

Roma Youth and Transnational Gendered Spaces

Author: Oana Marcu

Abstract presented for acceptance to the Annual RC21 Conference 2011:

The struggle to belong. Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings

Amsterdam (The Netherlands), July 7-9 2011

Session: Reconstructing Gender in Urban Space (Session organizer: Sandra Huning)

This paper is focused on the dynamic process of identity construction in migration, seen through the lenses of the intersectionality between ethnicity, gender, and class. On these three axes group identities are being negotiated in the constant process of “doing difference”.

The three-year transnational action research on which the paper is based uses ethnography, visual methods and peer-research, and is aimed at reconstructing the gendered migration experience of young Romanian Roma in Italy. The transnational migration of Romanian Roma families of the last ten years connects the South West of Romania to Milan by transnational circuits and kinship networks. As a result of discrimination in the access to adequate housing and labor, many Roma migrants live in segregated “nomad camps” or squats and are involved in informal street economies: they beg, play music, or pickpocket on a daily basis.

The Roma are usually seen as a relatively homogeneous ethnic group, and there is an ongoing process of constructing the “imagined community” of a unitary European, oppressed minority. On the other hand, the migrants themselves creatively build identities to differentiate from other groups with whom, in migration, they come to share urban spaces. Some of the practices of Roma groups (especially language and family related practices) are reified as “tradition” and come to mediate the differences between Roma and non-Roma, or between different groups of Roma, defining identities in antithesis to the fluidly constructed “other”. But tradition is not “done” in a uniform manner inside the group it defines, instead it is embodied mostly in women and comes to legitimate control over their lives. Such a process is indicated by the practices like premarital virginity, arranged matrimonies and maternities. By maintaining strong distinctions between gendered life paths, minority groups reclaim valued identities, based on the moral value of “our” women and family arrangements.

City streets, as opposed to domestic space, bare gendered opportunities and risks that youth often experience away from parental and community control. Thus daily experience of the city contrasts housing segregation and allows youth to build new belongings and gender scenarios, inverting the “traditional” ones. Some young boys and girls become “occidental”, some convert to new religions, while some women use the abilities gained in the streets to negotiate higher power and status in their families. New, culturally hybrid identities emerge and families re-organize care and control over their members. Thus transnational parenting, women breadwinners or independent life projects are accommodated into a new kind of family tradition.

Contact details:

Oana Marcu

Department of Sociology

Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy

Researcher for Codici Agenzia di Ricerca Sociale, Milan, Italy

Presentation

Nicolae Guță, the king of manele music, dedicates one of his songs to the migrant girl returning from Italy, talking about her newly gained occidental appeal. He sings:

*My girl is back home
Right from Italy,
She really changed while abroad!
Creates sensation around herself
When she says "Ciao ragazzi!"
She wears fine lingerie,
As they do in foreign countries.
In Italy it is good, oh, world,
You make thousands of euro
My girl brings the money,
I will join her too next year!"*

(Nicolae Guță – „Ce bine e în Italia”)

The song is written from the perspective of the partner remaining in the home country, and talks about a girl who wears the miniskirt and fine lingerie, initiates migration in the couple and is the breadwinner. Those less familiar with this genre of gypsy pop, as I have to confess I was myself at the beginning of my three-years journey with Romanian Roma, might instead see Roma women caught in a more traditional role. It might include being bound to the domestic sphere, mother of numerous children, devoted to the family, always wearing the long gown, living in a patriarchal order.

This apparent contradiction between the two extremes of Roma gender scenarios fascinated me more and more. While conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the South West of Romania, with my team from Codici, we noticed how ritualized gender displays (Goffman, 1977) are enacted in community celebrations, especially matrimonies. They involve dancing, dressing, courtship and union in public scenarios that bare strong distinctions between men and women, both in spatial arrangements, activities and in symbolic acts. Public shame was always gliding above who risked to interpret them wrong, while between arranged youthful matrimonies and bride's virginity proof display, there seemed to be little space for young people's will or decision.

Still, versions of a gendered tradition coexisted with inversions of it (Thomas, 1992). For example, the love escape allowed young people to force their decision on their parents, and more or less "freely" choose who they wanted to marry. Even if it is a transgression, parents actually have ambivalent reactions. On the one hand, they act angry as their decisions were overlooked, on the other, they make sure that the transgression is quickly accommodated in the traditional scenario. While young people get to choose who they marry, all the other steps of the ceremony (like

negotiating the doth and displaying the cloth stained with blood to prove virginity) necessarily follow, so that the transgression is incorporated into community life, and the matrimony is still celebrated by the elderly with joy and merriment.

At the same time, the style of dressing, casual and for special occasions, became more western-like, as young boys and girls were eager to follow the Mtv look of manele singers. Some boys and girls who migrated abandoned any traditional outfit during their daily activities. Thus girls were allowed to wear trousers and jeans while going to school or while working in the city, but for many, getting back home in the evening signified stepping again into the more traditional house role and attire (long gown, meek attitude).

These few examples suggest that within these coordinates, young boys and girls negotiated their freedoms while "bearing respect for their parents" and thus for tradition. Let's look at each scenario in greater detail.

The traditional version of family roles also emerged with Roma youth who participated in a peer-research process we organized in Milan. They all migrated to Italy with their families, in adolescence, from cities and the countryside in South West Romania. When discussing ethnic identity, they thought premarital virginity, matrimony customs and profound differences between men and women were essential. Still, they chose to carry out a research on the topic of "Love among Roma Youth" and uncovered a variety of actual practices of dating and friendship between men and women, some opposing traditional scenarios.

With people in migration, as Das Gupta (1997) observes, the representation of "tradition" is often linked to gender scenarios: in his study of Indian women in the United States, he shows how women are seen as essential players of tradition persistence, modeled by nationalistic discourse. The model of the Indian woman in the United States emphasizes elements of chastity, obedience and attention to the needs of the family. Second generation Indian girls are thus intensively controlled by their families in order to ensure that they conformed to the role of deferent daughters and good Indian women. Thus, Das Gupta (1997) notices that immigrant women most often bear the weight of signifying their ethnic community's identity. Moreover, George (2000) in a study on transnational ties, shows how these contribute to re-creating the "old oppressive system of gender and class relations in migrant communities" (George, 2000, p. 171).

Gender and ethnicity are two of the main axes on which *difference* is being *done*, as West and Fenstermaker (1995) put it. Romanian Roma, both in Italy and in the country of origin, use gendered practices ranging from arranged matrimony to women's dressing code to mark ethnic difference, between themselves and the non-Roma (the *gadje*) and with other Roma communities they perceived as different. Thus, positive ethnic traits are being claimed, essentialized in the purity of Roma women and leading to a more solid family order. Moreover, those who do not conform gender norms, are alterized, from an ethnic point of view. For example, women who do prostitution, even inside the Roma community are defined as Romanians as they cannot be Roma, while women *manele* singers who appear in videos dressed in sexy outfits, who date, dance and go to discos are immediately judged as still "gypsy, but of a different race than us".

These distinctions that Roma ethnics make between themselves and other Roma are very common, and are expressed not only on grounds of gender practices, but also on the grounds of different dialects spoken by different groups, on geographical grounds, traditional and contemporary occupations or class and socio-economic status.

It is important to point out that for Roma youth in Italy and Romania, the process of constructing the ethnic identity and the negotiation of belonging takes place on a particular background: the Roma are labeled as representing an “otherness” marked by backwardness and poverty, they are often stigmatized as marginal and/or criminal, and are often subject of discrimination and persecution (European Roma Rights Center, 2008).

Public policy, in Romania and Italy appears fragmented, with little responsibility taken at all levels, and the main social and economical problems faced by many Roma remain critical: I refer to housing insecurity, precarious health and low services access or massive unemployment (Dell’Agnese and Vitale, 2007). At the same time, the Roma are seen as barriers of a culture that makes them *essentially* different. This is best illustrated by the “nomad” label that is attributed to all Roma in Italian public discourse, erroneously because East-European Roma who live there have all been sedentary for centuries. The “nomad” travels in borderlands and doesn’t belong to the place where he happens to be. The attribute, accurate or not, has concrete effects and many Roma in Italy today live in “*nomad camps*”, segregated areas at the outskirts of cities, designed as parking lots (for campers) or, worse, as temporary containers who, with the passing of the years, became “home” (Piasere, 2006).

The access to formal employment is very difficult, and many Roma who migrate in Europe today are forced to make a living in the informal labor market, most often begging in the city streets, on trains and subways. Other, less numerous, are involved in petty crime, like theft, while others play music in public spaces or wash car windows at city crossroads. As Ellis, Wright and Parks (2004) point out racial and ethnic residential segregation is often contrasted by work in non-segregated environments and much more inter-racial contact takes place on the workplace than one would take into consideration when looking only at the living conditions of minority groups. It is the case for Roma youth too, as even when they did not follow schooling or work as employees, they have significant inter-ethnic interactions on the streets or trains, while carrying out informal activities.

Moreover, life spaces are gendered. Many scholars in human geography, inspired by the work of Daphne Spain, the anthropologist who coined the term “gendered spaces” (Spain, 1996), have pointed out that urban spaces (as well as domestic space) bare different meanings and different opportunities for men and women (and for different ethnics), are populated to different degrees by men and women and are more appealing for men and respectively for women (Fortujin, Horn & Ostendorf, 2004; Green & Singleton, 2007; Halford & Leonard, 2003; Koskela, 1999; Pain, 1997). Similarly, migration spaces - public space as well as nomad camps - see different participation of women and men, with different meanings and impact on personal and ethnic identities.

Begging involves communicating (by the means of standard phrases, leaflets, dressing, and attitude) one’s own situation of poverty in order to impress by-passers, obtain their empathy and receive a small contribution. It is an emotional rapport mediated by sorrow and pity for the

beggar, and very often women and children are seen as better beggars than men because more able to present themselves as vulnerable and worthy of help. This position is also less coherent with images of hegemonic masculinities, emphasizing aspects of strength, power and authority, and this might be one of the explanations for the fact that the number of women we met begging in the streets of Milan is double compared to that of men.

Still, in many families the money earned by women who beg remains the only income of the entire family, which give them the status of breadwinners, even if it doesn't save them from bearing the exclusive responsibility of child rearing and domestic work. The fact that women can engage widely in social interaction while doing informal work in public space leads to specific changes in the balance of the roles they cover in their family. For example, they learn Italian language much quicker than their partners, and thus become mediators for the family with the public sphere, when accessing services or relating to institution. In traditional Roma family order, this role was exclusively male.

The situation is slightly different for what concerns those involved in petty crime. Young boys and girls who pick-pocket are far less numerous than those who beg, and these street groups are ethnically mixed, but I will put this case under your attention because of its significance for the gender dynamics I am talking about. For those Roma boys and girls that are involved in petty crime, this context allows for different gender scenarios to be deployed. Other authors who studied delinquency, like Katz (1991) for example, underlined the fact that illegal activities allow for "bad-ass" masculinities to be performed, based on intimidating and exerting power over the other. In the case of pick-pockets, boys and girls interpret the role of the *șmecher*, which means sleek and cool, able to fool people and the authorities. *Șmecher* is also the main character of *manele*, gypsy pop music I already mentioned, and it is characterized in terms of looks and consumption patterns. The *șmecher* wears brand clothes, owns cars and gadgets, has a lot of girls which he treats bad. Its feminine counterpart, the "șmecheră", adopts a masculine, occidental style of dressing, and is depicted as far more libertine than traditional young Roma girls, or even with shady moral standards. She is capable of twisting men's heads, gains a lot of money and has a word to say in the decisions that men (fathers or husbands) might take for her life.

It is interesting to notice that, even if informal street-work maintains vulnerability and marginality of those who practice it, it is still connected with building oneself valued gender identities and allows for traditional gender norms to be contested in everyday practice. People involved in informal work in the public space also gain major abilities and build social networks that can help them cope with migration difficulties. Youth learn to relate to a wide variety of people and develop a social capital that can further support housing and work integration. These processes of differential use of public space by men and women and by youth and the elderly lead to significant gaps between generations and genders.

Each of these interaction scenarios presents different practices and modalities, that contradict, to a lesser or stronger degree, traditional gender scenarios, leading to a multiplicity of effects on moral trajectories of the persons involved. Who interprets gender adequately, is a „good” Roma woman or men. Who doesn't, is not completely a woman or a man, but is *infertile*, *homeless*, or

loser, and sometimes not even a Roma anymore (is of a different race, a *muslim*, or *Romanian*). In this manner, the ethnic group claims positive attributes to oppose stigmatizing discourse, in the purity of its women, the stability of the gypsy family, traditional and enlarged.

Thus daily experience of the city contrasts housing segregation and allows youth to build new belongings and gender scenarios, inverting the “traditional” ones. Some young boys and girls become “occidental”, some convert to new religions, while some women use the abilities gained in the streets to negotiate higher power and status in their families. New, culturally hybrid identities emerge and families re-organize care and control over their members. Thus transnational parenting, women breadwinners or independent life projects are accommodated into a new kind of family tradition.