



Locational determinants and valuation of Vlach Rom (Gypsy) fortune-telling territories in the United States: An integrated application of economic and cultural logics and methods



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Economic geography and the applied geography of retail site location have been historically driven by neo-classical market indicators; for example, population, income, and education levels. While distinct markets for ethnically-defined economic activities follow traditional market indicators, they are more complex in their establishment and organization. The purpose of this article is to examine the evolution of territorial locational determinants and efficiencies of ethnic niche economies, particularly the Vlach Romani fortune-telling business in the United States. Using self-appraised fortune-telling territory prices and a large georeferenced dataset of modern fortune-telling establishments (known as “offices” or *ofisuria* in their dialect of the *Rromanes* language) in New York City and Los Angeles, I test several hypotheses regarding the distribution and site-selection criterion of fortune-telling territories using Ordinary Least-Squares (OLS) and zero-inflated Poisson regression models fitted with a spatial regime. While only examining one culture group, this article demonstrates decision making and locational determinants associated with highly structured ethnic economic niches can be spatially analyzed, quantitatively modeled, and situated within a broader economic and urban narrative of spatial territorial adaptations of ethnic niche economies to dynamic demand markets.

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Introduction

Romanies, or Gypsies, are an ethnic people of European descent comprising a loose collective of related and widely distributed groups and sub-groups who have successfully exploited a characteristic set of niche economies. American Romanies have remained economically independent as self-employed entrepreneurs by developing their economic niches, most notably fortune-telling, the act of interpreting someone's present and predicting their future using circumstantial evidence and “sensitive guesswork” (Okely, 1996, p. 100). While Romani occupational niches have been extensively covered ethnographically using qualitative field methods, few studies quantitatively measure the characteristics and dynamics of these niche economies. This research fills the void by implementing econometric models using “dredged” datasets containing information on fortune-telling establishments to measure locational attributes determining the value of Vlach Rom fortune-telling territory in the United States, with the intention of

describing and interpreting the dynamics of ethnic niche economies.

The shared ancestry of the Romani people (proto-Romanies) likely originated in Northwestern India, circa 1000 A.D (Fraser, 1992; Salo, 1991a,b). The most widely-accepted theory of their ancestral origin involves the migration of their nomadic ancestors northwest through Asia Minor into Europe during the 14th Century and eventually to the Americas (Gropper, 1975). Other theories trace their history as camp-followers (Matras, 2004), remnants of an army of defeated Indian warriors (Hancock, 1998; Kochanowski, 1968), and members of the upper-strata of an undetermined ethnic Indian population (Hancock, 2002).

Enumerating the world's Romani populations is inherently difficult due to the group's mobility and mistrust of government inventories. Globally, Romani populations are estimated to be between 2 and 6 million (Hancock, 1987, 2002). Like varying worldwide estimates, North American figures range from 100,000 to 1.5 million (Erwin, 1993; Merino, 2005). These estimates include Romani ethnic sub-groups, including the English *Romanichals*, Iberian *Kale* [*Gitanos*], Welsh *Kale*, Scandinavian *Kale*, Central European *Sinti*, Hungarian-Slovak *Bashalde*, Romanian *Ludar* and

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Boyash, and East European and Vlach-speaking Roma or Vlach Rom (hereby referred to as Rom, as in Salo, 1991a). The Rom and Romanichals are the largest Romani ethnic sub-groups in the United States (Salo, 1981, p. 97).

Rom began arriving in the United States as family units around 1880 and continued to arrive until after World War I, following the larger migration of Eastern and Southern Europeans into the country. Today, Rom are found across the U.S., clustering in urban areas, particularly New York and Los Angeles (Gropper, 1975; Salo, 1991a,b). Rom population estimates for the United States range from approximately 20,000 (Salo, 1979) to 500,000 (Sutherland, 1986, xv). Their economic survival typically depends on fortune-telling but is supplemented by male contributions earned from car sales, roofing, paving, and metal recycling, among others (Salo, 1987, p. 103; Salo & Salo, 1982). Rom are socially organized by their extended family (*familias*), larger family group of cognatic kin or clan (*vitsa*), and racial group or nation (*natsia*) (Sutherland, 1986). Rom *natsia* include the *Kalderaš*, *Machwaya*, *Ludar* [Boyash], *Lovara*, and *Kunesti* (Sutherland, 1986). *Natsia* are distinct, but interconnected through marriage alliances (Fabeni, 2013).

Rom culture attempts to preserve the integrity of *romaniya* – the Rom way of life – through maintenance of the *Rromanes* language and deliberate social segregation from *gaje*, or non-Romanies (Lee, 2001). Entrepreneurial ethnic economic niches are the most apparent and sustained manifestation of Rom social segregation from the *gaje* and cultural preservation through occupational knowledge diffusion among close relatives (see Volery, 2007 for a detailed theoretical discussion of ethnic niche economies). Long-held occupational traditions date back before their arrival to the United States and historically differentiated each sub-group (Nemeth, 2002). The two largest Rom *natsia* in the United States are the *Kalderaš* and *Machwaya*, the latter traditionally working as horse-traders and fortune-telling specialists and the former as copper-smiths. Other Rom groups found in the United States are the *Chuara* (sieve-makers), *Lovara* (horse-traders), *Ludar* (spoon-makers and animal trainers), *Boyash* (gold-washers), and *Kunesti* (knife-grinders). Endogamous and arranged marriages, and naming practices designed to preserve the inconspicuousness of their ethnic origin are additional methods Rom socially segregate (Sutherland, 1986). Rom are given a Romani name, which is later adapted to the host culture, and a common surname (the *nav-Gazhikanès* or *gadzé* [*gaje*] name). For example, an American Rom named *Babi* might adopt the similar name Bob and the common last name, Wilson (Lee, 2001, p. 198). Romani and English nicknames (“Bango Nak”, “Fat Tony”, “White Bob”) are also ubiquitous among male Romanies.

Hundreds of years of often-inaccurate or biased representation by official state documents, historical texts, journalist reports, and academic research has created enduring ethnic Romani stereotypes, such as the hyper-sexualization of Romani women (e.g. Esmeralda of the Hunchback of Notre Dame) (Belton, 2005; Hancock, 2002; Mayall, 2004). The concerns of a traditional cultural geographer studying Romanies are decidedly different than social geographers or geographers ascribing to the “New cultural geography,” let alone anthropologists, sociologists, or linguists. Due to the considerable collection of related past literature and immediate relevance applied to the economic geography of the Rom fortune-telling business, the ethnographic approach was selected.

While there exists a dearth of geographic research on American Romanies (recent exceptions being Nemeth & Gropper, 2008 and Gropper & Miller, 2001), literature regarding European Romanies is growing, particularly regarding mobility rights and settlement patterns (Kabachnik, 2009, 2010, 2012; Shubin, 2011; Sobotka, 2003). Studies on Romani economic and occupational adaptations

have also focused on European populations (Casa-Nova, 2007; Horváth, 2005; Saitta, 2010). Consequently, new research measuring, analyzing, and interpreting data on American Romanies is both a needed addition and a novel approach to Romani research.

The peripatetic niche

The cultural survival of the Romani people can be attributed to their success filling the peripatetic niche (Salo, 1987). Peripatetics are “small, ethnically-recruited kinship-based bands who make their living by providing goods and services to the larger population” (Salo, 1991b, p. 287). Peripatetic groups are characterized by opportunistic economic exploitation of surrounding populations, and are motivated by intermittent, geographically-erratic demand (Salo, 1987).

Romanies have also been similarly categorized as “service nomads”, or spatially-mobile peoples whose primary means of survival is exploiting resources in social environments; in essence, they are “interim masters of imperfect markets” (Nemeth, 1986, pp. 135–136). Service nomads survive by momentarily following the central place theory (see Christaller & Baskin, 1966) principle of minimizing consumer's travel cost to distant, alternative sedentary suppliers. They out-compete conventional firms for a limited time by exploiting spatial gaps between supply and demand; however, once the market gap becomes fully serviced by established firms, collapses or deteriorates, service nomads move onto other imperfect markets (Nemeth, 1986, p. 141). Success is contingent on foresight, anticipating market gaps and the ability to quickly respond to intervening opportunities (Nemeth, 1986, p. 137).

American Romanies are successful peripatetics due to their secrecy and propensity for mobility, granting them a competitive advantage in the social resource marketplace (Nemeth, 2002). Their secrecy entails use of a specific dialect or variant of *Rromanes* and an ability to remain ethnically ambiguous (“passing”) amid a host population – perhaps the principal reason Romanies have not been able to penetrate Asian or Sub-Saharan African peripatetic markets. Romanies avoid dependence on a single trade in case an occupation becomes obsolete (e.g. copper-smithing). Romanies position themselves where the most profitable trade can be securely provided; if a situation is lucrative enough, they will travel hundreds of miles on short notice to meet the demands of a suitably imperfect market (Berland, 1983; Sway, 1988).

Fortune-telling: a cultural context

For generations, fortune-telling, the act of interpreting someone's present and predicting their future, has remained the American Rom's primary means of economic survival and crucial component of their ethnic identity. Fortune-telling is considered a sacred obligation for Rom women; young Rom girls are taught fortune-telling techniques by their mother, grandmother, and female in-laws. If girls are not taught early, most believe them unlikely to become skilled readers (Okely, 1996). Rom Reverend Merino (2005) suggests, and other American Rom agree, fortune-telling is “what make[s] you a [Roma]” (p. 114).

Fortune-telling is perpetuated and sanctioned by *romaniya*, the set of moral codes and social rules Rom are obliged to obey (Merino, 2005). The “first law” mandates obedience to one's father, husband, and father-in-law. Parents and relatives ingrain fortune-telling into the identity of young Rom girls for the following reasons: 1. To maintain a quintessentially Rom cultural tradition passed down along successive female generations; 2. Generate familial income, and 3. Increase bride price, and bring pride and prestige to the *familia* (Merino, 2005, pp. 109–111). Any contrary decision is subject to social exclusion or other punitive measures (Merino, 2005,

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