similar to the examples mentioned above, Pitt-Rivers also shows that there is nothing impersonal about banditry and begging: both acts are part of a moral setting that the village community understands all too well. Pitt-Rivers shows that 'gypsies' mobilize the very shame that they themselves appear to lack to obtain products from farmers, who fear their accusations of meanness and gossip: 'Thanks to their own shamelessness they are able to apply pressure to the shame of others, for shame is a self-regarding sentiment, and the fact that the victim of such manoeuvres feels no moral compunction to give way does not prevent him from reacting in order to save his pride.' (*op. cit*: 185) And to summarize the difference between these two figures, the beggar and the bandit: 'In the first instance the bandit is the ally of the pueblo as long as he remains within the pale. In the second, the shameless one is free to molest honest people as long as he remains within the law. When either puts himself outside the law and also outside the moral community

then the pueblo makes common cause with the Civil Guard. At this point law and morality join forces' (*idem*).

- *Getting something out of nothing*

Stewart (1997) discusses 'Gypsy work' (*Romani butji)* in the very opening of his monograph: this an occupational realm defined by its opposition to gaźe work, and consists of scavenging, hustling, commerce, and anything that, as Stewart puts it, amounts to 'getting something out of nothing.' Although he notes that through these activities the Rom did in fact multiply their meagre factory wages, Stewart argues that the Rom's insistence on cunning and trickery was mostly rhetorical, as it helped them maintain a fantasy of 'reaping without sowing' or 'living lightly and easily in an uninterrupted free lunch' (*op. cit*: 26), in contrast with the 'heavy' labor at the factory. This cliché whereby the Rom 'represented themselves as living like parasites on gaźo backs' (*op. cit*: 25) was in stark contrast to the reality of deprivation and marginalization in which they actually lived but helped both the Rom and the non-Roma obscure their co-dependence and therefore maintain it.

The same argument of obscuring co-dependence in order to maintain civil relations is put forth by Engebrigtsen (2007), who shows that, even though the Roma in her fieldsite often have a better economic situation than their non-Roma neighbors, they maintain an appearance of being the beneficiaries of the latter, just to preserve the previous order and not bring antagonism in the open. Peasants and Gypsies both obscure their interdependence, even though village life relies on their exchanges of favours, services, and products. In another text, Engebrigtsen (2008) discusses the social construction of theft across a series of cases—the weak stealing from the powerful, the victors from the defeated—and argues that the non-Roma Romanian peasants that she worked with did not see stealing from employers or from public property as a problem. The only thefts they took issue with were if their Roma co-villagers stole from them.

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Gypsies, then, view stealing from non-Roma in the same way in which non-Roma view stealing from the state: as morally justified, albeit illegal.

Engebrigtsen's narrative of morally legitimate theft resonates with accounts of 'righteous' theft during socialism, particularly 'stealing from the collective' (e.g., Cucu 2019, Gagyi 2018, Verdery 1996), which was not morally condemned, but rather celebrated, even though the members of the collective (whether agricultural or industrial) were well aware that stealing was in itself both a sin and a crime. And before socialism, stealing was inbuilt into the local tradition of banditry, or hajduks, which is intimately related to regional identity, along with its overtones of autarchy, as I discussed in Chapter 2. The by now classic studies of Hobsbawm (1981) and Scott (1985) assimilate banditry to peasant rebellion against capital accumulation and against power, respectively. None of them discusses the fantasy of 'reaping without sowing,' but instead emphasize the moral and political dimensions of banditry. I suggest that the Rom's practices of theft and deceit should be reckoned with in similar terms.

## *Stealing to belong*

In contrast to Scott's emphasis on peasant resistance to power structures, Hobsbawm shows that bandits were not inherently antiauthoritarian, and occasionally served as personal militias for members of the local landed gentry. Nor were they 'children of nature' (*op. cit*: 85) but instead were closely connected to markets and the wider economic milieu. In Blok's apt summary of Hobsbawm's argument, 'social bandits are thus reformers rather than revolutionaries' (1972: 494), a symptom of the advent of capitalism that dislocated large numbers of the peasantry. Blok is critical, however, of Hobsbawm's emphasis on banditry as embodiment of class conflict, showing that in most known cases, bandits turned against

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peasants and repressed their mobilization. According to Blok, banditry is less about social protest than Hobsbawm would have us believe, and more about the liaisons that bandits cultivate with powerholders (*op. cit*: 502).

This sense of deep embeddedness, if not complicity, of seemingly anti-social elements with figures of power transpires most clearly from Piliavsky's (2020) historically informed ethnography of Kanjars, a north Indian caste of thieves declared untouchable and yet employed by royals to supress peasant revolts and by fellow villagers to guard their crops, as neatly documented in Chapters 2 and 3 of her book. 'Kanjars are the ultimate go-betweens,' she writes: 'mystified and excluded from the ranks of ordinary caste life, they paradoxically end up in the innermost crevices of respectable people's lives' (*op. cit*: 67). Piliavsky shows that the Kanjar exchange their services for patronage or social incorporation, which is why they cultivate, rather than shun, hierarchy. Like the Rom, they want to be part of the body politic, even if the only means at their disposal is to be socially incorporated. As the book's Prologue shows, the alternative, i.e., *not* being incorporated, is certainly not better: because the Kanjar are seen by villagers as 'nobody's people,' they become the target of pogroms.

This discussion serves to recast the Rom's self-identification through theft and deceit in a different light from previous accounts, which were mainly centred on resistance to the state or on a keen differentiation from the non-Roma. Instead, I suggest that the Rom's thefts serve, somewhat counterintuitively, to challenge the gaʒe's belief that the place of the Rom is outside society. The Rom Čor are doing this by enacting the very antagonism that the gaʒe profess. As we learned from Herzfeld's account of Cretan *klephtos*, stealing is a way of poking holes in your opponents' self-sufficiency and of demonstrating your capability to them. Sociality can only emerge from this mutual acknowledgement of worth. Along the lines of Herzfeld's chapter title which I cited here, *Stealing to befriend*, the Rom of Mahala are 'stealing to belong.'

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*A predatory world*

As with the Rom described by Zatta and Piasere (1990), the Rom of Mahala are also well aware that stealing is morally wrong. For this reason, they often describe themselves as 'sinners' in the eyes of God and hope that God might forgive them eventually, knowing the circumstances of their transgressions. These circumstances boil down to women's obligation to provide for their families, and before having families, to prove themselves as 'capable' in order to even have a chance at getting married. The Rom are accountable to God and to one another, but not to the gaʒe, because there are no moral contracts to bind them to the latter—on the contrary, there are numerous fault lines, as the Rom see them.

While they have to live up to the standards of their own society, in order to ensure their place in it, and to acknowledge that they had to break God's commandments, there is nothing in the Rom's relation to the gaʒe that might engender a similar sense of accountability. Indeed, the Rom often wonder rhetorically 'What have the gaʒe ever do for us?' to signal the absence of any moral obligation whatsoever. It could be objected that in a fair, egalitarian society, nobody would have to do anything for others in order to ensure common rules for living, but the Rom's position in non-Roma society is rarely one of equality. Being structurally subordinated to the non-Roma, their expectation is to be 'helped' or otherwise to enter a relation of mutual obligations, as I explain in the final chapter.

The suspension of moral obligations towards the gaʒe is not strictly speaking a function of othering, but a consequence of the fact that relations with them are rarely egalitarian: someone usually ends up on top, and it's best to be aware of that from the outset. More than othering, what enables stealing from the gaʒe is the assumption that the relation with them is amoral from the outset, and its only likely outcome is an unequal one; like with any zero-sum game, one can only try to be on the winning side. The other issue with the gaʒe is not only that the

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Rom live in their world and navigate their rules in their daily life, or that they are absent-minded and careless with their belongings; it is also that in reality they often settle. Most of the cases when the thieves are caught end amicably: the thief returns the prey, perhaps offers a bit more on top to be left alone, and no arrests take place. In other cases, there is also a beating that the victims administer the perpetrator, which the Rom see as justified, because they practice it too when someone endangers what is theirs. By the same token, even imprisonment is seen as inherent to their occupation.

Another justification of stealing from the gaʒe is also that these are seen as hapless and unable to guard their own goods. This idea contradicts the view of gaʒe avarice mentioned before but remains in line with the Rom's view of gaʒe world as a 'natural world' of abundance (Zatta and Piasere 1990). Or, as one of my interlocutors put it, watching the gaʒe dispose of resources is like watching water go down a drain—there's so much waste that you feel no remorse if you stretch out your hand to get some for yourself. This view of the gaʒe world as a world existing 'out there', where things can simply be 'found', suggest a notion of circulation of people and things that shapes the Rom's cosmology. This is, however, as much metaphysical as it is pragmatic: the Rom are well aware that the gaʒe themselves often get their possessions in random or illicit ways: whenever we drove through the city at night, which was our favourite pastime, my Rom interlocutors would knowledgeably point at bars and luxury cars and inform me to whose local politician's son or lover they belonged, or which businessman involved in some lucrative deal with the state owned them.

The fact that the gaʒe as a whole are not judged worthy of moral obligations does not mean that the Rom do not feel a sense of obligation to individual victims. Their stories of theft routinely contain details about how when stealing from an old person, the thieves left some money behind, or how someone was initially rude to them, and therefore became fair game.

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Supposedly such details conveying some sort of justification or moral balance were emphasized because I was myself a non-Roma, but I would interpret them in the vein of 'noblesse oblige,' i.e., those possessed of a 'talent' to steal should use it responsibly.

Stealing from the gaʒe relies then on a relational morality, which is determined circumstantially, not in the least based on personal responsibility and capability. But deceit cannot be reduced only to stealing, and in any case, it is not the only relation that the Rom have with the gaʒe. Stealing or begging as such are rather exceptional events; most people certainly don't practice them every day, although they do talk about them frequently. Most interactions and exchanges I witnessed between the Rom and the gaʒe were perfectly equitable and often amicable, and took the form of marketplace exchanges, which was the more respectable counterpoint of deceit. One man even admitted that his wife, who went every day to her stall in the second-hand market and never made any spectacular gains, over the years made far more money than he did by stealing. Antonio also criticised stealing as inefficient: whatever money is made needs to be spent on lawyers and prison visits at some point. My suggestion is, then, that the emphasis the Rom place on deceit or trickery is meant to downplay other, more contingent, and less spectacular, or power-ridden, forms of exchange and interdependence.

*Stealing from the Rom*

It should be mentioned, however, that the Rom do not only steal from the gaʒe, but also from one another, although they profess otherwise. One woman explicitly told me she would never steal from fellow Gypsies, 'Because it would feel like I would be stealing from myself.'[39] And

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[39] Very similarly, Herzfeld notes that 'When a Glendiot steals from a covillager, he is approaching the equivalent of incest. Such an act, especially if the victim is a kinsman, is regarded as "pollution."' (Herzfeld 1988: 184).

when the house of an elderly Roma woman was broken into, her relatives were upset that other Rom would do such a thing—they reasoned that it would have been impossible for the burglars to be anything but Rom, since only locals could know how rich the woman was, and anyway the gaʒe would not dare to break into a Gypsy house.

Other authors also surmise that 'the Roma… consider theft among themselves as non-existent – all Roma should share – or as immoral' (Engebrigtsen 2008: 132). However, thefts do occur inside the community and even inside households. Their justification is that the thief and his or her victims have become strangers to one another, i.e., they no longer uphold 'the fiduciary element' that Fortes (1969) saw as the basis for his definition of kinship as the 'axiom of amity.' Such thefts were often given moral justifications in terms of a breach of some moral contract—such as, 'my parents never gave me anything, so it's up to me to take things from them.' In the first three months that I spent in Antonio's household, his youngest son stole his mother's jewellery so insistently, sending her on a wild goose chase each time to find and buy back her missing valuables all across the town's pawn houses, that she eventually dug up some of her gold and bought him the car that he so strongly felt he was entitled to.

What makes theft inside the neighbourhood or the household different from deceiving the gaʒe is the fact that that people have the means to hold each other accountable or to retaliate. As Herzfeld points out in the case of Cretan shepherds, 'raiding is regarded as morally acceptable only among active shepherds, since only they possess the means to make it a truly reciprocal activity. Farmers, for example, are viciously attacked if they steal animals, on the grounds that they do not own flock animals that their victims can steal in return' (1988: 198). In the case of the Rom's stealing inside the *tsiganie*, the issue is not reciprocity as such, but the fact that thefts become part of a broader system of social order and obligations and cannot escape unpunished, one way or another.

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One needs a solid justification to steal from another Rom. Inside the Mahala, stealing and outsmarting can occur either as a punishment for the breach of obligations, or in the manner of a joking relationship between people (women, mostly) who are very close, e.g., by younger women who want to demonstrate their skills in front of elder women by stealing from them something insignificant and exposing themselves soon after the theft. In this latter case, it is not meant as an offence; in all other cases, the offence is undeniable, but it does not always attract retaliation. Instead, people are made to reflect on what obligations they might have broken in order to prompt their relatives to steal from them. And, of course, social superiors do not need to steal, since they are entitled to the property of others (daughters-in-law, wives, daughters) and all they have to do is take it.

# Imaginaries of theft

### Ʒan and-o gav*: Being on the move*

The Rom use the phrase 'going to the village' (Rom. *Ʒan and-o gav*) to describe their work. (Another phrase, 'to go en route,' Rou. *mă duc pe traseu*, is also used.) *Ʒan and-o gav* is likely a phrase that stayed with the Rom since their more itinerant times when it meant precisely what it says: going into villages to obtain money or goods from the non-Roma. To my knowledge, while other Roma may use the phrase in connection to begging or looking for work, only the Rom Čor use it to mean stealing. To be precise, 'Ʒan and-o gav' does not signify a single activity, but rather an occupational domain—the very act of procurement, rather than its specific modalities. The Rom use separate words to distinguish between begging, '*manglimos*',

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and stealing, '*čorel*,' but most often they only use 'Ʒan and-o gav' to refer to either of these activities, without further details.

This phrase also generated the adjective '[romni] gaveski,' meaning 'Roma woman who goes to the village,' i.e., a knowledgeable, cunning woman who is aware of how money works and how to hide it so that it cannot be found by others. (Ideally, in the ground.) For instance, when the old woman's money safe was stolen from her house, other women commented that the damage could not have been too big: after all, she was a 'Romni gaveski' so probably she kept her money buried. 'We're not gaƷe to keep our money in safes,' one of them said. 'What's wrong with [keeping it in] the ground?'

The topic of stealing was very much present in people's daily conversations. Without naming it as such, they nonetheless discuss stealing similarly to how other people talk about their jobs. They would talk about things they 'found' 'and-o gav,' about the adrenaline of the job, about the foods and drinks they had on a particular trip abroad. Once in a lively gathering of women, one participant recounted all the types of drinks she and her mates had tried while she was 'and-o gav' in Italy, and another one contributed with drinks she had 'and-o gav' in Spain, while a third one recounted that she always liked to drink energizing drinks when she went 'and-o gav,' to the point that her hands started shaking and she was wary that her colleagues might think she was afraid to do her part in the break-in.

People casually translated the phrase 'Ʒan and-o gav' for me into Romanian as 'going to work,' not in order to hide their occupation (which I was already familiar with) but because for them this was the best approximation in another language of outsmarting as a purposeful activity that procured them their livelihoods. Indeed, they saw it as their work, and did not waste time on further linguistic nuances. 'If you don't work, you don't have [anything],' I heard many well-known *gaveski* women say. 'You have to work for everything in life. If I had the right to exit

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the country, I'd go abroad and work or steal or do something,' my host Armonia often said, signalling that to be purposefully busy trumped other considerations about the grey limits between various modes of informality.

While it is not precise in terms of location and modality, 'and-o gav' simply means to be on the move, which in its turn means being on the lookout for ways to make money. This connection between movement and livelihoods signals that standing still is ruinous. For the Rom, it is mobility that signals wellbeing, in opposition to the more static peasant imaginaries of welfare (Stahl 1980). When several women gathered and talked about what they brought from their exploits, my host, who was not allowed to leave the country at the time, as part of the conditions for her recent release from prison, said that her heart ached when hearing how others brought stuff home while she sat around doing nothing. 'I don't like sitting around,' she said, 'It makes me sick; it gives me nerves.' I pointed out that she did not lack for anything, so it was not necessary for her to go stealing anymore. But needs were beside the point: she just felt ashamed that other women joked with her that she was now 'a pensioner' and she felt that she was losing her mind sitting at home. 'People need to go out of the house, do something, bring something, and have a program,' she told me. Not making any money of her own put her in a situation of 'humiliation,' as she defined it, even though her accumulated wealth was allegedly formidable: 'Let's say, if my mother's gold falls on your head,' her youngest son once told me, 'You would drop dead. That's how much gold she has.'

*Risk, capability, luck*

Going *and-o gav* is not readily distinguishable from other types of petty work available to Roma women. When we were selling at the local second-hand market, one of my friends asked

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me: 'How is this different from begging? We still have to beseech people and talk to them nicely so that they buy something from us, even if they are rude to us.' She said she found begging less humiliating than being a waitress or a saleswoman, because she, much like her cousins, felt that the ultimate humiliation was to be bossed around by gaʒe for a meagre salary. Whether one has to put up with 'risk,' as in the case of stealing, or with the 'humiliation' of begging, what matters in the end is whether it paid off, which can hardly be said for the low-skilled and low-paying jobs that Roma could access, given their lack of formal education and the employers' reluctance to hire them.

Recalling the quote above, where one woman said she had 'risked [her] life and [her] freedom' to make money, because this is [her] race, [she] was born like this,' I would now like to dwell on the notions that the Rom associate with stealing, namely 'risk,' 'capable,' and 'luck.' *Risk* is of course inherent to theft, not only because stealing can and often does result in punishment (whether private beatings, encounters with aggressive dogs, or arrest), but also because of its essentially antagonistic nature. The Rom do not expect the gaʒe to tolerate burglaries any more than they do themselves, and they defend property just as keenly as the next person. The fact that risk is inherent to stealing shows that for the Rom, outsmarting is not grounded in an ideology of redistribution or entitlement, as it was discussed in the case of state socialism, when collectivized peasants and disillusioned workers performed minor thefts from 'communal property' by way of criticising the regime. Literature on socialism and postsocialism amply documents modes of 'getting by' (Kideckel 2008) and coping with deregulation (Hann 2002, Mandel and Humphrey 2002) as modes of adaptation to rapidly shifting economic (and moral) circumstances. This helps contextualize the Rom's outsmarting practices in a political context where state law and the morality it embodies are seen as particular to a dominant group, and therefore as hegemonic, rather than shared, consensual values.

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For the Rom stealing is a high-stakes, prestigious activity. The bigger the risk, the more 'capable' the one who confronts it. This brings me to the second keyword of outsmarting, which is *capability*. It was said of me, for instance, that I was not 'capable' enough to join my Rom acquaintances 'and-o gav,' because I always insisted on respecting all the traffic rules; this may be laudable in itself, they conceded, but is entirely counterproductive when one is on the run from the law. Capability is contingent upon the circumstances in which it is demonstrated. An accurate equivalent of what the Rom term 'capability' is the Greek '*metis*', *Μῆτις*, as displayed by Odysseus in his exploits during the Trojan War—a certain propensity for cunningness and adaptability—or the notion of *virtu* in Machiavelli's *Principe*, defined as using a circumstance to one's advantage. For the Rom too, virtue cannot be extricated from the circumstances in which it is manifested; in other words, being 'capable' means quite literally making virtue out of necessity.

The third word, 'luck' (Rom. *baxt*), does not have quite the same sense in Romani of 'chance' or something external to the individual that befalls her from above, as its English equivalent. *Baxt* is requires 'capability' to be instrumented and used properly. The cognate adjective, *baxtalo,-i*, is usually translated as 'happy,' which is also imprecise, because being *baxtalo* is not an emotion, but a state that has been acquired through action. Olivera (2012) approximated it as 'blessed', which is indeed closer to the way I have heard it used in Mahala, but in light of the discussion above, I would suggest that the adjective *baxtalo, -i* actually means something like 'accomplished.'[40] People who are lucky become famed and are sought after; if they are unmarried women, elder women with unmarried sons look into getting them as daughters-in-

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[40] Olivera emphasizes that, while Roma are not unique in praising *baxt/baht*, they turned this concept into an ethics proper (2012:294). He also insists that, unlike the European sense of the word 'luck,' *baxt/baht* is not external to the individual, but intrinsic to personhood and to the quality of being a Rom. In his book on Romani religiosity, Bănică (2019) compares the Romani notion of *baxt* to its equivalent in Zoroastrianism, as a divine gift that thoroughly suffuses one's existence (*op. cit.*: 304-6).

law. The absence of luck is deplored and causes one to be avoided, for fear that it might be contagious; incapability is simply ridiculed. And taking no risks whatsoever is simply a very *gaʒikanes* thing to do.

The broader message here is that outsmarting is an exercise in adaptability and adequacy, a highly situational skill; I have never heard the Rom discuss particular rules or insights of stealing—as Antonio told me, the most gifted thieves are not themselves aware of how exactly they manage to steal. It is not by some arcane skills, but by a heightened sense of adaptation to the interlocutor, to the situation, and to the goal. This is further substantiated by another episode recounted by my host, Armonia, by way of criticising her husband, who failed to steal even when the opportunity to do so presented itself to him without any efforts. The two of them were sitting down in the city centre and saw a woman pass them by who dropped her wallet close to where they sat. Armonia, clad in her long skirt, was just preparing to sit on top of the wallet, cover it with her skirt, and appropriate it, when her husband grabbed the wallet and started running after the woman. Armonia was dumbfounded, and so was the woman who did not know that she had lost her wallet: 'You see', Armonia reasoned, 'She saw [Antonio] with his Gypsy woman, and knew she had to be on guard'. (Unlike women, Rom men don't sport any outfits by which they can be recognised.) Antonio reassured the woman and returned her the wallet; the woman was so shocked that she barely thanked him. Mutual expectations about Gypsies and gaʒe made the seemingly moral act of returning a lost wallet awkward in the end. To Armonia's mind, this was proof that to tackle things 'the Rom way' would have been the right thing to do. The broader implication of the story is that it makes no sense to behave like a gaʒo when the gaʒo take you for a Gypsy. This calls for a capacity to be permanently alert to circumstances, discern, and to adapt to them. Briefly put, for the Rom, virtue does not result from transcending circumstances, but from harnessing them.

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# The gender of theft

Even though the capacity for 'outsmarting' is a prerequisite of all the Rom Čor, regardless of gender and age, I have mentioned that stealing and begging are mostly done by women, as an enactment of their 'capability' and of their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters, while men are responsible with managing the wealth produced by women. This prompts an examination of the relation between women's *gav* activities, or handlings among gaʒe more broadly, and ritual uncleanness. Okely (1983) sees this relation as a paradox 'embedded in the Gypsy woman's role:'

> 'Within her own society she is hedged in by restrictions, expected to be subservient to her husband and cautious with other men. Yet nearly every day she is expected to go out to 'enemy' territory, knock on doors of unknown people, and establish contact with new customers, some of whom will be men. Success in obtaining money or goods will depend on her ability to be outgoing and persistent, and her readiness to take the initiative. She must be aggressive—quite the opposite to some of the behaviour required of her in the camp… Given the Gypsy women's frequent contact with outsiders, complete control over their activities can only be effected by supernatural beliefs, and ones fully internalised by the women.' (Okely 1983b:204–6)

This gendered division of labor has prompted Stewart (1997) and others to conclude that Roma women are seen as ritually unclean because of their frequent dealings with the gaʒe. According to my observations, however, Roma men transaction with the non-Roma just as often as women do, albeit from a more egalitarian position than women, who are the ultimate 'other' for the non-Roma and are more often subject to verbal and physical abuse. I surmise that the causality is in fact reversed from how Stewart frames it: it is not that women become unclean because they go stealing, but that they go stealing because they have the power to handle unclean and unholy matters. Okely similarly states that 'women are in some contexts more successful at

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Calling than men would be' (1983: 204), suggesting that the gendered division of labor is made primarily on the basis of pragmatic rather than symbolic grounds. In a previous chapter, I reiterated my hosts' injunction that I should take care of my belongings lest a *woman* comes in and steals them. That was because nobody, neither Rom, nor gaʒe, would be able to search women's hidden parts, in the proximity of which (or, as Antonio put it, *inside* which) they keep the stolen goods. A lawyer who represented some Roma women caught stealing in a village told me how puzzled the policemen who caught them were when they stripped the women naked and could not find the prey, so they had to let them go.

Because of the morally vague status of stealing, women's activities brings them dangerously close to the supernatural, and throughout the *gav* stories that I heard, there was usually a metaphysical side to outsmarting. I already showed above that Antonio drew a connection between stealing as a predisposition and witchcraft as its culmination, as both rely on the capacity to play with people's minds and ultimately to alter reality. It is not coincidental then that both are also bordering on the abnormal.

There are of course dreams, symbols, and superstitions connected to stealing, but beyond these, it is remarkable how many stories about going *and-o gav* had an element of transcendence. Virtually all *gaveski* women have a story about how they met the devil; some became dumb, others greyed on the spot, others caught word that someone in their family had died while they were out stealing. I quote one such story at length:

> The women were going *ando gav*, and they sat down to sleep somewhere: the men in the car, the women outside the car, out of respect. And one of the women went into the forest to do her thing, and before she did it, she ran into a man who asked her for a cigarette and a lighter, and she gave him, but she realised that he was *neujo*, unclean, so she didn't say a word, and neither did he, and after he smoked, he went away. When the women woke up to go further, they couldn't find this woman, so they went to look

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for her. One of the elder women found a policeman and asked him to help them search for the woman, but the policeman asked what they were doing there, he was suspicious, and he asked for their identity papers and told them to come to the police precinct in a few hours to get the papers back, and he left. A man from the group found the woman who had been missing, she was sleeping so deep that he couldn't wake her up, so he carried her on his arms to the car. Then they all got in the car to leave, and as they were leaving, they saw their papers thrown in the middle of the street, and when the woman woke up and told them what that man looked like, the elder woman realised he looked just like the policeman she had talked to, but she didn't tell them anymore, so not to scare them, and that woman never talked about it again.

The story is rather straightforward: stealing is a liminal activity, that brings one in the dangerous vicinity of evil spirits. It is not surprising that these spirits take the form of a policeman, but the story shows that they are far more unsettling that running into the police. The encounter appears to be a reminder that the real danger and the true judgment are not those posed by the gaʒe, however irked they may be at the time, but by something far superior to them. The real 'capability,' then, is to navigate this encounter, not the one with angry gaʒe or policemen. But this is between the Rom and another realm.

# Conclusion

This thesis started with Antonio's assertion that outsmarting, although 'shameful,' is the unique 'talent' that his *neamo*, the Rom Čor, have perfected for generations. By comparing it to witchcraft, Antonio essentially described outsmarting as a form of hyperbolic agency through which the Rom attempt to alter reality and overcome it. Despite widespread explanations of theft as driven by poverty, the Rom made it clear that their motivation to steal is not primarily economic but political: it is a way to subvert both their inequality from the gaʒe and the state's

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attempt to assimilate them. Many of the Rom Čor who had been incorporated into the working-class during socialism revealed that their employment was discontinued by frequent imprisonments caused by their incessant stealing; beyond the meagre material benefits that they might have derived from stealing mechanical components of machinery, the gain was that they could thus prove that they remained 'Gypsies' even after the state enslaved, deported, sedentarized, and proletarianized them (all within less than a century).

The topic of preserving Romani distinction as a form of resistance to the encompassment of states and non-Roma majorities looms large across the field of Romani Studies, and in conversing with this body of literature I compared the Rom's theft to the instances of banditry famously analysed by Scott (1985), Hobsbawm (1981), and Blok (1975). However, I found that, while outsmarting may be seen as a form of indirect critique of power, the notions of 'resistance' or 'class conflict' miss the point because the purpose of 'outsmarting' is not to dispel inequalities altogether but to change the marginal place that the Rom are allocated in them by default. In this sense, outsmarting enables them to overcome their marginal status and to prove themselves as 'capable' social actors.

Further, I re-examined the definition of theft formulated by Sahlins (2017 [1974]) as 'negative reciprocity' and 'making something out of nothing' in light of my data on outsmarting and showed that the case of Rom Čor speaks to the findings put forth by other ethnographies of theft e.g., Campbell's (1964) work with Sarakatsani shepherds, Pitt-Rivers' (1954) work with Andalusian bandits and Gypsies, and Herzfeld's (1984) work with Cretan shepherds. While stealing does entail the absence of obligations towards the victims of theft, the Rom are well aware that the gaʒe are not strangers to stealing themselves; moreover, the monopoly that the gaʒe exercise over all societal resources and their unwillingness to distribute them, along with their haplessness in guarding their own goods, turns them into plausible victims. With this, I

showed that stealing is a thoroughly relational practice whereby the Rom, by taking 'risks' and demonstrating 'capability,' attempt to retrieve the dignity that the gaʒe persistently deny them.

Where does outsmarting take us then in relation to virtue? The Rom Čor are far from unique in defining themselves as a moral community through their aspiration to embody what they consider to be virtuous behavior; indeed, most people do. What is particular to them, and to other marginalized populations, is that this aspiration is hindered or altogether stalled by structural factors such as racialization and social exclusion. This chapter has shown that, for the Rom Čor, virtue accrues not from transcending these hurdles but from confronting and harnessing them, indeed by enacting them on occasion. Granted, investing outsmarting activities that are otherwise humiliating or risky with an appearance of agency may just be one deliberate way of looking at these practices beyond their blatant inconveniences. Since the Rom are often reduced to begging and theft, they portray outsmarting as an agentive occupation— not so much a matter of pure choice, as classical liberal theory would have it, but as close to a choice as you can come under various structural limitations; a purposeful and efficient activity, the ultimate interpretation of which is reclaimed by the Rom from the gaʒe, in an attempt to verbally and temporarily reverse the hierarchies that encroach them. While it is true that this does little to challenge the structural marginality that defines Romani livelihoods, one needs to ask first why it is that the Rom Čor think that it takes a special 'talent' to make it in the world.

# CHAPTER 7: AT THE FEET OF OTHERS

'The gaЗe humiliate you, they make you feel like the
last person on earth.'
— Brianna

In Chapter 1 I mentioned that at the time when I moved into Antonio and Armonia's household, they were consumed by a fight. Armonia had had just about enough of Antonio's 'politics.' Antonio joked that his wife, being 'primitive,' qualified all his numerous activities outside the household indiscriminately as 'politics,' whether he campaigned till late at night across Roma neighborhoods before elections, reorganised village branches of the Roma Party whose county leader he was, or merely went to work every morning. But in fact, Antonio himself would be hard-pressed to draw a firm line between his political activities *sensu stricto* and his other jobs, public engagements, and private pursuits. Antonio would insist that 'his politics' were all about 'helping' people and earning the 'respect' of the gaЗe (non-Roma). His wife, however, maintained that he kept avidly pursuing activities separate from, and even at odds with, the interests of their household, and he no longer 'took care' of his own family; therefore, she concluded, politics had made Antonio a selfish, irresponsible man, who was always 'at the feet' of the gaЗe—the very opposite of what he claimed to be: a benefactor and an equal to the gaЗe.

It is this relationship between morality, care, social hierarchies, and politics, articulated in different ways by Armonia and by Antonio, along with their contradictory evaluations and definitions of 'politics,' that I would like to sound out in this final chapter. I trace these notions along three nested scales of sociality that I have introduced in previous chapters: inside the family, through Armonia's criticism of Antonio's conduct inside and outside the household; in Antonio's ambivalent relation with the cosmopolitan Romani civil society; and in his relation to non-Roma party politics. No hard lines can be drawn between the three realms, since Antonio

functions as a political broker between the interests of the Rom and those of non-Roma politics, while being held accountable by his wife and children for how he fulfils both his familial obligations towards them, and his role as an exemplary (or token) 'Gypsy man' among gaʒe.

We have seen, in chapters 2 and 6 that most local institutions, including the police and media, prefer to deal with Roma communities through the mediation of representatives like Antonio, whom they label as 'community leaders.' For his own group of Rom, Antonio is not so much a leader as a mediator, or what Kaminski (1987) calls an 'external leader:' a man who is not necessarily a leader inside his group, but whom his fellow Rom entrust to mediate their relation with the gaʒe; it is the latter who invest him with the status of a 'leader.' In fact, there is no single leader in Mahala, and this is not because the Rom tsiganiaki are egalitarian, but because these two functions—relations with non-Roma and internal prestige—do not have to coincide. Indeed, they rarely do. It is no longer clear whether the Rom sought to appoint a mediator between themselves and the gaʒe, or the gaʒe created this function as they insisted on talking to 'the leader;' what is clear is that, by Antonio's own account that I have mentioned in the Introduction, the mediator was always someone who was able to 'sweettalk' the gaʒe, mostly by manipulating their cliches about Gypsies. It was only after socialism, with the rise of democratic politics, that this position came to entail access to resources and could be approximated as 'brokerage' in the sense put forth by James (2011), who defines brokers as figures of moral uncertainty—partly heroes, partly hustlers. This ambivalence is similar to the one that enshrouds the Urapmin Big Men described by Robbins (2016), due to the fact that their solutions to the contradictions between moral ideals and social practice often imply forays into the boundaries of morality. Antonio's brokerage only marginally mediates the others' access to financial resources, since the Rom in his core constituency do no rely on state provisioning to survive. Instead, his status inside his group is regulated by his kin relations to 'valuable' families (Rou. *de valoare*) who are known both for their wealth and for their prompt

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retaliation in case of insults. Thus, his monopoly as 'Roma leader' is symbolic: he determines what state institutions know about the Rom of Mahala and mediates the Rom's access to certain state services that institutions might otherwise be more reluctant to provide, and the Rom would hesitate to demand.

While Critical Romani Studies and other approaches inspired by social justice tend to focus exclusively on structural marginalization and racialization, and risk overlooking how these are concretely experienced and tackled by one population or another, ethnographers, conversely tend to focus on one locality at a time and usually approach 'politics' as an afterthought to kinship, law, or social organization (exceptions include (Engebrigtsen 2007; Pulay 2014; and Berta 2019). These two realms of politics, that of the Romani movement and formal politics on the one hand, and that of kinship norms and hierarchies, on the other hand, rarely speak to each another. This chapter, and my thesis on the whole, point towards the analytical potential of such a conversation.

In this chapter we return to Antonio, who finds himself in a constant negotiation between his family obligations and the world of gaʒe politics. I explore this liminality through the contradictions deriving from the Rom's structural position in the broader non-Roma society and their own moral and political notions that they employ to live with 'others,' be they gaʒe or fellow Roma. This middle ground is shaped by the vernacular moralities of help, pity, and care, placing these notions on a continuum between the prescriptions of kinship and the realm of 'grace', i.e., 'something over and above what is due, economically, legally, or morally' (Pitt-Rivers 2011 [1992]: 88).

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# Conflicts of interests

On a cold winter evening, a few weeks after his party had won the parliamentary elections, Antonio took me on a ride in his car to have a chat undisturbed by the people at home. The Social-Democrats were trying to pass a set of controversial laws that de-criminalized certain acts of corruption and offered amnesty for a range of crimes that closely mirrored those for which prominent party members were being investigated. I was glued to my phone for news updates but could not decline an outing with Antonio. As he started the car, he initiated our conversation by telling me that he was a sympathizer of the governing party (that much I knew, but our 'conversations' were typically exercises in oratory, not merely exchanges of information). Not even a sympathizer, he clarified, but a friend. What mattered most to him was that his political patron had helped him personally with several requests: his current job as a market inspector or paving the main streets in Mahala and making public toilets available for local events, such as funerals. His loyalty to her was not political, but personal, he insisted: he helped her because she was personally invested in helping him.

Antonio told me that, as she moved up into national government, the former mayor had offered him a better position in Bucharest. He enumerated the material benefits he would get: a large salary, a paid house in Bucharest, and a driver. I congratulated him in the lavish rhetoric I had just picked up in Mahala: 'Well done, may you live long, may your children and grandchildren live long etc.' Antonio waited for me to finish my encomium and turned pensive, saying that his wife would never agree to move to Bucharest. If he went to the capital by himself, the family would break up, his children would judge him, and 'his Gypsies' would be on their own, without any help. This is why, he reasoned, he had to remain in Mahala, where he did things best. However, he added, he would use this occasion to test who is a friend of his or not. He would tell people that he was offered this job and, if they were happy about this, it meant they

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were looking forward to getting rid of him. Whoever appeared sad was his true friend and would be kept closer. I felt awkward about congratulating him so lavishly before and congratulated him once again for his genius strategizing.

Then Antonio changed the subject abruptly and started talking about how the party had great plans for the country: they would increase the salaries, build roads and hospitals, and do lots of other great things. Although I felt differently about the political landscape, and had not made this a secret, I did not contradict him—nor did he ask for my opinion. Where the previous government had cut people's money, he said, this one will give them more. 'That criminal,' he said, referring to the Prime Minister who administered austerity measures in 2010-2012, and whose government fell as a consequence, bringing the Social-Democrats back to power, 'He only knew how to cut people's money; he took everything from the poor, and then the [financial] world crisis came, and people were finished, to the ground.'

At no point that evening did Antonio mention the laws de-criminalizing corruption that the Social-Democrats were trying to pass, to the discontent of large segments of the population (including myself); despite this omission, the timing of our chat was clearly not incidental. As he drove me back home, he told me how he himself went out of his way to help people in need, sometimes covering the debts of poor sellers in the market who hadn't made enough money to pay the daily tax, and sometimes bringing food to poor families, because that's what politics was all about.

That same evening, the amnesty laws were passed, and almost immediately massive anti-corruption protests erupted in all major cities against the governing party. I learned about all this as I was watching a soap-opera with Armonia and her youngest son, which was suddenly interrupted for a news bulletin. 'Turn the TV back to my series,' Armonia asked me, but her son said it was not possible. 'Am I Antonio now, to watch politics all day long?' she asked

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impatiently. Soon enough, the middle son burst into the room to tell us the law had been passed, and then Armonia was happy: her cousin kept wondering whether the amnesty law would get passed, because they all had relatives in prison and they wanted to know if they might get out.

Then they turned to me: they wanted to know what Antonio had said about these issues. Not much, I replied, he said how well the Social-Democratic Party was governing the country, and how they raised salaries… Here the middle son asked impatiently: 'Why is he telling us about salaries, it's not like we're wage workers!' As the news bulletin turned to the thousands of people who had gathered in front of the government building in Bucharest and were shouting slogans against the Social-Democrats, Armonia was revolted: 'This will result in war, may God protect us all and my children.' The middle son commented that his father had been posting political slogans on his Facebook page all day: 'that's a nasty life, if it isn't complete boredom' (Rou. 'urîto viață, zău plictiseală de n-o fi'). Then, he asked me if the Social-Democrats happened to lower the taxes for getting a new passport or for importing cars; I was clueless, so he left the room. As the news bulletin stopped and the series resumed, I went next door to the girls' room.

The girls were quietly fidgeting with their phones. Mirabela commented out loud on an article about how Melania Trump seems to be a sad woman; I suggested there were more urgent things happening in the country, but she was well aware: 'I'm sick of these gaʒe always being so fussy (*nervoși*).' I asked her if she agreed with the amnesty laws and with corruption; she did not, but she still found it irritating how the gaʒe took to the street for anything. I went to smoke in the kitchen, and the family's youngest son followed me; he asked me why I was so much against this amnesty law. I replied something about corruption and mafia. 'So what's it to you that these guys are stealing?', he asked. I said Romania needed motorways, hospitals, and schools. 'Really, there's too much corruption in this country,' he conceded, mostly to pacify

me, because in Romani society it is impolite to contradict people to their face. A few weeks later, however, when the protests intensified, he wrote on Facebook that the people protesting were simply envious of the head of the Social-Democrats, 'the boss of Romania' and 'a true mafioso,' as he admiratively put it. Around that time, the prevailing question in our household (like in many others, I assume) was not whether politicians stole, but whether they were smart enough to get away with it.

The protests continued over the next few weeks, even in our town, a Social-Democrat stronghold. When she caught glimpse of the news while zapping, Armonia began to take pity on the protesters: 'They go out in this cold,' she conceded, 'And are jammed into each other, and we sit here in warmth, they go to their jobs and then they go to the protests, and it's a big thing indeed that they protest on behalf of us'. Then she gradually lost interest in the developments.

The middle son grew irritated that the gaʒe were always making a fuss. 'Why don't they just go and work, instead of putting their hands out for money,' he exclaimed one evening. I clarified that the protest was not about money, but, being a woman, it was not my place to contradict him. 'Even if they don't ask for money,' he conceded, 'They're still asking for something—why don't they just sort out their own lives, like normal people?' Later that year, he wrote an extended critique of the gaʒe on Facebook, inspired by some recent news concerning domestic abuse, but visibly fuelled by his earlier discontent towards the protests: 'Paedophiles, rapists, traffickers, criminals, people who beat their own mother/father, people who go to rallies in exchange for a sandwich without even knowing what they're rallying for, people who go to protests without knowing what they're protesting against, people who vote without knowing for what exactly, people who torture animals, people who boo their own president, their own government that they themselves elected, people who neglect their

country, people who speak ill of their country wherever they are, mothers who abandon their children, people who abandon their parents… that's about what I see and hear about [gaʒe], and after all this… [you still think] it's Gypsies who make Romania a laughing stock.'

# Romani politics in principle

There is, famously, a European-wide Romani movement, composed of numerous NGOs and supported by EU institutions, seeking to advance the interests of Europe's most disenfranchised minority— enhance the civil rights of the various Romani groups, ensure their political representation, and combat the poverty in which most of the continent's Roma live. But what of 'Romani politics?' Is it synonymous with the Romani movement? Who conducts 'Romani politics,' how, and for whom?

A survey of the literature indicates that the phrase 'Romani politics' is mired in contradictions (Klímová-Alexander 2005; Sigona and Trehan 2009). First, its agenda is widely diverse, accommodating humanitarian, anti-exclusionary, multicultural, and/or developmental approaches. Some organizations seek to resolve the many grievances that have constantly engulfed Romani livelihoods—racialization, poverty, and the various types of inequality that have come to define being Roma—while others are more focused on forging a collective cultural, linguistic, and diasporic identity of all Roma groups worldwide. Second, the movement is manned by experts, advisors, and other professional elites whose connection to local communities is usually enabled by mediators and local leaders and is nominally apolitical.

'Romani politics' is then primarily a field of expertise, mediation, and social critique, rather than one of political representation or mobilization; this is hardly new where NGOs are

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involved (Klímová-Alexander 2005; Kóczé and Rövid 2012). Indeed, the word 'community'[41] is typically used as a qualifier for 'development' and as the target of interventions (Ivasiuc 2014), and less in the sense of a political constituency with its own interests and values. Thus, 'Romani politics' could be taken to mean the predilect object of the Romani movement, but it is rarely used to describe the diverse political inclinations and the everyday political practices and interests of the myriad Romani populations that the movement claims to represent. Largely confined to the issues listed above—social equality, integration, multiculturalism, antidiscrimination—which constitute domains of policy interventions, the phrase 'Romani politics' is rarely used analytically to refer to anything along the lines of 'the politics of Romaniness/Gypsyness,' i.e., to account for local relations within and without Romani groups, vernacular political imaginaries and vocabularies, or the maintenance of social order.

Building on some early attempts at political mobilization in the 1970s in Western Europe[42], the international Romani movement took off especially after 1990, when the fall of socialism laid bare the state of the Roma minority in the former Eastern Bloc, which found itself at the bottom of society in every possible respect and was routinely targeted by communal and state violence. Poverty rates, unemployment, education levels, living conditions, life expectancy, and all

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[41]. The relationship between Romani NGOs and what they call 'the community' is too loaded for me to do justice to it here, although I continue to comment on it, especially from the point of view of my interlocutors. For now, I would just like to signal the similarities between the imaginary of 'community' entertained by Romani experts and activists, and those discussed by Rose (1999) and, building on his work, by Li (2006) in relation to the community development industry. As the latter puts it, 'community is assumed to be natural, yet it needs to be improved' (Li 2006: 4). Romani activists' assumption of community is of a 'natural' and inchoate space, where people maintain 'communitarian' identities and are insufficiently individualized so as to pursue their own values.

[42]. The first World Romani Congress was organized in 1971 in the United Kingdom, with the support of the Indian government, given that the Roma activists at the time sought to cultivate their Indian heritage, established on linguistic and historical grounds. At the congress, the Romani flag—a red sixteen-spoked wheel or *chakra* against a blue and green background—was reaffirmed as the national emblem of the Roma people, and the song *Gelem, Gelem*, referring to the Romani Holocaust of WW2, was adopted as the Roma anthem.

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possible indicators of wellbeing were, and have still remained, substandard. And, since Eastern European governments were often unwilling or unable to do much about any of this, supranational institutions such as the European Parliament and Commission, the World Bank, and the US State Department stepped in to draw attention to the fate of this minority. This effectively resulted in what political scientists have defined as the Europeanization of the Roma (see e.g., van Baar 2011), i.e., the political creation of a diasporic European minority.[43] Largely a political construct, the Roma minority remains a heterogenous label applied to disparate social groups who often have no idea that their interests are being represented thusly. In the absence of a shared history, language (as most Roma groups no longer speak Romani) and of anything else that might amount to a shared diasporic belonging (Gay y Blasco 2002), the main commonality of Romani groups continues to lie in their relentless persecution by the surrounding populations and attempts at assimilation by states. It is not surprising, then, that the Roma question was and continues to be framed largely as an issue of victimhood and human rights (Chirițoiu 2018).

The programmes to integrate the Roma and criticism of the non-Roma's exclusionary practices, as outlined by the Romani movement, develop largely in relation to abstract principles, and take very little account of the ways in which the Roma groups that they target are embedded in local relations, to say nothing of their own notions of politics. In these interventions politics is a realm of ideals, often posing as in the Roma's assumed *interest*, but they pay little attention to the actual, concrete and not necessarily internally coherent *interests* of these groups, and to the moralities that underpin them. My analysis of Roma politics tackles the middle ground

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[43]. Numerous analyses point out that the Europeanization of Roma issues was part of a broader strategy to orientalize the European periphery and gain leverage over national governments, while Western European governments themselves continued to marginalize not only their own Romani populations, but also Eastern European Roma immigrants. See e.g. Möschel 2014; Balibar 2011; Dembour 2009.

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between the seemingly contradictory realms of abstract principles (Roma integration, anti-discrimination, equality etc.) as upheld by the Romani movement, and of the Rom's concrete interests ranging from infrastructure to their local, day-to-day interactions with non-Roma. The notion of politics that I employ in this chapter, then, emerges at the nexus of two notions of the political that have rarely been examined together in the context of Romani populations: on the one hand, political moralities concerning vernacular understandings of authority, obligations, and sovereignty and, on the other hand, institutionalized politics, whether electoral, partisan, or civic.

## Romani politics in practice

Antonio makes no secret of the fact that he gained this positions in public administration due to his loyalty to the governing party: his political campaigning brings the party numerous votes. This and his other jobs are not mere rewards for his efforts, but also positions from which he can continue to exercise his popularity to the benefit of the party, in an endless virtuous cycle. Antonio sees this as a sign that he can climb up the political ladder in exchange for his electoral services, the same way gaʒe politicians do. His relationship with the party, or rather with individual party members, remains for him a token of respectability, and living proof that a 'dignified' livelihood can be pursued, away from what he sees as the shady or undignified occupations of other Rom. Finally, his political career is a promise of equality. Indeed, his biggest point of gratitude to his political patron was that she did not treat him as 'a mere Gypsy,' but as a partner and a fellow politician. She relied on his help as much as he did on hers, she 'gave' him public positions, and she supported him in front of his counter-candidates or 'enemies.'

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Antonio's political notions and practices closely mirror gaʒe politics, rather than some innate Roma values. This indicates that he is not the mediator between the two radically different worlds that he portrays himself to be, but the figure in which these overlapping worlds converge. Rather than bridge some imaginary chasm between the Rom and the gaʒe, Antonio embodies their overlaps and commonalities, in which neither the Rom, nor the gaʒe like to recognize themselves—the gaʒe least of all. Happy to have finally come across a 'civilized Gypsy', most non-Roma embrace Antonio as one of a kind, and are only too happy to let him manage their relations with the rest of the Rom.

Antonio tours the market once a day, his trusted men behind him. Sometimes he cheerfully exchanges greetings with merchants, at other times he gets angry and indicates that a stall looks disorderly or tells a young woman to sweep in front of her stall (although cleaning personnel exist), much to the amusement of neighbouring sellers. When conflicts erupt, Antonio only needs to hold a speech in which he inextricably brings together official regulations and family ties to appease the merchants. And when a several merchants made a coalition to denounce him for taking bribes for distributing the stalls, he made no effort to deny the fact. Instead, he staged a mock consultation with the complicity of the mayor to which he invited his 'enemies', from which the latter left pacified and loyal, thinking they had just been 'consulted.' Where others might only see paternalism or manipulation in his actions, for Antonio this was nothing less than 'the art of politics,' which worked the same way among the Rom as it did among the gaʒe.

Despite the rumours that he took bribes for renting out stalls, Antonio denounced this practice which had made the fame of his predecessors (who were, not coincidentally, his wife's uncles). Upon taking his position as inspector in 2014, he declared to a newspaper that 'no other taxes than the legal ones' would be demanded. This might sound like a tautology for most readers, but the merchants understood his message. Antonio cultivated a subtler, more benevolent form

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of encompassment, one that rested on the appearance of consent rather than on threats and extortion. Whenever he came home with small 'gifts' from sellers, Antonio remarked loudly (for my benefit) that he never demanded anything from anyone, but people gave him presents because they wanted to. He then had no choice but to accept them, lest the donors thought they had fallen out of favour with him.

Antonio's patronage is not merely opportunistic or extractive; it also encompasses a sense of responsibility that can easily be approximated as 'help': 'When you do them good, people remember you for life', he told me, as a way of summarizing his approach to politics. His loyalty to social democracy relied partly on ideological commonalities and partly on pragmatism, since social democrats had been in power in his town since the regime change in 1989 (there is a case to be made that, in terms of personnel and manners of conducting politics, in many places like Antonio's town the 'regime change' in 1989 was not much of a change at all). His political ambitions were at home in the party's lexicon, and especially in its practice. For instance, his concern for the downtrodden did not rely on ideas of redistribution, on the critique of accumulation, or on some covert inclination to socialize the means of production. Instead, he firmly believed that the poor should be 'helped,' i.e., included in the network of belonging and patronage which he was actively building as part of being a politician. As he handed out basic foodstuffs to them, or distributed them places at the second-hand market, he expected their loyalty in return, on which his rise in the party ranks depended. This practice coincided with the general approach of the party towards their constituency: doing good amounted to enmeshing people in favours, from which obligations derived: incommensurate, vague, but persistent.

# Armonia's political critique

The core of Armonia's discontent with Antonio was the fact that he had stopped caring about the household: while he went out of his way to 'help' others, politics had made him 'selfish' and 'irresponsible'. Pointing to various things around the house that she had paid for when she made money—furniture, renovations, even blueprints to extend their house—Armonia asked rhetorically what Antonio did with all his money and power. 'He works in an office, in warmth,' she would exclaim, 'while I risked my life and my freedom in cold and humiliation. And he still has nothing to show for it. I do' Not only were her gains obtained with more effort, but they had also left visible marks; Antonio's gains, she said, amounted to putting food on the table, as if that were enough, or as if it was a favour he did them, and not his duty. The problem was precisely that he did not do them any favours, but lived for his own fame:

> Does he think his grandeur will last his whole life, and his bossiness – the way people tell him 'May you live long, boss'? People do that because they need him, and we also need him, but should we also stand at attention before him and tell him 'Good day, boss, we kiss your hand'?

Antonio's failure to live up to the responsibilities of sharing the social position he had acquired was illustrated by the obligations he defaulted on. None of his six children had jobs, and two of them were begging abroad; four of them were unmarried, although some were well past marriageable age, and his youngest daughters spent more time with the gaʒe than was advisable for their social prospects in Mahala. His family was entitled to his 'protection' and to sharing in his 'grandeur'—the point of grandeur being precisely to share it.

In a sense, for his wife, Antonio had stopped being a Rom—a Roma man whose primary loyalties lie with his household. She sometimes even said that she only had a husband 'in all

but name'. 'I don't know how it is for you, the gaʒe,' Armonia would explain to me, 'but for us Gypsies family always comes first.' Her discontent was not only a cultural perk, however, but a deep moral preoccupation that she justified with reference to the very (Christian) roots of morality: in her summary, the Bible and all the other 'godly books' instruct us to 'help your neighbour as thyself and respect him, and only later help your fellow humans'. While theologically inaccurate, her adaptation of biblical teachings indicates that obligations follow a strict logic and cannot be random: they are first due to one's own, and only later to strangers. This view of obligations of care imparted in function of the degrees of closeness indicates that Armonia's view of the world was decidedly unequal. Her reasoning was not merely ideological, but also practical: if you are incapable to care for your own, she wondered, how can you care for strangers?

This was not all: while being ungrateful and selfish with his 'grandeur,' Antonio also showed far too much 'respect' to the gaʒe. Since he failed to reap any benefits from them, his respect to them was pointless, if not harmful, in Armonia's view. Her philosophy was that 'you should only respect the gaʒe as much as it's necessary, but not too much.' Her experience of being pushed around on account of being a Gypsy woman had taught her that the gaʒe need to be afraid of you, lest they walk all over you. That was precisely what she saw was happening to her husband: the gaʒe were advantage of him and he didn't even realize it. Intolerably for Armonia, he was being taken for a fool. To illustrate, she recounted a scene when Antonio took his family out to celebrate his wife's birthday right after the Social-Democrats had won the local elections with his help. They went to a central restaurant owned by one of his party colleagues and frequented by all local notabilities. Seeing them in Gypsy attire, the waiters stopped them at the entrance and told them there were no free tables despite evidence to the contrary. Even when Antonio called the owner, no tables could be found. The family had to go to McDonalds instead.

For Armonia, this episode showed that Antonio failed to reap any benefits from his position among the gaʒe, while the gaʒe incessantly reaped benefits off him, and that he disposed of his resources randomly, at odds with his family's interests. Armonia's critique was that Antonio had even lost his sense of realising when he was being taken advantage of—a counterproductive skill in a social setting when social mobility is incumbent on services and favours made to, and received from, others. If nobody keeps track, the investment that 'help' constitutes will generate no returns. In opposition with her husband who, as she saw it, settled for whatever he received and pressured her to settle as well, Armonia claimed to be more vigilant: she only lets herself be fooled if she wants to, she said. This claim of agency is crucial in a predatory setting that only consists of 'fools' and those who fool them; and of people who owe respect, and to whom respect is owed.

## Servitude and contagion

Antonio's daughters were more sympathetic to his purposes; they mostly supported them because he asked them to, not because they shared the same desire to be considered equal with the gaʒe or to perform the 'civilized Gypsy' role that they thought he was playing. Mirabela's sister Brianna reflected on her father's plight as follows:

> He sits at the feet of the gaʒe, and I really can't stand this, even if he's not completely humble, I would rather work for the English, or for others. The gaʒe humiliate you, they make you feel like the last person on earth. When I went with my father in his political campaigns, during the big heat, we would stay for hours and hours without drinking a glass of water, and when the party bigshots came, he bought them water, soda. And they still think of him as 'my Gypsy'…

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You need to distinguish yourself through something else, not through being a Gypsy. And he can't distinguish himself otherwise because they know him like that. You even hear them say, 'I have some Gypsy friends.' That's like saying, I became friends with a dog, I started to understand his language, I ate with him at the table… When you say you have Gypsy friends and sit down to eat with them, it's like you have to explain yourself, like it's something exceptional.

While Armonia saw the hierarchies between the Rom and the gaʒe as inevitable—something to be managed and capitalized on, which Antonio disappointingly failed to do—his daughter found it 'humiliating' that he did not challenge those hierarchies—not just reverse them, or find a way to benefit from them, but dismiss them altogether. She expected this role-playing that Antonio was doing for the gaʒe would not be the case with 'the English,' for instance, because the lack of cultural intimacy would prevent foreigners from putting the Rom in an already designated place.

The other problem with Antonio's transgressions was that they were contagious. In Armonia's view, not only did Antonio manage his relations with the gaʒe poorly, but their daughters might also end up replicating their father's mistakes. First of all, it was wrong for them to be into 'politics' at all, as she pointed out. Armonia found this downright detrimental for the girls' social standing and for their chances to land good marriages. Second, because they spent too much time with the gaʒe, the girls might forget 'how to be Gypsies'. Whenever the daughters raised their voice at their mother in the tense atmosphere that sometimes built up across the household, Armonia reproached them that they had become gaʒe and had lost any notion of respect and Gypsy propriety. In short, contagion from the gaʒe risked ruining her daughters too, after it ruined her husband.

# For an ethics of grace

Much like the gift, help is ultimately a form of exercising social control; it constitutes an investment, a way of entering relations and managing expectations. From a transactional perspective, for Antonio, helping the downtrodden is his way of securing his position; for Armonia, Antonio's care would be a sign that their family still held together, at least on a pragmatic level. And her help to me, while seemingly disinterested, since my presence in their household produced more discomfort than benefits, made it impossible for me to refuse her requests.

This crude transactional view is mitigated by what triggers 'help,' which for the Rom is a feeling of care or pity, perhaps more accurately approximated in English as 'grace.'[44] This is what turns obligations into wilful acts, and subordination into agency. Armonia explicitly told me that she did not want me to feel *obliged* to do anything for her; she wanted me to do it because I *cared*. Even though help, whether an expectation or an obligation, is ubiquitous in the life of the Rom tsiganiaki, there is no Romani word for it, except a loanword from Romanian, *ajutil*, which is scarcely used. One could almost conclude that help goes without saying; but of course, it does not. Hierarchy is so ingrained in the daily address of the Rom that it is clear from the context who helps whom, and who is merely fulfilling their duties.

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44 A lexical clarification is necessary here to signal the imprecisions of approximating the Romanian and Romani term 'mila', derived from Old Church Slavonic милъ to the English 'care,' derived from Proto-Germanic *karo- 'lament.' While 'care' is not explicitly hierarchical, 'mila' is. So a more faithful equivalent could be 'pity', derived from the Latin *pietas*. 'Pity' could therefore be approximated as 'grace.' Both entail a hierarchical relation: the Slavonic милъ, the Romanian/Romani *mila*, and the English<Latin<Greek Χάρις, 'grace,' are granted by God onto his flock, by a sovereign onto his subjects, and by someone who has more onto someone who has less (Pitt-Rivers 2011).

Conversely, care (*mila*) is mentioned explicitly far more often, whether in relations between spouses, parents and children, or hosts and anthropologist: it is a way of humanizing others and bring them into one's personal sphere.

For instance, once, as I was driving around town with two Roma women, I saw a homeless girl whom I'd known to live on the street for many years. I communicated my sense of pity, or compassion, to my passengers. I might have said something like, 'Poor girl, she's been living all this time on the street.' 'So then take her home, bathe her, and feed her,' one of my passengers replied. I had to admit I couldn't do that. 'Then why do you indispose us with this,' came the reply. I found the remark surprising, since generally I had hardly seen the Rom be unkind or brusque to beggars of whichever (perceived) ethnicity, and when they could not or would not give money, they said so in a friendly tone. Moreover, they themselves often relied on begging, just like this girl, so why would they be so dismissive about it now? What they reacted to in fact was not the idea of charity—indeed, they encouraged me, even if in a tongue-in-cheek manner, to pursue it—but my empty posturing, the only effect of which was to 'indispose' my passengers by pointing to a miserable person in the street about whom I was not going to do anything. 'Pity' is therefore not a mere sentiment, but something far more vital, that moves one to act and to manifest engagement. Hence the comparison I proposed between pity and grace. As Pitt-Rivers defines it, 'grace is always something extra, over and above "what counts," what is obligatory or predictable; it belongs on the register of the extraordinary (hence its association with the sacred)' (Pitt-Rivers 2017:72). Building on the etymology of 'pity,' which meanwhile in Romanian at least acquired pitiful overtones which place it in the vicinity of patronage, corruption, and other forms of indignity, the two concepts overlap significantly. *Pity* is what rulers did when they bestowed favors onto their chosen servants: they did not have to do it, but did it nonetheless; *pity* is also what believers implore from God, and what beggars ask of strangers.

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As Pitt-Rivers reminded us, there is also a 'moral supremacy' (*op. cit.*: 73) at work in acts of grace (and pity), which leaves open the possibility—but not the obligation, as is the case with exchanges guided by interests— for further acts of grace. In a sense, pity is the prerogative of the sovereign person, unlike the obligation to redistribute, which, at least on the face of it, is just that: an obligation. What's more, as my anecdote above suggests, despite its idiosyncratic and undignified overtones, pity also bestows humanity upon its recipient in ways in which humanitarian ideas of redistribution do not. This is perhaps why the imaginary of social justice with which the Romani movement operates fails to mobilize the Rom *tsiganiake* and others like them: they don't want to be given what is due to them on account of being disenfranchised, or be the recipients of an obligation. Instead, they want to receive acts of grace, that have the power to restore their dignity and consecrate their belonging to the social whole from which they have been systematically excluded. Egalitarian principles might be well-meaning, but they take the personal out of the political (Piliavsky n.d.), leaving the Rom to wonder what remains.

## Conclusion

There is some truth to the notion that hierarchy is ultimately a relation of power; Graeber (2018) wrote a passionate contribution to this effect in his Afterword to a volume that investigates the complexities of hierarchy (Hickel and Haynes 2018), and urged us to see hierarchy realistically for what it is: power and domination. To present power as 'hierarchy' is to disguise and legitimise it, Graeber argued. Indeed, for most people, hierarchy certainly is power, in the crude sense of inequality—but is it not something more? Piliavsky (2020) argued that hierarchy is about belonging rather than tallying who is on top and who is on the bottom; encompassment into a hierarchy entails the hope, and sometimes the evidence, that positions within it can

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change. In a sense, positions even become irrelevant as long as the hierarchy works as it is supposed to.

'Power' ultimately remains a top-down relation, where someone has control over someone else, who is bossed around and exploited. But this is not how hierarchy worked among the Rom, or what mattered to them when considering social order. Feeling pity and being moved to give help cut across labels and structures such as 'patriarchal' or 'discriminatory,' Rom and gaʒe, male and female. It is true that the status quo is only fleetingly and momentarily disturbed but, like in Leach's (1970 [1954]) model of 'oscillating equilibrium,' this is enough to remind those on top that they depend on those below them, and those below that they can expect care and responsibility from those above, and especially that two sides will perpetually exchange places. The idea that people prefer an unequal social order that runs on hierarchy, favors, obligations, 'help,' and 'pity' to the egalitarian, inclusive one that Romani civil society and EU institutions seek to achieve for them seems counterintuitive at best, and reactionary at worst. For most people across the world, however, including the Rom of Mahala, egalitarianism is more of an exercise in imagination than a concrete reality. Perhaps when they see it, people will embrace it with more enthusiasm; until then, regardless of how we fell about it, hierarchical imaginaries rooted in pity, help, obligations, and grace, will likely continue to shape vernacular politics not just in Mahala, but also far beyond its fuzzy boundaries.

When America open the floodgates and let all us Italians in, what do you think they were doing it for? Because they were trying to save us from poverty? No, they did it because they needed us. They needed us to build their cities, their subways, and to make 'em richer. The Carnegies and the Rockefellers, they needed worker bees and there we were. But some of us didn't want to swarm around their hive and lose who we were. We wanted to stay Italian and preserve the things that meant something to us. Honor, and family, and loyalty. And some of us wanted a piece of the action. We weren't educated, like the Americans, but we had the balls to take what we wanted. And those other fucks, the J.P. Morgans, they were crooks and killers too, but that was the business, right? The American way.

Tony Soprano, From Where to Eternity. *The Sopranos*, Series 2, Episode 9 (2000)

## Fission and fusion

As I am writing up this dissertation, I catch up thanks to Facebook livestreaming with the latest *belea* ('trouble') from Mahala: two related families are threatening war. Several years ago, their sons were driving together through Mahala when they were accosted by two policemen who asked to see their documents. Angel, the one behind the wheel, had just turned 18 and he had no driving licence. He tried to escape but one of the policemen stood in front of the car to stop him. As Angel accelerated, he ended up dragging the policeman along for several hundred meters and badly injuring him. Angel was sentenced for attempted murder and is serving 18 years in prison. The son of the second family, George, was called in as a witness together with

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his non-Roma girlfriend at the time, who was also in the car. According to their declarations that surfaced recently, they both declared that Angel 'lost his head' and, even though George told him to stop the car, Angel drove on. Later they attempted to change their declarations so as to ease Angel's sentence, but this had no effect on the court case.

I was in the field when this incident took place. People in Mahala were saying that it was the fault of George's girlfriend, the gaʒi ('non-Roma'): she was the one who had told Angel to drive on and scare the policeman. Around the same time, a Roma man from a different neighborhood was murdered by a Rom from Mahala whose former girlfriend, a non-Roma woman, had gotten together with the victim. My interlocutors in Mahala similarly reasoned that it was the girl's fault for setting the two men against each other.

Almost five years after the incident, Angel's family summoned Rom judges to analyse the case and pronounce a sentence. The Romani trial was also broadcast on Facebook, so that family members abroad could see. The judges essentially ruled that George was not guilty, even though his initial declaration had been a mistake. They added that George's attempts to change his declaration to something more favourable to Angel should be appreciated, and it was not his fault that it did not have an effect. As they explained, 'you know what the gaʒe are like, they only take into account what you said the first time, and it stays like that.' They sentenced George's family to pay Angel's family 20.000 EUR for their distress.

Angel's family was shocked by the verdict and declared they would not respect it. They continue to hold George responsible for their son's sentence and asked 100.000 EUR from George's family as compensation; otherwise, they added, George's family should leave Mahala lest there will be a war. George, who is in the US, like Angel's parents, answered the threats from Angel's family through this own livestream, asking them to take up any problems that they have with him and stop threatening his parents, or else he 'would go to jail for real crimes,'

unlike Angel, who is serving time for a gaʒo ('non-Roma'). Later they all deleted their recordings and negotiations are still underway for the two families to make up.

Albeit more serious than the average, this incident is not unique in Mahala and, like many others I became privy to, it encapsulates most of the topics that I discussed in this thesis. One is that relatedness (George's mother is the aunt of Angel's mother), however tightly regulated, can become a site of antagonism. The collectivity converges against gaʒe and breaks up against one another—a different sort of fission and fusion—until order is reinstalled. The people who find themselves in-between this close kinship relation had no choice but take sides, depending on their relations to the belligerents. Those who are closer to Angel's parents reason that the parents are understandably upset with the long prison sentence and they need to do something about their distress. Others, closer to George's side of the family, say that the sentence was so heavy not because of George's testimony, but merely because the police hate the Rom.

This also points to the transnational nature of Roma sociality—not so much in the sense of a 'diaspora,' a notion that Gay y Blasco (2002) showed does not apply to the variety of Roma groups out there—but in the sense that, within a given group, however atomized, kinship, morality, and legal obligations stretch across distances, and connectivity or attachment remain as active as ever, even after a decade or spent more abroad.

Another topic raised by this incident and that I examine in my dissertation is the way 'Gypsy law' develops not in a clear-cut distinction from gaʒe/state law but in its crevices. As the *tsiganie* becomes polarized between the warring factions, the severity of the crime as such becomes irrelevant. What is at stake is not an abstract notion of fairness, but how to mitigate the disruptions caused by 'the gaʒe effect' (a coinage after Mitchell's 'state effect' [2018]) onto the *tsiganie* ('Roma collective'), family relations, and individual lives. Not only does the state have tribunals, prosecutors, policemen, and prisons, whose full force is experienced by

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the Rom, but George might have to pay 50.000 EUR 'in vain,' as the Rom would say, for the declaration of his one-time girlfriend even though he is now long married (to a Roma woman) and a father of two. Had a Roma woman been in the car with George (who could only have been his wife), the money would at least solidify some relations inside the *tsiganie*, e.g., her parents and the other Rom would see that George pays up. To spend it because of gaʒe is as 'useless' as doing 18 years in prison for them.

If state law is dominant and forceful, 'Gypsy law' seeks to maintain social order though negotiations and small concessions on both sides. In the case of crimes among Rom, the family of the victim would retaliate; since the crime now concerned a gaʒo, i.e., it was socially disembedded, the main question was how to maintain relations within Mahala that the legal complications of this crime disrupted. And the reactions to this incident, shaped not by arcane notions of right and wrong, but by family obligations, indicate that social order is reinforced both by 'legal' and affective means. Ultimately, this also goes to show that moralities are not abstract but embedded into contexts and contingent upon relations.

The broader implication of the incident recounted above and the overarching topic of my dissertation can be summarized as 'the *dialectic of articulation* between a local system and its encompassing context' (Comaroff 1982:146 original emphasis). Specifically, I have been looking at the ways in which the superstructure, so to speak, which leaves the Rom in a situation of social and spatial marginality, is reflected, distorted, mimicked, or transcended onto inner relations. As in the incident with Angel and George, we see that the ripple effects inside the *tsiganie* can be quite far removed from what is at stake for the non-Roma (state).

# Grace comes full circle

This thesis has started from the genealogy between outsmarting and witchcraft, as suggested by Antonio, ponders upon oaths and curses in its middle, and ends with a discussion about the political value of 'grace.' Pitt-Rivers theorizes curses and witchcraft as 'negative grace' (2017:73), which would be a more accurate description for theft as well, as a form of 'negative reciprocity.' I have started this dissertation from several questions: How does the social inequality which defines the Rom's place in society reflect onto their inner practices of social order, personhood, and aspirations? If the Rom of Mahala are not moved by the promise of emancipation and equality elaborated by the Romani movement and EU institutions, what *are* they moved by? And, lastly, if they hold kinship to be their utmost value and resource, how does it accommodate domination and exploitation?

After sixteen months as a guest residential ethnographer with the Rom, it became clear that these questions were somewhat misguided, in that the dualities that they imply are nowhere to be found in real life. Therefore, in my analysis I have placed social exclusion or outer inequality on a continuum with inner hierarchies, and argued that the relation between them is dialectical, meaning that they reinforce one another to the point that it is impossible to point out where one begins and the other ends. For analytical purposes, however, I divided the material in three parts that largely reflect the progress of my own understanding.

Unavoidably, I approached the Rom, as a gaʒi, from the outside. In the first part of the thesis, I reviewed what outsiders might learn about Mahala if they were curious to ask: data from secondary research and interviews which were far more formal than most of my fieldwork. This preliminary stage describes the 'centrifugal forces' that place the Rom at the margins of society and that turned Mahala into an enclave of Gypsyness. My description of Mahala from

the outside, along spatial and temporal dimensions, enabled me to place that the current fuzziness of Mahala's boundaries in the broader area's history of, and fascination with, ungovernability. As I came across narratives of nomadism in the interviews though which I was trying to reconstruct the history of the place, I learned to decouple locality from identity, and to pursue the Rom's view of themselves as people in motion, through interdictions and persecution. If Mahala as a place is scarcely governed, however, the Rom's movement was overgoverned, as it justified their deportation during WWII and their sustained persecution during socialism. My interlocutors emphasized how they thrived not despite, but through these waves of oppression, somewhat in the logic of 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger,' and used these obstacles to find new ways to continue being Rom—which is to say, 'proper' or 'capable' Rom. This is what I mean by the phrase 'making virtue out of necessity:' it suggests a way of tracing what matters for the people we work with without losing sight of the wider structures that circumscribe their options. This part also analyses houses (from the outside) as statements of 'capability' that the Rom make to both Roma and non-Roma audiences. Despite being written off as 'tasteless,' on closer examination the houses of the Rom reproduce architectural elements that non-Roma can understand and potentially admire and thrive in the same vacuum of governability as 'Gypsy law' and other misrepresented topics associated with Roma. Lastly, I analysed my interlocutors' accounts about how they are discriminated against by the non-Roma and their repertoire of reactions. One was the fantasy of retaliation, e.g., by actually stealing something from shops where they were suspected to be thieves anyway on account of being Roma. Another was the rhetorical choice to frame discrimination not as victimhood, but as misrepresentation or a misjudgement of the non-Roma. And another one yet was for the Rom to enact the very stereotypes of the gaʒe, strategically, in order to obtain what they needed.

I summarized this as a form of proactive and resourceful agency that inserts control into a system of structural restrictions and power inequalities. This prefaces a series of structural and conceptual transformations that my interlocutors make and my dissertation tracks: from social exclusion and inequality to hierarchy and a social order of obligations and acts of grace; from stigma to the moralities of 'capability' and of staying Rom throughout hurdles; and from dualities and contradictions to dialectics and relationality.

In Part I, I also discussed my access to the field, methods, and positionality. I showed that, despite the family credentials I was relying on, I did not get easy access into the *tsiganie* from the gatekeeper who had been my father's friend; I gained it through an offer of mutual help from his wife—an act of grace in the first instance, but also an act of insubordination, as it later turned out, since she invited me to move in partly to spite her husband, who had forbidden his family to host me. This may seem like an inauspicious start, but antagonism is very much part of the Rom's social life, and Antonio did not resent my presence in his house. In fact, he liked that I managed to slip in through the cracks—a perseverance worthy of a Gypsy woman, to paraphrase his words. A reflection on the loaded ethical implications of my research— something which I have done not just in a separate chapter, but throughout the thesis, simply because ethics cannot be disentangled from the entire endeavor—could start perhaps from my mimicry of Rom behaviors. This was not a deliberate strategy, but the result of the pedagogical efforts of my hosts, and in time it became my heuristic tool. Moreover, it was a way to reciprocate their care and help in ways in which they understood and found respectful.

In Part II I analysed the Rom's sociality and practices of maintaining social order in three core venues: domesticity, making relations, and law. All of these, I showed, are infused with hierarchies. Domestic space is where hierarchies come together through clashes or negotiations, to the point where the house becomes a bundle of contradictions. In Chapter 3, I

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examined how these contradictions play out in several realms. First, I examined neighborliness with Roma and non-Roma, and showed that non-Roma serve as buffer-zones between Rom households. This did not make for smooth relations between Roma and gaʒe, however, and I described several instances of hostility on both sides. The biggest problem with regards to vicinity, however, is assessing 'la bonne distance,' a la Lévi-Strauss, at which another Rom household can be established, and this is a field of confrontation and asserting primacy. Then, I moved onto liminal spaces, such as the courtyard and the kitchen, and the ways in which these shifted their functions depending on occupancy—something that holds true for other rooms in the house as well. The chapter also dwells on the relation between people and their prized possessions, or wealth, showing that ownership is contiguous with spatial arrangements and gendered constructs about women's roles and women's bodies. I then moved on to analyse 'the gender of the house' through the aspirations that women invest in houses and that are curtailed by men. The house is a contradictory space insofar as it almost crumbles under divergent forces: keeping up appearances towards the non-Roma, towards Roma, and keeping hierarchies in place, and all the while investing—but also saving—resources. Chapter 4 deals with hierarchies, as engendered by the marriage process and ritual speech, both of which, I argued, are political insofar as they enact social order. In relation to marriage, I discussed elopement as a mode of circumventing hierarchies. However, the chapter shows that social order is not something that is just imposed from above, like a script that social actors have to play, but a process to which they tend through affects, most notably through pity. As a vehicle of agency, pity between Rom can be compared to outsmarting in the relation between Rom and gaʒe, insofar as they are both individual attempts to mitigate hierarchies and often end up reaffirming them.

Chapter 5 examined 'Gypsy law' as a mechanism of maintaining social order, on a continuum with feuds ('beleaua'). After analysing how Roma judges describe 'Gypsy law'—as a process

of mediation that does not contravene with state law but handles issues like separations or offences that gaʒe law simply has no means to handle—I presented the case of a judgment that followed a ransom hit. Through this case, I argued that 'Gypsy law' is not parallel with state law, as the judges implied and as most of the literature on the topic suggests, but in a relation of complicity that is part of the enclavization process that I described in Chapter 2. The second argument, that 'Gypsy law' reinforces social order, was made clear through the example of the party that was found guilty by Rom judges and, because he was not handed over to the authorities, was sentenced to kneel before his victim and pay him a large sum of money.

Part III takes on the dialectical relations between the Rom and the gaʒe in the two most prominent arenas of their interactions: outsmarting and politics. Next to kinship relations, these are also the arenas where the Rom prove 'capability,' or pursue virtuous personhood. In Chapter 6, I argued that, by enacting the stigma projected onto them by wider society, outsmarting enables the Rom Čor to assert their belonging to the social body by virtue of what they call their 'talent' to outsmart others. I examined this process through its associated imaginaries of 'luck' (*baxt*), 'risk', and 'capability,' all of which are contingent notions whereby personal merits prevail over adverse circumstances. I showed that while it is mostly women who tackle outsmarting activities, this does not result in them being considered ritually impure, as other authors suggested (Stewart 1997), and that that this gendered division of labor is made primarily on the basis of pragmatic rather than symbolic grounds, since women's bodies are in many ways less susceptible to inspection or intrusion then those of men. The broader argument of the chapter, and of the thesis on the whole, is that for the Rom Čor, virtue accrues not from transcending the systemic marginalization that they are faced with, with but from confronting and harnessing it.

In the final chapter, I analysed the political imaginary of the Rom through the case of Antonio, a politician caught between his handlings with the gaʒe and with formal Roma politics, and the internal politics of the Rom, including his family obligations and his wife's criticism of his politics. I showed that for the Rom, the political is very similar to the familial in that they both function on a mixture of obligations that derive from social order and acts of grace. Conversely, obligations to redistribute are impersonal; they derive from an abstract principle of equality that does not say much to the Rom. I ventured the hypothesis that this imaginary of familial politics is perhaps why principles like inclusion, emancipation, and redistribution promoted by the Romani movement and EU institutions do not mobilize 'traditional' constituencies such as the Rom Čor. Like in my example with Armonia who told me that I should *want* to visit her, not feel obliged to do it on account of her helping me with my work, the Rom might not want to be the passive recipients of portions that egalitarian moralities think are due to them; they want to receive acts of grace, personalistic, idiosyncratic, and incommensurate.

# Displacements

I envisage this dissertation primarily as a contribution to political anthropology, by employing and elaborating on the notion of dialectic to describe relations that the Rom describe in antagonistic terms, and scholars of Roma describe in terms of victimization and/or resistance. Specifically, my research focuses on what the Rom call 'outsmarting' and analyses it as a practice, as a rhetorical construct, and as a cosmological representation of the relations between themselves and the rest of the world. I show that outsmarting is a process whereby the Rom not only dispute, but also seek to harness the inequalities that encroach them from the outside

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and thrive in the process. The do not merely resist or overcome necessity: they make virtue out of it.

My research therefore speaks to the anthropology of moralities, kinship, and law, insofar as these can be brought to bear ethnographically upon political anthropology to illuminate the ways in which people imagine good lives for themselves, what it means to be a good person, or what a good society looks like, and how they go about pursuing these aspirations. I have shown that all of these things, that at times can be contradictory, other times dialectic, and are always contingent, are reflected, nay, enacted in relations. These relations, then, are socially ordered and need to be kept so. This is what I meant by the dialectic between inequality and hierarchy: the conflicts of interests and values between the Rom and gaʒe trickle down into internal contradictions that eventually need to be resolved by the members who are lowest on the scale of social values, i.e., young women. When observing incidents or behaviors, one might conclude that the society of the Rom is patriarchal; but when noticing that these values are shaped by broader societal forces, issues such as patriarchy and consent lose their relevance and cannot be represented ethnographically. What *can* be represented is women's intense relational and affective labor, spanning a broad continuum between 'risk' and 'pity.'

With this labor moving now onto digital platforms following the Rom's long-term migration overseas and with ever fewer occasions for them to hang out collectively, it remains to be seen how the dialectic I have described fares across wide distances and media/mediums. If the Rom are removed from the historical inequalities that have determined their social position in Europe, will these inequalities follow them onto new territories and, if so, how will they continue to shape the social order of loose, digitally connected networks of kinsmen? If the qualified audience for the 'performance' of Gypsyness (Gay y Blasco 1999) is reduced to a phone screen, and if the foreigners around do not understand the markers of Gypsyness in the

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same way local gaӡe do, per Brianna's fantasy in Chapter 7 above, how does this performance change? These are questions that my thesis does not address; nonetheless, my hope is that it provides a starting point for this conversation to take place in the future.

The Rom of Mahala certainly cannot stand in for the transnational minority labelled 'Roma' and their means of tackling marginalization are rather unique; while many other groups I have worked with in the past expressed awareness and bitterness at the effects of social exclusion, none of them ventured that outsmarting the non-Roma might be a way to being solving this issue. The Rom Čor stand out through their particularity: much like their fantasy of outsmarting and witchcraft disguises their social subordination and the fact that the gaӡe default on the obligations that would result from this inequality, the category of 'the Gypsy thief' is a stereotype. Not only that: it obscures other, more mundane forms of relationality, politics, and wealth creation. Stealing, moreover, is not really as 'exotic' as stereotypes or, on occasion, the Rom themselves make it sound. Marx and Harvey (2003) showed that 'primitive accumulation' or 'accumulation by dispossession,' respectively, are inherent to capitalism, but one does not need a profound understanding of dialectical materialism to be aware that predation in its multiple forms is pervasive in our world well beyond enclaves and wildlands (Brachet and Scheele 2019). Displacing this unflattering reality, along with many others—patriarchy, patrimonialism, hierarchy, magical thinking etc.—onto ethnicized 'others' only serves to shield some of us from recognizing that these traits continue to be part and parcel of liberal modernity. A lot of people, however, the Rom of Mahala included, are not in a position to ignore this fact, because they are the ones who have to work through its consequences and all the while remain themselves.

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