Nationalities Papers (2019), 47: 2, 217–231
doi:10.1017/nps.2018.23

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Reading the Present Through the Past: The Roma in Postwar Kosovo

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Abstract
This article explores the relationship between memory, political violence, and identity among the Roma minorities in Kosovo. In the aftermath of the 1998–1999 conflict in Kosovo, countless Roma were forced to escape Albanian retaliation, accused of being Serb collaborators. Many had to resettle in enclaves near Fushë Kosovë on the outskirts of Kosovo's capital Prishtina, others left for Serbian-controlled northern Kosovo or to neighboring countries or to Western Europe. Through an ethnographic investigation with displaced Roma families around Prishtina and in Prizren, the article examines how the communities mobilize collective memories of the violent past to adapt to a new political situation, find their place, and navigate their present within Kosovo's social, economic, and political landscape. It shows that the past is a constant reminder of compromised loyalties toward the majority group, which in turn dictates their (non)relations. Roma voices and narratives about the violent past are not part of the dominant and official discourse; they are counter-memories, telling a story that is silenced and unrecognized by the majority.

Keywords: collective memory; counter-memory; displacement; identity; political violence; Roma; Kosovo

Introduction

> *His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past.*[1]

"We should leave; this is not a good sign. We have been through very difficult times"—said Ibrahim, while walking through the quarter of Morava [*Moravska*]—the erstwhile Roma neighborhood of Prishtina in Kosovo, in April 2013.[2] For a moment, Ibrahim, my Roma interviewee, hesitates to come along. All of a sudden he becomes suspicious bordering on paranoid, often looking over his shoulder to see if someone was following us. "We should leave," he insists, "I don't want anything similar to happen again. I don't want to get in trouble. People are spying on us from their windows." He seemed scared, hesitant, and soon he fell silent. A few Albanian children were kicking a ball on the street, but other than that, there were only the silent walls of a village at naptime. The streets looked well maintained and clean, the fence walls neatly whitewashed. Not much could be seen beyond them, but the houses seemed properly built and well maintained; they probably were quite nice and neat on the inside as well.

Fifteen or so years after the conflict, the neighborhood has been completely transformed, yet signs of the war are still lingering; some burned-down or destroyed houses and their remaining walls are now inscribed with graffiti or writings such as *Pron e UÇK* (property of the KLA, the Kosovo Liberation Army) or *komandant Krasniqi* ("commander Krasniqi," apparently a reference to a local KLA commander).

Ibrahim says that alongside other methods, these inscriptions were used to pressure Roma families to abandon their houses. "Whoever found such a sign on their doors or walls were to leave the house in no time." Other cases involved physical violence, setting houses and property of fire, fleeing, expulsion, and rape (Amnesty International 2009; ERRC 2011). Both the inscriptions on the walls and flashbacks from the recent past caused him to relive the anxiety of the violence that destroyed entire Roma neighborhoods throughout Kosovo and caused the Roma to flee.

The violence during and after the Kosovo conflict at the turn of this century provoked large-scale forced mobility for Albanians and Roma alike. Amnesty International (2009) reported that "more than 3,000 ethnic Albanians, mainly males, but also women and children have been victims of enforced disappearance by Serb police, paramilitary and military forces" (2009, 6). About one million ethnic Albanians were forced to flee. The same document reports that about 230,000 Serbs and other minorities left Kosovo by August 1999 (2009, 7) and "An estimated 800 Serbs, Roma and other minority groups, including Albanians, perceived as associated with Serbian authorities, were abducted or/and killed by members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), during and after the war" (Amnesty International 2009, 3).

Several years later, the war and violence seem to still be present through fears and recollections of past events that marked entire communities in Kosovo. How then do the individual and the community deal with such a violent past in order to make sense of the present and project a future? How does this translate into the Roma communities or other minorities' everyday experience? How is the present experience influenced by memories of the violent past and how does it tie in with questions of identity?

In this article, I will address this set of questions by exploring the relation between memory, political violence, and identity. I focus on experiences of the Roma minority in Kosovo to show how the violent past manifests itself in the everyday life of the Roma, how that helps us to understand the present situation the Roma live in, and how they negotiate their place among other communities in Kosovo today. To Benjamin (1968) and his followers, the importance of looking back at the past is key not only to understanding historical events "as they flash back through memory" (1968, 255), but also to making sense of the present, while looking into and building up the future. It is rather the now that concerns us, the way it is intertwined with the violent past of not too long ago, where collective memory (Halbwachs [1950] 1997) and its usage.

Political violence, and identity become important vectors in deconstructing the present tense. Collective memory, a concept developed by Maurice Halbwachs, is understood as the social construction of the past by members of a group, constituted through acts of remembering (Halbwachs [1950] 1997; Wertsch 2002, 2009). Framed as a set of memories of lived experiences, as the reconstruction and representation of a shared past of such lived experiences of a group, collective memory is socially negotiated and continuously reconstituted by individuals (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995; Halbwachs [1950] 1997). Often the memories are recalled and preserved through "figures of memory" that Assmann and Czaplicka defined as fixed points "maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)" (1995, 129). The collective memories are thus reproduced and maintained through official commemorative practices, performances, textbooks, media, history (Todorov 1995), and particularly through what Nora (1989, 12) calls "*lieux de mémoire*," such as "museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, dispositions, monuments, sanctuaries." Yet, collective memories are primarily kept alive through everyday communication, as well as oral history production and transmission (Assman and Czaplicka 1995; Halbwachs [1950] 1997) from one generation to another.

Scholarly literature suggests that collective memories are often linked with violence and identity (Halbwachs 1992; Ricoeur 1998, 2004), where "identity" is understood as the personal and social development process of an individual or a group, by the individual and/or by the

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group (Erikson 1975). Ricoeur goes as far as to say that "violence has an important place in shaping identities" (1998, 41). Referring to the violent events in Kosovo and the Balkans throughout the nineties, Duijzings (2005) argues that violence rather "serves to homogenize the population, establish undivided loyalties and unambiguous identities" (2005, 266). He contends that through violence "clear and unequivocal boundaries can be drawn, and locally and regionally defined identities can be substituted with (an) ethnic or national one" (2005, 267). Yet, Halbswachs (1997) reminds us that an individual becomes aware of his or her identity by acknowledging the sharing of the same past with other group members. What happens then when not all the social groups share the same memories, or when the memories of some groups do not necessarily fit into the main narrative? The case of Roma is illustrative of that, as they tell another story, which is not part of that main narrative built by the dominant ethnic group. Foucault (2001) suggests looking for discontinuities in the stories told and the facts that build around a specific story and narrative. He suggests looking for "counter-memories" (2001, 1021) defined as complementary "points of historical discontinuity that need to be made visible" (Rabinow and Rose 2003, 366). Such definition deconstructs the notion of a single truth purported by the official historiography and proposes instead to look for the missing aspects that make the picture whole. This would mean looking for unheard or silenced voices (Das 1989, 2007), for the voices of discord (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006) that are not part of the main narrative. It would mean looking for what Bamberg calls "counter-narratives" (2004), those points of resistance that tell a story outside of the dominant culture or the master narrative. For, giving "voice" to such stories, Das (1989) argues, is not a matter of quantity or accessibility of material, but rather a question of authorization and recognition of such non-official accounts. Creating such space could call official historiography into question, expand the possibilities for interpretation, and render recognition and legitimacy to such voices.

In that sense, the collective memories, counter-memories and identity are intertwined and closely linked to several local processes—political, social, and economic. They are part of complex social connections and reflect the dynamics of societies (Clayer 2007, 2014). I look into these social dynamics through an ethnographic investigation among Roma families around Prishtina and Prizren, conducted in various periods between 2012 and 2013.

In the course of my fieldwork, I worked primarily with Roma individuals, but also with Ashkalis and Egyptians of different backgrounds—community leaders, heads of households, and others, who were not typically active in politics. Most of them were unemployed. The qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews were anonymized by rendering the names of interviewees and places unrecognizable due to the highly political sensitivity of the issues.

For this purpose, a review of the literature on collective memories, political violence, and identity, as well as of writings on similar subjects by various scholars engaged in research in the region was undertaken. The review screened published academic works from an interdisciplinary perspective, including philosophy, anthropology, sociology, history, and political science. I also reviewed grey literature – non-academic books, newspaper, and blog articles related to the Roma in Kosovo. In addition, official government reports, documents, and websites were consulted in order to obtain as much information as possible from a variety of sources and perspectives. Observations and other ethnographic data fed into the analysis, completing and nuancing the data gathered. The information collected was critically analyzed and represents the core of this paper.

The ethnographic accounts and the analyses show that the past is a constant reminder of the compromised loyalties toward the majority group, which in turn dictates the group's (non) relations. They also show how Roma mobilize collective memories to negotiate their place and status, and navigate their present in Kosovo.

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Roma Identity and Politics

Who are the Roma? What is their position in Kosovo? How has this position changed with time and how did it affect the lives of the Roma? I propose a detour from identity and politics to introduce some historical context and make better sense of the present times.

The Roma are one of the ethnic minority groups living in Kosovo that together with Ashkalis and Egyptians form the group known under the abbreviation of RAE. In the Balkans, their presence dates back several centuries (Asséo 1994, 2002; Crowe 1996; Kolsti 1991; Mariushkova and Popov 2001); they speak Romani, a language that constitutes an oral form of Sanskrit (Courtiade 1993; Friedman and Dankoff 1991). In Europe, the Roma are estimated to be about 12 million people (Liégeois 2009), representing the largest ethnic minority within Europe today who have kept their own language and identity without having a territory of reference (Asséo 2002).

Ashkalis and Egyptians have also lived in the Balkans for centuries, in similar economic and social conditions, but they do not speak Romani. The Roma, Ashkalis, and Egyptians in Kosovo are mostly Muslim, though there are some Orthodox and Catholic Roma as well (Elsie 2011, 241). The 2011 census,[3] the first one since Kosovo declared independence in February 2008, shows that about 92.9% of its population is Albanian, while the remainder includes 1.5% Serbs, 1.6% Bosniaks, 1.1% Turks, 0.5% Roma, 0.9% Ashkali, 0.7% Egyptians, 0.6% Gorani, and 0.1% other (ASK 2011). A quick comparison with the 1981 census shows that the composition of the population in Kosovo—77.4% Albanians, 13.2% Serbs, 2.2% Roma, 0.8% Turks, and 6.4% other (ASK 2008, 18)—has been reversed dramatically for some of the minorities after the war, particularly the numbers of Serb and Roma minorities. Other sources suggest that "in the late 1990s, between 100,000 and 150,000 Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians lived in the province, just under 10% of the overall population" (ERRC 2011, 14). However, these estimations were often a matter of dispute (Krasniqi 2015), as both the 1991 and 2011 censuses were partially boycotted, the former by the Albanians and the latter by the Roma and Serb communities in the northern part of Kosovo.

Literature suggests that the Roma have often had a dissonant relationship with the local populations, marked by discrimination and social sidelining (Asséo 1994; Ginio 2004; Stewart 1997). In the former Yugoslavia, these animosities evolved in complex ways and were influenced, for the most part, by the politics of the state (Duijzings 1997, 2000; Sandelin 2004; Trubeta 2005). During Tito's rule in Yugoslavia, the Roma in Kosovo—as in other parts of the Yugoslav Federation—benefited from social and cultural policies, as did other ethnic groups, including Albanians (Ströhle 2016); the federal government even encouraged some of the ethnic groups to strengthen their identity. Unlike other Roma in neighboring countries (Albania, Romania, etc.), the Yugoslav Roma were free to organize themselves in associations[4] and were recognized as one of the ethnic or national minorities (Sardelić 2015). The first radio station started broadcasting in the Romani language in Tetovo (Macedonia) in 1973 (Kamusella 2009, 332; Kenrick 2007) and in Prishtina only in 1983 (ERRC 2011, 13). A pool of university-educated specialists[5] was created (Fraser 1995; Sandelin 2004) as well, despite a lower education level compared to other ethnic groups. Yet, many Roma lived in deprivation, with no running water or electricity, in poor health, with high rates of child mortality, and suffered from racial discrimination (Kenrick 2001; Sandelin 2004; Sardelić 2015).

Several scholars (Barany 2002; Kenrick 2001; Sandelin 2004) argue that to some extent, the Roma were better positioned in Tito's Yugoslavia—and in Kosovo—than elsewhere in Communist Eastern Europe. Contrary to assimilationist and homogenizing national policies in most Eastern European countries that viewed the Roma as a "deviant" social group (Stewart 1997) to be disciplined and normalized (Sula-Raxhimi 2015), in Yugoslavia, Sardelić (2016) argues, they were positioned "between underclass and ethnic group" (2016, 96). Ethnic identities were promoted to build a multi-ethnic society, benefiting the Roma and other ethnic groups (Duijzings

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1997; Trubeta 2005). For instance, the Albanians were represented, like other groups, at the highest levels of the party and state institutions, particularly in Kosovo's urban areas (Ströhle 2016). This situation changed dramatically with the coming to power of Milosevic (Di Lellio 2006; ERRC 2011; Kenrick 2001; Malcolm 1999). The oppression against Kosovo Albanians did not leave the Roma and other groups impartial. The place reserved to one ethnic group in comparison to others created tensions among the social groups who saw those better treated as allies of an oppressive state apparatus (Bieber and Daskalovski 2003; Duijzings 1997). The tensions escalated with the suppression of Kosovo's autonomy by Milosevic in 1989 and with the creation by Albanians of a parallel state and education structure, boycotting Serbian authority in early 1990 (Bieber and Daskalovski 2003; ERRC 2011; Kenrick 2001, 2007). In the midst of the mounting tension between the Serbian authority and the Albanians, the Roma and other ethnic groups had "to choose a society with which to align" (ERRC 2011, 14). One of my Roma interlocutors describes it this way:

> We have always identified with the ethnic group that held the power, in order to have leverage and jobs. And that brought the conflict to us. That's why the Roma were chased away and the majority of Roma left their places. We never fought for territory and it is unfortunate how things turned out for us at the end. (My fieldnotes)

His story resonates with the analyses of several human rights groups (i.e. ERRC) and of other scholars (Duijzings 1997; Kenrick 2001, 2007). It also shows that Roma loyalty was toward those who held power—the Serbs, consequently losing their loyalty toward the Albanians, a majority group with no power at the time. Inevitably, this contributed to increased tensions between these two ethnic groups (Duijzings 1997). The Roma were played against the Albanians and benefited from the federal government's anti-Albanian policies. Some of the tensions, for instance, were related to the fact that the Roma got the jobs of thousands of Albanians who were dismissed en masse by the Serbian government, even if they had been unemployed for many years (Duijzings 1997, 211).

In the early 1990s, other minorities—like the Egyptians—were supported by the political class—particularly of Serbia, but also of the recently independent neighboring Macedonia—to identify as a separate ethnic group, aiming to "weaken the numerical and political representation of Albanians" (Duijzings 1997, 214). For Trubeta (2005, 71), "the Egyptians gained sympathy in Belgrade being perceived to be distinct from the larger Albanian population and potential allies of Serbian nationalists." Other scholars argue that the self-proclamation of the other two identities, Ashkali and Egyptian, was a response to the political pressures from the main ethnic groups to identify with them (Marushiakova and Popov 2001; Sigona 2009). Yet, according to Trubeta, their political representation was ascribed to their otherness as constructed by the dominant society and internalized by Roma and Egyptians, weakening thus their position as equal among other groups at the nation level (Trubeta 2005). Sardelić (2015) calls such positioning of Roma *in-betweenness* and describes it as an ill-defined social, legal, and political position in the context of Yugoslavia and its post-disintegration, granting them a less valuable citizenship, defined by "uneven practical rights" (2015, 163). Sardelić shows through multiple examples how the Romani minorities were forced into this position due to their underprivileged status that policies often failed to address.

In Kosovo, the resentment that was brewing over time gained another dimension during the 1998–1999 war in Kosovo, with the ethnic cleansing campaign against the Albanian population. Many Roma, but also Ashkalis and Egyptians, enlisted in the Serbian army and joined militia groups fighting against the Albanians and were often used as human shields by Serbian militia groups (ERRC 2011). Others, mostly Ashkalis, sided with the Albanians and often protected their neighbors from the Serb reprisals (UNHCR/OSCE 1999). Among the most denigrating tasks they performed were linked to obeying orders and being "posted outside food shops to keep the

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Albanians out" (Kenrick 2007, 144); or other jobs such as grave-digging, transporting dead bodies, setting houses on fire, looting, and destroying properties. Their involvement—unwillingly or not—on the side of the Serbian forces led to targeting the Roma as "Serb collaborators" by Kosovar Albanians (Kenrick 2001, 2007; ERRC 2011). Several reports (Amnesty International 2009; ERRC 2011) documented that the Roma, as well as Ashkalis and Egyptians, were "victims of attacks by Serbs against non-Serb populations, including beating, kidnappings and murders" (ERRC 2011, 17). At the same time, perceived as "Serb collaborators," they also faced retaliation and became the target of attacks and killings by Albanian individuals or groups seeking revenge (ERRC 2011). "They were abducted or killed. Women were raped and houses burned; […] evidence suggests that armed Kosovo Albanian groups systematically targeted members of the Serbian and Romani communities after June 1999" (Amnesty International 2009, 7).

Being caught in the middle of hostilities between Albanians and Serbs during and after the war in Kosovo, thousands of Roma were forced to flee the violence, some huddling in minority enclaves near Fushë Kosovë, and others fleeing to Serbian-controlled northern Kosovo, other countries in the Balkans, or Western Europe. The politics of identity promoted by the Yugoslav government (Duijzings 1997) thus turned into a boomerang for the Roma, Ashkalis, and Egyptians during and after the war, destroying the precarious social ties that held the many ethnic groups together in Kosovo and in the larger context of Yugoslavia. They were caught in "power games beyond their control" (Kenrick 2001, 407) and were a sort of "collateral damage due to their disempowered in-between position" (Sardelić 2015, 173).

As the war ended in 1999, from Kosovo's placement under UN administration[6] until the declaration of independence on February 17, 2008, another identity label was introduced, the RAE, an abbreviation standing for Roma, Ashkalis, and Egyptians. The new label, coined by the international administration in Kosovo (Bhabha et al. 2014; Sigona 2012), represents the new official ethnic identity grouping of the three minorities and ensures them representation in the Kosovo parliament, through the application of specific quotas.

Flexible Identities: Conflicting and Accommodating

It is difficult to trace back when exactly the RAE label was produced. The term seems to have been initially put forward by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Soros Foundation in Kosovo, after the war, to avoid the use of the direct translation of the derogative term *Magjyp* (Gypsy), used by the Albanians as a common denominator for all three groups: Roma, Ashkalis, and Egyptians (see Egyptian interviewee, cited in Sigona 2012, 8). One of my Roma interviewees frames it this way:

> We didn't even know that we would be called differently from that moment on. That was imposed upon us by the internationals. They believe that we are the same. This is ridiculous, to the point that, one time, a job advertisement published in the newspaper by a big foreign company operating in the construction business in Kosovo, stated that the company was looking for someone who could speak Albanian, Serbian and preferably the RAE language. I laughed so much; there is no such thing as a RAE language. There is only the Romani language. Ashkalis and Egyptians are not Roma, they do not speak our language; they speak Albanian and some speak Serbian too. (My fieldnotes)

The dire living conditions of the three communities across Kosovo, and having suffered a similar fate during and after the war, seems like a plausible argument that would have made it easy to access the services provided by the numerous international organizations operating in Kosovo (see also Egyptian interviewee, cited in Sigona 2012). Lichnofsky (2013) argues that their exclusion from the majority and regional loyalties, rather than cultural difference, laid the ground for such denomination. Hence, their collective exclusion and suffering, and narrative about

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violence, received some kind of international recognition, although not in explicit terms, but was articulated and expressed as a recognized and legitimized, albeit imposed, new national identity.

The new label was preserved in the Ahtisaari plan,[7] which formed the basis of the new multiethnic state of Kosovo, including—among others—specific quotas for the minorities' representation in the parliament. As a result, the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities have four reserved seats in the Kosovo's parliament,[8] one for each community and an additional seat awarded to the community with the highest overall votes.

Several interviewees from the three communities were not enthusiastic about the labeling; despite similarities—economic impoverishment and facing social and racial discrimination—they clearly and strongly articulate their differences. Several authors (Bhabha et al. 2014; Duijzings 2000, 2005; Sigona 2012) argue that in today's postwar Kosovo, the singularity of ethnicity is stronger than ever; "an individual identifies primarily as a member of an ethnic group and his/her experience is incorporated, but at the same time silenced, in the generic ethnic collective" (Sigona 2012, 6). Yet, the RAE identity concoction accommodates the three communities, as it ensures a stronger representation, given the small percentage each community represents compared to the overall population; it ensures a stronger public and collective voice.

The Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians I met would sometimes speak with contempt about each other, clearly distinguishing themselves from the other two groups in terms of history, narrative, language, customs, and rituals. Yet, this new category that puts together seemingly disputed and conflicting identities, unites and accommodates the Roma and other identities in Kosovo's new political landscape created with the Ahtisaari plan in the Independent State of Kosovo.

Thus identity, particularly the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian identities, have changed with time and in the specific social and political circumstances, by putting forward one or another identity especially when exposed to violence and life-threatening events. Duijzings rightly argues that "Ethnic identities […] vary and change, are manipulated, imposed, or in return rejected, get slowly lost, discarded, revived or reinvented" (1997, 215). Either self-promoted or imposed, Roma, Ashkalis, and Egyptians make use of these individual and collective identities to better fit new social realities. RAE is thus a brand that not only guarantees *de jure* political representation to the Roma, Ashkalis, and Egyptians in Kosovo today, but also imposes a place for the three communities in the political scene, where they can have a voice, a collective one, however small. If this new reality accommodates the Roma in Kosovo's current political scene, the violence of the past—of war, but also long-term discrimination and the current dire economic and social conditions are strong reminders of frictions among communities, of tensions built over time and anchored into the present. But how is the past manifesting into the present? The next section looks into the remnants of the past and the meanings they carry today.

Remnants of the Past and Present Forms of Violence

Much has changed in Kosovo today. Yet traces of the war still linger around towns and villages, as reminders of the past. Driving through the area of Dragodan, an upscale neighborhood of Kosovo's capital, Prishtina, a winding asphalted road goes up and down the hill linking the lined-up two- or three-story houses with angled roofs to the main arteries in downtown. Dragodan is one of three such hills serving as residence to the city's upper class; it adjoins Velanije, where the Kosovo Albanian elite of the Tito times used to live. But Dragodan had been more mixed. Affluent Roma or Ashkali used to build houses there, an indication that during a period from Tito's rule to the fall of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the better-off benefitted from urbanization and social investment in political structures that sought to maintain a degree of multi-culturality even within government structures. This is not to say that all benefited equally. Ghetto-like Roma and Ashkali neighborhoods had existed in Prishtina, just as documented elsewhere in former Yugoslavia (Kenrick 2001; Kenrick and Puxon 2009; Sandelin 2004).

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But what can be seen now among these houses, about 15 years after the end of the conflict, are only smoke-darkened walls and gutted houses. These ruins are reminders that the relative well being of the Yugoslav period was wiped out by the inherent violence of war. It also shows how brittle the prewar peaceful balance was, and how quickly it disintegrated.

After the war, people from different ethnic backgrounds "swapped" places, mainly through squatting, creating among other things, an enormous property rights problem in Kosovo, unresolved to this day. Others, like the Roma, left forcibly and unwillingly, often without a place to go to (Kenrick 2001, 2007; Schulze 2014), abandoning their houses and neighborhoods. Consequently, in Prishtina and some other places, patches inhabited by the Roma before the war are now either occupied by ethnic Albanians (like in Moravska) or lie abandoned after being burnt down, as in Dragodan. Nothing about these ruins is grandiose. They are neither monuments nor memorials—these *lieux* of official memory production (Nora 1989; Halbwachs 1992); they lie rather abandoned and unacknowledged. Yet, they serve as mnemonic devices, as an epitome of remembering (Stewart 1996) of a past gone, of a life displaced and shattered. As Stoler argues, and I concur, these ruins are not just "leftovers" […], but rather underline "what people are left with," suggesting that the ruins are rather pointers of the ways people deal with loss and make sense of "the material and social afterlife of structures and sensibilities" (Stoler 2008, 194).

In this "*théâtre de guerre*" (Pandolfi 2008), both sides—to various extents—have been victims of violence and suffering (De Sario et al. 2001; Lafontaine 2001). According to several reports (ERRC 2011; HRW 2010), about two-thirds of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians live outside Kosovo, while others cannot go back to their former homes, either because they have been occupied by Kosovar Albanians or because of irregular ownership papers. The Roma, Ashkalis, and Egyptians mostly live in isolated informal settlements or camps, scattered in a few places in Kosovo, leading to further segregation (OSCE 2008).

Such mass displacements and the ruins they leave behind, as Stoler argues, are "typically state projects, ones that are often strategic, nation-building, and politically charged" (Stoler 2008, 202). These ruins have a life of their own, in that they are produced at a specific time, in specific places, by specific actors carrying out their political project. Hence, the discussion around the displacement and such ruins points inevitably to the politics of nation-building, to the stories they tell but which are silenced, and to the social life that once existed but now is destroyed.

As thousands of Roma, Ashkalis, and Egyptians were forcibly returned—pressured particularly to leave EU countries, lack of security and difficulties in finding a job, have motivated many to leave Kosovo again (IOM 2013; HRW 2017). Their displacement in and out of Kosovo and the life-threatening postwar atmosphere disrupted irreversibly the lives of the Roma. With high illiteracy rates, widespread poverty—more than 36% living in extreme poverty (Sigona 2012)— and an unemployment rate of about 98%, compared to the 35% unemployment rate nationally (WB and ASK 2013), the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities are the poorest in Kosovo today. Precariousness, deep poverty, social and economic insecurity, and a lack of perspective for the future, are strong reminders that the past is a direct cause of the present forms of violence. Feim, a Roma in his forties, who lives in a Serbian village, brings both past and present together in his stories:

> During the war, we did not dare go outside. Until KFOR forces came, we lived in fear of attacks from our neighbors. We remained here; gunfire was heard every time they passed by our house; they would throw stones at us when we were walking on the streets. After the war, seventeen Roma and Serbian houses were set on fire in our village, then many families left. My uncle left, too. As they do not speak the Albanian language that well, he and his family cannot come back, they would be easily recognized; they fear for their life here. (My fieldnotes)

Later that day, Feim showed me the place where his in-laws used to live. Only few burnt ruins taken over by vegetation could be seen. "My in-laws left Kosovo in 1999 and got shelter in

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Shutka, the Roma neighborhood in Skopje, where they still live." Feim, too, switched neighborhoods and neighbors, from Albanian to Serbian ones.

> We are Muslims, but Albanians do not like us and the Serbs are Christian Orthodox. We are neither part of the Serbian structures, nor of the Albanian ones. But since the Independence of Kosovo, the situation is stable. Now, our biggest problem is the economic situation. Nobody has a job in my village. In my family, we are all unemployed and live on social assistance from both governments, Kosovo and Serbian, both amounting to about 120 Euros per month. I cannot get a job although I am a trained car mechanic. At a job interview, when they learned that I'm *magjyp*, they said, "sorry we don't have a job for you." Many Roma have changed their names here to pass for an Ashkali or Egyptian, hoping to find a job. We are really stuck here; nobody will hire us. I also collect cans and other recyclable stuff to top up the social assistance payment. (My fieldnotes)

While describing the life-threatening brutalities suffered during and after the war, Feim's story displays the ambiguous place of Roma communities today, the fear and lack of security—particularly social and economic—for those who live in Kosovo or those who wish to return. It shows that both Serbs and Albanians keep the Roma at a distance, deepening the divide along ethnic lines. In the past, they were sandwiched between the two ethnic groups—the Serbs and Albanians—that switched power; today, although not directly and physically threatened, both sides reject the Roma, keeping them "on the margins of narratives of homogenizing a nation" (Bhabha 2008, cited in Sardelić 2015, 163). Cornered in such a position, the Roma believe they stand a better chance if they present themselves as *magjyp* in order to find a job, trying to pass, discretely, for Ashkalis or Egyptians, hiding, switching, or fusing their identities between the two others. The name change came up on several occasions during the interviews (by several Roma, Ashkalis, and Egyptians, by a high official at one of the UN agencies and a few representatives of well-known NGOs working with the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities), pointing to the fact that the fear of identifying as Roma has motivated many in Kosovo to change their names to Albanian ones, or hide their identities. Identity thus becomes flexible and interchangeable, whether it concerns entering the job market, making a living, or building different social relations with the majority and restoring loyalties. This should be read as a way of coping with the violent past, but also as an attempt to get out of extreme poverty and as a possible protection measure in case violence makes a comeback. It is a survival strategy used among the Roma minorities.

As Feim tells his story, he lowers his voice as if he were telling a secret; "shush…someone might hear us." He is cautious, although the closest people to us are sitting at a table, which is too far for them to be able to listen in. His memories often come out inarticulate, like random pieces of a puzzle, sometimes illustrated with figures, and at other times with descriptions. He tries to convey a message that is not linked only to him and his personal story, but rather to the Roma as a collective that suffered in Kosovo. On another occasion, I told one of my interviewees to choose a discreet meeting place, rather isolated, but still public (in a public garden for instance), while another one preferred to have the interview in his car, after having decided against two different coffee shops. He became nervous by the way four Kosovar Albanian men in one of the coffee shops in Prishtina were staring at us. Their demeanor had a completely different meaning to my interviewee; the memories of fear and violence of the war came back to him somehow; memories of violent events due to the alleged compromised loyalties toward Kosovar Albanians. It shows that the Roma—at least the ones I met in Kosovo—have not yet overcome the fear of the war and postwar events.

Fear, as a mechanism triggered by concerns such as safety and security (Petersen 2002, 2011) refers in this case to the ethnic violence that the Roma as a collective were exposed to and to memories of violence. The display of fear could be interpreted in association to a rather unsafe and relatively unstable environment the Roma are currently living in. Several reports

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(OSCE 2008; ERRC 2011) have documented that fear and poverty are the two main afflictions of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. On the one hand, fear is a reminder of the violent past that exposed the Roma to death and destruction and, on the other, a warning signal to be extra cautious in public spaces and to remain as unobtrusive as possible, in order to ensure a certain stability in the present. That translates into keeping the Roma more isolated in their neighborhoods, furthering their segregation after the war. Fear, closely linked to the experiences lived during the tumultuous conflict, in the form of collective memories, becomes a constant and practical companion to their survival and ability to navigate everyday life (Das 2007). Connecting the dots between the ruins, the displacements, and the lives in the aftermath of such destruction, might give a voice (Das 2007) to these unacknowledged, fragmentary, yet important stories that could open in unexpected ways to "differential futures" (Das 2007; Stoler 2008, 195).

Collective Memories and Counter-Memories

Schulze reminds us that "memory is not a simple and straightforward recounting of past events. It is the wide field where the battle is fought over the framing of individual and collective identities and, even more importantly, over the interpretation of the past" (2014, 136). What do Roma remember about the violent past? How do their individual experiences resonate into a collective experience, which qualifies as collective memory? What do they make of it and how does it intermingle with identity?

Muhamet remembers and describes the relations of the Roma to place in these terms:

> In our neighborhood, we had very good relations with Albanians. During the war, many Roma kept the keys and watched many Kosovar Albanian houses forced to flee during the ethnic cleansing campaign in 1998 and 1999. But then, things changed for the worst, we were accused of being Serb collaborators. (My fieldnotes)

He remembers a time when relations of trust and loyalty with the Albanians were possible in his area; they helped each other, they cared for each other. This was the case in other places, too. For instance, in the town of Podujeve, and the villages of Krusha, Samodrazhe, and Arze, the Roma sided with the Albanians and were thus spared from retaliations (UNHCR/OSCE 1999).

> We did not suffer the same thing. In Prishtina, it was very difficult. Imagine that in 2002, I was not able to go to Prishtina because everybody would recognize from my skin color that I was a Roma. For me, it was much easier to go to Tirana than to Prishtina. People would say: he is *magjyp*, collaborator, a black–hand,[9] and what not. In fact, we [Roma] have always been discriminated, firstly, by the prejudices of the non-Roma people—Albanians, Serbs, and others; secondly, our own self-discrimination, which we have inherited from one generation to another. (My fieldnotes)

Despite any historical inaccuracies, by remembering specific events, my interviewee tries to make sense of a collective understanding of what happened and indicates that violence was not homogenous throughout Kosovo; some places were more affected than others, based mainly on the degree of loyalty built in different localities among the communities. He also reminds us that they were racially discriminated against, making them easy targets and adding another layer to the complex relations with other communities. Racial discrimination and sidelining, as my interviewee suggests—and as several scholars (Asséo 1994, 2002; Duijzings 2000; Fraser 1995; Sardelić 2015; Silverman 2014; Stewart 1997) have long documented and analyzed—is not just a question of postwar phenomena; it has been there for centuries, taking different forms of exclusion at different times. Even during Tito's regime, discrimination was present (Duijzings 2000; Sandelin 2004), manifested as a form of violence expressed through high poverty and low education rates, hard living conditions, abusive, demeaning, and neglectful attitudes by the majority population and the political class, conditions that have nurtured lifelong exclusion. This

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form of violence qualifies for what Farmer (2004) calls in another context "structural violence." Sardelić (2015, 162) calls it epistemic violence,[10] a non-physical form of violence, referring to particular discursive practices in the games power and knowledge play. The war got the already existing structural violence to another level of irreversibility and destructiveness.

Despite their specificities, the stories collected during the interviews converge toward a common point—they add the missing parts to the puzzle of violence and suffering of Roma, Ashkalis, and Egyptians during and after the war, as well as their present consequences. These experiences are remembered, told, and kept alive via vernacular and oral storytelling among the Roma, as "Roma memories and narratives remain mostly unconnected to the wider narrative and collective memory" (Schulze 2014, 131). Yet, these accounts give voice to "locally produced stories" (Das 1989, 324), as individual experiences of a collective violent past, which, remembered individually and collectively, form part of Roma collective memories. In her seminal work concerning violence during the Partition of India, Das (1989, 2007) uses the notion of voice, borrowed from Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, to convey important messages about voices unheard or silenced that suffered from such violence. For her, such voice is not "an account of speech or utterance, but an element that might animate words, give them life" (Das 2007, 6), tell a story that has been omitted or refused to be heard. Due to the community's ambiguous relationship with the majority, Roma memories and narratives about the violent past are not part of the dominant and official discourse, nor are they part of official commemorations and celebrations of the past. These official memories and narratives are, among others, about how Albanians fought and won against adversity. This dominant narrative is one told by men about men waging a liberation war and building the nation (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006; Di Lellio and Salihu 2014; Luci and Krasniqi 2006). The Roma were regarded as alleged "Serb collaborators," disloyal to the Albanians during the conflict; their stories are precisely the opposite of that of the heroes in the dominant narrative. Roma memories tell a story that has been silenced and unrecognized by the majority, a story told by the voices that are not heard, that are refused to be heard or are silenced (Das 1989, 2007); a story told by voices of discord (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006), which do not necessarily fit into the master narrative and are thus left out (Di Lellio 2016). Yet, I agree with Das's argument here that giving voice to such accounts does not merely mean making them known, but rather "acknowledging and recognizing the pain and suffering of individuals and communities" (2007, 57).

These are "counter-memories" (Foucault 2001; Rabinow and Rose 2003) that can only pass through vernacular channels to be told; they tell the story of a past transmitted through "traditional practices of storytelling in which history, legend and personal memory are mixed" (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006, 526). These are counter-memories developed through "counter-narratives" (Bamberg 2004) outside of the master narrative.

Yet, the "collective past," expressed in the interviews through similar and concurring stories, all blending into a (counter)narrative about the violence and suffering which, in another context, Malkki called the "collective voice" (Malkki 1995), becomes the mechanism for their story to be told, to show their suffering, bear witness to the hurt done to society (Das 2007) and, at the same time, consolidate their collective narrative as a group, which remains outside of the official narrative. For, giving "voice" to such stories, as Das contends, is not a matter of quantity or accessibility of material, but rather a question of recognition of these account by official historiography (Das 1989; 2007). It means to acknowledge such historical points of discontinuity (Foucault 2001) that would allow for some closure and looking toward the future.

In recent years, other alternative forms of recollection of memories of those who suffered during the war have emerged—such as the Kosovo memory book database, since 2014, the Oral History initiative, since 2012, or personal stories published by NGOs or individuals. Several Roma stories and voices have been included and are now part of some of these initiatives. Yet, Roma collective memories remain largely silenced and unheard (Schulze 2014); they are the counter-memories and the missing parts in the main narrative that keep history from becoming a

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whole. I would like to think that the Roma are neither Kosovo's "abandoned minority" (ERRC 2011) nor its "forgotten citizens" (Galjus 1999, cited in Sigona 2012, 3), but rather a people whose pain and suffering is acknowledged and recognized.

Conclusion

By calling on Benjamin's thesis on history (1968), my intention was not to write a historical article, nor to complete the missing bits in the puzzle of Kosovo's history before, during, and after the war; nor do I claim to have the single absolute truth about the past. Rather, I combined the historical perspective with an ethnographic one to understand how the past is remembered and how the Roma live and cope with it today; how these memories are used as reminders of what happened, in order to navigate the system and find their place in Kosovo's political, social, and economic landscape.

Memories of violence—individual and collective—bring back the memories of experiences lived not so long ago, memories that are still present through the presence of ruins, manifestation of fears, expressed by avoiding places, by hiding or switching identities, or simply by refusing to return to Kosovo. At the same time, these memories show that the past is a constant reminder of the compromised loyalties toward the Albanian majority, which in turn dictates their (non) relations and maintains a certain established distance, both physical and social. Such compromised loyalties still lie at the heart of their relationship with the majority and ultimately affect the Roma's (but also Ashkalis' and Egyptians') political, social, and economic situation and their social adherence to society at large.

The Roma (Ashkali or Egyptian) narratives and their suffering have been left out of the dominant discourse produced in Kosovo by the national master narrative built around the national heroic and sacrificial figure who resisted the Serb oppression and fought the enemy (Di Lellio and Schwandner-Sievers 2006). Their voices tell a story that is silenced and goes rather unrecognized (Das 2007) by the majority, a controversial story that is not written yet and is still in search of recognition. The master narrative consolidated around a very specific victim and sacrificial hero does not allow breaches or multiplication of heroes or enemies. Thus, the Roma stories feed into a counter-narrative (Bamberg 2004) and their memories are counter-memories (Foucault 2001), the complementary "points of historical discontinuity that need to be made visible" (Foucault 2001; Rabinow and Rose 2003, 366). Therefore, the single truth becomes many truths through different individual stories and collective voices as they are remembered; truths that are pronounced as a knowledge that exists and circulates as oral history but is still unrecognized, hence it is disqualified.

Yet, the individual and collective stories told by the Roma—although outside of the official discourse—have managed to capture the attention of human rights and international organizations that have administrative power in Kosovo and still influence its government's decisions. These experiences and memories served also as motivation in the creation of a new identity, internationally negotiated and imposed—the RAE; a newly designed identity that ensures both Roma and the other minorities who suffered a similar fate, political representation in Kosovo.

We are fully aware that by voicing their stories of the past through some selected pieces of memory, the participants in this research, Roma, Ashkalis, and Egyptians, bring forward, use, and manage their position and identity (Bamberg 2004). However, their stories show that the identities they embrace, often conflicting ones—disputed, flexible, fused, fluid, transformed, and reconfigured again, but products of the local and specific socio-political context—accommodate the Romani in Kosovo's new political landscape. Their narratives suggest that memories of the past turn into a tool to adapt to new realities and negotiate their place within the new context; a place that is merely guaranteed constitutionally, while their voices remain unheard, in need of acknowledgement.

https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2018.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Financial Support. I acknowledge the support from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), which funded my doctoral research through the Vanier Graduate Scholarship.

Notes

1 See Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1968), particularly his notes on the Paul Klee's painting "Angelus Novus" that Benjamin calls the angel of history. The quotation is from Benjamin 1968, 257.
2 In the English version I use "Kosovo," the internationally recognized designation for the country. However, in the direct citations from conversations with Albanians, I use the Albanian version "Kosova," commonly used by the people I worked with. Similarly, I use "Prishtina" instead of "Pristina."
3 The number of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians, representing in total about 2% of the population, was respectively: 8,824 Roma, 15,436 Ashkali, and 11,524 Egyptians.
4 More than 40 local Roma organizations exited and adhered to the first Romani Federation of Serbia by 1975 (Kenrick 2001).
5 Only about 100 Roma had university degrees in the entire Yugoslavia (Sandelin 2004, 169), trained as doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, etc.
6 From the end of the war in 1999 until recently, Kosovo was governed by an international presence, such as KFOR (Kosovo Force), the NATO peacekeeping forces that entered Kosovo in June 1999 following the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1244, to secure the population and environment in Kosovo. At the same time, the same UN legal framework mandated a United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which stayed in force until the independence of Kosovo in 2008. The latter was replaced by the European Union Rule of Law Mission (EULEX), a body that is present in Kosovo to this day. All these governing bodies in Kosovo—local and international—used the same term—RAE—to describe the Roma, Egyptian, and Ashkali communities.
7 The Ahtisaari Plan is the comprehensive proposal for the establishment of the State of Kosovo, which includes, among others, constitutional provisions, community rights, and provisions on the justice system.
8 The Parliament of Kosovo has 20 reserved seats for minorities, out of a total of 120.
9 "Black-hand" and "white-hand" are derogatory vernacular terms used both by the non-Roma and the Roma to refer to each-other.
10 Sardelić borrows the term from Spivak (1988), who in turn borrowed it from Foucault (1966).

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Cite this article: Sula-Raxhimi, E. 2019. Reading the Present Through the Past: The Roma in Postwar Kosovo. *Nationalities Papers* 47: 217–231, doi: 10.1017/nps.2018.23