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The Intimacy of Labor Street Sweeping and the Pleasures of Anything Else

ELANA RESNICK

Street sweepers in Bulgaria, predominantly Romani women, rely on the humor-generating and disruptively joyous friendships they cultivate while performing the racialized labor of cleaning city streets. I write about these relationships through an analytic framework that I call the *intimacy of labor*, building on and diverging from the related concept of “intimate labor” (Boris and Parreñas 2010). Both approaches highlight the mutuality of love and monetized work. However, while intimate labor focuses on how intimacy characterizes certain kinds of work, my approach differs by centering not on labor itself but on the relationships that emerge through the conditions of the racialized workplace. Within this paradigm, an intimacy of labor framework highlights how laborers, using close workplace friendships, collaboratively generate new forms of living based on humor, pleasure, and play. Their friendships enable them to disrupt society’s denial of their power and open up the possibilities for multiple loving, kind, collaborative otherwises (Ballestero 2019; Povinelli 2011)—manifestations of what sweepers call “anything else” (*neshto drugo*).¹ These

I remain grateful to the team of sweepers who let me work with them and laugh alongside them. Their generosity, friendship, and sense of humor inspired me and continues to be at the heart of my work. I thank Neda Atanasoski, Catherine Fennell, Mayanthi Fernando, Jessica Greenberg, Anand Pandian, Savannah Shange, and Deborah Thomas for their input on this work, at a book workshop sponsored by the University of California Humanities Research Institute (UCHRI). I am grateful for earlier feedback from Pamela Ballinger, Meghanne Barker, Eileen Boris, Emily Channel-Justice, Vanessa Díaz, Gillian Feeley-Harnik, Krisztina Fehérvári, Severin Fowles, Barbara Harthorn, Martha Lampland, Alaina Lemon, Jane Lynch, Paul Manning, William Nomikos, Raquel Pacheco, Eda Pepi, Michael Silverstein, Kalinka Vassileva, and Casey Walsh. Thanks to Amy Benson Brown and Megan Pugh for their editorial support and my gratitude to Christina Freeman for help with image formatting. I am incredibly thankful for the generative and generous feedback from the editors and anonymous reviewers at *Public Culture*. Funding for this project came from the Fulbright-Hays Program; the Wenner-Gren Foundation; the American Research Center in Sofia; Council for European Studies; School for Advanced Research; the University of Michigan; the Wilson Center; the UCHRI; and the University of California, Santa Barbara. All interlocutor names are pseudonyms, as are the location names *Vasilotka* and *Queen Anna*.

1. My thoughts on disruption are inspired by an interview with Tina Campt (2018) on “refusing refusal,” Deborah Thomas’s (2019) work on “Witnessing 2.0,” Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora’s (2020) writing on refusal, property, and personhood, and Elizabeth Grosz’s (2012: 14) focus on the “possibilities for being otherwise.”

“anything elses” are rooted in an always-ephemeral future in which, through disruptive solidarity, something else is possible even if that is not yet defined.² Sweepers might not know what “anything else” specifically looks like, but they know that it is not the here-and-now, body-breaking labor of waste work.

In Bulgaria, the poorest country in the European Union, waste labor is racialized and gendered. Nearly all waste workers are Roma, and over 90 percent of street sweepers are Romani women.³ Sweeping work is critically important for Bulgaria’s meeting its European Union environmental sustainability standards—manifested in steadily increasing recycling quotas and European cleanliness measures. Yet sweeping labor has been systematically devalued since the end of socialism in 1989, and throughout the period of my research (2010–22) was a minimum wage position, albeit with a legitimate labor contract, paying less than two hundred euro per month.⁴ Waste work in Bulgaria has traditionally been racialized as “G*psy work,”⁵ but it was not as highly gender segregated until the end of socialism during the so-called transition-era reforms that followed and up through Bulgaria’s European Union accession in 2007.

The focus of this piece is on how street sweepers’ intimacy of labor emerges through the experience of shared workplace struggle and moments of seemingly out-of-place pleasure. Sweeping enables the kind of affective “collective sentiment” that surfaces in the fight to dictate life on one’s own terms within labor conditions designed to dehumanize and humiliate (Mankekar and Gupta 2016: 24). In other words, sweepers continually make and remake their own world, together. This shared, affective worldmaking is rooted in workplace solidarity, a phenomenon like “kinship” that might, in the words of Tiffany Lethabo King (2019: 27), be considered “erotic,” although neither term quite encapsulates the sweepers’ intimate relationships with each other. “Erotic” here does not connote the conventional understanding but instead speaks to how “instances of coming together gesture toward

2. The concept of “anything else” (*neshto drugo*) intersects with what Michelle Murphy (2017: 497) calls an “alterlife” or “prompt” for thinking about “life already altered, which is also life open to alteration.”

3. Most of the Romani women that sweep Sofia’s streets live in infrastructurally neglected Romani neighborhoods, support entire families, and explained that there is little other work they could do, especially without secondary education. This positionality is highly racialized. The women I worked with, like many Romani Bulgarians, understood themselves as “black” (*cherni*) in contrast to those in power, “ethnic Bulgarians” they categorized as “white” (Hancock 2000; Kóczé 2018; Resnick 2009).

4. Data from the Bulgarian National Archives shows that sweeping labor, during socialism, paid a living wage that could be on par with office workers at the same firm. Sweeping was also more respected as a crucial part of socialist urbanization projects.

5. In line with Romani activists and scholars, like Ioanida Costache (2020), I spell “Gypsy” as “G*psy” because it is a racial slur. Also see Oprea 2012.

an otherwise mode of being human that holds space for one another's well-being, joy, and future" (27).

As noted above, the intimacy of labor I analyze builds on and departs from the analytical category of intimate labor, which places on a spectrum the occupations typically categorized separately as care work, domestic labor, and sex work (Boris and Parreñas 2010). Such work often relies on "bodily and psychic intimacy" between workers and clients, while this very intimacy and bodily presence is used to stigmatize the work and those who perform it.⁶ Romani sweepers' labor in Bulgaria, managing the physicality of other people's trash, can be situated on this spectrum. However, the intimacy this article focuses on is not between workers and waste (or those who discard it) but between workers themselves, which is why I use the phrase "intimacy of labor," drawing a distinction from the concept of intimate labor.

In fact, at times sweepers' intimacy of labor stands in direct contradiction to the more easily categorized intimate labor they perform. If we think, alongside Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2010: 7), about intimate labor as involving "embodied and affective interactions in the service of social reproduction," we can say that the intimacy of labor works to disrupt social reproduction of the status quo. That is, sweepers' intimacy on the job serves not to maintain things usually associated with gendered social reproduction, like kinship networks or "social constructions of motherhood" (Bakker 2007: 541), but to disrupt them in order to make space for social networks of women that are not beholden to fulfill caretaking needs. These social networks, life-sustaining friendships, provide new avenues for futures in which something else—even temporarily—can be imagined. Within the public space of the street, workers use the intimacy of labor to upend expectations of women in the project of social reproduction, ultimately creating new possibilities for the contours of gendered life-making itself.

This article draws on my experience working on a team of forty street sweepers in Sofia, Bulgaria, most of whom were Romani women.⁷ As a white woman from New York, a PhD student at the University of Michigan at the time, my positionality both allowed me to get hired by the white Bulgarian bosses who saw this as a potentially fruitful opportunity and served as a ready topic of conversation for sweepers who tried to convince me to work elsewhere, since I was "white" (*biala*) and therefore "could be hired by anyone." I often reminded my colleagues that this

6. Waqas Butt (2020: 235) writes about "waste intimacies" in urban Pakistan to foreground multivarious kinds of inequality. While examining waste labor in Bulgaria attunes us to similar inequalities, this article focuses on a different (but intersecting) form of intimacy—that among laborers.

7. Although most of the sweepers were in their thirties and forties, some were as young as twenty and others were in their sixties.

work was only temporary for me, as I shifted in and out of the workplace in ways that only someone who didn't rely on its income for survival could. Unlike them, I did not risk being fired for slow work or arriving late. What ultimately did get me fired was bringing a filmmaker with me to the job, something the sweepers encouraged but the bosses found unacceptable and cause for termination after eleven months of work.

Hypersexuality and Parodic Excess: Sweeping Labor and Media Reverberations

Sweepers must negotiate racialized depictions of Romani women's volatility, economic dependency, and hypersexuality that serve as a pivot of popular media and social life in Bulgaria and across Europe (Kóczé and Rövid 2017; Lemon 2002; Oprea 2012). They constantly contend with the hypervisibility of what Cathy Cohen (2001: 455) calls "regulated nonnormative heterosexuality" as well as the lens through which public forums view them, that is, as the preternaturally "dirty G*psy" (Oprea 2012). Here I attend both to my own ethnographic observations of these phenomena as well as their intersections with popular tropes in mainstream television. These interlinked depictions form the landscape in which sweepers work.

Sweepers are harassed on the street daily. This includes having lit cigarette butts thrown at their flammable uniforms, neighborhood residents dumping buckets of water on them from balconies, and barrages of anti-Roma hate speech yelled at them as they work. Instead of responding by attempting to make themselves invisible, they played with the parodic excess of stereotypes of hypersexual Romani women. They catcalled white men, shouted about sexual desire on public buses, and, as I will show, performed white womanhood to parody it.⁸ In this way, they queered normative expectations, boldly asserting their own uniformed presence and denaturalizing the gendered expectations to which Romani women are routinely subjected.

During the winter of 2013, I was standing alongside several of the sweepers I had been working with for nearly six months. We were waiting inside the local outpost of the massive Austrian-owned BILLA supermarket chain in a neighborhood of Sofia. It was a cold January morning, and the sweepers were using BILLA's fluorescent-lit entryway to warm up and avoid the surveillance of their bosses.

8. I use the term "white" to allude to non-Romani Bulgarians who refer to themselves as just "Bulgarians." I insist on using the modifier "white" to denaturalize the unmarked whiteness of Bulgarianness and to follow the lead of my Romani interlocutors who also invoke a language of explicit whiteness. Also see Baker 2018, Imre 2014, Rexhepi 2023, and Rucker-Chang and West Oheri 2021.

Illuminated images of yellow plastic shopping bags with bright red letters, floating pineapples, and flying salty crackers framed the entrance. Two sweepers who always worked together, Donka and Nadya, pressed me on the typical things they questioned me about when work was slow: if I smelled “down there,” or if the reason I slept so badly was because I desperately needed sex. Donka and Nadya reveled in their abilities to take up public space and play with the blunt stereotypes of Romani sexuality that pervade everyday life. Donka, a mother of two and grandmother of five, got louder and louder, smiling in response to the looks of horror she received from me and passersby. “Come on, Nadya, you must tell the *Amerikanka* that she is going to need to wash *that thing* if she’s ever going to get a boyfriend. No man is going to want her after this work. After a hot day sweeping, she is going to stink.”

In calling out—and leaning into—stereotypes of Romani women’s bodies, sweepers preempt media parodies of them by making themselves hypervisible first. Humor, including parody, is often defined as subversive of traditional categories. But, in contexts where “nothing is disrupted,” as Susan Seizer (1997: 63) writes, jokes can function as “agents of conformity.” As Romani women play with the racialized and gendered social order, the intimacy of their labor enables them to navigate the tensions between disruption and conformity. Scholars have importantly analyzed parody in terms of political dissent (Bernal 2013; Boyer 2013; Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Haugerud 2013). However, what remains less analyzed is how the subjects (or objects) of stereotypical parody—like the Romani women in this essay—negotiate it. Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1984: 199) has written about parody as a conversation that is “internally dialogized” and oriented “towards someone else’s discourse” (Shipley 2017). In such dialogue, multiple voices speak as multiple texts are animated through conversation. This analysis brings together many of those texts, spanning the workplace and popular television media.

When a crew from the national TV station filmed us sweeping that same winter a few weeks later, during the first snow of the season, the reporter moved swiftly to evoking racist Romani stereotypes. She asked about how many children sweepers had and whether they cleaned condoms off the street. Most sweepers, not wanting to be publicly shamed, ran expertly outside the camera’s view. But Sofka, a long-term sweeper who was even more boldly outspoken than Donka, put her broom down and stood squarely in the center of the frame. The reporter asked if she shared food with “the American.” Sofka took a moment, looked straight into the camera, and declared, “We drink from the same bottle of water.”

Sofka’s assertion took aim at the knowledge that such bodily intimacies were transgressive in Bulgarian society and flaunted it. When the recording aired later that day on the evening news, the voice-over focused on how an American girl had

left her luxurious life in New York to sweep the streets with Romani women, as Lenny Kravitz's "American Woman" played in the background. But, sensing in the moment the journalist's fetishistic fascination with the intimacy between the white foreigner and her Romani colleagues, Sofka jumped in with a lightning-fast response that asserted an embodied intimacy that refused the lens through which media outlets tended to represent her, that is, as the "disgusting G*psy" (Oprea 2012).

These encounters and labor relations echoed what I saw when watching the famous late-night Bulgarian comedy show *The Comedians* (*Komicite*): the recurring character of "Luba-the-G*psy." Luba is a satirical caricature performed by a white man depicted as an always-pregnant, nonworking, middle-aged Romani woman. Her very appearance elicited loud laughter from the live studio audience.⁹

In one episode, Luba is visited by a self-serious white Bulgarian census taker. Luba greets him by explaining she has nothing to give him, but then she immediately asks him for some money for "the kids." He awkwardly dodges her request, then questions her about her plumbing, electricity, and household composition. Finally, he asks her about her occupation:

Census taker: How do you make a living?

Luba: We make it by ourselves.

Census taker: No, you misunderstood. How do you pay your electricity, your medical bills? Think about your last job.

Luba: Aha . . .

Census taker: You can't live off the fact that you are Roma for the rest of your life.

Luba: Who told you that?

Census taker: Okay, then, who pays for you being Roma?

Luba: Are you stupid or something? Why aren't you listening to me when I explained it to you? Nobody pays us. You pay us for being Roma. I told you what our profession is: being G*psies—Roma. My grandfather worked as a Roma and a G*psy, and my father, and my mother, and that's what I work as.

Audiences are supposed to understand that "being Roma," within a white Bulgarian imaginary, means depending on governmental and other handouts instead of

9. I thank Raquel Pacheco for highlighting the transphobic elements of this.

working. Luba's request for money at the outset of the interaction is emblematic of highly racialized expectations of Romani women's opportunistic approach to life. Media representations and political campaigns in Bulgaria frequently portray Roma as anti-laborers, unwilling to work, and yet living the "good life" by just being Roma.

In another *Komicite* episode, the same census taker goes to Luba's house to ask about basic demographic information. He asks, "How many people live here?" Luba responds, twirling her long hair around her finger, "Ohhh, wait, I have to see . . . do you know how long I've tried to count but it just doesn't happen?" The camera pans to the studio audience, where a white woman laughs loudly. Luba continues, "They hide under the beds, under the fridge. Do you know how rude they are?" The census taker chuckles, gestures toward Luba's protruding belly, and says, "I see you are expecting." Luba rubs her stomach and replies, "I am, I am." The census taker asks if it is a boy or a girl. Luba responds that it is a boy and that the doctor says, "we need to name him Louis." There is a pause for the joke.

The census taker asks why. "Because he is the fourteenth," Luba replies, straight-faced.

Looking down at his clipboard, the census taker remains serious. "Yes, but here in this column I have to write how many children you have." Luba shrugs and waves her hand nonchalantly, "You write whatever you want."

She counts with the fingers on her left hand, as though trying to keep track of her children. "I have four from my first marriage, I have four from the second marriage, and three are mine personally." The televised studio audience—here, all white women—laughs at this joke, that three are hers "personally," suggesting both that she doesn't understand how procreation works and that she doesn't have a father responsible for them. The census taker looks down and voices the common stereotype aloud: "Apparently you give birth to a lot of children . . ." Luba interrupts with a wave of the hand, "A lot, but I have lots more to go . . ." The audience cackles.

This broadcast television representation rings funny for its white audience because of the pervasive fears of Romani "overpopulation" that characterize everyday life in Europe. These include the broadly publicized erroneous statistic that Roma would "outnumber" non-Romani (white) Bulgarians by the year 2020. This also manifested in protests during the period of my fieldwork that featured the widespread slogan in Bulgarian, adorned on posters and T-shirts, "I don't want to live in a g*psy state." These are the same tropes that link Roma with waste—material excess—itsself. In front of another television camera, when Sofka highlights the sharing of a water bottle with me, the white American, she preempts the commonplace understanding that Roma—like the waste they collect—are superfluous, frustratingly overabundant.

Based on these experiences and representations, as the following sections show, Donka, Sofka, and their colleagues confront expectations of their racialized and gendered positionalities through what Audra Simpson (2014: 107) terms “endless play,” or the refusal of an external gaze (Shange 2019).¹⁰ In engaging in this parodic play, they disrupt workplace expectations and create something new in its wake by making use of the intimate friendships and physical intimacies with waste that their daily sweeping provides.

Queens with Men’s Hands: Playing with the Gendering of Racialized Labor

While almost all sweepers were Romani, very few bosses were. Vili and Mimi, the two white Bulgarian middle managers who surveilled sweepers’ labor on foot, constantly reminded them that they were there to work, not “to sit on benches and do whatever [they] want.” As they made their rounds, Vili and Mimi repeatedly yelled to whoever was in earshot, “You are not here to enjoy the space, you are here to clean it.” They would scold workers, telling them that they must not talk out of turn or interrupt when roll was being called in the predawn morning. In after-work walks to the bus stop, when I could catch Vili and Mimi alone, they told me they had to take on multiple jobs because this one did not pay enough, especially considering the challenges of managing “such women” and their “disrespect.”¹¹

Sweeping can be humiliating, especially when working under two white bosses who can impose their will at any time. The labor also takes its toll on the body (Brooks 2007; Resnick 2015). The sweepers on the team told me stories of bodily pain and total humiliation. Lilia, a great-grandmother and one of the oldest workers on the team, shared that she was once instructed to clean her area until it was spotless, even if that meant working into the night. She cleaned so thoroughly that she crawled down under a bush to collect the stray garbage beneath it. When Boyan, the head boss, drove by to let the workers go at the end of the day, releasing them with a quickly shouted “go home with your instruments,” she was so deep in the bush that she did not see or hear him. She ended up working into the night, going home well after dark. It wasn’t until she arrived at work the next morning to the laughter of her bosses that she realized she had taken their instructions more literally than

10. Simpson (2014: 107) defines “endless play” as: “I am me, I am what you think I am, and I am who this person to the right of me thinks I am, and you are all full of shit, and then maybe I will tell you to your face.”

11. Some middle managers were also employed by loan companies that targeted sweepers and worked them into often life-long and intergenerational systems of debt entrapment (Resnick 2015).

they intended. I knew Lilia was trying to help me feel better by telling me this, in response to my own complaints that surfaced soon after I began working.

When I started sweeping, I could not help talking about how painful it was. The skin on my face was sunburned and chapped from exposure, my hands blistered and bled, and my back ached so much each night that it was impossible to sleep. The women on the team would ask me how sweeping was in New York, where I was from. “There’s poor and middle class and rich there too, but the workers who do this job make more money than you,” I told them. Donka nodded and said, “Well, here, the rich just think about themselves. Nobody considers us. And now from day one you’re working hard.” The others in the group agreed.

Ani, a sweeper who had been standing quietly nearby, piped up, “Ask Boyan to show you *his* hands.” How calloused someone’s hands were served as an index of how hard they worked; Boyan spent his time in the driver’s seat of a jeep surveilling their labor, an easier job than sweeping, so Ani knew that his hands would be softer than the women’s. “Your hands, they are soft, you haven’t worked in a while,” Donka told me as she looked down at my open palms. Lilia leaned over and touched my not-yet-calloused hands. “I was also like that at the beginning,” she recounted. “Your hands are softer, but now our hands are hard, like men’s.”

When sweepers talked about the difficulty of their work—or my inability to sweep as well as they could—they would allude to the simultaneous power and shame of having “man hands.” The phrase reveals their critical attention to how sweeping transforms the body into a gendered tool for labor. It also surfaces the ways that ingrained gender dynamics play out through the bodily transformative potential of sweeping—“man hands” are both more powerful than “woman hands” and an index of the psychic and physical toll that waste work takes. Mingled with the pride and humor of “man hands” was also a poignant sense of loss. Desires to reclaim an idealized and unobtainable femininity ran deep among team members, and many sweepers saw work as a transition from a pre-work self to a differently gendered personhood. They expressed a nostalgia for the time, before they swept, when they still had “woman hands.”

However, even this imagining of the “woman hands” of a former life is mostly fantastical. Almost all the sweepers had been cleaning at home since before they were married, often since the age of nine or ten. Many sweepers recounted to me, wistfully, that they never advanced past elementary school because they were taking care of the house and their siblings while their parents worked. And Romani homes, as I witnessed and they told me, “are spotless—not like how Bulgarians live.” My colleagues were in their thirties or early forties when I worked with them in 2012, meaning they were of caretaking age right around the time of the “changes” in Bulgaria—

the shift from socialism to capitalism in late 1989 and the years of severe economic crisis that dictated the 1990s. This meant that the generation of Romani women I swept alongside typically could not easily read or write. It also meant that they had entered Bulgaria's labor force in the 1990s while their young husbands struggled to find work. Many construction projects that promised work to Romani men as builders fell into demise within the same decade when funding dried up. This was the period that many of the sweepers identified as the hardest, when their husbands developed chronic stress-related illnesses. The result was that Romani women became heads of households, both by working outside the house to provide financially and by doing most of the caretaking at home.

After lunch one day, as the bosses called roll and read out our assignments, a relatively well-off and well-respected coworker, Zlatna, smiled at me. We were assigned, together, to clean a big boulevard, one of the main arteries of the city, commonly called Tsaritsa Anna (Queen Anna). The sweepers colloquially called it simply Tsaritsata, the Queen. The Queen was one of the major thoroughfares in the area we worked and, according to municipal inspector protocols, should be cleaned every day. Zlatna smirked, saying, "Now we are queens, with crowns, at the intersections. Right, Elanka?" I looked at her, unsure of how to respond. "What?" I did not understand the play on the name of the boulevard. "We are queens now, so where is your crown?" Zlatna replied, laughing at the confusion on my face. In hindsight, I understood her joke as recognition that Bulgarian society was built on the denial of dignity to Romani women—they would never be queens, but they would sweep the Queen's dirt.

Sweepers would often joke that their white bosses might as well be their pimps, for they were basically just "street workers" paid in cash. When the paper bills were handed out in personalized envelopes at my first payday, my colleagues exaggeratedly fanned themselves with the cash and told me that it was like they were "cheap prostitutes or strippers." The company for which we worked paid less than competing firms and did not offer benefits like food coupons or paid overtime. Yet many sweepers chose to work for this company precisely because they paid in envelopes of cash. For sweepers already in debt, the cash-only policy prevented their salaries from becoming attached to debts due to the bank (Resnick 2015).

Sara, who was about my age and was sweeping with us on the Queen that day, appreciated the value of a good joke. At one point, she looked over in my direction, brushed her hair out of her face, and declared, "We are so beautiful in these uniforms, we might as well make some extra money working these streets." She lifted the baggy pant leg of her bright red uniform to reveal a bare calf beneath and called out, "Come on, sexy ladies, let's go from the boulevards to the highway and make

the real money.” Zlatna and the older women on the team laughed. It was a common stereotype that Romani women worked as prostitutes along Sofia’s ring road (*Okolovrusten put*), which encircled the whole city like a highway and divided urban space from the city’s industrial zone. It also skimmed the edges of Vasilotka, the neighborhood where most sweepers lived, and all knew how uncomfortable it could feel standing there, even just waiting for a bus. Nearly all Bulgarians joked about what people could pick up by driving in slow traffic along the ring road.

Such banter seemed to hit on deep, ambivalent feelings about womanhood and the racialization of waste labor. Sara’s joke substituted one version of gendered social marginality (street sweepers treated as trash) with another (ring road prostitutes) to play on claims of desirability and beauty—something that sweepers described themselves as having lost. In other quieter times, sweepers made it clear that jokes about prostitution were also bound up with their anxieties about how visible and vulnerable their work made them, as well as how hard they strove to maintain dignity amidst the dirt of the job. Many women, including Zlatna, told me that, although they were accustomed to working outside, this job was dehumanizing. Except for Desi, one of their two white Bulgarian colleagues who they explained wore an adult diaper, the rest of the team regularly had to pee on the streets like “stray bitches,” since the company did not provide restrooms for workers, and most stores, except BILLA, prohibited their using public bathrooms.

The Intimacy of Laboring toward Anything Else

The intimacy of labor on Sofia’s city streets often manifests in embodied humor.¹² However, this joking was not only a refuge from such travails but also a pleasure in its own right. Workers on the team routinely explained that they loved working with Donka because life was long and hard, and they needed to laugh—something she made easy. One warm day in October, I was sweeping in a team of five, along with Hristina, Raya, Mitko (Sofka’s teenage son), and Donka. Our noon lunch break was over, and we had two hours until we would reconvene for roll to be taken before we could be “released” to go home. But with only a block left to sweep, they knew we could, and should, move slowly. Sweepers always needed to appear to be working in case an inspector came to check on them. If the inspector realized the team had finished early, sweepers would just be given more work to do, to fill the hours until the end of the official workday.

12. The enjoyment of intimacy here differs from Danilyn Rutherford’s (2001: 308) analysis of market-based intimacies, the “enjoyment” of which “was often linked to the pursuit of particular goals.” Sweepers’ collective pleasure making does fulfill certain workplace needs but is not as goal oriented.

While Mitko, Hristina, Donka, and I walked along the road, Raya ran ahead to see what was in a large municipal waste bin behind the BILLA. Donka yelled after her, reminding her to grab the apples dangling from a tree branch hanging over the sidewalk. “What am I, your pet squirrel?” Raya retorted. She reached deep down into the metal dumpster with one arm, holding the frame with the other so she would not fall in. A moment later, she emerged holding a white leather purse with shiny silver-tone metal clasps and a bundle of blond hair neatly wrapped in folded tissue paper.

“Raya, what on earth have you brought us?” Donka shouted.

“You know, people are really buying these,” I intervened.

Hristina responded, pulling away dramatically, “Yes, yes, I know. But I don’t know what kind of hair this is, I’m scared. Can you recognize it? I don’t know who it belongs to or where it is from. Throw that away!”

Eyeing the white bag slyly, Donka picked it up. “Look what I found . . .”

Hristina interjected, “And it’s a nice one, on top of that . . . Do you know how much money you can make from that?”

As we passed the purse around, considering its potential market, Donka grabbed the silky blond hair from the ground, where Raya had thrown it. Quietly, she attached it to her head with the black elastic band that held her own sun-bleached, dyed-red hair. She resumed sweeping with exaggerated movements that made the ponytail sway side to side. Raya threw the handbag to Donka, who grabbed it and placed it in the crook of her arm, daintily, as though going to a ladies’ lunch, as she continued to sweep. We laughed as Donka pranced, parodically impersonating the imagined owner of the found goods: a blond woman who would flitter around the street, calling attention to herself and her white handbag on a Tuesday afternoon. All of us recognized the stereotype: Donka was impersonating a *kifla*. This Bulgarian word for a sweet, crescent-shaped baked good, typically eaten for breakfast, is used colloquially to denote an “airhead” or materialistic girl who is distinctively Bulgarian, stereotypically blond, unmarked as white, and most likely not Roma.

That the items with which Donka performed were someone else’s trash was a fact lost on no one. The sweepers knew all too well that the trash they cleaned had been owned mostly by white Bulgarians, and they often remarked about waste as the leftovers—what I called in my notes “an index”—of life that has already been lived. And, in this case, life lived by someone else. White Bulgarians have the privilege to avoid the afterlife of consumption, but Romani waste workers do not. Donka’s jokes suggested that recovering waste is, in a way, a resurrection. Donka was imagining the past life of trash and animating that trash to resurrect a *kifla*. While Donka would rarely have such close personal contact with white Bulgarian *kiflas*, due

to systemic urban segregation, the “public reproductive labor” of street sweeping (Boris 2019) connects her with such women’s discards.

If we think about humor as rooted in the element of surprise (Beeman 1999: 103), Donka invoked surprise via material juxtapositions—her red uniform and Romani womanhood were seen as at odds with the kifla hair and bag. She seemed to both mock white womanhood and claim it, refusing to embody the service work sweepers are expected to do. Donka’s performance draws attention to both the enduring strength of hierarchized racial and gendered social orders and the potential to temporarily disrupt them by underscoring the absurdity of their logics (Seizer 1997). Yet there is a greater change at stake: the joke takes the practice of collecting other people’s trash and turns it, through collective practice, into play, entertainment, and pleasurable unruliness.

Donka’s joke also cut in particularly transgressive ways as she worked to diagnose the absurd through embodiment.¹³ As in cross-dressing and drag (Morris 1995; Robertson 1991; Rubin 2011), Donka’s embodied parodic performance—crossing racial and class lines—points to the ways in which race and class are already gendered, as Romani women’s racial identity is encoded into their gendered class performance.¹⁴ Donka’s act serves to parody white womanhood. In doing so, it brings attention to—and effectively denaturalizes—the coupling of whiteness and class-based femininity.

Returning to the barracks later that day, the team hoisted their sweeping instruments (broom and dustbin or *faraj*), as shown in figure 1, onto the bus, as they often did. But the ticket controller, who circulated between buses to check and punch holes in tickets, told us we weren’t allowed on without tickets—something the company never provided its workers. The group complained but ultimately got off and waited a long time for another bus, without a controller on it, to arrive. When we finally climbed on the next bus, Hristina seemed bored. She looked around and began to boisterously expound on what she thought I wanted in a man. Laughing, she asked whether I wanted “some chocolate,” and when I did not answer, continued, “The American, our American, likes herself some chocolate, if you know what I mean.” The bus got quiet. “Some smooth, dark chocolate is what she wants, isn’t that right? You like it dark, don’t you?” I looked at her and smiled, not liking to be the center of attention but wanting to support her public display. “Or maybe some

13. See Menninghaus 2003 on Kristeva’s analysis of abjection and laughter.

14. Similarly, Jennifer Robertson (1991) finds that the possibilities of gender subversion among Takarazuka performers in Japan are, as Rosalind Morris (1995: 583) puts it, “contained by other identity structures—in particular class—that are gendered without being reducible to gender.”



FIGURE 1 The daily work and working tools of street sweeping. Photo by author.

milk chocolate? What is it today?” I felt the shared feeling of power bubbling up. I remained quiet; I was used to playing the team’s straight woman. Frustrated after the long wait, Hristina was going to say what she wanted, asserting her presence and letting everyone know she had just as much a right to occupy public space as anyone else, while also acknowledging the transgressions involved.¹⁵ These claims to public

15. Hristina’s teasing also got at a fundamental part of racialization in Bulgaria—colorization (Simmons 2008). I thank Savannah Shange whose feedback helped me make this explicit. Among sweepers, whiteness

space emerged through the intimacy and friendship networks that waste labor both demanded and generated.

After we got off the bus, we still had some time to kill until we would meet to be released for the day, so we sat on the sidewalk, atop our brooms, watching people walk by. Emboldened, the group commented aloud about passersby. There were old men that were ignored, elderly women shopping, kids—and then Donka saw a man about my age in a tight black Diesel Jeans T-shirt and screamed out, “Hey, sexy man, we like how you walk in that shirt. We have some nice American stuff for you right here.” He looked around, unsure who was screaming at him. Donka looked at him directly. “YOU, I’M CALLING YOU.” I laughed and, continuing to play my role of straight woman to Donka’s bravado, ran away. The man turned red in the face as Donka and the other women laughed. Hristina’s whole body was shaking and Raya hid her head with her hair as she slapped the ground while she laughed. I waited until the man was out of sight to return. Eventually, we picked up our brooms, figuring it was about time for roll call and release. We fell silent when we saw the bosses waiting, having come by to check that we didn’t leave our work detail early, which, of course, we had.

The space of the workplace enabled a kind of intimate solidarity that allows sweepers to yell at white men walking by. When Donka addressed the man in the tight T-shirt, she used the collective *we*—stressing “*we* like how you walk.” The plural pronoun here affirms how the intimacy of the workplace affords a particular kind of workplace friendship that enables this power. It is through this affective solidarity that Donka diagnoses the absurdity of their situation, aloud, for passersby to deal with. Her assumption of power here is based on the collectivity that the intimacy of labor enables. It allows her to embarrass the white man in the tight shirt and approach him in the hypersexual manner Romani women are usually treated.

Such ways of playing with their hypersexualization, as sweepers were acutely aware, could trigger popular ideas of Romani women and overpopulation that have become mainstream in Bulgaria as politicians use demographic fears to garner support. Politicians, their propaganda, and its media reverberations, like the character of Luba, depict Romani women’s predilection for having children as a quintessential hindrance to “European” progress in Bulgaria.¹⁶

was commonly esteemed and a constant point of discussion. Sweepers elucidated their understandings of local racial hierarchies in ongoing dialogue with other racial systems across the globe (in the United States, Western Europe, etc.).

16. Compare this with Arjun Appadurai’s (2021) account of the European project.

The intimacy of labor creates bonds that enabled the conditions for claiming power through humorous play on the bus and in the street, and for sustaining one another in hard times. These are critically nested intimacies—of women laboring intimately with waste objects in ways that sustain a particular aesthetic order, while at the same time forming social intimacies that disrupt the expected status quo. And it is no accident that the city street is a particular space in which intimacy develops. Sweepers existing under the legacies of state socialist planning would sometimes do what was expected of workers: to “loaf” in official jobs but “practice extremes of overwork (‘self-exploitation’)” at home (Gal 2002: 87). However, something also happened that was not quite as planned—they turned the public street into a place for negotiating intimate relationships. And these relationships could *only* happen in the space of the street. At home, the sweepers would be caught up in household and reproductive kin work, but it was in the public space of the city street, through the intimacy of labor, that they forged these bonds.

Conclusion: The Pleasure of Cocktails Instead of Brooms on International Women’s Day

Once a year, for International Women’s Day on March 8, sweepers got the chance to live, as they put it, “like regular women” and revel in the pleasures generated with the intimacy of labor. Sweeping, they told me, had made them lose their femininity, but for one night, before returning to work the next morning, they celebrated one another as women. Dating back to a 1910 conference in Copenhagen, International Women’s Day has become popular around the world and was adopted as an official Bulgarian holiday in 1944 at the start of the socialist regime. Today it is one of the most celebrated holidays in Romani communities in Bulgaria, observed by nearly all Romani women.

Immediately after the new year, sweeping teams begin collecting money to reserve a table at one of Sofia’s Romani nightclubs on March 8. In preparation for the celebration, women buy new outfits and jewelry, and, since this might be the one night of the year when they can escape from family responsibilities, they chip in for bottles of fruity alcohol. During the year that I swept, Nadya, who was organizing the festivities, could only get a reservation at Onyx—the Sofia nightclub that hosted most International Women’s Day events for Romani women workers (nearly all sweepers)—on March 7, so that’s when the team would celebrate. As the day approached, I made plans to go home with Nadya after work to get ready for the night out.

After a grueling day of cleaning, I took the bus with Nadya to her small and

cozy home where she served us bread and cheese and tomatoes, and then called one of her neighbors to come over and straighten my hair with a steam iron. Nadya assessed my black outfit and lent me sparkly hoop earrings. Her teenage daughter and husband laughed at us jovially as we got dressed up, but Nadya told them to be quiet because this night was important. “For one night a year,” she asserted, “we are women.” She had been preparing for International Women’s Day for months. Over the last few weeks, she and the other sweepers had spent time discussing what to wear, how to do their hair, what they would drink. Nadya explained that she bought a new outfit for the holiday every year. The rest of the time, her money went to supporting her husband’s travel back and forth to his job in the Czech Republic where he laid cobblestones, her daughter’s clothing and school needs, her son’s textbooks, household electricity and coal for heat, and her parents’ medicine. But for International Women’s Day, she took time for herself to dress up and wear something new. While she did her hair, she instructed me to look through her pictures from the previous years she had celebrated. As I flipped through the pages of her well-preserved photo album I saw a smiling, carefree young woman change over time to the still-young but worried mother and responsible caretaker Nadya had become.

When we were ready, we gathered outside her front door with others from the sweeping team to wait for taxi drivers, most of whom were neighbors and workers’ relatives. In the back seat of a taxi, the women checked hair and makeup in their phones and laughed, realizing aloud with joy that they seemed like teenagers. Each sweeper had paid a cover of twenty leva for Onyx, but since that only covered food and soft drinks, everyone stashed various types of alcohol in their purses, mostly small plastic bottles of sweet apple-flavored vodka that would mix easily with whatever the club provided.

When we arrived, Onyx was filling with sweeping teams from across Sofia, each at a separate table. We sat down at our reserved spot and the sweepers on our team announced to me, “We are the blackest of the sweepers.” They pointed to a table across the room and explained, “Over there are the blonds; they sweep the center of Sofia.” I nodded, as this much-discussed racialized labor division had become so naturalized to me by this point. The tables had traditional Bulgarian *shopska* (tomato-cucumber-cheese) salads at each place setting, along with big bottles of Fanta and Coca-Cola. There were neon-green lights and poles for dancing, as shown in figure 2. Red, pink, and yellow balloons were tied onto chairs and attached to the ceiling, where disco balls revolved slowly. As the women took their places and poured their own drinks, a DJ played music and called out to each team by the region they cleaned, prompting each group to cheer in recognition.

The women from the team laughed, drank, ate, smoked cigarettes, and cried



FIGURE 2 Inside the club for International Women's Day celebrations. Photo by author.

with release. It was as though all the pent-up sadness, fear, stress, and worry had bubbled up and, for one night, could be let out.

During downtime at work, out of earshot of their bosses, sweepers remarked—and asked me to note—that “we die so white Bulgarians can live.” Their sentiments echo what Lauren Berlant (2007: 754) calls “slow death,” or “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence.” It is not spectacular but “incremental and accretive” (Nixon 2011: 2). It is also, in the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007), a death that is “premature.” But at Onyx, as on other occasions, I was reminded that, even as Romani women workers die so that white Bulgarians can live, they also find pleasure and create life for themselves and one another.

Within the conditions of late liberalism in which they work and live, sweepers are expected to remain invisible stewards of public space, cleaners of other peoples’ trash (Resnick 2021), but instead they make themselves visible and heard, asserting their humanity on their own terms. They ascribe life to themselves through “unruly yet generative conceptions of being” (Jackson 2020: 4). They are not trying to become human—or “feminine”—in terms of white European liberalism. Instead, they play with white femininity to denaturalize it as desirable and, in doing so, disrupt the expectation that such personhood would serve as an antidote to their racialized disposability. And they do so with a shared intimacy that extends beyond the individual body to create collectives, and thus forms of “coalitional survival” (Hobart and Kneese 2020: 5; Lorde 1988).

If we think of sweepers’ intimate friendships as alternative kin-making (King 2019), of an enduring and generative coming together, we can understand the process of “feeling with, rather than a feeling for, others” as a “critical survival strategy” (Hobart and Kneese 2020: 2). Creating these kin-like relations is itself a public refusal to conform to the racialized and gendered roles foisted on Romani women. Women connect not just to their blood relations but also to people of their own choosing, with whom they establish and maintain enduring and obligatory ties. This helps generate the potential for social change, radical in its ability to demand particular kinds of collective “otherwises” (Povinelli 2011). However, unlike the “social projects” in Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2011: 10) work, the kind of alchemical intimate kin making I address here does not have the force of a counterpublic but “exist[s], nevertheless,” and “these alternative worlds maintain the otherwise that stares back at us.”

Sweepers know they are enmeshed in the death paradigm of “no life” (*niama zhi-vot*) they articulate so often, but they refuse to be subsumed by it (Resnick, forthcoming). Through the intimacy of labor, the women who work together also love each other, tell jokes, and help one another achieve cathartic release. When Sara

raised her pant leg to liken her sweeping work to cheap prostitution, when Hristina teased me about my desires for “chocolate” on the bus, or when Donka catcalled a white man on the street, they called into existence an unruliness that felt freeing (Kelley 1994).

However, the sweepers rarely did things for themselves, individually. They only had a singular moment each month, directly after payday, when they would stop to buy themselves an ice cream on the way to the bus stop as a treat before using the rest of their cash to pay for electricity, heating supplies, food, and overdue interest on their loans. But on International Women’s Day, the sense of release was felt deeply. “Man hands” were, if only temporarily, converted back into “women’s hands” with polished nails that held cocktails instead of brooms.

The team knew the night would end, that the next morning, everyone would be back in their uniforms, gathered at the barracks at 5:30 a.m., reporting to bosses who surveilled their labor and reminded them that their humanity is always in question. But no one spoke about that now. Instead, they held each other and laughed and cried as they drank fruit-flavored vodka and smoked freely under the scattered light of the disco ball. Romani women cannot transform workplace pain and humiliation away. They cannot ignore the demands of overdue bills, sick husbands, and dependent children; ongoing threats of violence on the street and from the government and media outlets; the racialized oppression that lumps them together with the very trash they clean. But they can, through the intimacy of labor, create the pleasure of “anything else,” together.

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