

Book Review

Chelsi West Ohueri. 2025. *Encountering Race in Albania. An Ethnography of the Communist Afterlife*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. 240 pp., ISBN 9781501781865 (hardcover), ISBN 9781501781872 (paperback), ISBN 9781501781889 (eBook). \$ 130.00 / \$ 34.95 / \$ 22.99

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Encountering Race in Albania makes an important theoretical contribution to the growing literature on “race” and racialisation in (Southeastern) Europe. Drawing on nearly 20 years of sustained engagement with various actors in Albania and long-term fieldwork in Tirana, Chelsi West Ohueri examines how “race” and racialisation operate at Europe’s peripheries. The book offers an ethnographically rich and theoretically nuanced exploration of the widespread assumption that Albania is *raceless* and investigates the social, political, and cultural work done through such claims.

Chapter 1, “The Communist Afterlife”, situates Albania historically and introduces the main ethnographic interlocutors. Chapter 2, “The Trial of the Anthropologist”, turns to West Ohueri’s experiences as a Black anthropologist from the United States, analysing how “race” emerged in her everyday encounters with different residents of Albania. She argues that some of the initial resistance to the very notion of “race” stems from the belief that being a good host – honourable, hospitable, and respectful towards guests – is a core element of Albanian identity. In this context, “race” is often equated with racism, while racism itself is seen as fundamentally incompatible with being a good Albanian. As a result, any acknowledgment of “race” in everyday life is interpreted as a potential accusation of racism and is, therefore, strongly rejected.

Understanding “race” as an imagined and invented dimension of social relations – one that hierarchises people along axes of superiority and inferiority and emerges through encounters – West Ohueri shows that “race” and racialisation operate differently in Southeast European peripheries than in European and American centres. Her aim is not to ask “what American or Western frameworks of race tell us about Albania” but rather, “what can an ethnographic and locally situated study of Albania tell us about race?” (8). This shift in perspective leads her to develop new analytical terms for studying how “race” and racialisation function in

Southeastern Europe – terms that have so far been missing from both academic and everyday discussions of the topic.

One such term is “peripheral whiteness”. It “attends to race’s shifting nature, as Albanians are simultaneously racialized in and outside of whiteness, and how understandings of blackness for Roma and Egyptians might shift yet they remain outside of the boundaries of whiteness” (14). Addressed in Chapter 3, “Peripheral Whiteness”, the concept is informed by Cedric Robinson’s framework of racial capitalism. It highlights how whiteness functions at the peripheries of Europe and of capitalism: as a field of promise and possibility, from which many Southeast Europeans are excluded, even as they continuously strive to inscribe themselves within it.

The book illustrates these dynamics through everyday examples of racialisation and antiblack as well as anti-Roma racism: the use of blackface and brownface in popular culture in Albania (162-3); an incident in which an Albanian woman on a plane shouted the N-word at West Ohueri (59); and both the structural and everyday exclusion of Roma and Egyptians from the Albanian nation (Chapter 4). At the same time, West Ohueri shows how white Albanians themselves have historically been racialised – as men with goat or horse tails (87), as “bloodthirsty, stunted, animal-like” (88) – and how they are subjected to ongoing international monitoring, excluded from many of the privileges of life in European and American centres due to their presumed backwardness (83-4), and so on. Comparable processes of racialisation have been documented across Southeastern and Eastern Europe.¹

Chapter 4, “On Blackness: A Story in Six Names”, examines different configurations of blackness in Albania, including the complex set of terms used by Roma and Egyptians to describe themselves: *Arixhi*, *Gabel*, *Rom*, *Jevg*, *Egjiptian*, to name just a few. Roma and Egyptians might draw on blackness as a framework to counter their experiences of exclusion and discrimination, using it to articulate claims to transnational and universal belonging.² While the discussion of emic terms is fascinating, I would have liked to see more details about how the racialisation of Roma and Egyptians is implicated in the national and transnational political economy. Reading this chapter, I was reminded of Eirik Saethre’s ethnography *Wastelands*, which demonstrates how the racialised exclusion of Ashkali refugees who fled from Kosovo to Serbia underpins the functioning of transnational capitalism in its peripheries.³

Chapter 5, “A Question of Racism in Three Acts”, highlights various instances of racist discrimination in everyday life – through football, popular culture, and the

1 Baker, Catherine, Bogdan C. Iacob, Aniko Imre, and James Mark. Eds. 2024. *Off White. Central and Eastern Europe and the Global History of Race*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

2 Partridge, Damani J. 2022. *Blackness as a Universal Claim: Holocaust Heritage, Noncitizen Futures, and Black Power in Berlin*. Oakland/CA: University of California Press.

3 Saethre, Eirik. 2020. *Wastelands: Recycled Commodities and the Perpetual Displacement of Ashkali and Romani Scavengers*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

segregated housing of Roma and Egyptians. It approaches the construction of ethnic and racialised belonging as fundamentally intertwined, suggesting that the “discussion of ethnic conflict in the Balkans is, therefore, a discussion about racialization” (158). Maintaining sharp analytical terms (and inventing new ones when existing categories fail to capture everyday complexity) is crucial. Yet this chapter – like the book as a whole – shows ethnographically that a strictly definitional approach misses much of the important and ambivalent sociopolitical and economic work carried out through racialisation in daily life. Rather than reproducing racialising logics by asking whether Roma and Egyptians are white, Black, or an ethnic group, cultural anthropologists of Southeastern Europe should continue to study the processes through which certain groups are rendered separate – so biologically and culturally different that their labour exploitation and housing segregation appear natural and unavoidable.

With this book, West Ohuiri invites us to move beyond the issue of whether “race” exists in Southeastern Europe and instead to ask more pressing questions: how processes of biologised differentiation – ethnicisation and racialisation – unfold in everyday life, and why they operate differently in Southeastern Europe than in the European – and American – centres.