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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Elana Resnick, 2025, *Refusing Sustainability: Race and Environmentalism in a Changing Europe*. Stanford University Press. 272 pages.

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Refusing Sustainability: Race and Environmentalism in a Changing Europe diagnoses a central paradox of European environmental aims: the European project's sustainability practices both depend upon and generate racialized power, with marginalized populations bearing the costs. Drawing on over two decades of ethnographic fieldwork, author Elana Resnick follows the lives, labor, and activism of Roma in contemporary urban Bulgaria. Through fieldwork with street sweepers (mostly Romani women), waste recovery sectors (formal and informal), high level state and European Union officials, and activists in the Romani movement, Resnick explores the entanglements of racialization, politics, environmental sustainability practices, and the financial and legal entrapment of Roma in Bulgaria's path toward Europeanization, identifying a process she frames as "racial sustainability." Resnick argues that these realities produce a "waste-race nexus," such that Roma are seen and racialized as social trash, an extension of the material waste they labor to contain.

Resnick insists on the need to "redefin[e], collectively, what it means to sustain life amid environmental harm and the racializing effects of the top-down progressive projects aimed at alleviating it" (7). Vivid and observant actors drive this ethnography alongside Resnick's insights, including Baka the waste collector, Simon the activist, and Donka the mischievous street sweeper. By centering interlocutors' struggles, joys, and humorous responses to what they view as the absurdities of European modernity—at once a refusal and response to a state apparatus and imperial project that offers "no life," in pursuit of "something else"—the text strives to resist the portrayal of Romani experiences of systemic racism to a "fetish for pain narratives" (27, citing Tuck and Yang 2014) and does so convincingly. Resnick asks readers to reckon with the stakes of aspiration toward Europeanness, modernization's fractally recursive racial hierarchies, and the maintenance of a long-denied "absent presence" of race in Balkan studies.

The book is comprised of a thorough introduction, five body chapters, and a future-looking conclusion. Resnick builds her case around the history and present working conditions of street sweepers and waste collectors in Bulgaria's capital city of Sofia, with chapters 1 and 2 forming the bulk of support for her arguments regarding racial sustainability. Chapter 1 explores contract waste labor, primarily through the lens of Resnick's own eleven-month experience as a paid

street sweeper. Laboring alongside Romani workers, she documents the contingencies and conditions of the sector including sporadic pay dates, seasonal hiring and firing, and a surplus of potential workers, alongside the history of racialized waste collection and her own embodied experiences of racialization through proximity to waste work. This is coupled with a revealing picture of the contradictions of waste recovery for EU recycling mandates in chapter 2. The chapter deconstructs an aspect of the triumphalist narrative of the West's totality over Eastern Europe's socialist past, pointing out that, in Bulgaria, EU "greening" practices rely on socialist-era recycling systems and infrastructures, not to mention the Romani waste collectors who keep Bulgaria on track to meet these goals. Ethnographer and interlocutors alike call into question who can claim Europeaness via the waste industry, and whose sacrifices make (white) European belonging possible.

The additional chapters illustrate how the logics of racial sustainability resonate with other aspects of Romani life. Chapter 3 offers a bleak and at times tragic, but vital, portrayal of the dwindling Romani activist movement after European Union succession in 2007, and the concomitant failures of European integration strategies. Supplementation by life expectancy statistics makes all too clear that the accession-era funding landscape strengthened, rather than alleviated, structural inequality and state surveillance against Roma. The chapter also contributes a critique of civil society mechanisms and the ramifications of project logics on material change, a contribution that resonates in other sectors and locales beyond Bulgaria. The fourth chapter sensitively confronts one of Bulgaria's most blatant stereotypes: Roma voters as opportunists and "political trash" vis-a-vis the waste-race nexus. Centered around the 2011 election cycle as a pivotal moment of Romani political disengagement and increased state surveillance, Resnick demonstrates how the trappings of "progressive" democratic processes and civil society discourses, in a country largely acknowledged to suffer from election corruption, have repeatedly failed the Roma (and the working class, we might add). These closed avenues of change, she argues, yield Romani political disengagement as a refusal of the status quo in the face of institutionalized racism. The final chapter recounts the workplace friendships formed among women sweepers. These intimacies, the chapter argues, enable women to pursue alternative femininities and claim space in public life, while also offering a kind of empowerment beyond the gendered expectations of domesticity awaiting them at home. The conclusion extends this logic, as Resnick argues that community solidarities around water usage and infrastructural repair perform a refusal of Romani discardability.

With its long commitment to a single fieldsite, multifaceted entry points, clear writing, and compelling arguments, *Refusing Sustainability* is instructive for both seasoned and budding ethnographers. Resnick helpfully peels back layers of her research process and invites readers into her own decision-making throughout the text, showing how one might balance the consideration of positionality and humility in the field with taking an uncompromising activist stance. She is especially poignant and even instructive on the role of the outside (white) ethnographer in marginalized communities as she personally reckons with the participation of researchers in imperial and colonial histories. Resnick's self-described journey to her subject speaks to the simple act of looking around at daily life with fresh eyes—one of the outside-ethnographer's greatest gifts to a hosting fieldsite.

Occasional generalizations overlook individual and collective efforts to advocate for Roma communities in Bulgaria, and at times the emphasis on racialization bifurcates race and class as discrete, rather than complexly entangled, issues. Readers might take care to recognize that there *are* white Bulgarians for whom Roma rights are a priority, notwithstanding the intensity of systemic discrimination and racialized violence against this group made clear by this book. Additionally, the book may have benefitted further from engagement with existing contemporary scholarship on Romani life from Bulgarian scholars, especially ethnographic studies of gender and positionality; for the unfamiliar reader or student ethnographer, such discussion would provide a road map of sorts for domestic scholarship with Romani communities vis-à-vis Resnick's own reading of this body of work. For the purposes of Resnick's stated goals, the book does not suffer from this omission.

One of *Refusing Sustainability's* finest contributions is its diagnosis of the fraught and imbalanced relationship between Europe's "centers" and "margins," which Resnick refers to as "asymptotic" (65)—a Europe that Bulgaria can never fully reach. Resnick also points to the impacts of modernization and state corruption on non-Romani Bulgarians, even as she writes to destabilize Europeanness as unmarked whiteness — a plea to recognize the implications of racialization and the pursuit of European normalcy on all Bulgarian life. This critique is written so carefully that it does not deny the experiences of the majority, but rather demands that readers conceptualize race as contextual, as "about power and positionality" (11). As such, the book renders a "through the looking glass" effect for a fresh view of a familiar issue. *Refusing Sustainability* is sure to be a crucial addition to many anthropological and European studies course syllabi, graduate and undergraduate, and a foundational text for discourses on waste, race, ethnicity, and power in the Balkans and beyond.

Works cited:

Tuck, Eve, and Wayne K. Yang. 2014. "R-Words: Refusing Research." In *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, edited by Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn. SAGE Publications.

Author

Sarah Craycraft, PhD. Folklore & Mythology, Harvard University.



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