This talk explores the world of illegal Romani settlements, the trash that sustains them, and the Ashkali refugees who call them home. Many Ashkali, who are pejoratively referred to as Gypsies, fled war and persecution in Kosovo, hoping to build better lives in Belgrade. Today, Ashkali are relegated to slums, sidelined from the formal economy, denied citizenship, and subjected to everyday violence. To survive, Ashkali collect the only resource available to them: the garbage in dumpsters. Discarded apparel, rotten vegetables, and scraps of wood are utilized as clothing, food, and building supplies. Trash-picking, which was lauded a century ago, is now associated with dirt and degradation. Waste is so denotatively powerful that it is a potent metaphor for social and economic exclusion. Nevertheless, garbage ties Ashkali to the transnational flow of commodities. As the bedrock of people’s material lives, trash is also at the core of their social realities, engendering identity, morality, and relatedness. However, as goods move from Serbs to Ashkali via the dumpsters, representations of the filthy, destitute Gypsy are promulgated. This talk examines how Ashkali economic, material, and social worlds are constituted through waste.

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