



Voyagers of the smooth space. Navigating emotional landscapes: Roma street vendors in Scotland[☆]

'Every story is a travel story – A spatial practice' (De Certeau)

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 December 2013

Received in revised form

30 April 2014

Accepted 1 May 2014

Available online 16 June 2014

Keywords:

Politics of mobility
Emotional landscapes
Smooth space
Romanian Roma
Dreams of presence
Voyagers

ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic research, the article explores the way Romanian Roma street vendors construct/project their space of movement. It shows how the space of movement is created and recreated by people on the move, through practices and emotional experiences, and becomes, in Deleuzian terms, 'smooth'. The Romanian Roma street vendors experience contradictory emotions and uncertainties, which nevertheless do not restrict their movement but, on the contrary, impel them to move further. Through begging, they lose fixity in their occupational identities. Their journeys become fluid spaces, involving continuous change throughout their routes. Emotions and dreams of becoming constitute their space as 'existential', performative/processual. Their selves are fragmented by survival needs and dreams of becoming, between practices of mobility and 'dreams of presence'. In this sense, the article shows that Roma street vendors project their flexible space-in-the-making by using 'emotional landscapes' as 'tentative mappings' in their travels, both narrated and practised. In this process, they become *voyagers of the smooth space* who follow loose routes, 'points of relay', along which *home* is nevertheless a fixed location.

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1. Introduction

Starting with 2002, when Romanian citizens were allowed to travel visa-free into the Schengen area for up to three months (Sandu et al., 2004), more and more Romanian Roma chose to travel abroad. Upon arrival at their destination, they succeeded in obtaining social benefits and subsidized accommodation from local authorities and decided to live there for longer periods. From 2007 onwards, the level of their migration increased, as they followed their relatives or friends already living in Western Europe. However, after 2007, local accommodation was no longer provided to incoming EU migrants, and the Romanian Roma were pushed into a new pattern of movement which involved more travelling and crossing contexts than time spent in one place. This article concentrates on Romanian Roma, who chose Scotland as part of their route, and perform temporary activities like begging and street vending.

Based on my field observations, this form of mobility seems to be different from the migration pattern common to ethnic Romanians with respect to Western countries. The latter usually choose to stay for longer periods of time in their place of destination, look for formal jobs, and form transnational communities (Sandu, 2005). Temporary living, the activities of begging and street vending,¹ are characteristic of the movement of Romanian Roma, and their experiences of place and mobility might differ from those of migrants who have particular routes and/or specific destinations when moving from one country to another.

Theories of international migration have explored patterns of fixed route migration in some detail, and concentrated on either long or short-term residence in one country (Massey et al., 1993). However, they focused more on the concepts of 'place' and the way people manage their lives in different settings (Cresswell, 2010) and less on migrants' constructed space of movement. Exponents of the mobility paradigm (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Urry, 2000, 2007) described these theories as "sedentarist" (Halfacree, 2012), in so far

[☆] **Funding body:** This research was coordinated and funded by The Norwegian Social Research Institute (NOVA), Oslo.

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¹ For instance, while most of the Romanian Roma I have talked to, practice begging/selling "The Big Issue" as everyday economic practices, those who temporarily settle for agricultural work have contracts and are part of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (see for more details Home Office website).

as notions of 'stability, meaning, and place' were considered 'normal' when characterizing migration, while 'distance, change, and placelessness' (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 208) have frequently been questioned by both policy makers and researchers and seen as less common features of migration.

Furthermore, mobility is not just movement from one place to another. It 'involves a fragile entanglement of physical movement, representations, and practices' (Cresswell, 2010: 19), which can be seen as including both features of mobility and political acts 'implicated in the production of power and relations of domination' (p. 20). Media and political representations of Roma mobility towards their countries of destination are often negative and attached to general portrayals of the Roma as 'poor' and 'discriminated' in their countries of origin, 'flooding' Western European countries like France and the UK.²

Many of these labels are sourced and strengthened by an Orientalized-type discourse about the Roma, who for centuries were perceived as "colonial subjects' without a colony' (Tebbutt and Saul, 2004: 4), and often portrayed as outsiders in literature, the media and art (Tebbutt and Saul, 2004). They were subjected to multiple forms of knowing and governance, which constructed the outsider as exponent of a 'muted group' (Sibley, 1981), either a deviant or a romantic nomad. As Sibley (1981) explains, while the deviant is included in 'the muted culture that is revealed to the dominant group' (p. 18), the romantic Gypsy is part 'of the muted world structure that is hidden from the dominant group' (p.18).

Nevertheless, while still aware of the danger inherent in over-romanticizing mobility and people on the move, mobility paradigm theorists suggest that contradictory sides of mobility should be explored, as both movement and fixity, and incorporated in the new mobility paradigm both as 'sedentary and nomadic conceptualisations of place and movement' (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 214). Taking into consideration this critical observation, the present study includes both elements of fixity and continuity, which are part of the Roma vendors' subjective construction of space of movement, generally opposed to that projected by EU states.

As Cresswell (2010) argues, the way space and pace of movement are projected by states versus people on the move are not apolitical elements of mobility. On the contrary, '[s]peeds, slownesses, and immobilities are all related in ways that are thoroughly infused with power and its distribution' (p. 31). With reference to Roma migration within the EU, a member of the European Parliament declared that '[p]eople who travel around Europe in caravans, without a normal income, will cause trouble in long run' (Derk Jan Eppink, European Parliament 2010).³ The assertion indicates a certain attention paid to and commitment towards regulating the European 'free space of movement' and controlling any form of irregular mobility which does not fit the economic purposes of the European polity. It also suggests how '[m]obility itself is 'channelled' into acceptable conduits' (Deleuze, Guattari, cited in Cresswell, 2010: 24) and 'abnormal' conduits. The Romanian Roma's fast and irregular movement within Europe is perceived as a form of disorder within an organized, exclusionary, 'striated space' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986). As Deleuze and Guattari (1986) argue, states, and, in my view, politics fear that flows of mobility over a non-striated space can turn into a 'war machine' against state

sovereignty or the polity's powers to control and govern. Therefore, the 'free space of movement' is continuously and discursively regulated 'to decompose, recompose and transform movement, or to regulate speed' (p. 60) and, in this way, prevent the dissolution of nation states' political power.

In other words, European space of movement is organized for a 'corporeally structured mobility' (Gogia, 2006: 373). Only certain groups of people (e.g. highly skilled, long-term employees, tourists) are considered to perform 'normal' mobility, while those with a perceived lower status (informal and low-skilled workers, Roma) are considered to be outsiders within a structured European space of movement. The latter are more subjected to the regulatory practices of the so-called 'free' European space of movement, which is ordered and measured by the 'channelling motion of producing correct mobilities through the designation of routes' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 24). The differential representation of the 'space of travel' can be seen as the expression of an unequal relation of force, revealing inequalities in the governance of the European space-of-movement, inflicted upon the agents who travel through that space. Those who travel might not experience the space-of-movement as it is organized and disciplined by the European states, but rather a space imagined and constructed through their practices, representations, and emotional experiences. Therefore, the whole imaginary grasping of the 'free space of movement' becomes an important political feature of mobility, unravelling disjunctions in the representation of both movement and constructed space.

In the present article I explore the process through which Romanian Roma construct the European space of travel as 'smooth', 'without conduits or channels' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 34). I follow Cresswell's (2010) desideratum for a politics of mobilities, which 'are both productive of such social relations and produced by them' (p. 21): 'aspects of mobilities (movement, representation, and practice) are political, they are implicated in the production of power and relations of domination.' (p. 20). These theoretical assumptions are developed further into a conceptual analytical framework about space, landscapes and emotions, which is essential for the interpretation of Roma's travel narratives of space construction.

While in the next section, I present the methodology and the research questions, in the following parts, I discuss Roma's emotional experiences and trajectories of movement, and conclude the analysis by presenting the subjective dimensions of the space making by the Roma.

2. Methodology and research questions

My 6-month ethnographic study explored the relations between travel experiences, Romanian Roma flexible statuses, and their projected space of movement. Ethnography as a method was useful in grasping meanings and narratives of space-making as recounted by people earning their living on the street and often classified and stigmatized as beggars.

During my fieldwork in Edinburgh and Glasgow, in 2009, I met almost 30 Roma street vendors, both female and male, aged between 19 and 40. However, I only had close contact with three young Romanian Roma couples, from the Arad region, who would alternately sell and beg on the streets of Edinburgh. I used to meet them on the streets on a daily basis, often in front of supermarkets and churches, where I could engage in both casual conversations (almost 50) and observation sessions without disturbing their informal economic practices, which sourced their day to day living and partly supported their money-saving efforts. Some of the Roma street vendors, I met during my fieldwork, were extremely reluctant about being interviewed or recorded and very worried about the possibility of an unfavourable portrayal of their mobility-

² See for example: 'The truth about Romania's gypsies: Not coming over here, not stealing our jobs', *The Independent*, 11 February 2013; London's Marble Arch gypsies vow: 'We will be back', *Express*, 29 July 2013; 'France's Interior Minister calls for Roma gypsies 'to return' to Romania or Bulgaria because they can't integrate', *Mail Online*, 26 September 2013; 'French police clear Roma camp in centre of Roubaix', *BBC News*, 27 September 2013.

³ See the European Parliament (2010) "Situation of the Roma people in Europe" (debate), 7 September 2010.

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