New Nonfiction from F. Ahmeti: Bunker Mentality

“The home of the Albanian belongs to God and the guest.”

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Durres reminds me of the Jersey Shore. The mix of family fun and adult nightlife, and the dirt, is not unlike the town featured on the MTV reality series in which a bunch of people mostly from Staten Island, NY stayed at a house on the boardwalk in Seaside Heights, New Jersey. Like Durres, Seaside’s boardwalk has a carnival atmosphere, with games, prizes, and vendors selling novelty food and toys – and all the litter that comes with it. There are many Jersey Shore experiences which are nothing like the infamy promoted by MTV, and far from the filth one would expect from an almost comically industrialized and densely populated state. These were all beyond my family’s price range, though, so we used to go to Seaside Heights when I was a kid. My family is from north jersey. Our path to the ocean is geographically blocked by Long Island. Thus, we don’t go to the beach but *down the shore,* per local dialect. On the long journey south the landscape becomes sparse and starts to look like a Springsteen song, and one can infer why there is an undercurrent of animosity between the northern and southern sides of the state.

My memories of Seaside Heights, perhaps mercifully, grow sparser with time. There was the time when we stayed in a high-up hotel and I got a Cookie Monster themed fifth birthday cake, and I remember that was when my mother quit smoking for several years because she said it was a wake up call that she got *pneumonia in the summer*. There was a time my father frugally brought down discounted focaccia from an Italian grocery store up north and we ate it cold sitting on the floor

of the cheapest motel room we could find. The last time we went, when I was eleven years old, a man who was arguing with his pregnant girlfriend in the street punched out the driver side window of my mother's van in the middle of the night. When the motel's night manager knocked on our door, the police had already wrapped the man's hand and taken him away. Some old men hanging around outside relayed the story and pointed out the trail of blood. I remember seeing the old men and thinking I was like them, because I like to stay up late, too. I realized when out-late later in life that those who stay up and idle in the streets at night are people (drugged up or not) who can't or won't go home. My mother brushed away the broken glass and drove home up the highway with 70 mph winds in her face. At home, I discovered I was covered in bed bug bites that I'd thought were only mosquito bites.

Like the Jersey Shore, there are plenty of places in Albania to go if you're in need of something more scenic. But I used to swim at Seaside Heights. One spring, still battling a bout of bronchitis, I bathed in the cold waters of Brighton Beach off Brooklyn. I breathed in big swigs of the Hudson River in small installments through the mist blanketing transit stops in Jersey City. I was practically nursed on dirt. So it doesn't bother me like it should.

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The Albanian collective memory, whether painted in blood, or etched on the angry edges of towering gray stone mountains, is threatened by our general lack of written record. There exists an Albanian literary canon, nursed in mosques and monasteries, written by exiles and those who became martyrs because they didn't act quick enough at becoming exiles. These works withstood the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage that goes on in the background of every occupation: the slow burning suppression, like not allowing children to be educated in their native tongue, and the literal burning of libraries and cemeteries. My Albanian parents left Yugoslavia in time to

avoid being martyrs or refugees, so are instead exiles.

Despite sharing a language that survived several consecutive centuries of occupation, those Albanians who*could* read and write did so until the turn of the twentieth century in three different regional alphabets. In 1908, Albanians converged from all across their regions at the Congress of Manastir, (present day Bitolla, North Macedonia) to decide on one alphabet to unite them all. Among those in attendance were guerilla fighter Cerciz Topulli, priest-and-poet Gjergj Fishta, and Avni Rustemi, a school teacher who later assassinated the traitor Esat Pasha Toptani with two bullets in broad daylight in front of the Hotel Intercontinental in Paris.

Early English records of the ancient and as-yet uncharted nation came in the form of travelogs written by those well-to-do westerners who bothered to visit and found what they saw interesting enough to write down. There was Edith Durham, who first went to the Balkans for some fresh air after her doctor told her that her stuffy upper-class Victorian lifestyle was making her ill. After her first trip, she wrote a book affectionately titled *Through the Lands of the Serbs.* On her second trip, she met the Albanians, and dedicated the rest of her life to writing and lobbying for the Albanian cause, decrying the then-new Yugoslavia as a front for Serbian hegemony, calling it a new tyrant worse than the old. There was Lord Byron, the ever-image-conscious poet, who had his portrait painted in southern Albanian costume, and stayed with Ali Pasha Tepelena at his castle situated in the bright blue waters across from present-day Greece. He characterized us as “brave, rigidly honest, and faithful…. cruel though not treacherous, and [having] several vices, but no meannesses.” Byron acknowledges in his letters home that Ali Pasha, who treated him with the utmost hospitality, was a bona-fide tyrant. But he was equally well known for his diplomatic prowess, progressive religious pluralism, and most importantly

for defying the Sultan and running his governorate as an almost-autonomous Albanian state. For the last of these, Ali Pasha's head was paraded through Istanbul on a silver plate in 1822.

Castle of Ali Pasha Tepelena, Butrint, 2022

In movies we are gangsters, human traffickers, arms dealers. *Taken* shows Liam Nisson murdering his way across western Europe to retrieve his daughter from the Albanian traffickers who sold her into the sex trade. In *War Dogs* two American arms contractors travel to Albania to seize upon a cache of discounted AK-47 rounds, only to find that the Chinese-made munitions are subject to embargo and must be fraudulently repackaged before sale. The first season story arc of the *Law and Order* spinoff, *Organized Crime,* revolves around Detective Elliot Stabler going undercover to infiltrate the Albanian mafia in New York City; they own a boxing gym, as is expected of people with a warlike nature. In a classic episode of *The Simpsons*, Bart is traded for an Albanian exchange student, a polite and conscientious guest who turns out to be a spy seeking nuclear intel. I will gladly tune into any of these, no matter how negative the representation, if only to hear the actors take a shot at the Albanian language.

Of course stereotypes are not pulled from thin air. Florin Krasniqi, a school teacher from Kosovo, crossed the US-Mexico border crumpled in the trunk of a Cadillac on Christmas Eve 1988. In New York, he worked as a cab driver and a construction worker and eventually opened his own roofing business. Then, Krasniqi funneled $30 million in weapons and

equipment to the fledgling Kosovo Liberation Army, purchased legally in the US and transported under the pretense of exotic game hunting.

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The Balkans, particularly the formerly barricaded fields of Albania, carry a type of mystique that quirky off the beaten path type travel bloggers salivate over. There is a particular brand of adventurer that marvels at scarcity as spectacle, and Albania is certainly vulnerable to them. One can get a similar effect by visiting their own ghettos or touring the ruins of an old boomtown close to home, but it reads sad when the subject and audience speak the same language and carry the same currency. Here is an example (based on 100% true events) of what one of these might sound like:

My first morning in Duress I woke up to dead jellyfish all along the beach. They had been spit up onto the shore in a storm, and the waters of the Adriatic were dark, churned muddy by the rains.

By the hotel poolside, families with multiple close in age little children drank Turkish Coffee and ate Bread and Cheese for breakfast. I walked the beach a bit and saw ***The Bunkers!*** *which were filled with trash and there was also trash strewn everywhere all around…..*

……At dusk, a dog descended on a polluted drainage ditch to drink. I went out to get some dinner along the cobblestone promenade between the beach and the long strip of hotels that vary in price and quality from bare bones cheap family digs to infinity pools and dining terraces that transform to dance clubs at night, complete with live music. One charismatic performer switched between traditional Albanian songs and Dua Lipa hits and shouted "join us" in English, waving at passers

by on the cobblestones.

I gave some lekes to a beggar with no hands who raised his wrist-stumps in appreciation and offered what sounded like blessings in his native language.

I stopped in a restaurant that specialized not in Albanian cuisine but the food of neighboring Macedonia, where the waiter brought an ashtray with the menu, something we don't do in the USA anymore.

The restaurant offered Kosovan beer and local raki, an Albanian white whiskey that is said to be a healing tonic for all manner of ailments. I had Macedonian specialties like speca (peppers) and buk me djath (bread and cheese), some qebapa (kebabs), and a lettuce-less salad of cucumber and tomato. I washed it down with a liter bottle of mineral water. They don't serve tap because the tap water in this country is not drinkable.

I didn't drink alcohol because I was too scared (out here in a strange land all alone).

For dessert and digestion I walked and wandered down the cobblestones a bit more and there was a Turkish in a vest and a red fez selling dondurma,the iconic stretchy mastic ice cream, in excotic flavors like hazelnut and pistachio to complete the oriental ensemble of it all. At that moment, I realized it was late, and feared I would be human trafficked, so I went home past the stray dogs and also humans that all but hid away during the day and slept on the beach at night. [Here is where the tourist might add candid photos of the locals as if they were inanimate]

Albania is one of the poorest countries in Europe, and this is why the exchange rate was ever in my favor. A leke is not equal to a dollar…….

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Durres is not foremost a resort town, but a port with an incidental beach. At a hotel there, I remembered the words of my immigrant friends, who say things like *I was too afraid even to order a coffee*, when describing the disorienting experience of their early days in America. I know about enough Albanian to get by as a guest, but not enough to hold a job or build a life. I know enough that a variable in accent or cadence can completely throw me off balance. I can barely read a poem in Albanian, but even with jet lag, I can still read most signs and restaurant menus.

In Durres, I drank coffee sitting in the sun by the hotel and read the news from America on my phone. I read about the people who cooked to death in the cargo hold of a tractor trailer in Texas, and I thought about the violently bumpy roads of Albania and the empty expanses on either side of them and the conditions that lead one to throw themselves into the potentially deadly journey of migration even when their life at home is not under imminent threat.

After breakfast, I went for a walk on the beach, where I saw big purple jellyfish, like the ones on Spongebob Squarepants, staggered in a line, dead. I ducked around a bunker, and saw that it had been filled with trash, an act of resourcefulness that helped keep the contents from blowing around the beach in the breeze.

Image of Death in Durres, 2022

All along Enver Hoxha’s border, guards waited with rifles ready to fire upon any enemy upon entry – and to shoot on sight any who dared to defect. The bunkers, built by Hoxha as a project of national defense, are a visual culmination of his extreme isolationist policy.

They were built to be used by citizens in the event of an invasion, but more importantly, to loom in the background of daily life. Enver built 173,000 of these instead of fixing the roads. Today, these concrete domes of varying sizes sit like small bitter blisters on what could otherwise be an unspoiled panorama. Some bunkers dot the peaks and valleys of the countryside, while others are sprinkled on the shores of coastal cities. Some of the larger bunkers have been creatively repurposed into museums and others painted as public art. Many are sinking slowly, soon to be reclaimed by the land, unsightly but unworthy of the effort of being removed. But the bunkers have an enduring mythology all their own. They are known as hideaways where young lovers go for

privacy – something like what the automobile was for American teens in the 1950s. They are known as sites where rural people relieve themselves when an outhouse is too far away. I have been on Albania's highways. For an idea of the experience, picture the landscape where Wile E Coyote chased the Roadrunner through endless empty miles, but painted gray and green and more poorly paved. While I don't personally know what passions would possess one to want to have sex in a mad, dead, dictator's concrete bunker, I do know that there are not many rest stops in the Albanian highlands, and if it was between pooping in the open road or befouling Enver's bunker, I know what choice I would make.

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The Austro-Hungarian scholar Franz Nopsca wrote about asking for water at an Albanian home he passed on his travels in Kelmendi. He was offered buttermilk instead, and consumed the entire container. When a family member came home with a craving and saw that the buttermilk was all gone, he proclaimed his relief that Nopsca had arrived first, sparing the family the shame of having no food to offer to a guest. Albanian hospitality is legendary but not very much more legendary than anyone else's. There is a reason why a viral Reddit post about a Swedish family not feeding their son's guest spiraled so out of control that it garnered a research-driven analysis in The New York Times. Most cultures will feed and protect their guests. It is considered indecent to do any less.

View of the Adriatic from inside bunker, Durres, 2022

Once I worked in a beer restaurant in the domain of yuppies along the Hudson River. This is a place where, for example, factories where immigrants toiled are refurbished as luxury apartments and the brutal markers of the building's past life like ceiling beams and exposed brick are fetishized as features, rather than blight. One evening, a Turkish gentleman came in and sipped a big beer on the terrace. He was very sociable, very bald, and very much a happy drunk. He asked me questions about the history of the building; I asked around and learned that it used to be a belt factory, and shared this info the next time I circled past his table. Amazingly, that was the same night my favorite work belt that had served me well for several years finally broke. It was Italian leather, given to me by an Albanian old lady ex-coworker who said it used to be her own but now she was too fat. The Turk said he was interested in the restaurant's concept – modeled on an Austro-Hungarian beer hall – because he had majored in hospitality and hotel management at school. I had always felt suspicious that the vibe attracted at least a small percentage of covert white nationalists. I don't remember if I told him that. Obviously, it came out that he was Turkish and I was Albanian when we finally told each other our names. He told me, with some excitement, that his grandmother was Albanian. I told him I might have some Turkish mixed in somewhere amid the five-hundred-year occupation. I told him, we might be cousins.

I left to do other work and returned to perform the final closing task of shutting the terrace umbrellas and front gate. My cousin was now sitting with two white people at another table, captive in conversation with these strangers who were fast becoming his friends. So when the white lady said she *feels bad* about holding me up, but didn't actually get up, I saw an opportunity to give her some soothing perspective and

maybe even close the show. I said: Don’t worry about overstaying your welcome – this guy (my cousin) came to my house once and didn’t leave for over 500 years! My cousin commenced to shake and laugh as the whites declared themselves unaware. Then he rose, staggered towards the restaurant gate, set down his beer, hugged me, and handed me a $10 bill.

Upstairs, the manager said for future reference that this late after closing I was allowed to simply kick people out.

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Enver wasn’t completely crazy for thinking up the bunkers. The lands of the Albanians had over and over been invaded. We starred as supporting acts in so-called proxy wars between major world powers. We were there as states splintered and borders bled together.

His paranoid policy was only a shrewd exploitation of the Albanian collective memory.

There were many things that attracted occupiers to us. Kosovo has its silver mines. Macedonia fertile soil for farming. Albania a path to the sea. On the edges of Montenegro and Greece there are still droves of Albanians who exist in a precarious position, plentiful enough to be a political scapegoat but not quite plentiful enough to hold their share of political power.

While the path forward for the Albanians in former-Yugoslav states has been and remains bumpy, no Albanian inside of Albania has been killed or persecuted for being Albanian in generations. I try to imagine, as an exile’s child, how bad it had to be that someone from Albania would elect to defect and risk being shot for it along the way. Only a few years before the war that sent Kosovars pouring out into Albania to avoid death by Yugoslav federal army, and a few years after Enver Hoxha finally dropped dead, Albania had its own mass exodus out.

There is a famous image from this time. Type in “Durres migration” and Google will give you the original photo and everything you ever wanted to know about it all from differing angles. The picture was appropriated during the height of the war in Syria and the migration crisis it precipitated. Those who defended migration aimed to garner sympathy by claiming the photo showed European refugees fleeing the Nazis in World War Two. The Nazis (of today) said the ship showed Syrians. Both were wrong.

The ship was called Vlora, leaving from Durres bound for Bari full of Albanian migrants and Cuban sugar. The photo was not from 1944 or 2015 but 1991. These weren’t Europeans,™ but Albanians. A few seconds of Googling could have stemmed the tide of this disinformation. The name *Vlora is* clearly visible on the bow. Vlora is a coastal city in southern Albania, the former capital, and site of the 1912 flag raising and declaration of independence. Vlora is Albania’s Philadelphia.

Durres Sea Cliff across from Italy, 2022

View of Durres, 2018

In 1991, twenty thousand Albanians hitched themselves to every available inch of space including the ropes and ladders and parts of the Vlora's rigging; many were forced to hang on for dear life the entire voyage. On arrival, the passengers were crammed into a football stadium while Italy planned. Conditions rapidly worsened, and police even alleged some of the people who had arrived without any luggage and some without shirts on their backs had fired guns inside the stadium. Some escaped the stadium, but all of the rest were deported. The Albanians were especially plucky and so continued to try. Italy seemed tired. Politicians resorted to lazy tropes about the Ottoman Empire and the migrant "invasion" of the day, their own more contemporary incursions into Albanian lands notwithstanding. In 1997, the ship Kateri I Radkes sailed from Vlora across the Strait of Otranto. An Italian navy ship assigned to intercept and inspect instead crashed into it, causing it to roll and sink, 35 miles from Italy's shores. Over half of the 142 people aboard drowned.

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I empathize with immigrants. Sometimes, in my effort to be hospitable as possible I tell them their English is *very good* even when it isn't and sometimes I accidentally go too far and flippantly say their English is perfect when I really mean I can understand them perfectly. I don't know what it's like to immigrate, but I know what it's like to be in a room full of people I know well and all-but understand their conversations, but not be able to participate. I know the frustration of filtering your feelings through your own inner-translator and it still coming through slow with plenty of sediment. I knew what it was like, back then when in the den of yuppies but now more than ever, studying in tiny Tallahassee, to have everyone ask about your accent. I know what it's like to be asked to coach everyone you meet on how to pronounce your name and still have most people just avoid calling you by any name altogether. I try and try and try again to find a short and

satisfying way to explain to others why *I am an Albanian* does not mean *I am from Albania*.

I was born and educated in America, and so I have a soft spot for the visual poetry of aquatic migration. We were taught early of the mystic power of the Mayflower, and the music of mass migrations to Ellis Island, all those millions who muted themselves to become a part of one collective American orchestra of white noise. In conversations about migration, I think about the ones who aren't invited to assimilate, even with the proper paperwork. I think about those who survive sneaking through the desert only to drown in the Rio Grande. I think of the little boys Aylan and Elian – one drowned, and one seized by immigration officers at gunpoint, their names aloud almost like anagrams, their images emblematic of the endgame for sociopathic immigration policy. When I get frustrated with our country, I think about the group of Yugoslav-Albanian conscripts who were accused of killing a Serbian comrade who drowned in an accident. They fled across the border and Hoxha handed them back to be executed. I think about my father as a conscript, placed in the brig for cursing Josef Broz Tito in an argument with his Yugo-Slav commander. Me and my father have the same name and somewhat of the same temperament and I'm annoyed with him and my mother for giving me this name but grateful at least they gave me an Albanian one.

View of from Butrint Lake, 2022

Entrance to Ali Pasha Castle, 2022

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It is not likely for most people reading this to find themselves in the Balkans, but likely enough that they may someday find themself in the home of an Albanian, as we tend to immigrate out. I have encountered more than one of my brethren even in my time in tiny Tallahassee. So, below is a travel guide not for the Albanian homeland, but an Albanian home, wherever in the world you may find it:

1. We don't wear shoes in the house; this keeps the floors clean. Sitting on the floor is optional, normal. The couch is as much a seat for your ass as a backrest for floor-sitters.
2. You will get dry fruit and nuts and tiny cups of coffee (sometimes tea) and depending how serious your guest is about their religion you may get with your small cup of coffee a shot of raki. Be careful, some people think it's water. They grab it to cleanse the palate after the strong sediment-laden coffee. It will successfully clear your palate, but only by burning off whatever flavors are on there.
3. Kids can choose between White or Black soda. There's going to be smoking so if you have asthma or your kids do not like smoke, visit only in good warm weather so you can be received on the patio, porch, terrace, or equivalent where there is ventilation. Eat even if you

are not hungry. If someone offers you something to eat, say yes and eat at least some of it.

4. When it’s time to go, the signal is you will get fresh fruit. You may be able to tell how beloved you are by your host based on what kind of fruit you are served. Chilled melon, for example, is a labor of love. On holidays or special occasions you may get a baked sweet. Baklava is another labor or love. But the layered politics of Baklava are too dense to cover here.
5. After the fruit, instead of leaving, talk for like two more hours in the doorway. Talk until the sun sets if it hasn’t yet. Be sure to have many peaks and valleys in this conversation, many false endings and wild asides, so as to reflect the peaks and valleys and various wild wormholes of Albanian terrains and topographies.

Note:

Mirembrema = good evening, hello

Naten a mire = good evening, goodbye