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Consuming the City: How Global Structures Facilitate Resistance to Ethnic Co-Optation

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Contemporary migration theory conceptualizes the nation-state as an ideological force that assimilates the particular symbols and practices of the nomadic ethnicity into dominant nation-state citizenship norms. We interrogate this classic governmentality argument and highlight the role of a prominent postmodern consumptionscape - the global city - in constructing migrant identities that actively promote the oppositional aspects of the nomadic ethnicity attenuated by the process of national mainstreaming. We focus on the nomadic Roma ethnicity. To demonstrate how Roma and local citizen identities are co-constituted through consuming the global city, we analyze the consumption practices of and social interactions among nomadic Roma consumers, national citizen consumers, and city officials in three global cities: Pisa, Toronto, and Berlin.

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migrate: waves, snow, wildlife, seasons, winds, aurora, tornados, solar eclipses, etc. In these cases, consumers are observed as orientated towards environmental forces that sustain their actions and cultures, yet move them through time and space in interesting and unfamiliar manners.

What should we do then, in order to stay in touch with participants for whom structures such as clock-time, urban geography and roads become less meaningful than the course of a river, the tide, seasons, or snow falls? Biosocial ethnography suggests that the researcher should detect and delineate the natural influences that order the motivations of such consumers. By orienting ourselves to these influences, site selection and sampling become fluid, highly mobile procedures. Further to this, we may enter into a process of parallel interviewing of phenomena that are often regarded as ontologically different (Newton 2007). At the level of representation, I wish to suggest that the biosocial ethnographer should consider the boundaries of the “natural” and the “social” by uniting voices from introspection, autobiography, thick transcription and thick inscription (Arnould 1998; Holbrook 1995). Through these diverse procedures, we can re-unite fragmented constructions of time, nature, space, marketplace and subjectivity.

“Consuming the City: How Global Structures Facilitate Resistance to Ethnic Co-optation”

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This presentation advances a growing research stream on consumer acculturation by analyzing the formative relationships between ethnic consumer identity construction and globalization. In this presentation, we will first review the leading conceptualizations in classic and consumer theories on migration and highlight their theoretical omission regarding the conditions of possibility to reclaim co-opted ethnic symbols and practices. Next we explore the importance of global cities and the citizenship discourse as a structuring mechanism in migrant consumer identity construction. The main goal of this presentation is to examine how previously co-opted nomadic consumer identities, which actively reinforce nomadic ideals while subverting ascribed national cultures, are re-politicized and reclaimed through everyday consumption in the global city.

The idea that the sociopolitical discourse of the nation-state dominates contemporary society has become a staple notion in sociology, migration and cultural studies (Beck 2000; Chernilo 2006; Wimmer and Schiller 2002). Contemporary migration theory conceptualizes the nation-state as an ideological force that assimilates the particular symbols and practices of nomadic ethnicities into nation-state cultures and citizenship norms. This is an example of ethnic co-optation, whereby the dominant form of sociopolitical organization (the nation-state) brings into its system opposing movements (e.g., nomadic lifestyles) through extensive socialization mechanisms (Lustick 1980; Pettai and Hallik 2002). This classic governmentality argument has led researchers in consumer culture theory (e.g., Askegaard, Arnould, and Kjeldgaard 2005; Oswald 1999; Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Peñaloza 1994) to approach immigrant consumer identity as a dyadic, passport-driven construct involving mainly national identifications and agents. However, migration and consumer culture theory ascribes little to no potential for individuals with nomadic predilections to also use consumption and the commercial marketplace in order to reclaim and re-politicize their co-opted symbols and practices.

For this reason, both classic and consumer theories of migration would not have predicted the important role of a prominent postmodern consumption scape—the global city (Sassen 2001)—in

helping construct migrant identities that actively promote the oppositional aspects of the nomadic ethnicity attenuated by the process of national mainstreaming. According to global sociologist Saskia Sassen (2006, p.321), “through the thickness of daily life and local, mostly informal politics, cities can accommodate and enable the unbundling of the tight articulation of the citizen and the formal state politics.” Consequently, today’s citizenship is moving away from the classic definition comprised of strong national ties in exchange for certain citizen rights, towards a revised definition containing new structures of power relations and positions detached from national sentiments (Sassen 2006). The struggle over the meaning of space and citizenship has empowered certain migrant consumers to reinforce their previously nomadic, non-national cultural identities, especially through their consumption behavior.

To contextualize this phenomenon, we focus on the historically nomadic Roma ethnicity that is comprised of approximately 50 million people. Overview studies (Belton 2005; Liégeois 1994; Petrova 2003) commonly associate the Roma as a victimized ethnicity whose nomadic culture has been stripped away in favor of indoctrination into nation-state cultural norms through centuries of official persecution, slavery, forced assimilation and attempted integration via social programs in all the countries that they traveled to. Yet, after extensive conversations with 18 community leaders and individuals of Roma ethnicity (both male and female) in Toronto, Berlin and Pisa, where everyday activities (e.g., housing, working, education, dressing, religion, cooking, family, and traveling) were discussed, we found that they use the available structures and consumption resources of the global city to create partial and inconsistent acts of resistance against the dominant forms of socio-cultural normativities. For example, mobility remains an important aspect of their lives, as is demonstrated by their involvement in several selling-oriented economic activities at once that constantly change over time. The informants described themselves as self-employed, who enjoyed traveling to various markets in order to buy and sell goods and services, which ranged from cars, to handicrafts, to clothing, to music, much in the same way that their nomadic ancestors earned a living. Furthermore, they consume technology, food and housing in a way that reinforces their family-oriented, tight-knit community lifestyle by mainly using it to stay constantly connected with each other. The informants also mentioned the importance of creating Roma organizations and centers in these cities that actively promote their traditions and cultural roots to the outside world, as well as provide a network of assistance and information exchange for Roma citizens.

Methodologically, this analysis is part of a larger ethnographic and netnographic (Kozinets 2002) investigation of Roma consumption in Toronto, Berlin and Pisa. Our collection of ethnographic and consumer interview data was completed in the summer of 2009 and subsequently analyzed. We solicited informants through Roma activist websites as well as local and national Roma community centers and associations. In order to better understand the sociocultural and political context in which Roma consumption unfolds, we also interviewed regular (nation-state based, sedentary) citizens, as well as city officials in the respective cities. In total, we analyzed 39 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which ranged from 30 minutes to 2.5 hours in length, as well as 140 pages of online materials and archival and historical data using the iterative interpretation process of hermeneutical analysis (Thompson 1997).

Our results offer new insights into the process of global migration. Scholars in contemporary migration theory and consumer research have proposed different mechanisms and modes through which individuals acculturate, including marketplace forces and political struggle. Which mechanisms and modes of acculturation may or may not play a role in nomadically oriented consumer identi-

ties has remained unexplored. Our findings shed useful theoretical light on the construction of nomadic citizenship, a hybrid migrant identity, through the structures and resources provided in global consumption scapes.

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