

# PREFACE



In September 2012, I did a two-week trip to Madrid to prepare for fieldwork. Each day, thousands of people were protesting in the streets of Madrid against the unsocial policies of the state, including the cuts made to public expenses in order to ‘save the banks’ that had gone bankrupt because of the financial crisis of 2008. This was the backdrop of my fieldwork; this was Spain and Madrid anno 2012, and this was what caught my attention. El Rastro, on the other hand, the very locus of this study, seemed completely empty and dull. I went there a few times during my two-week trip. I walked up and down the steep hills of the outdoor market area of el Rastro, looking for the emblematic market, in search of its people. In fact, I never saw any market, any Pentecostal churches or any Gitanos. All in all, el Rastro seemed like an abandoned place. There were hardly any people there at all. I left Madrid after two weeks, psyched by all the protests people were making against the immense injustices of the time but quite disillusioned by the fact that I had not found the market, the churches or the people I had set out to study. Where were they? *Who* were they?

I went back to Madrid early January 2013. I rented an apartment for one year in Calle Salitre (Saltpetre Street), 10 minutes’ walk from the heart of the Rastro market. I kept following the protests at Puerta del Sol and the movements of ‘Los Indignados’ (‘the outraged’). I also, of course, tried to locate the Gitanos of el Rastro, the market and the churches – and little by little I realized what my initial failure had been. I had missed out on the rhythm of the *barrio* (‘neighbourhood’). It so happened that the times I had visited el Rastro were the times when its people were elsewhere. El Rastro has a breathing rhythm to it, it inhales and exhales, and if you catch it on one of its inhales it seems like life has abandoned it completely. I finally managed to be there on exhalation, bringing out both market and people.

Tuesday and Saturday there is a small morning market at the lower part of el Rastro. After a couple of slow morning hours, this market evaporates, and its traders and customers go elsewhere. Sunday is the big el Rastro market day. For the Gitano *comerciantes* ('merchants') of the area, the day starts about 8 AM with preparations; by midday el Rastro is packed with people, and at 4 PM the streets are once again abandoned. Then, the streets are empty for several hours, until *los creyentes* (the Gitano Pentecostal 'believers') of the *barrio* go to church at about 8 PM. Before church, street corners and plazas are full of children playing, youths flirting, men negotiating prices of sellable items, women gossiping and old people strolling and keeping an eye on family and relatives. Two hours of church leaves the *barrio* to itself again, then, at 10 PM, life once again reappears. Inhale and exhale, inspire and expire. Slowly, I figured out the rhythm of the *barrio* and its people.

This study is historically situated between two huge crises of global reach – the financial crisis of 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic, both of which gravely affected Spain. The 2008 crisis led to government cuts in state social expenditure and the increased neoliberalization of Spanish society. Because I was able to follow the lives of the Gitanos of el Rastro from 2012 until the finalizing of this book – with multiple revisits to the field and letter correspondence and phone calls to some of my main interlocutors and closest friends – I gained insight into how such crises of global reach affected the daily lives of people 'on the ground'. These crises constitute an historic and ethnographic macro context for the interlocutors of this book, a book that first and foremost presents an ethnographic case that restricts itself to a particular locus and focus, namely the Gitanos of el Rastro. However, with that said, the ethnographic examples that will be presented throughout the book equally show that the lives of these people are never just local; on the contrary, they include experiences, relations and transactions going as far as Latin America, Turkey and China, as well as into the realm of the transcendent and the divine.