

# Forced Nomadism and “Frozen Transience”: Roma Mobilities in Rome Today

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## INTRODUCTION

When we speak of the mobility of the Roma (“gypsies”)<sup>1</sup> of Europe today, we do not speak of culture, of their ancestral relationship to place, home, and movement. Their current situation, which has gained media attention because of France’s recently implemented policy of “voluntary repatriation”, is forced nomadism by another name. The Roma’s historic nomadism has been used, conveniently, as an excuse for the lack of housing and dwelling places they face today. “They don’t want regular housing.” – “They can’t live like us, in one place.” While the Italian word for gypsy, *zingaro*, is recognized as offensive today, like “gypsy” is here, the word still commonly in use in Italy is *nomade*, which carries with it a profound and sometimes instrumental misconception.

In the spring of 2008, after a far-right victory in the national and mayoral elections, the municipal administration of Rome announced a “Nomad Emergency” which would be addressed by a “Nomad Plan” -- dismantling unauthorized Roma camps and resettling those who proved that they were in Italy legally in large government-authorized camps. (It is important to understand that estimates of the Roma population that constitutes this “emergency” are between 10,000 and 15,000, in a city of 3 million.) In practice these tactics are not new, but the level of national attention, media frenzy, and rhetoric was. The “plan” kicked off with a census that included the fingerprinting of all Roma over two years old. This tactic, which targets a specific ethnic group, has not been seen in Europe since the Nazis. Italy has been cited by Amnesty Inter-

national, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, and a host of organizations for this and other related human rights abuses.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I describe two different Roma communities that have been affected by these policies. They are at different ends of the spectrum, from a group with resources that cannot find a piece of ground on which to dwell, to another that was moved into a government camp following the dismantling of their unauthorized settlement. Each group is subject to a different tactic in the government strategy of mobility-as-disempowerment. One tactic is “forced nomadism,” the other “frozen transience”.

In 2008 I worked with 36 Iowa State University students in Rome under the auspices of an Italian Roma rights organization and with Italian architects, documenting conditions in Roma settlements. We learned a great deal about techniques of living lightly, about *ci arrangiamo*, figuring it out, and *autogestione*, something between do-it-yourself and self-determination. Practices of dwelling embody culture, and the two cases discussed here demonstrate the resourcefulness with which the Roma adapt and maintain these practices despite the precariousness of their daily lives. Most importantly, we observed, and were invited to participate in, dwelling practices, habits and habitations, ways of living in the city that were new to us, different, sometimes difficult, that gave rise to ideas about new configurations of housing, neighborhood, and living together in the city. The narrative voice sometimes used here is meant to convey the first-hand experience of empathetic witnessing which drives the research.

**FORCED NOMADISM:  
THE KALDERASHA ROMA  
A First-Person Account of the *Sgombero*  
(Eviction) of the Kalderasha Roma,  
June 6, 2008**

The police came this morning, at about 7am, to tell the Kalderasha they had to leave to leave the Lungotevere, the dead-end street where about 100 people have been living since they were evicted from city-owned land three years ago. The Kalderasha live in large, well-appointed campers that attach to cars, and are mostly self-sufficient; they need a source of water, portable toilets, and, ideally, an electricity hookup. They've been looking for a piece of land somewhere in or around Rome. They've tried to buy land, but no one will sell to them.

There's a range of responses among them, varying mostly according to age, about standard housing vs. life in campers. Some young people are ready to move into apartments, say that this kind of life with all its difficulties is over. But some of the last believers in nomadism are Kalderasha, like Aldo, who says, "It's fundamental to being Kalderasha, and not living in houses is its last vestige." Traditionally, they moved to share work, going to where the big jobs came up. When Aldo was a kid, schools cooperated, and he did subtraction in one place and division in another, carrying his school file with him. Now, he says, their nomadism would have to be seasonal, accommodating the need to keep kids in one place during the school year. But on the other hand, why can't the kids do distance learning? It seems that digital technology should made life on the move easier.

Back in 2005, when the city first told them that they would have to move from Campo Boario, it also promised, in writing, that another location nearby, satisfactory to all, would be found. The location was important, because the children were attending local schools. But the city reneged on its promise, no location materialized, and when the deadline arrived the Kalderasha got into their cars and pulled their campers out onto the street. Some went to the Veneto, where they had relatives. Some went to Saxa Rubra, a suburb far outside the city. And some simply pulled around the corner onto the Lungotevere. This long, one-way street along the river comes to a quiet dead end here. My American students had already met the Kalderasha in their

wanderings around the city. Not knowing to be afraid of "gypsies," they'd walked down this street, said "*Buongiorno*," and been greeted in return.

By the time I hear about the *sgombero* and make my way across the city it's 5.30pm, ten hours since the police drove down the street announcing with their megaphones that it was time to go. This is extraordinary: a *sgombero* that has not been effected ten hours after its inception. The *sgombero* is on hold. The nervous police have been given orders to not act, to wait, while negotiations take place. The fearful boredom of a long standoff is in the air. The Kalderasha have refused to leave until a new and acceptable place for the community is found. Represented by Aldo, they have entered into negotiations with the city. In the meantime, a crowd has appeared. This is not what the police want, civilians mixing in, hanging around to observe a *sgombero*. The idea is that it happens fast, usually at dawn, before lawyers or journalists or sympathizers can show up. This aspect, the police dogs barking at the end of their chains, the stepping over the sleeping children, and the megaphones, is part of its pogrom quality. It brings terror, and part of that terror is secrecy, speed, and isolation.

There was no preparation, no warning, for this *sgombero*. This morning, in fact, an article appeared in the city's newspapers, saying that the city had announced No More *Sgomberi* for the next few months, while the census of the Roma is being organized. Yet here they are the very same day, scores of police with blue riot helmets, with police vans, staying together in groups, with tense, attentive faces. A tense, attentive police face is an international sign to worry, never mind their numbers and the blue helmets. A few city officials are here too, youngish men, looking sporty-elegant in jeans and good jackets, shouting into their cell phones or joking with the police. It's been a long day and they look sweaty and exhausted.

A police chief calls the police together and gives them some instructions. They begin to move down the street, and everyone follows. Starting with the first camper, they begin to take down license plate numbers. They are planning on issuing *multe*, tickets, for illegally parked vehicles. The crowd begins to yell. "Villains! We will have you arrested!" "This is illegal," a photographer says. There is a big fuss around the third camper, police buzzing, signaling to

each other. What is it? Three young people, perhaps university students, are sitting on a box with their backs against the camper, blocking the view of the license plate. The waiting continues. By now the police have been here for 12 hours. Has anyone eaten lunch? Sonia says, "Who can eat with this anxiety?"

About 8pm more police reinforcements arrive. What do they expect? The question answers itself. "But who do they think will make violence here?" I ask others repeatedly. The answer is always the same. "They themselves." The Kalderasha are non-confrontational, have always moved peacefully, even with no place to go.

A group of young men are huddled together puzzling over their manuals, trying to figure out how to hook the campers up to the cars. It's been a few years, and they don't remember how, or they're new to this place, or perhaps the cars are new since then. I can't help laughing at the irony of it. One guy looks up, sees me giggling, and says, "Some nomads, huh?"

About 8.30pm there is a resolution of sorts: a temporary location is accepted, just for 10 days, until a better one is found. Aldo thanks everyone, there is applause, and then the cars begin to pull out slowly, one after another, sometimes honking as onlookers wave, women smiling a polite resigned smile from the passenger seat while children stare out of the windows. By now it is dark. I walk along the sidewalk of the Lungotevere past the waiting cars. "I'm sorry, I'm very sorry," I say into the open windows as I go by. "*Grazie, signora*," "Thank you, it's OK, what can you do," "Thank you, you see this is how it is for us ...". I watch the long line of tail-lights receding and then walk the Lungotevere suddenly empty for the first time in two years, a few lounge chairs left behind, a little tent, a shopping cart, a washing machine not worth taking, the potted palms too big to move.

Earlier in the evening I went up to a policeman and said as politely as I could, "Excuse me, but I'm a foreigner, so perhaps I don't understand these things, could you help me, how is it that this *sgombero* was decided upon, for here, for today?" – Signora, I can't explain, you need to speak to someone who is above me – he took me to his superior, a policeman with a hat. I repeated my question. "Signora, let me explain. This is a public street, and a pub-

lic street must be kept clear for traffic, a vehicle cannot remain in a public street for more than 12 hours at a time. This is not a *sgombero*. We are *liberando la strada* – [liberating the street]."



Figure 1: This municipal parking lot along the *autostrada* on the edge of the city is now home to Rome's Kalderasha community. Image from Google Maps.

### KALDERASHA ROMA IN THE PARKING LOT

The place to which the Kalderasha were relocated, supposedly for 10 days, was a parking lot on a university campus on the far edge of the city. Here they were isolated, highly visible, and vulnerable. There were a few incidents of people shouting or throwing bottles from moving cars. The men felt that they couldn't leave to work, or to look for work, for fear of attacks on those who stayed behind. The Kalderasha are, by tradition, expert metalworkers. They refinish metal pots and pans and trays and candelabra for high-end hotels and restaurants, as well as sacred objects for churches all over Italy. This last is particularly painstaking, skilled, and lucrative work. We observed Ruby, sitting on a crate beside the camper, sheltered from the wind, while he worked on a gold chalice over the course of several days, stripping, buffing, polishing, and electroplating, in his improvised workshop consisting of several crates and buckets, tools, various jars of powders, and his car, idling, with some live wires from the battery sitting in a chemical bath containing the chalice and a few grains of pure gold dust. "It's less than ideal," he said, "but it works."

After a year of strenuous protests by the campus administration, but not before that, they were again moved, to their current location (as of this writing, November 2010): a fenced-in municipal



Figure 2: Aldo and Ruby refinishing a gold chalice in the parking lot. A car battery is their source of electricity.

parking lot abutting a big box store at the edge of a tangle of freeways far from the central city. Negotiations with the authorities about a permanent, or an acceptable, site have ceased. Here they are subject to pollution due to heavy traffic. Few are willing or able to make the drive, which could take up to two hours, twice a day across the city to take children to school. The local school, under fierce pressure from parents in the community, mandated (illegally) that the Kalderasha children would be accepted only if their heads were shaved to be sure they did not carry lice. The Kalderasha accepted with another condition: that all children, not just the Kalderasha, would have their heads shaved. This was rejected, so no school.

Yet despite this, in this parking lot, just as on the dead-end street, in the grassy area outside the horsetrack, alongside a freeway, in whatever unhospitable, undomestic environment they received temporary permission to settle, the same flowered tablecloths, magnificently laid tables, immaculate white shirts and dresses were in evidence. They made it look easy. Half an hour after each hurried move, the women were moving serenely from garden hose to camp stove, the plastic tables were covered with flowered tablecloths, the risotto was cooking, the children were setting out the cutlery, the elderly gentlemen in suit jackets were napping in plastic lounge chairs.

The size of their group changes with the exigencies of the situation; while all the Roman Kalderasha would like to be in one place, that hasn't happened



Figure 3: The pedestrian "street" formed by campers is also the space of cooking, eating, and socializing in the parking lot.

since the major *sgombero* in 2005, when they were evicted from the city-owned property called Campo Boario, where they'd lived legally and peacefully for 20 years. The Campo Boario, ironically, was cleared for the construction of the *Città dall'Altra Economia*, The City of the Other Economy, a complex where fair trade and ecological goods and ideas are promoted and sold. There, the students went to the local schools, the Kalderasha were customers at local establishments, they had a protected place to work, they leased portable toilets, water and electricity from the city. Then, there were 200 people in 60 campers or so; now, that group is dispersed. Each group requires only a piece of land, access to water, portable toilets, and, ideally, electricity. Whether they park in a circle or oval or rectangle or series of rectangles, neighbors and "neighborhoods" are maintained, so that extended families are loosely grouped. From the campers an entire domestic world unfurls. In front of the campers, in what becomes common space, a mixture of piazza and street, awnings come down, to be adjusted throughout the day. Sturdy plastic tables are set up. The kitchen, consisting of a camp stove, a large basin and a garden hose for water supply and dishwashing, has its own zone alongside the eating and sitting area. The campers have small refrigerators, run by generators when they are off the grid. They have small bathrooms but sewage becomes an issue; when the group stays for a long time in one place, they need access to toilets.

Behind the camper is another zone: small washing machines and clotheslines are organized there, and

babies nap while women take down and fold the clothes. Sometimes a large tent is erected in front of the camper, creating a semi-enclosed room, especially useful during warm rainy periods, a place to eat, socialize, nap.

In the current municipal parking lot, the city provided portable toilets for the first few months and then, one day, without explanation, removed them. Since then, the Kalderasha use the toilets in the two adjacent big box stores. The staff there has gotten to know them and is accommodating. What do you do in the middle of the night? I asked Aldo. He looked at me like how-dumb-can-you-be? *Ci arrangiamo*. We work it out.

### "FROZEN TRANSIENCE": CASTEL ROMANO



Figure 4: Castel Romano, the second-largest government camp for Roma in Italy, along via Pontina, south of Rome. Image from Google Maps.

Given that subjects in motion are seen as dangerous because of their very movement in a sedentary society where subjects can always be located, it is necessary to create the notion of a process of "civilization" in which gypsies are passive subjects who need to be "civilized" from their asociality.<sup>3</sup>

When you search Google for Castel Romano, what comes up is the popular designer outlet of the same name, on the via Pontina, an hour's drive from central Rome. Your eyes travel, so to speak, down the via Pontina several kilometers and look across the road to see the other Castel Romano, a startling rectangular site of what looks like bare earth, studded with tiny structures aligned in a grid; they might be temporary barracks or chemical toilets. What they are, in fact, are metal containers of the type used for emergency housing. The site is clearly without any vegetation, and is enclosed by chain-link fences seated in low concrete walls. Floodlights

look down from tall poles. At the entrance to the camp, one is stopped by police. Residents and visitors alike must show their papers. Authorization is required to enter. Once inside, along the high fence that contains the camp, one finds the trailers occupied by various organizations that oversee the camp. Beyond this, there is only the vista of an endless sea of metal boxes in grid formation.

Castel Romano is the first of the "mega-camps" built by the municipal government to house Roma. These people were evicted in 2005 from their shantytown because of a "health emergency" declared there; a few weeks later, plans to build on the land were revealed.<sup>4</sup> Holding between 800-1200 people, Castel Romano is the largest authorized Roma camp in Italy. Walter Veltroni, Rome's left-wing mayor who oversaw its construction, called it a *Villaggio della Solidarietà*, a "solidarity village."



Figure 5: Castel Romano

The containers at the front of the camp are in good condition, well-cared for, and the ground is clean and covered with gravel. But when one breaches the first line of containers, women come rushing up. "*Signora, acqua, acqua, signora!*" – "*Signora, here we have no water.*" "Come into my *baracca, signora, look.*" She takes my arm and pulls me inside; at the sink she turns the faucet. "Look, *signora*, do you see water? How can we live without water? *Signora*, this is a *lager!*" – a concentration camp.

The grid placement of the containers means that space is undifferentiated, homogeneous; all containers are in an equal relation to each other, they

all face the same way, they cannot face each other, or create enclosure between them, turn their back to make a family grouping. Distance is enforced and regulated; affinities and associations are undermined. The layered zones of social space created by Roma in every camp, the flow of dwelling between inside and out, is defeated by this layout. Hot or cold, when it's not pouring, people sit in the narrow threshold of the door and the several steps that lead up from the ground. Here one watches to see what's happening, to see who goes by, who's out and about, and one watches for passersby to talk to. This watching is what one does in a city, in a town, in a community; it is part of participation. Yet here little happens. Socializing, visiting, is discouraged by the miniscule interior of the container, the brutally void quality of the exterior, the dusty or muddy ground, and there are no *places* to go. There is no social center, no workplace, no bar, only the endless containers on the ground. *Gypsies* are being *housed* here; the containers are *housing* them, the way that a machine or a mechanical part has a *housing*. The possibilities of participation and agency have been reduced almost to zero. Here is truly *terra di nessuno, terra nulla*; no man's land, no-place. One sits in the doorway and waits.

"Frozen transience" is Zygmunt Bauman's term;

[Refugee] camps boast a new quality: a 'frozen transience', an ongoing, lasting state of temporaryness, a duration patched together of moments none of which is lived through as an element of, let alone a contribution to, perpetuity.<sup>5</sup>

At Castel Romano, there is no sense of where one can go from here, and yet to imagine a lifetime here is out of the question.

This sense of no-place, of extreme anomie, is linked to location and geography as well as to the physical place itself. One moves to and from, in and out of the camp with difficulty. The via Pontina, nicknamed *Strada della Morte*, the Road of Death, is famed for its incidence of high-speed fatal accidents, and there is no proper entry or exit road to adjust vehicular speed. From the bus stop, one walks for twenty minutes in a sort of unpaved ditch below grade, mud in rainy weather, the path made only by many feet. The schoolbus makes the 1-2 hour trip each way to Rome, arriving sometimes two or three hours late; only 50 out of hundreds of kids go to school regularly, along with one very old lady who is without family and goes to the city

every day to beg. The police enter containers to check IDs and conduct searches of containers and cars without anything remotely resembling a warrant, and often check for car registration and insurance. With other visitors, I watched while a man ran alongside the tow truck laden with cars, yelling, "My papers are in order! Look at my papers!" leading us to believe that vehicles were being confiscated illegally. The micro-economies that many Roma depend on – hauling, picking up waste from building sites, salvaging and reselling metal, various kinds of metalwork, selling bits and pieces on the street and at flea markets – depend on vehicles. Given the dwindling possibility of this work, made more difficult by the camp's remote location, never mind the confiscation of vehicles, it is no mystery that criminality flourishes there.

Like the Kalderasha settlement described here, self-built or *autogestito* camps, including the one from which the residents of Castel Romano were evicted, are organized according to social structure. Houses and campers are organized to create a sense of enclosure. Porch, piazza, outdoor living room, places to gather for coffee, meals, play. A sense of being "outside" everyday Italian society is counterbalanced with a rich sense of interiority, of containment, of safety, both inside the house or camper and in the elaborated, inhabited spaces between and among houses and campers.

There are attempts at *autogestione* in Castel Romano. In some containers, carpets have been laid down on the floors, walls painted, pictures hung. Here and there is a brick finish or faux stone on the front of a container, a proper porch light, paving, a tiny lawn, a potted palm tree. Some residents have claimed spaces between adjacent containers, using them for parking or for storage; in a few cases, one sees awning, covered space, furniture, garden, chickens. These residents speak with pride of their improvements while they speak at the same time with desperation and loathing about where they are. They are living a contradiction, attempting to express agency within the cage of the camp, attempting to make the interior into a home in an inhospitable context. Under all circumstances, there are some who have the strength and the ability, financial or emotional, to struggle to improve the quality of daily life, to feel at home. I would speculate that these moments of *autogestione* are simultaneously moments of adaptation and moments of

resistance. The general lack of *autogestione* may be interpreted as the opposite of adaptation or resistance: a passive surrender, an inability born of exhaustion, depression, hopelessness, lack of funds, mobility, and so on. But perhaps it is also a form of resistance, a refusal to engage with an untenable situation, a refusal to even attempt to make oneself at home, a coming face to face with frozenness and with transience.

## CONCLUSION

It is cruelly ironic that mobility, which once characterized the Roma way of life and signified its alleged freedom, is now forced on them. Ironic, too, that people whose identity was never related to place find themselves fixed in place, in camps where papers must be shown to be granted entry. These are the two faces of Rome's strategy of "de-gypsification."

The majority of Italian Roma, like the majority of French Roma, have been in the country for generations and feel Italian. "Voluntary repatriation" -- current French policy -- is a myth of a real home *somewhere else*, just as the notion of "nomadism" is a myth of origins. Both of these myths are ways to justify the persecution of the Roma, to insist that they are a people for whom there is no place in the city today.

The UN defines adequate housing as a human right, and beyond that, it specifies culturally adequate housing:

The way housing is built, the materials used, and the policies supporting these must facilitate cultural expression and housing diversity.<sup>6</sup>

Space is cultural: ways of organizing and occupying and traversing spaces are ways of practicing, enacting, and regularly breathing new life into what we call culture. The city as an engine of integration is an impoverished model for today. The new social and cultural forms produced by multiple cultures, individually and syncretically, will inevitably also produce new spatial, architectural and urban forms. To embrace multiculturalism is to embrace a city we have not yet seen.

Antonio Tosi, urban sociologist:

By governing the multilayered coexistence of different cultures, city living sets the citizen apart not on

account of a cultural homogeneity, but rather on account of his/her having learnt how to 'be' in town, having developed an aptitude for an intensive exchange of presences and practices. City living is a sort of habitus, whose acquisition makes people fit for multicultural coexistence.<sup>7</sup>

Walt Whitman, poet of the city:

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)<sup>8</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

1 The term Roma is used as shorthand here to refer to very diverse groups in Italy which are generically labeled as *zingari* (gypsies) by the majority population. The pejorative term "gypsies", now fading from use in academic and sympathetic circles, is used to explain "Roma" for readers who may not be familiar with the term.

2 Amnesty International, "Italy must stop the discrimination against Roma", 10 Sept. 2008; "Memorandum by Thomas Hammarberg, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, following his visit to Italy on June 19-20, 2008."

3 Luca Bravi and Nando Sigona, "Educazione e rieducazione nei campi per 'nomadi': una storia," *I campi per stranieri in Italia*, ed. Matteo Sanfilippo, in *Studi Emigrazione*, XLIII (164), 857-874. Author's translation.

4 "Il Municipio", *Giornale di Roma XI*, Ottobre 2005, newsletter of the district.

5 Zygmunt Bauman, *Society Under Siege*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 114.

6 United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights, Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, "The Right to Adequate Housing (Art.11 (1))." CESCR General Comment 4, Dec. 13, 1991: 3-4.

7 Antonio Tosi. "An urban issue". *Urbanistica*, no. 111, 1998: 7.

8 Walt Whitman. "Song of Myself," *The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy, (New York: Penguin Books, 1975), 123.