Articulating ‘otherness' within multiethnic rural neighbourhoods: Encounters between Roma and non-Roma in an East-Central European borderland

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Abstract: The issue of otherness in the social construction of ethnicities and rural multiculturalism has long attracted the attention of scholars. By following a postcolonial background, this paper investigates the social construction of Roma as ‘other’ in a multicultural landscape (the Romania-Serbia border) using interviews with participants of different ethnic groups. This paper addresses the following questions: (i) Is the Roma population in this area completely spatially segregated (or are settlement patterns more complex than this, with a greater degree of social mixing)? (ii) How do different kinds of prejudice against Roma operate within this multicultural context? (iii) How does discrimination against the Roma interface with power relations, in particular political power in the area? The findings indicate that, alongside ethno-nationalist racism, Roma face prejudice from apparently more ‘progressive’ groups, who accept multiculturalism, yet blame the Roma for their own disadvantaged social and economic position on the grounds of a failure to integrate that is pictured as ‘backward’. We therefore conclude by calling for an enhanced and radical pluralism to combat the vilification of rural Roma.

Keywords: rural Roma communities; otherness; social constructionism; multi-ethnic neighbourhoods; Romanian Banat region; East-Central European borderland.
Introduction

The literature on rural places often focuses on a difference between perception and reality. As Agyeman and Neal note, ‘rural populations and places are fluidly and diversely constructed’ (2009, 228), changing over time (Cloke 2006). Yet in perceptual terms, the countryside is often associated with ideas of immutability and resistance to the types of change that characterise urban areas. A tension therefore emerges between the idea of rural traditions and everyday customs as permanent yet vulnerable features of the cultural and literal landscape, and the material reality of rural diversity and change. Where such change becomes embodied in particular people or communities, ideologically charged concepts of ‘the other’ and ‘otherness’ can come into play (Little 1999; Holloway 2005; Kuus 2004; Agyeman and Neal 2009). The construction of the rural as threatened by change can lead to a racialized resistance to multiculturalism (Radford 2016), as rural communities are perceived as divided between those who are perceived as ‘belonging’ and those who are othered as ‘alien’.

This paper, however, focuses on the ‘othering’ of the Roma in a self-consciously plural and multicultural area. During the period between pre-modern rural cultural systems and the contemporary geopolitical logic of the EU, Eastern Europe has witnessed significant spatial and social change, including the development of ethnically mixed populations, which has often been particularly pronounced at cross-border regions. Yet in such places, in spite of the absence of the notion that the rural is traditional and unchanging, there is an enduring tendency to marginalize certain elements within the rural community, particularly the Roma who have encountered an intense and long history of othering, across cultural, political, economic and spatial dimensions (Powell and Lever 2017). This prejudice has direct material consequences for the Roma people, in the form of a lack of access to the labour and housing markets, reduced educational
opportunities, and segregated spatial environments (O’Nions 2010; Maestri 2014; Grill 2018; Pulay 2018).

Since the publication of Said’s Orientalism, there has been increased interest in the ‘othering’ of the Roma in Eastern Europe. Petra Gelbart’s work on ‘gadjology’ has challenged a ‘Eurocentric’ perspective of the Roma by both subjecting it to critical analysis, and exploring its impact on Roma lives. This research builds on such work, providing an in-depth investigation of different types of anti-Roma prejudice, and their impact on the marginalized themselves. Our aim is to explore the finer nuances and complexities of marginalisation and its relationship to configurations of power ‘as they exist between and among individuals and institutions’ (Little 1999, 441). We aim to answer the following research questions: (i) Is the Roma population in this area completely spatially segregated (or are settlement patterns more complex than this, with a greater degree of social mixing)? (ii) How do different kinds of prejudice against Roma operate within this multicultural context (i.e. how do members of Roma and other communities perceive the social, economic, and political position of Roma people)? (iii) How does discrimination against the Roma interface with power relations, in particular political power in the area? In order to uncover the answers to these questions, it is imperative to understand the theoretical context of these issues, briefly conceptualised in the section bellow.

**Theoretical background**

In Orientalism, Edward Said (1978) discusses the construction of Europe as the site of civilization, modernity, and social advancement on the basis of the ‘othering’ of the East. His path breaking analysis studies the ways in which knowledge, representations, and interpretations play a role in establishing dominant power, enabling a type of Eurocentrism that is constructed
on the basis of an exoticised and denigrated oriental ‘other’. Those studying the marginalization of Roma peoples have recently adapted Said’s insights to the construction of the Roma as ‘uncontrollable’ and nomadic Gypsies (Sali 2015), who represent an ‘uncivilized’ and ‘exotic’ past that is out of kilter with European contemporaneity (Marushiakova and Popov 2017). In particular, Petra Gelbart (2012) has explored the construction of the Roma by the non-Roma, or ‘gadje’, opening up a space in which the dominant is subjected to critical scrutiny as the subject of research. Gelbart’s objective is to allow Romani people space to emerge as subjects in their own right, refusing both to exoticise them or to view them solely in terms of their accommodation to gadje ways and cultures. Turning the tables on dominant culture also allows alternative ways of imagining and representing Roma culture to emerge, for example replacing a dominant focus on ‘gypsy crime’ with a more subversive focus on ‘gadje crime’ (Robaza 2017).

The cultural construction of rural societies is a process that is fuelled by political practice and policy, along with pre-existing cultural prejudices, which act as primary engines for the creation of rural disadvantage and the marginalisation of certain groups. In the case of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, marginalization has persisted across socialist (Foszto 2018) and capitalist political-economic formations, though the ‘invizibilization’ of Roma issues has arguably intensified under neoliberalism (Powell and van Baar 2019). As David Radford (2016, 2131) has argued, ‘otherness’ is a feature of everyday life, reflected in ‘the conscious and unconscious differences that members of different communities feel, see, experience, understand and interpret when interacting with one another, or when one is aware of the ‘others’ presence in the community’.

Where the social construction of identities occurs within an established, hierarchical, and racialized social order, individuals have limited agency or choice to create their own
identities according to their own beliefs about the world. Social identity depends mainly upon the negotiation of pre-existing power relations, especially at the interface with major social institutions, such as the education system, healthcare, the welfare system, religious institutions, the law, and the media. Individuals consequently have little personal power over what wider society accepts as ‘normal’ or as ‘other’ (Zevallos 2011). However, these relationships stretch beyond the bluntly material: representation (visual, linguistic) has a special cultural authority to define who ‘belongs’ and who does not in any given environment (Hall 1997).

However, as Gail Kligman has observed, in a culture where one group is strongly dominant, ‘otherness’ can emerge at multiple cultural loci, and discrimination can operate in multiple ways (Kligman 2001). The role of an exclusionary ethno-nationalism in ‘othering’ certain ethnic minorities (including the Roma) in East-Central Europe is well-documented (Brubaker 1996; Eley and Suny 1996; Yuval Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy, 2018). The factors contributing to this are complex, but most researchers note the importance of a reinvention of a historical past in which certain groups ‘belong’ to a nation or place to a greater extent than others. Nationalism is thus constructed in dialogue with an ‘other’, who is often racialized or gendered (Eley and Suny 1996). For example, Yuval Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy (2018) have shown how racialized discourses against the Roma have been amplified via the deployment of bordering technologies, which have materially reinforced the conceptual construction of a difference between ‘indigenous’ people and ‘migrant’ Roma, with the latter increasingly depicted and managed as a ‘criminal category’. Unfortunately, this is a consistent feature of Roma marginalization across its facets (socio-economic, spatial, educational, cultural) in many otherwise very different European contexts (O’Nions 2010; Berescu 2011; van Baar 2011;
Vincze and Raț 2013; Filčák and Steger 2014; Clough Marinaro 2017; McGarry 2017; Maestri 2014; Picker 2017).

Nevertheless, as Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) shows, ideas of the other can also be constructed temporally. Eurocentrism relies on an idea of Western Europe as historically ‘advanced’ in comparison to a ‘backwards’ East. As this paper will show, such ideas are also at play in the ‘othering’ of the Roma in multi-ethnic areas of Eastern Europe. In this discourse, the Roma are blamed for rejecting European neoliberal modernity, in favour of their own culture, a gesture that is inscribed as ‘backwards’. The terms of this discourse are accepting of multi-ethnic, multicultural places, but nonetheless blame the Roma for their own disadvantaged position: they are perceived as making an active choice not to integrate, not to ‘move with the times’. The rhetoric of European identity, modernity and multicultural tolerance thus becomes a weapon that can be used against them. There are additional sociospatial implications to this argument. Fortunately, there is an emergent body of research exploring the stigmatisation, eviction, and marginalisation of Roma people in Central and Eastern Europe (Pulay 2018; Méreiné-Berki et al. 2017; Grill 2018; Crețan and O’Brien 2019; Lancione 2019; Málovics et al. 2019; Crețan, Málovics, and Méreiné-Berki 2020). However, much of this research focuses on Roma spatial segregation, which is indubitably severe and pronounced in some areas. The result of this is that some researchers have built a causal connection between Roma spatial separation and anti-Roma discrimination, to the point that some research and policy assumes that solving spatial segregation is key to solving discrimination. Our research complicates this picture, suggesting that the reality on the ground in some areas may be more complex, with Roma groups living in far more socially mixed areas.
As Zelinsky and Lee (1998) influentially argued, the sociospatial behavior of minority ethnic groups within a dominant culture is often pictured in a binary fashion. Assimilationists argue that migrants meld into the culture, dispersing into heterogeneous neighbourhoods, while pluralists argue for a mosaic pattern of settlement, in which distinctive ethnic areas are able to maintain communities. Their concept of ‘heterolocalism’ offers an alternative to this: in this view, spatial dispersion need not imply a loss of distinctive culture or strong community ties, thanks in part to the development of new visual and communication technologies. Our research suggest that in multi-ethnic border areas, Roma communities are heterolocal: they dwell in more ethnically mixed areas, and yet retain a minority culture. However, in spite of this mixing, they remain the victims of distinctive forms of discrimination and marginalization, suggesting that heterolocalist patterns of residential segregation do not necessarily result in a greater degree of tolerance for Roma culture.

To date, little has been done to correct Roma lived experiences of precarity and deprivation, particularly in terms of sociospatial behaviours. In part, this may be because of the ideologically ingrained nature of the ‘bordering’ that excludes Roma peoples, and the ‘othering’ that they face. Understanding the shifting spatial dynamics between different ethnic groups in a multi-ethnic Central and Easter European space, and their relationship to different discriminatory discourses, is therefore important if we are to ensure that research on this type of marginalization leads to meaningful social, economic, and cultural change (see Yuval Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy, 2018).

**Location of the study area**
In order to explore the ‘othering’ of some identities in multicultural rural spaces, and the benefits and detriments of this to different groups, this research was conducted in the historically multi-ethnic Banat region, which encompasses the modern national territories of Romania, Serbia, and Hungary, on the southeastern border of the European Union. In particular, we were interested in the Birda-Moravita Plain, part of the larger Banat Plain, which sits in the Pannonian lowlands (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]

Figure 1: Location of the study area

Following the Turkish withdrawal from this region in the first part of the 18th century, the province of Banat was established by the Habsburg authorities in the southeastern area of the Pannonian Plain. It was designed to be an experiment in colonisation, and an area that was formerly sparsely populated was quickly settled by successive waves of migrants from further West, mainly from the territories that now comprise modern Austria and Germany (Covaci 2016). The region maintained this multicultural character even after 1918, when Banat was partitioned between what are now the nations of Romania, Serbia, and Hungary. The Banat region’s three main cities, Timișoara, Novi Sad, and Szeged, were divided between the three countries, and Romanian Banat swiftly became that country’s wealthiest region, in large measure because its strategic position on the west brought opportunities for an intensified economic relationship with Central and Western Europe.

The 2011 census distinguishes at least 16 ethnic groups in the area, including Hungarians, Roma, Ukrainians, Serbs, and Slovaks (Romanian Census 2011). The Roma have
been present since at least the medieval period, and Roma communities continued to settle in the Banat Plain from the Habsburg Empire through to the post-1918 Romanian state. However, over the past century, Romanian internal labour migration policies have encouraged thousands of Romanians (and other ethnic groups) to relocate and settle in the region. In spite of the continuing presence of a number of ‘minority’ groups, it has come to be perceived as a majority Romanian area, rather than a multi-ethnic region. The Banat area therefore offers an example where comparatively recent types of migration have reshaped cultural perceptions of who ‘belongs’ in the area, and who does not.

**Positioning rural Roma in the historical context of the area**

Historically, the Roma have a long history of being a marginalized group (politically, economically, and socially), from slavery in the older Romanian principalities to the pogroms of World War Two (Powell and Lever 2017; Lancione 2019). However, the predicament of contemporary rural Roma needs to be understood in terms of more recent changes, in particular the social, economic, and cultural impacts of the progressive shift from a socialist to a capitalist mode of production. This had profound ramifications for rural areas, not least because agricultural labourers who used to work on socialist collective farms lost employment, and had either to find different jobs (driving migration to urban areas) or to find an equivalent role on a new, capitalist farm. Roma people have therefore been acutely affected by the loss of rural jobs, and the need to adapt to a new agricultural system.

Neoliberalism offered them few possibilities, meaning that many joined the new transnational labour force, choosing to work abroad as seasonal labourers. In Banat, their plight has been intensified by direct discrimination from ‘white’ ethnic rural neighbours, often centring
on perceptions of Roma unemployment and dependence on public welfare. Similar types of vilification against the Roma has been observed in other regions in East-Central Europe (see Filčák and Steger 2014).

Within the Banat region, Roma have traditionally been a non-dominant group, along with Jews (most Banat Jews migrated to Western Europe or Israel after the Holocaust and the creation of Israel, however) and other several ethnic groups. Communist period did not bring much improvement in the welfare of the (rural) Roma communities in Romania, with segregation and marginalization placing them at the bottom of the Romanian society (Foszto 2018).

Historically, there has not been seen a clear-cut shifting dynamics on the non-Roma perceptions against the Roma in Romania, because even in the Banat region multiculturalism has been viewed in terms of good relationship among all ethnic groups excepting the Roma people. There was some evidence that public perceptions of Roma had been worsened during post-communism, with other ethnic groups accusing them of laziness, theft, drug use and prostitution. During mid-late 1990s, 2000s and even by early 2010s Partidul Romania Mare, lead by ultranationalist Vadim Tudor, was an important anti-Roma party in Romania through launching numerous negative mass-media vilification against the Roma people (Gallagher 1995).

Further, Romania’s accession to the EU has not improved their situation by creating a new multiculturalism, in part because of the strength of hidden or ‘backdoor nationalism’. Romania’s post-EU integration is anchored in a growth of nationalism which has also impacted the Banat region, and small far-right organizations have begun to target the Roma. Timișoara, in particular, has seen protests that blame the Roma community for the loss of built cultural heritage and corruption in the administration of property restitution (Crețan and O’Brien 2019). Romania is currently witnessing a bottom-up process of political change, in which the corruption...
of the political elite is increasingly challenged (Creţan and O’Brien 2020), and recent events in Timișoara have helped to foster anti-Roma sentiment in the mass media, and amongst local administrative leaders, one of whom used their social media account to call for ‘actions against the Roma mafia’. While both media discourses and local development policies of the 2010s trumpeted the region’s multiple ethnicities, the specific plight and needs of the Roma are rarely mentioned within such local policy papers and discourses, despite their explicitly marginal status (Vesalon and Creţan 2019).

Within urban civic society, Roma are increasingly well represented, both by specific Roma interest groups and within non-Roma NGOs, but from our field research we noticed that such organizations and such representation is often lacking in rural areas, perhaps a result of the fact that existing Romanian and EU programmes have tended to focus on towns and cities. Roma are generally only given help by local politicians around election time, in order to court their vote (Creţan and O’Brien 2019).

Research methodology

Methodologically, this paper follows a mixed methods approach, blending document analysis, participant observation and mapping exercise, and semi-structured interviews. Primary and secondary sources, including official statistical data from the post-socialist period, were used to build a picture of the Roma population in the study area (Romanian Census 1992; Romanian Census 2002; Romanian Census 2011).

Primary and secondary data provided valuable context for participant observation, building on the three authors’ established networks, as natives of the Banat region. One of the authors (Raluca) has worked as an educator and activist with the Roma community in Banloc
while studying for her PhD. She is among the editors of two secondary school newspapers (‘Pagini de Suflet’ / ‘Soul Pages’ and ‘Condeie Bănlogene’ / ‘Writings from Banloc’), adopting an editorial policy in which local ethnic communities are presented in a positive light. The other authors (Remus and Sebastian) have also been involved in a number of projects with Roma people for many years. This intimate knowledge of the observed community provided the study authors with ‘thick’ knowledge of households and families in the area, adding richness to the study (particularly since official data is not sufficiently fine-grained to capture detailed social attributes at village level). In order to study patterns of Roma dwelling in the study area, participant observation was supplemented by a mapping exercise in which Roma residences in the study area were delineated on local administrative maps provided by local authorities.

This in-depth knowledge also assisted with the development of semi-structured interview questions. The objective was to survey opinion across a range of ethnic groups in the area, so that we could study the ‘othering’ of the Roma population, and the relationship between discrimination and power relations. We chose interviewees because they allowed us to survey a representative sample for the major ethnicities present in the villages, across different occupational groups. To this end, we interviewed 48 participants from the Birda-Moravita region, specifically in the multicultural hinterland of the town Dentă (the villages of Banloc, Soca, Liebling, Ghilad, Jamu Mare, Denta, Livezile, Breștea, Voiteg, Jebel, Giera and Toager).

Participants were identified via discussions and conversations with people on the street, at workplaces, or in parks and other public spaces (such as schools and bus stations). Interviewees were aged between 19 and 85, and 26 were female. In employment terms, eleven were pensioners (seven women, four men); others were intellectuals, peasants, industrial workers, and unemployed people. Ethnically, thirteen participants identified as Romanian, seven
as Roma, and the other 28 individuals as members of other ethnic groups (Serbians, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Germans, and Bulgarians).

All interviews were undertaken in Romanian, which all interviewees spoke fluently. The responses provided by participants were recorded in a field observation notebook, transcribed and read repeatedly, then coded and analysed thematically on the basis of the major topics of interest revealed by the interviews (Bryman 2016).

Results

Assimilation, pluralism, heterolocalism? What patterns of Roma residential dwelling did our research reveal?

Over the post-socialist period, 1989-2011, there have been three major Romanian censuses: 1992, 2002, and 2011. These show that in our study area, Roma people comprise around 5% (1,055 individuals) of the population (21,646 individuals) (Romanian Census 2011). Rural Roma people tend to be more concentrated in border areas, perhaps because they are often more heavily involved in cross-border trade than other demographics. Certainly, other ethnic groups are also involved in small cross-border commerce. The 2011 census showed that the population of several of the border villages (e.g. Banloc and Ghilad) was 9-10% Roma, while other villages were home to far fewer Roma families. Larger villages like Banloc, Liebling, and Ghilad have witnessed a slight increase in the rural Roma population over the past 30 years: in 1992, Banloc had 92 Roma residents, but by 2011 it had 258. Many have Pentecostal beliefs, which is statistically associated with larger family size (5 to 7 persons).

We sought to explore the spatial location of the Roma communities in the area in a fine-grained way, working village by village. We discovered a mixture of mosaic pluralism and
heterolocalism. In Jamu Mare, a commune of five villages near the Serbian border, Roma families are spatially grouped in the southern part of the village and have a good relationship with the Hungarian and Romanian communities in the area. In other places that we analysed, middle-class and wealthy Roma people were not restricted to peripheral areas but were living in central, mixed districts, though in a manner that developed and maintained their ethnic specificity within a cohesive interethnic culture (Seamon 2015). Similarly, before the 1990s, the northeastern part of Banloc (a so-called 'gypsy' neighbourhood) was inhabited exclusively by Roma families, but has since become more mixed as Roma people have moved to other areas, allowing them to interact with other ethnic groups.

As this suggests, not all rural Roma are poor and segregated: in the Birda-Moravița Plain, some now occupy a secure economic situation, which has also improved their social status. Roma have literally moved away from the margins to their central areas of Toager, Jebel, and Liebling, though they often still occupy distinct locations, which they share with other members of their community. Nonetheless, they are spatially and socially close enough to other groups to allow the fostering of good relationships. In the Denta area, both Roma and Serbian ethnic groups inhabit space in a manner that is closer to the heterolocalist model than assimilationism or pluralism (see Covaci 2016), with spatial dispersion and high levels of interaction with other communities.

Perhaps surprisingly, and in contrast to the findings of other researchers, we did not notice obvious patterns of severe spatial segregation. Geographically, Roma families lived in majority Romanian, Hungarian, and Serbian areas, where they were well integrated into the community. However, as the next section of the paper shows, this should not be read as a denial of the cultural and political discrimination faced by the Roma community: much local work is
still required to reduce damaging forms of othering, including stereotyping, stigmatisation, marginalisation, and discrimination. It does illustrate, however, that in these multicultural border areas, sociospatial patterns of dwelling can be more complex than a straightforward narrative of segregation might suggest.

‘There is a strong tendency to avoid Roma’: to what extent did interview participants perceive Roma as a minority group that suffered unfair and iniquitous discrimination?

Many of the Romanian interviewees believed that negative attitudes towards Roma families were generated by highly visible differences of politics, economics, and social mores between Roma and Romanians, a similar pattern to what we know from the current literature (Kligman 2001; Lancione 2019). However, the picture was not uniform: some participants accepted and respected Roma culture, while others exhibited more negative tendencies towards rejection and discrimination. Almost half of those interviewed expressed the belief that minorities should be granted the same rights as majorities in Romania, but half blamed the Roma themselves for their excluded status, citing a failure to obey local laws and customs, and stating a belief that Roma were claiming a greater number or rights than were accorded to Romanians. One Hungarian interviewee from Denta perceptively noted that this ‘victim blaming’ has a long history:

I think there is a negative impact of othering the Roma which is materialised in the possible conflicts between minority Roma people and majority and/or other ethnic groups. But I reckon the marginalisation still occurs, since the tendency to marginalise is historically present towards Roma. (R.M., 33 years old, woman, Denta).
Several Romanian participants stated a belief that nobody gains from othering the Roma community. However, because the group is viewed to have a tendency of self-exclusion, this apparently progressive belief was compatible with the perception that the discrimination that the Roma experienced was their own fault, a result of their refusal to integrate: ‘I think they self-exclude themselves through their own behaviour. They have a certain lifestyle; they do not adapt to the norms of the society they live in’ (L.D., 44 years old, male, Livezile). Similarly, other participant argued that society does not tend to exclude them, but on the contrary, protects them by offering state social assistance and allowances, yet they still have an attitude of contempt towards society, expressed by refusing to work and obey laws, behaviours through which they become unpleasant. Nobody gains from this form of exclusion of Roma communities, but I might admit that extremist Romanians consider themselves superior [to them] (C.F, male, 37 years old, Banloc).

Such views were occasionally shared by other non-Roma ethnic groups in the study. Unfortunately, some Romanian interviewees admitted that they avoided contact with Roma due to their different skin colour and longstanding stigma against them, a recurrent issue mentioned also in recent urban studies on the Roma people in Romania (Crețan and O’Brien 2019). The problem is so severe that politicians are sometimes unwilling to provide inclusionary leadership, as a Bulgarian participant from Breștea told us:

marginalisation is present due to the fact that some politicians are not interested in solving ethnic stigmatization issues because the Roma communities are viewed as having inappropriate behaviours. The lack of effort is justified by arguing that such communities
cannot be helped because they are embedded in their own laws and traditions and will not adhere to European laws (T.D, female, 42-years-old, Breștea).

This interviewee expressed generally favourable views towards multiethnic, multicultural European spaces, but argued that the Roma were almost willfully participating in their own disadvantage by refusing to integrate with a ‘melting pot’ that epitomized contemporary European ‘modernity’. This is an example of how an apparently more progressive attitude towards the difference and a European identity can be used to discriminate against the Roma, blaming them for being on the ‘wrong side’ of a conflict between EU law/policy and local Roma law and custom, and stigmatising them as socially uncooperative and even ‘backward’ as a result. Within this logic, any discrimination the Roma suffer becomes self-inflicted damage. The alternative interpretation, however, is that the EU has not sufficiently considered the need to make space for Roma traditions, as a distinctive counter public.

Some of the Hungarian participants in the study pointed to the negative impacts of othering on the Roma, especially the lack of opportunities for them to be educated in their own language, and their inability to access full rights. S.K, a 24-year-old Hungarian woman from Denta argued that ‘contemporary society has a negative effect on ethnic minority groups primarily because it does not pay enough attention to the education of Roma children and younger ethnic generations’. As a response to this opinion, S.I., a 51-year-old Roma woman from Denta confirmed that she felt that her ‘children were sometimes misjudged in school because of their Roma name’. We discovered that most of the Roma interviewees were proud when talking about Roma children bearing the names of renowned historical figures (Napoleon, Traian), football players (Maradona, Pelé), or characters from Latin American telenovelas, which
are limited-run soap operas (Orlando, Mercedesa, Esmeralda). However, to non-Roma local people, these names appeared exotic, and could even carry a stigma, thus reinforcing marginalization.

A minority of other Roma participants stated that cultural segregation allowed them to avoid discrimination, by reducing contact with other ethnic or majority groups. However, several Roma participants discussed their experiences of exclusion, both in the street and the workplace. O.O., a 53-year-old Roma woman from Livezile, admitted that ‘there is a strong tendency to avoid Roma primarily due to the difference in culture and behaviour between us and them. But people are not so harsh against the Roma as in other regions of Romania’. The Roma counter discourse reflected in the attitude that ‘here people are not so harsh against the Roma’ indicates how subordinated social groups invent such narratives in order to defend their identities and needs (see Fraser 1990). On the other hand, we noticed that visible difference for the non-Roma becomes a straightforward justification for social and economic exclusion of the Roma people, suggesting the persistence of a lack of respect for Roma cultural difference. The ‘multicultural’ nature of the area was clearly not flexible or inclusive enough to accommodate this type of difference.

Questions of ethno-nationalism: how do power relationships serve to create and reinforce stereotypes, contributing to the marginalisation of rural Roma families?

Our study suggests that these attitudes sit alongside more strongly anti-Roma views, some of which are ethno-nationalist in origin. In keeping with other studies in the field (Covaci 2016), we found some evidence that a small group of people with strongly prejudiced opinions against the Roma had a disproportionately large influence on public discourse, politics, and policy.
The Roma interviewees were quite reflective about the community’s desire to preserve its specificity, and its unwillingness to assimilate with majority groups. When asked about the source of prejudice against their community, many blamed Romanian political leaders, but others also argued that the community itself needed to be more open. When questioned about extreme nationalist viewpoints and their role in reinforcing historical stigma and stereotypes, many acknowledged the pain associated with terms such as ‘cioara’ (crow), ‘stinky Gypsy’, ‘dirty Gypsy’ and ‘lousy Gypsy’ (see also Crețan and O’Brien 2019). Along with nationalist politics, some Roma and non-Roma respondents noted the influence of anti-Roma discourses in the media, which reinforced the othering of their community. Alternatively, we discovered in our Roma interviewees several counter discourses to nationalism and media vilification, such as ‘we are clean’, ‘we don't steal’, ‘we keep united in family’, ‘we are not criminals’. Such narratives indicate again that Roma could act as subaltern counter public defending their ‘subaltern’ condition in front of everyday vilification (see Fraser, 1990).

Most of the Bulgarian, Serbian, Romanian, and German participants argued that the levels of stereotyping and stigmatisation in the Banat region were somehow lower than those of more urban areas. Yet the influence of extremist parties, such as the nationalist Partidul Romania Mare, is still felt in these rural areas. Power flows in a top-down fashion, from central political parties to local village party members, and the vilification of Roma people has proven a powerful tool in their appeal to the populist vote. In this way, certain groups fashion their ‘cultural superiority’ on the basis of the othering of the Roma, including extreme forms of Romaphobia (van Baar 2011; McGarry 2017).

Yet we also found evidence that the long coexistence of Roma communities with other ethnic groups has created the foundation for the emergence of good interethnic relations in the
Banat region. Good levels of communication and mutual respect exist, and many participants were accepting of Roma people and resistant to ‘othering’ discourses and behaviours where they encountered them. One interviewee argued that she did not believe that it was ‘beneficial to stereotype Roma or other ethnic groups’, but acknowledged a ‘tendency, even in this village, to avoid Roma’ (M.M – 49-years-old, female, Bulgarian, kindergarten teacher, Denta). Another interviewee, from village Jebel, argued that

the Roma have a community of their own here. Most of them are nice people and create no problems. Others are now abroad and rarely come back but I admit that people here use stereotypes as ‘stinky Gypsies’ or ‘lousy Roma’ (R.E., female, 80-years-old, Jebel).

When asked about the social integration of Roma communities, a male Romanian participant noted: ‘I think it is more of a stereotyping problem, and I know the children of some educated Roma very well’ (P.O. – 26-years-old, male, Livezile).

All of these contributions suggest that stereotypical views of Roma are agents of stigmatization, and that they are fuelled by the corrosive and dangerous nature of the resurgence in far right views of ethnic nationhood over the post-communist era (Brubaker 1996; Eley and Surey 1996; Creţan and O’Brien 2019). As Chalmers and Joseph (2006) argue, patterns of ‘othering’ behaviours can change with alterations to the politics of rural areas. Post-socialism has brought important changes in the socio-economic situation and practices of both the Roma and other ethnic groups, bringing with it a ‘reinscription’ of otherness in Eastern European spaces (Kuus 2004). Yet, as the section above notes, this is not the only discourse within which discriminatory anti-Roma views are aired: ethno-nationalism sits alongside a more pro-European, multicultural set of attitudes that are nonetheless disadvantageous to the Roma (see Eley and Surey 1996; Creţan and O’Brien 2019).
Conclusions

The present paper explores the social construction of otherness in a multi-ethnic rural area. It explores the persistence of prejudice and discrimination against the Roma, in spite of a historically multicultural setting and in the absence of severe spatial segregation. In spite of these differences, the Roma community still experienced ‘othering’ at the hands of majority groups, in a similar fashion to more urban areas (McGarry 2017; van Baar 2011; Powell and Lever 2017; Crețan and O’Brien 2019; Málovics et al. 2019).

Solving the problem of discrimination against Roma peoples constitutes a major goal for the EU, nation states, and local municipalities, working in tandem with local and international NGOs and educational programmes. This research suggests that a lack of spatial segregation, and a self-consciously multi-ethnic attitude, may not be sufficient to combat anti-Roma prejudice. The Roma in our study were not severely spatially segregated from other groups, yet were still subjected to prejudice. This may pose a challenge to writing and policy that focuses solely on the generation of more ‘socially mixed’ areas as a solution to Roma marginalization. Further, while we found evidence of ethno-nationalist influence on local communities, we also witnessed anti-Roma prejudice in interviewees who broadly accepted the rural as a multi-ethnic, multicultural space. This apparently more ‘liberal’ position tended to construct the Roma as obdurately anti-modern, arguing that their disadvantage was the result of their choice not to integrate with a ‘European’ identity and a neoliberal capitalist society. Roma culture, in this discourse, was implicitly not only ‘backward’ but ‘anti-modern’ in its refusal to adhere to contemporary cultural, social, and legal norms. In such a discourse, the Roma become insufficiently ‘cosmopolitan’ to partake in the post-socialist society of the area, a relic of some older social
setup. There are clear parallels here with Said’s postcolonial argument that Eurocentrism relies on a view of Europe as temporally ‘in advance’ of the East, but with a twist: because a certain type of integrated multiculturalism itself becomes associated with the EU and with modernity, it becomes a justification for the exclusion of the Roma.

The lack of political attention to the plight of the Roma, outside of elections reinforces marginalization. Extreme nationalists deliberately target the Roma in order to appeal to a small and highly prejudiced voter base, yet there was also a more general perception that the Roma were responsible for their own disadvantage, even where they were living in socially mixed neighbourhoods. The social construction of the rural otherness in a multi-ethnic space that borders the European Union highlights the need for further research into Roma marginalisation, in order to understand more fully the cultural, economic, social and political dynamics that are at work.

In particular, our research suggests the need for alternative and more inclusive models of the ‘public’, beyond a superficial but ultimately discriminatory multiculturalism. The work of Nancy Fraser (1990) may be useful in developing a more egalitarian and plural sense of rural ‘belonging’, based on a critical interrogation of concepts like class, gender, and race. In particular, the emphasis on Roma ‘integration’ appears to be a sticking point that requires challenge: social models that emphasize difference rather than assimilation are needed to fight back against a homogenizing hegemony, whether this appears in the form of ethno-nationalism or an apparently more progressive emphasis on ‘modern’ society.

It is important to understand how the Roma face an impossible choice: to abandon their culture and integrate, or to separate themselves to some degree from ‘bourgeois’ dominant culture. Moving beyond this binary, towards a more inclusive culture that is respectful of
belonging-in-difference, is necessary. Here, Fraser’s notion of a subaltern counter public (1990) offers an alternative and more liberating approach: a public sphere that is defined by difference ‘where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs’ (Fraser 1990, 67).
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