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# The Bosnian House: Trajectories of (Non-)Return Among Bosnian Roma in a Roman Shanty

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## Abstract

This article draws on materials collected during ethnographic fieldwork among Bosnian Roma refugees who reconstructed homes in an urban shanty at the periphery of Rome (Italy). In the last two decades, many of these Roma started building or refurbishing houses in villages in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, close to the Serbian Republic (where their former home village is now situated). The construction, refurbishing, and maintenance of these houses played (and still play) a role in the local economy; they also changed the local landscape and became the mark of a new but intermittent presence in post-Dayton Bosnia. The houses and the transnational practices connected to them have become tokens of economic success and aspirations that revolve around both the Bosnian context and the Roman one. They also express nostalgic attachments to a lost homeland radically transformed by war, foreign interventions, and the advent of the market economy and eventually turned into an unfamiliar place. This article builds on the literature on transnational migration and material culture and explores the ambivalence and complexity of transnational trajectories that stretch between an urban context in the EU and a rural one in non-EU and reveals complex scenarios of identity, movements, and unlikely returns.

## Keywords

Bosnia and Herzegovina; Bosnian Roma; house-making; nomad camps; refugees; returns; Rome

## 1. Introduction

I sit on a worn sofa in a self-built veranda in a nomad camp at the periphery of Rome. It is a September afternoon in 2023. Osman (a pseudonym, like all other persons’ names in this article, respecting the privacy of my interlocutors) sits next to me, complaining about the pain in his back, a common affliction among the camp’s inhabitants, whose livelihoods gravitate around the collection of scrap metal. In my left hand, I hold

a hand-rolled cigarette with Bosnian tobacco, which Muradif (Osman's uncle) brought from a recent trip to Bosnia. The chipped cup in my right hand is, like the sofa, a byproduct of scrap-metal collection: "Good persons" getting rid of metals often give away other stuff. The cup contains sweet, scorching coffee prepared "the Bosnian way." Drinking it while sitting together, alternating conversations and silence, is a symbolically loaded gesture that expresses and produces social and emotional vicinity; it is embedded in the old ways that my hosts, like many diasporic Bosnian Roma—cf. Saletti Salza (2003)—brought from their home country. "What shall I do?" rhetorically asks Osman. He continues:

I like it here, but it's harsh: Look at the rats, the cockroaches infesting the interstices of the walls, the broken pipes....We spent one month without electricity this winter! Always a problem, and the city authorities don't care. What are we, beasts? You saw how it is in my house in Bosnia! There, everything is clean, tidy, new! Not like this mess.

Osman knows I can judge his words by myself: In 2018, I accompanied him and other Roma of the camp to a village in eastern Bosnia, where he and many of the camp's inhabitants have properties. The few weeks spent there were punctuated by works and renovations: Osman had a bathroom constructed, leaks in the roof fixed, and old window frames replaced by new ones. Osman's brother hired workers to dig a new drainage around the house he recently built on an adjacent plot. Sitting on the sofa, Osman is now proudly evoking the house to draw a stark contrast with the living conditions in the camp. But I also notice a contrast between this assertion and the words he pronounced a few days earlier when he said: "This house has eaten all our savings, all our energy...and what for? It stays there, I live here, my kids want to be here....It's not like before, better to sell and be done with it!"

I often encountered such contrasting statements during my fieldwork; they express a complex and ambivalent situation, which, in this article, I try to unpack. Under attention are transnational practices and imageries of Bosnian Roma refugees whose everyday existence unfolds in an urban ghetto in the Roman peripheries but whose movements and material and emotional investments are also directed to rural villages in the post-Yugoslav space. Research demonstrated that homemaking processes may occur simultaneously in separated yet interconnected spaces (Brun, 2015; Van Hear, 2014) and temporalities (Ballinger, 2012). Multiple, fragmented, and at times conflicting experiences of "home" thus combine, also simultaneously, for instance, when returns to the ancestral land (either to resettle or just for a visit) become a source of migrants' "surprise, confusion and disappointment" (Maruyama et al., 2010, p. 3; see also Wessendorf, 2007; Wojtynska, 2016). The intricacies of return and homemaking are extremely evident in the post-Yugoslav context. In the aftermath of the 1990s conflict, many refugees avoided resettling in their home villages if another ethno-national group controlled these. More often, in the difficult search for a normal life, they ended up in places populated and governed by their ethno-national group, but which they never inhabited before (so-called "majority returns"). Trapped between displacement and emplacement and belonging and non-belonging, refugees remained strategically mobile and dispersed in and out of the post-Yugoslav context. Returns thus proved to be problematic, partial, and temporary, and homemaking turned out to be an incomplete, multi-situated, and continually negotiated process (Čapo, 2015; Jansen, 2007; Skrbiš, 2007; Stefansson, 2006, 2010).

This study explores the complexity of returns in the post-Yugoslav space by examining the intersection of Roma mobility and material culture. Several studies have addressed the making of houses in contexts of

transnational migration. Scholars conceptualized houses as “dynamic material forms” (Dalakoglou, 2010, p. 762) embedded in flows of materials, money, and persons and rising at the intersection of multiple discourses concerning home, nation, race, gender, and generation (see also Basu & Coleman, 2008). Some have explored how houses in the host country contribute to the (albeit partial and incomplete) homemaking processes in contexts of forced displacement and diaspora (Brun, 2015; Miller, 2008). Others focused on the construction or refurbishing of houses in the home country and argued that houses are an economic investment and testimony to a successful migratory trajectory; they may act as a “proxy presence” in their owners’ absence (Dalakoglou, 2010) but also mark the distance that at times develops between migrants and their original background (Smith & Mazzucato, 2009).

As per the specifics of Roma migration, research underlined the heterogeneity of migration strategies and reflected on the complex relations that migrant Roma develop with home and host countries (Durst & Nagy, 2018; Matras & Leggio, 2018). Roma returns to the post-Yugoslav space attracted less attention but were nonetheless addressed by works (Krasniqi & Stjepanović, 2015; Sardelić, 2018) that evidenced the impact of poverty and anti-Gypsyism on Roma returnees. Scholars also researched the nexus between Roma migration and the making of houses in the home country (especially from the female perspective); they thus conceptualized houses as processual entities that express both attachment to the place of origin and upward socio-economic mobility (Benarrosh-Orsoni, 2019; Tesar, 2016). These studies, however, focused predominantly on Romanian Roma and thus on situations in which home villages remain reference points of Roma transnational circuits. The intersection of Roma multi-sited house- and homemaking practices in the post-Yugoslav context, instead, remains largely unexplored.

This article addresses this gap of knowledge by drawing on ethnographic materials collected over 20 years of research among a network of Bosnian Roma families who define themselves as *Xoraxané* (that is, Muslim) and more specifically as *Xomá* (a term which, for analytical purposes, I will hereon adopt to distinguish them from other Roma groups and individuals, including other Bosnian *Xoraxané* Roma). Identity and sense of belonging to the restricted *Xomá* community (about 300–400 persons) are based on a thick web of family ties and a history of cohabitation and working collaboration in Bosnia and, later, in Rome. The *Xomá* network is then connected to a larger network of diasporic Yugoslav Roma (predominantly *Xoraxané*) stretching across Italy, the EU, North America, and the post-Yugoslav space, with whom *Xomá* share friendship, family linkages (due to inter-group marriages), and intermittent experiences of cohabitation in Rome’s nomad camps. I started following the vicissitudes of *Xomá* families in 2001 when conducting participant observation in Roman shanties inhabited by Yugoslav Roma. After two years of fieldwork, I moved to Iceland but maintained a continuity of research through regular return trips to the *Xomá* settlement in Rome. Although embedded in this long history of relation, this article builds primarily on materials that emerged from research activities conducted in the last six years and combined digital ethnography with traditional forms of multi-sited ethnography in Rome, Bosnia, and the Serbian Republic.

In pre-war Bosnia, the *Xomá* dwelled in houses, practiced seasonal itinerant economic activities (such as scrap metal collection and the sale of vegetables in markets), and lived what they nostalgically recall as “a peaceful and happy life” (Solimene, 2019). Since they arrived in Rome in 1992, instead, they have been facing the xenophobia and anti-Gypsyism that pervade Italian society (cf. Hepworth, 2014; Tosi Cambini & Beluschi Fabeni, 2017). Well documented are episodes of grassroots aversion towards the Roma population in Rome. Renowned are also the institutional repressive and exclusionary practices that revolved around the

so-called “nomad camps’ policy” and exposed Roma to discrimination, dehumanization, and ghettoization in urban shanties (Daniele, 2011; Sigona, 2011; Solimene, 2018). At present, most *Xomá* have Bosnian citizenship and a regular permit to stay in Italy (though some still lack a visa); young generations, born in Italy, are acquiring Italian citizenship. However, most live in a state-run nomad camp situated outside the urban area. The camp, fenced and guarded by cameras and police, is a conglomerate of portacabins provided by the city authorities 20 years ago and now battered by time and overcrowding. Self-made constructions and trailers were subsequently added by its inhabitants. Spontaneous readjustments of the dwelling space, formally prohibited but de facto tolerated, enabled the *Xomá* to compensate for the lack of infrastructure and maintenance and to re-appropriate an externally imposed and regimented space and turn it into a home. Homemaking also builds on domesticating the urban territory, which the *Xomá* frequent every day for working activities (mainly scrap-metal collection), everyday chores (buying food, attending schools, going to the doctor), and leisure (going to the gym, cinema, restaurant, or visiting a relative outside the camp). Though rarely recognized, their long-standing rootedness in the city’s local economic, social, and cultural fabric disclaims reductive portraits of the *Xomá* as dangerous outsiders segregated in an urban ghetto (Solimene, 2022).

As I will explain in the following pages, in the last two decades, many *Xomá* started building or refurbishing houses located in Bosnian villages that they never inhabited before. Indeed, after the war, their former home village ended up in the Serbian Republic, an entity created by the Dayton agreements (cf. Donais, 2005; Pugh, 2002). Like many other Bosniaks (Muslim Bosnians), most *Xomá* avoid traveling there for fear of discrimination by the Serbian majority. I will argue that the Bosnian houses became the mark of a new but intermittent *Xomá* presence in post-Dayton Bosnia, which played (and still plays) a role in the local economy and contributed to changing the local landscape. Talking about a (majority) return, however, would be an error. Indeed, the intricacies of returns in Bosnia are further complicated by the *Xomá* rootedness in Rome and the impact of intersecting forms of anti-Gypsyism consolidated in both the Roman and the Bosnian contexts. The Bosnian houses will thus be the lens to explore the ambivalences and complexity of transnational practices that connect a Roman shanty to rural villages in eastern Bosnia and thread together nostalgic memories and future aspirations. This article thus unpacks complicated scenarios of identity, inter-ethnic relations, and movements, whose future implications for the *Xomá* remain highly unpredictable.

## 2. “Going to Bosnia”: From Returns to Departures

When in 1992, the Serbian paramilitary troops attacked their home village, the *Xomá* rushed out of their houses and fled; through different adventurous routes, they eventually reunited in an informal shanty in Rome, where some relatives had been dwelling for years. The trajectories of the *Xomá* and the relatives who initially hosted them in Rome crossed on various occasions, reflecting complicated relations where family ties and a sense of common belonging intersected with recurring animosity between the two networks. At the time of the *Xomá* arrival, the exceptional circumstance temporarily set aside old frictions and for some years *Xomá* shared with their relatives in Rome intersecting dimensions of (in)formality: housing (illegal settlements that lacked any kind of infrastructure), juridical (nobody had a visa or the refugee status formally recognized, and many lacked any official document attesting to their identity), and economic (begging, peddling, and scrap-metal collection without authorization). However, the rise of new tensions led the two groups of families toward separate but not completely disconnected paths (for a detailed analysis on regard see Solimene, 2018, 2019).

When I first met them in 2001, the *Xomá* still dwelled in an informal settlement and lacked visas, but had gradually got acquainted with the Eternal City, where they eventually reconstructed a sense of home and normalcy (Solimene, 2022). They were grateful that despite the war and forced displacement, they were still living together (like they once did in their home village) and supported each other against the challenges implied by lack of documents and working and housing informality. However, the sense of loss stirred by the collapse of former Yugoslavia was very tangible. Bits of the lost home filled various aspects of daily life in the camp: food, music, celebrations, daily practices of hospitality, and neighborliness were all expressions of nostalgic attachment. Bosnia was also maintained alive by memories about the good life before the war, “when Tito was alive and the denigrative word *Cigan* [Gypsy] was prohibited by law,” when the *Xomá* traveled freely in summer and spent winters in their houses, cultivating the good relations with neighbors (Roma and non-Roma; Solimene, 2019).

For years, the *Xomá* nourished the dream of a return to pre-war normalcy. After the official end of the hostilities, many had ventured into exploratory journeys back to their home village, even if undocumented. In my first years of fieldwork, some kept returning from Bosnia with news, pictures of their houses, and accounts of friendly encounters with old neighbors and with the “good persons” who were “taking care” of the house. The “good persons” were Serbian refugees occupying houses informally; but their presence guaranteed that a house would not be dismantled, vandalized, or ruined. Nonetheless, the lingering shadow of a definitive loss grew stronger at each visit, fueled by the awareness that former Bosniak inhabitants had left and that those “taking care” of a house might eventually occupy it indefinitely—with or without the owner’s consent.

The turn of the century, therefore, coincided with the intersection of several processes. On the one hand, realistic resignation replaced nostalgic fantasies of a return to the past. The relational and emotional entity once revolving around, and symbolized by, the material space of the home-village had been completely erased by war, forced displacement, and the demographic earthquake following Dayton’s treatise—which substantiated the (ethno)national ideologies that the war had radicalized (Donais, 2005; Harland, 2017; Jansen, 2007). On the other hand, a new chapter of the *Xomá* lives had commenced in Rome, where the first steps were made toward regularizing their position as immigrants, and their housing situation. *Xomá* could now travel abroad and come back without incurring problems with Italian law. By obtaining a registered residence in the state-run camp they inhabit today, they formally accessed the right to health, education, and employment (on the Italian mechanism of registered residence see Gargiulo, 2011). These processes redirected *Xomá* nostalgic aspirations, resources, and trajectories elsewhere. This elsewhere was still Bosnia, but “Bosnia,” I came to realize, meant many things: It was the lost home that had existed before the war, the post-war entity created by the Dayton agreements, and the blurring of these two entities and of the temporalities in which they were embedded (cf. Solimene, 2019). Finally, “Bosnia” also referred to a more specific territory, centered around the city of Tuzla, where the *Xomá* had started buying properties.

Tuzla is situated in the north-eastern part of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, near the border with the Serbian Republic. Being among the UN Safe Areas hosting a UNPROFOR contingent during the war (Harland, 2017), its shelling was (relatively) limited; local non-Roma acquaintances of the *Xomá* also emphasized the role of a self-organized militia defending the city (see also Calori, 2015). Tuzla was and still is an important administrative and economic center in the region, renowned for its power plant and the coal mines alimending it. The *Xomá* also mention the market, which many frequented in the old days. Many assert

(but the issue is debated among *Xomá*) that the first to buy a property in the area were Osman and Fadila, who in 2006, spotted a sign of a house on sale while driving on the road that connects Sarajevo to Tuzla. Tuzla was a familiar place, which both had frequented in pre-war times; besides, Fadila's father had spent his childhood there, and her sister lived (and still lives) in its surroundings, married to a local Rom. The house on sale was in a village mainly inhabited by poor people because, although within the administrative territory of Tuzla, it stands on the surrounding hills and in proximity to the power plant and its venomous fumes (cf. Forti, 2021; Holland & Pranjić, 2013). The owner was a local Rom named Medo (now defunct, whom many describe as a wealthy and well-connected person), who had purchased a plot nearby, where he was building a bigger house.

Osman and Fadila bought Medo's house with the savings from the scrap metal collection and the sale of the house in their home village; Bahrudin, a non-Roma acquaintance of Medo's with connections in the local administration, acted as a broker and helped with the bureaucracy and practicalities related to the purchase. In the arch of a decade, almost all *Xomá* between 40 and 60 years sold their old houses (if they could) and bought plots of lands and/or houses in the same area, preferably near properties owned by close relatives, who often would previously inquire and pledge for them in front of local sellers. Bahrudin became one of the reference points for stipulating contracts, requesting building permits, or obtaining the connection to telephone, electricity, and water. In the arch of a few years, Tuzla became a new landmark in the mental maps of the *Xomá*. "Going to Bosnia" or "to our country" no longer referred to a return trip to the home village but rather to departures to villages near Tuzla, which the *Xomá* had never inhabited before.

Bosnia thus became the destination for short stays, usually in summertime, when the large scrap metal collectors in Rome close. Stays in Tuzla gravitated around the construction/refurbishing of the new houses. *Xomá* who didn't own a house or whose house was still uninhabitable, found hospitality in the houses of a relative they were traveling with or rented a room at a hotel nearby. These sojourns also served other practical issues such as renovating Bosnian documents (for instance, a driving license), getting a tooth fixed at a local dentist (cheaper than in Italy), or exploring the possibilities of buying a property. Studies on emigrants visiting their home country (Skrbiš, 2007; Wojtynska, 2016) showed that the distinction between return visits and tourism may be blurry. This is the case of the *Xomá*, who in the last years have been referring to a trip to Bosnia as a "holiday." Indeed, trips entail exciting travel with the ferry boat across the Adriatic Sea and a stop in a restaurant in Jablanica; a few *Xomá* even spend some days in popular tourist locations, in Croatia or on the shores of Bosnian lakes. The main destination of the "holiday," however, remains Tuzla, and most *Xomá* are content with spending some time away from daily life in Rome, enjoying a place they (or their relatives) legally own, and working on its construction/refurbishing, meeting other *Xomá* or Roma acquaintances, chitchatting with a neighbor, or roasting a lamb. Life in small villages is monotonous, but going downtown is always exciting: *Xomá* relish a walk around the street market in Tuzla, or the fresh summer evenings in the historic center, where they blend with the crowd of locals and tourists, stroll around, peek at shops, buy a child a toy at the store owned by Chinese migrants, eat *čevabi* or *palačinke* at a restaurant, or sit at a table outside to enjoy coffee, the local beer Tuzlanska, narghile and/or live music. These spatial practices contrast with those characterizing daily life in Rome, where *Xomá* keep out of the center. Not only the *Xomá* cannot collect scrap metal in Roman central districts, but they are often identified as the incarnation of a negative stereotype there—the Gypsies/Nomads—and thus experience discrimination and harassment, especially by the police. Therefore, they prefer frequenting peripheries and conurbations where they have established friendly personal relations with the local population and authorities, and thus feel relatively safe.

The break from the everyday routine, which moves especially (but not exclusively) tourists (O'Reilly, 2003), has thus quite profound meanings for the *Xomá*: It means a respite from the biopolitical discourses that treat Roma as dangerous criminals, filthy and miserable Gypsies segregated in the nomad camps. In Tuzla, unlike in Rome, the *Xomá* live in a house and do not have to continually face police harassment or forms of everyday racism. As once asserted while walking in Tuzla's center: "Here people treat us with respect, even when they see that we are *Cigani* because we are different from the local ones...you see how these go around, dirty, dressed in rags...here we don't go working with metals, we always dress clean and tidy." In Tuzla, in other words, the *Xomá* feel like well-off and respectable foreigners coming from a globally renowned city (Rome) and enjoying a holiday. Their nice shiny cars, elegant and clean clothes, and above all (at least in their eyes) their houses (or potential ones) would testify to their economic success but also, somehow, to an alleged socio-cultural superiority over local Roma, whom many (included the *Xomá*) frown upon for their destitute conditions and (alleged) lack of education and culture. While interrupting the routine of scrap-metal collection, life in camps, and Italian racism and anti-Gypsyism, in Bosnia the *Xomá* would also eschew the despite and discrimination that target, instead, local Roma, many of whom (except a relatively prosperous minority) struggle with poverty and are pretty visible while begging or searching for scraps on the roads or the city center. This narrative often emerges when *Xomá* talk about Bosnia, especially when complaining about the discrimination they suffer in Rome. Nonetheless, it only presents one side of the coin; in the following sections of the article, I will address the other side and the complexities and ambiguities that hide behind the *Xomá* experience of Bosnia.

### 3. Foreigners' Houses

The *Xomá* are not the only diasporic Roma who, in the last decade, bought properties in the post-Yugoslav space. I met and heard of many other Bosnian Roma who now live in Italy and the Western EU and have made similar investments. The *Xomá* intermittent presence in the Tuzla area is thus part of larger transnational flows of diasporic Roma (see Sardelić, 2018), which in turn are embedded in the wider and much debated politico-economic transformations that occurred after the 1990s wars in the name of peace and neoliberal democracy (Donais, 2005; Jansen, 2007; Pugh, 2002; Stefansson, 2010). In Tuzla, the advent of the market economy materialized in the opening of shiny malls ("like in America," the *Xomá* comment) and chains such as Bingo and Konsum, the flourishing of the tourism industry and the arrival of big and small foreign investors—including members of the diaspora based abroad (Forti, 2021; see also Halilovich & Efendić, 2019). However not all former inhabitants returned after the end of the hostilities, and the policy of majority returns and the contemporary flows of transnational migration (Bergesio & Bialasiewicz, 2023) contributed to the area's demographic reshuffling. It is worth also mentioning the impacts of "foreign proselytizing and Islamic activism" (Hesová & Rašidagić, 2020, p. 721) from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Since the 1990s, these countries joined Western ones in the (re)construction of infrastructures (libraries, schools, youth centers); they also introduced forms of Islam that diverge from Bosnian traditional syncretism and are now spread among Bosniaks educated in madrassas (in Bosnia and abroad) and among former foreign fighters (who were granted citizenship in return for their support during the war).

These changes are visible (at least partly) also in the countryside, which is punctuated by building sites and houses under construction (and often inhabited only intermittently). Bahrudin (the broker) told me that most of these construction works are financed with remittances from abroad—especially in Germany. Like in the cases described by Smith and Mazzucato (2009), emigrants' houses often stem out of the surrounding landscape in terms of dimensions, shape, and esthetics. While typical rural houses are relatively modest and



surrounded by orchards, emigrants' houses have a suburban flare: They are large, sumptuous, square-shaped; their façade is filled with large mirror windows and balconies; wrought-iron railings replace fences fabricated with cheap materials; orchards are replaced by spacious garages, gardens, or bare ground where sometimes piles of second-hand merchandise brought from the EU (working and gardening tools, bicycles, scooters, etc.) are displayed for sale. New properties thus communicate social, cultural, and esthetic distance from the rural context surrounding them, a distance which the wealth (mainly) generated by a successful migratory trajectory in Western EU expresses and (re)produces (see also Halilovich & Efendić, 2019). The *Xomá* house-making activities contributed to altering the local architectural landscape. Some *Xomá* built houses anew (often bulldozing old constructions and orchards); others made visible alterations, adding a floor, balconies, or a garage. Nevertheless, contrary to the Romanian case, where Roma emigrants' houses often exhibit specific ethnic esthetic (Benarrosh-Orsoni, 2019; Tesar, 2016), *Xomá* houses look, from the outside, much like those of successful non-Roma emigrants. It is only inside that a specific *Xomá* taste emerges, materialized in sofas that cover the whole perimeter of a living room, ornate tapestries, or walls decorated with logos of Armani, Versace, or Louis Vitton.

The *Xomá* house-making practices rely on building materials, furniture, ornamental objects, and household items that *Xomá* find while collecting scrap metals in Rome and transport to Bosnia with their vans. Many things, however, are bought in loco. I refer mainly to items such as kitchen and bathroom furniture (ironically, often made in Italy and surprisingly expensive) that *Xomá* want brand-new and of design quality. Local stores, therefore, have found in the *Xomá* regular and prodigal customers. The same is true for local companies and workers in the building sector, to whom the *Xomá*—who lack know-how (their carpentry skills are basic and self-learned) and tools (especially heavy machinery) but are continually investing in improvements, enlargement, and refurbishing—are a source of regular income. *Xomá* desires to personally choose materials and control major works further swells the costs because of the high demand for workers in the building sector in summer. Moreover, while *Xomá* can easily judge esthetic results, quality control is more problematic because flaws become evident with the arrival of rains, frost, and snow (when *Xomá* are already gone). This situation forces *Xomá* to trust local workers' skills and integrity, even if, judging from the rate of problems related to leaks and humidity, my impression is that even crucial works (concerning roof, windows, and drainage) are sometimes poorly executed; this, in turn, implies repairs and thus additional costs. The flow of money that the *Xomá* inject into the local economy is thus considerable and not limited to their short summer stays: During the whole year, they send money to trusted local non-Roma who go after unfinished works, repairs, and maintenance.

The works on the house, and the expenses related to them, are a common topic of conversation among *Xomá*, who not rarely boast about them with pride. In the cases described by Tesar (2016) and Benarrosh-Orsoni (2019), the house and the money spent on a house in the home village testify, in front of the local population (Roma and non-Roma), to the owner's economic success and reputation; in some cases, they thus subvert the local power relations that in pre-migration time forced Roma in subaltern position due to their lower socio-economic conditions. In the *Xomá* case, things are similar, but with a slight difference. The care and resources invested in a house communicate to the non-Roma local population a commonality of morality and tastes, which is functional to distinguish *Xomá* from the local *Cigani*, whose poor habitations would be a mark of social discrimination but also of an alleged lack of "culture" and "dignity." Therefore, the house elevates the *Xomá* from the status of subaltern racialized subjects suffered by many local Roma. It also distinguishes the *Xomá* from many poor inhabitants of rural villages, who cannot afford new and bigger houses. However, the local ethno-scape is not the main stage in which houses (and their costs) impact reputation. *Xomá* are aware

that other inhabitants of the camp in Rome, relatives living elsewhere in the city, or in Italy or the EU, and other diasporic Roma who invest(ed) in properties in the Tuzla area (and more generally the post-Yugoslav space) look (in person or on social media) at each other's properties, compare them, exchange comments, praise or criticize location, dimensions, architectural style, quality of the materials, and the related costs. It is this larger, transnational Roma audience, whose presence in villages around Tuzla is intermittent and new (and therefore whose identity is only relatively affected by the local history of unequal interethnic relations), which represents the main target of a carefully tailored self-representation that makes the house (and the money actually or potentially spent for it) a token of one's character, tastes, resourcefulness, and respectability. But the "conspicuous consumption" (Tesar, 2016) linked to the house is a two-edged sword: It may uplift one's reputation as well as undermine it because money should be spent properly. For instance, many *Xomá* look down on Žarko, a distant relative who spent a fortune on his house. The building's glamour, which once reflected his wealth and attracted admiration, now stirs disapproval by those who look at the unfinished (and uninhabitable) house going into ruin while Žarko, as the gossip goes, "after spending all his money, ended up living like a tramp in Bosnian villages, his wife away and his children under the care of a poor Bosnian woman who only feeds them potatoes." Another more common (and less dramatic) circumstance in which the expenses on a house may trump one's reputation is when they are considered excessive. Many are, according to the *Xomá*, subterfuges when not scams, which locals intentionally tailor to affluent outsiders to squeeze their money. The same money that elevates the *Xomá* status, therefore, can be also a sign of gullibility, and a mark of aloofness from the local context. This ambivalence between belonging and not belonging, a recurrent trope of conversation about Bosnia, will be discussed in the last section.

#### 4. Strangers at Home

The *Xomá* intermittent presence in the Tuzla area is not devoid of ambiguities: While working on their image of wealthy and respectable urbanites who do not mingle with the local "Gypsies," the *Xomá* also claim a Bosniak identity, which locals, in many circumstances, grant them. *Xomá* are, after all, Muslim refugees forcibly dislocated by the war, whose nostalgic attachment to Yugoslavia—a widespread sentiment in contemporary Bosnia, also among young generations (Jansen, 2007; Stefansson, 2006, 2010)—is symbolized and reproduced by their houses. Nostalgia is an essential element at play during the travels to Bosnia. On the way to Tuzla, nostalgic imagery surfaces when praising the beauty of landscapes, the clarity of waters, and the taste of food. Upon arrival, the idyllic landscape of social interactions and good neighborliness (*komšilik*), which is the central trope of Yugonostalgia (Stefansson, 2010), is reawakened by casual encounters with persons belonging to the local ethno-scape (such as the owner of a grocery across the road, or the man selling vegetables in the parking lot nearby) and visits of neighbors (Roma and non-Roma, Bosniaks, and Croats), who drop by at the house entrance and welcome the newly arrived, exchange news, comment on the economic or political situation, or disclose gossip. The feeling of homeliness emerges especially in the interactions with the "good persons" taking care of the house in the *Xomá* absence, who are among the first and more assiduous visitors, as they come to exchange reciprocal pleasantries and small talk, but also to report on the work done during the year and discuss the plans for the following weeks.

The horizon of social relations based on "brotherhood and unity" that had once characterized Yugoslavia is not only the fruit of *Xomá* imagination; as Bahrudin once underlined: "We are all the same: no matter if you are Croat, Bosniak, Serb or Gypsy...or Italian...what matters is that you are a good person" (see also Calori, 2015). However, the nostalgia about a shared idealized past, and the interaction during the summer stays,

bring *Xomá* and locals together only up to a certain point. The initial feeling of homeliness, indeed, gradually weakens with the rising impression of aloofness from the local socio-cultural fabric. No *Xomá* grew up in the area where now they have properties nor spent enough time in their new house to consider it their “home” or to consider the village in which the house is located as their village, as it eventually occurred with a shack in a Roman camp. The *Xomá* often feel like wealthy foreigners that locals learned to squeeze in every possible way. For example, the police might be “polite,” *Xomá* assert, “but they stop us on the road because they see a foreign plate. So, they invent some problem, and then say they will close one eye if we buy them a coffee” (that is, a small bribe). Complaints regard also the local building companies and workers, who “drain our savings without even guaranteeing a good result.” In general, interactions with the local population remain superficial and impersonal: “Yes, they are kind to us...but you never know how much you can trust them...they only mind their own business.” Many also talk about a tension beneath a façade of peaceful relations, the fruit of the scars of the war, and the constant preoccupation about its return: “Here everybody is armed, they are ready for war...you always need to be careful...if you say the wrong word or look the wrong way, you can get into trouble.” Anti-Gypsy sentiments further complicate interactions with locals. Presenting themselves as wealthy outsiders and avoiding mingling with the local Roma in public spaces do not always preserve *Xomá* from distrustful gazes. Alleged ethnic markers such as the presence of many children, gold jewelry, a scarf to hold a baby, breastfeeding in public, darker skin complexion, or Romani language may trigger the adverse reaction of a street vendor, a waiter, or an administrator.

There are exceptions to this landscape of impersonal relations. For example, Osman and Fadila have built an intimate relationship with the family of Izbet, the non-Roma man who had built their house and worked on its renovations. After Izbet’s death, his sons took the legacy and now, together with their mother, take care of the house in Osman’s and Fadila’s absence and remain in regular contact with them during the winter. “These are reliable people” Osman and Fadila assert, to the point that they are among the few non-Roma regularly invited to sit and drink coffee and keep the keys of the house during winter. The same is true for Bahrudin, the broker, who is “always ready to help” and keeps keys and documents (in case he needs them, but also to keep them safe). Nonetheless, even the genuine attachment these persons demonstrate may be stained, in the eyes of the *Xomá*, by self-interest:

Yes, they are good people, and you can trust them; if you ask something, they will do it. But they don’t lift a finger without asking for money...after all, can you blame them? There’s no work in Bosnia.

Finally, ambivalence also characterizes considerations about local Roma, with whom the *Xomá* share the label *Cigani* (which non-Roma locals ascribe them) and a complicated (but undenied) sense of belonging based on a common Roma identity; but with whom interactions are mostly occasional and impersonal. “They are *Xoraxané*, like us, we speak the same language,” *Xomá* assert; however, different places of origin, migratory trajectories and family ties, and a lack of regular contact express and produce a distance in social, economic, and cultural terms. Recent developments might indicate a process of familiarization to the local Roma network. For example, some young *Xomá* recently married girls belonging to local Roma families. However, the bride’s parents were mainly family friends from pre-war times, who ended up living in the Tuzla area (or owning a house there, which they visit in summer), and only in a few cases were they new acquaintances among the local Roma. The fact, then, that two marriages with local Roma girls did not end well alimented the existing imagery that depicts the local Roma as untrustworthy, if not dangerous. Ordinary misery and uncanny behaviors are, according to the *Xomá*, quite common; there are also rumors of local

Roma being behind the thefts that occurred in some houses; I even heard stories of attempted kidnappings of young *Xomá* girls (for, *Xomá* claim, ransom, forced marriage, or trafficking of organs). This imagery especially targets Roma who, at some times, lived in the EU, and whose return to Bosnia was caused by the failure of the migratory path. These Roma, among whom are even distant relatives or persons who in the 1990s lived in the same Roman camp the *Xomá* dwelled in, are considered persons whose lack of judgment led them to “wrong choices” and no other place to go than a poor Bosnian village, where they either live by begging and collecting bottles and scraps, like the stereotypical poor *Cigani*, or become “small gangsters” doomed to the ill-reputed Bosnian jails.

Therefore, in Bosnia, one may have an acquaintance, an in-law, an old friend, or even a close relative (as Fadila); sometimes, families fragmented by the diaspora reunite in Bosnia: In 2019, Fadila and her sister met their mother and brothers (who now live in the US). However, these ties are weakened by distance in the normalcy of daily life, and their re-compositions in Bosnia are ephemeral and irregular because money, visa (in the last years, the pandemic) dictate the possibility of a sojourn to Bosnia, and its length (which rarely exceeds two or three weeks). Besides, going to Bosnia implies a (temporary) detachment from the family members with whom one shares everyday life in Rome. Indeed, extended families rarely move in blocks from the camp; instead, each domestic unit moves independently from the others and usually leaves someone behind to take care of the shack (or simply because there are not enough seats in a car). Therefore, while Rome is considered “home,” a place where, despite all, the *Xomá* feel part of the social, cultural, and economic fabric, and where they live immersed in the communal life of the camp, Bosnia seems instead an unfamiliar place that the *Xomá* are acquainted with, but where they feel “alone” and estranged in their own houses. This is true especially for young *Xomá*, born in and used to Rome, who in summer enjoy the excitement of the travel to Bosnia and of dwelling in a house, but shortly after start longing for the relations and practices they left in Rome, and even for the shacks in the camp, which constitute the stage of their normalcy (Solimene, 2022). In other words, it is in Rome, and not in a house in Bosnia, that the *Xomá* feel at home; because Bosnia is a place full of houses but devoid of the meaningful relations (among Roma and non-Roma) that shape the *Xomá* individual and collective sense of identity and place in the world, and thus that make a place home.

## 5. Conclusions

This article presented the paradoxical situation of Bosnian Roma refugees who, after reconstructing their “home” in a state-run ghetto in Rome, eventually invested in properties in their alleged homeland, Bosnia, but away from their former home village. The rapidity with which transnational practices related to the houses in Bosnia spread in the *Xomá* community might have suggested that a process of (majority) return—at least at an embryonic stage—was taking place; the fact that the disposition of properties in the Tuzla area tended to translate family linkages in spatial terms might have been interpreted as an attempt to recreate, in Bosnia, the village that the *Xomá* had reconstructed in the camp. Reflecting on that period, some *Xomá* seem to acknowledge this. However, they also acknowledge that the growing awareness of the structural problems scourging post-Dayton Bosnia (unemployment, corruption, nationalism, and anti-Romani sentiments) eventually discouraged the fantasies of resettling that, more or less consciously, had initially accompanied the purchase of houses in Tuzla. The result is that, after many years, going to Bosnia has acquired the form of a departure rather than a return. Stays in Bosnia are a holiday, appreciated because they are a break from everyday life in Rome, the camp, work, police harassment, Italians’ xenophobia, and anti-Gypsyism; but they also suspend the normalcy that the *Xomá* have, with time, reconstructed in Rome.

What the houses in Bosnia stand for, therefore, remains drenched in ambiguities and uncertainties. Houses differentiate *Xomá* from “root tourists” (cf. Maruyama et al., 2010; Skrbiš, 2007) but do not make them returnees either; they are vehicles and symbols of the *Xomá* presence in but also absence from Bosnia; they are testimony of their attachment to an ancestral land, but also of the estrangement from post-Dayton Bosnia. Around the houses revolve Yugo-nostalgic memories that (especially among elder *Xomá*) find only fragile materialization in the present, transnational practices and imageries that make life in nomad camps and the Roman peripheries easier to endure and future trajectories that, ironically, might no longer involve Bosnia. Today, the material and emotional investment in the Bosnian houses intertwines with afterthoughts about whether this enterprise was worth it, after all, and whether (as many young *Xomá* assert, contesting their parents’ choices) one might be better off, instead, by selling the Bosnian house.

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