



# Rethinking Ethnographic Comparison: Two Cities, Five Years, One Ethnographer

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography  
2017, Vol. 46(3) 263–284  
© The Author(s) 2014  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0891241614548105  
journals.sagepub.com/home/jce



**Giovanni Picker<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

In this article I show that the ethnographer can be a heuristic source of comparison. I reflexively discuss the ways in which I learnt from the problems behind my comparative ethnography of everyday representations of Roma in both a Romanian and an Italian city. As a priori detecting a homogeneous group called Roma in Europe can be problematic, my comparison lacked the necessary condition of similarity between the two contexts. Once I came back from the field, I understood how my differently perceived selves influenced my informants' articulations of their own representations of local Roma. This and further observations made me understand that I had not carried out a comparison; rather, I established a series of "partial connections" through "juxtaposition." In the Conclusion, I encourage more reflexive research on the heuristic validity of taking ourselves-ethnographers as heuristic units of comparison.

## **Keywords**

Comparison, partial connections, juxtaposition, reflexivity, Roma

---

<sup>1</sup>Central European University – Institute for Advanced Study, Hungary

### **Corresponding Author:**

Giovanni Picker, Central European University – Institute for Advanced Study. Nador utca, 13, Budapest 1051, Hungary.

Email: pickerg@ceu.hu

As both fieldworker and future author I was free to allow ideas to germinate in their own time and through my own thinking, not by proxy.

Judith Okely, *Thinking through Fieldwork*, 1994, 23

## Introduction

When last year I presented a paper in a workshop on comparison, the responses of the audience were particularly critical. I was told that the problem that I was trying to address did not exist, and that therefore there was no controversial issue. My point was that it is problematic to compare ethnographically the everyday representations of Romani people in two cities of two different countries. The reason for this is that, since Roma have for centuries generally been—and still are—in subaltern positions, representations of them play such a significant role in limiting their own strategies and resources of identification that comparing those representations in two distinct contexts would imply considering that Roma identity is to a large extent similar in both contexts. Although across Europe there are individuals and families self-identifying as Roma (or as Kale, Romanichal, Manouches, etc.),<sup>1</sup> assuming a priori that there is an overarching category of “Roma” indexing some sort of transnational cultural sameness seems to lack empirical ground (Okely 1994a; Piasere 1993, 68), and to be potentially pernicious (Piasere 2006; Tremlett 2009; Willems 1997, 1–18).<sup>2</sup>

At the workshop I had the impression that my colleagues’ lack of full understanding was not so much related to their lack of familiarity, as they told me, with the history of many Roma and their essentialization, exclusion, and persecution, but primarily to a certain scholarly uneasiness with rigorously and reflexively problematizing the assumptions behind comparative ethnography. In this article, I aim to do exactly this: I will problematize the assumptions behind my comparative ethnography, extensively discussing how I “learn[t] from the problems (of comparing) and the resistances [to comparison] . . . , and not only from clear-cut solutions” (Niewoehner and Scheffer 2008, 276). Building primarily on Nyiri’s (2013) concept of “juxtaposition” and on Strathern’s *Partial Connections* ([1991] 2004), I will show and discuss the role that my various relevant geocultural belongings played during fieldwork in both an Italian and a Romanian town, as well as how I dissected partial connections between the two contexts.

Although ethnographers have generally conceived their approach as comparative, the literature on ethnographic comparison, and the related comparative ethnographic literature, tends to avoid problematizing the very assumptions and tacit knowledge behind the act of comparing.<sup>3</sup> In this regard,

Herzfeld (2001) proposes viewing reflexivity and comparison as mutually linked, to the point of considering comparing the ethnographer's social position with the social context she or he is investigating. In a more comprehensive work, Gingrich and Fox (2002) have sought to renew the comparative perspective, acknowledging that "global connections and the heterogeneous local responses to them legitimate a renewed comparative agenda for anthropology and related fields. If people around the globe are increasingly reacting to comparable conditions, it becomes a more obvious challenge for scholars to compare how people react and what results culturally from their reactions" (Gingrich and Fox 2002, 7). Gingrich's (2002) essay, the only essay on this subject entirely based on firsthand research, addresses the issue of comparison by carrying out what he calls a "controlled, macro, self-reflexive comparison" (Gingrich 2002, 233). He does so by reviewing his and his colleague's comparative study of the mobilizing forces in the aftermath of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. Although the author methodically dissects historical circumstances in the making of the two empires, the comparison still rests on a rather clinical and etic approach, without an ethnographic focus on everyday life. Similarly, Sally Falk Moore (2006) underlines the value of historical comparisons, which—in contrast to old synchronic comparative studies on traditions and customs—show the variety of social transformations *within* the same social setting, rather than social hierarchies *between* settings.

Comparison has also been discussed and carried out within a more phenomenological framework, which allows the apprehension of everyday dynamics as tightly linked to epistemological and social structures. Bourdieu (2002) conducted fieldwork in his native town of Béarn and then compared his own cultural lenses with fieldwork he had done in Kabila, in order to control and account for his own interpretation biases. Burawoy (2003) coined the expression "ethnographic revisit" to refer to doing fieldwork in a context in which other ethnographers had previously worked, and comparing the findings of the two research experiences (see also Sallaz 2008). In a similar vein, Nyiri (2013, 379) discusses the heuristic value of ethnographic *juxtaposition* as opposed to comparison; she provides an account of her different fieldwork experiences among Chinese entrepreneurs in late-1980s Hungary, in mid-1990s Laos and Cambodia, and in late 2000s Australia, showing the heuristic value of juxtaposing those experiences in view of having an ethnographic account of "sites and moments where links between individual activities and structural forces are most visible." Finally, comparative ethnography has been carried out as a systematic synchronic endeavor in the work of Wacquant (2007), who looks comparatively at French *banlieues* and American inner cities or ghettos. His work rests on the idea that local political economy, changes in Welfare State regimes, their constitutive ideological premises, and

their effects on everyday life in marginalized urban areas can be better analyzed if viewed as part of a macro-system of transformations in the capitalist West, and thus as comparable.

All these studies rest largely on the assumption that comparability between geographically and historically distant social contexts is only relatively dependent on the ways in which the ethnographer inhabits the field and is perceived by her informants. By contrast, my comparative ethnography on the everyday representations of local Romani citizens that I conducted in both an Italian and a Romanian town relied almost entirely on my perceived relevant geocultural belongings while I was in the field. In order to reflexively account for the ways in which I dealt with the problems of comparing, I will primarily refer to Marilyn Strathern's *Partial connections* ([1991] 2004). The anthropologist suggests that distant settings are incommensurable and that the connections that the ethnographer may envisage are probably not parts of a coherent whole but gestures of a fragmented unity, and of collections of incompatible fragments. This configuration is the result of a deep problem in Western thought concerning the notion of the individual.<sup>4</sup> The ethnographer as an individual has generally been viewed as a bounded, coherent, and organic entity; as a consequence, the compared phenomena appeared as completely external to the ethnographer, giving the idea of a coherent and perfectly integrated reality "out there," of which different parts were observed and compared. By contrast, according to Strathern, the ethnographer would better be configured as a constellation of partial selves, in communication with different networks, none of which constitute a whole. The metaphor that would best represent the ethnographer is, following Donna Haraway, the "cyborg"—half human, half machine, with multiple selves that are apt to capture different stimuli and functions while constituting, at the same time, a singular entity: "A cyborg does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end" (Haraway 1985, 99, quoted in Strathern 2004 [1991], 37).

This article is a reflexive account of the ways in which I became aware of the importance of my "partial selves," and how, in turn, such awareness allowed me to learn from the problematic aspects of my comparison. Once I came back from my fieldwork on the everyday representations of local Romani citizens in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) and Pescara (Italy), I became aware that my contextually defined relevant geocultural belongings—I was an Italian in Cluj and a Milanese in Pescara—were crucial parameters in relation to which my informants articulated their everyday representations of local Roma. This awareness allowed me to situate my informants' representations, which cast local Roma in two "eternal elsewhere(s)" squarely within the context of social, political, and economic local processes. Over

sixteen months between summer 2007 and summer 2011, I conducted fieldwork in Cluj-Napoca (Romania) and Pescara (Italy).<sup>5</sup> In each field site, I carried out about thirty semistructured interviews with civil servants and NGO activists, and conducted participant observation in the “Gypsy neighborhood,” and local media analysis. After discussing the formation of my research design, I will outline the most telling ethnographic encounters in each field site. In the last section, I will discuss at length my argument, which is that only through a systematic “juxtaposition” (Nyiri 2013) could I understand the relevance of my multiple geocultural belongings and that what I was doing was only sketching a picture of “partial connections.” This, in turn, made me aware of having done a “problematic comparison” (Niewoehner and Scheffer 2008, 276).

### *Comparability and the Making of My Research Design*

When in summer 2006 I drafted my research design, I was motivated by two main questions, one contextual and one methodological. The first concerned the extent to which Roma were socially excluded from European national societies, and how, in turn, this history of exclusion was expressed in the present-day place of Roma in European societies. The methodological question was about the ways in which ethnography could grasp the everyday process of belonging to a community and consequentially of taking active part in its political making. Theoretically, I was working within the framework of social citizenship and belonging, which allowed me to conceptualize “the place of Roma” as a matter of citizenship rights and territorial/political belonging. I could find an answer to the first question in recent reports and studies about the social exclusion of Roma from the four main Welfare domains of labor, education, housing, and health.

To the second question I found an answer through readings and discussions with my colleagues and mentors. I could look at the everyday representations of local Roma, in order to observe the ways in which social closure works in everyday practices and discourses. At that point, I needed to choose a field site. Thanks to my colleagues and friends, I discovered Cluj-Napoca, the major city of Transylvania, Romania, in which a relatively visible minority of Roma live. However, a problem soon emerged, as I came across two large surveys of representations of local Roma (i.e., Costarelli 1999; Topalova 2002). Those surveys showed the significant differences between those representations in different national contexts. In order to account comprehensively for the phenomenon in Europe, and for its cross-national variation, I planned to investigate the everyday representations of Roma in two different contexts. Since the majority of European Roma live in Eastern Europe, and

because of the ongoing EU integration processes through which, in January 2007, Romania was to enter the EU, I decided to frame the research design around the recent EU imposition on Eastern European countries of minority protection standards. Operatively, I based my proposal on the comparative research question as to whether everyday Western representations of Roma were consistently more tolerant and respectful than their Eastern counterparts.

However, I was largely ignorant of the fact that the main assumption behind my comparison—namely that any self-identifying Romani individual or collective displays a reliable degree of cultural similarity to any other—was problematic. Lacking familiarity with the social history literature on Roma, I did not know that the origins of Romani “otherness” are to be found in the politics of nationalism, which between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries was based on the idea that Roma/Gypsies/nomads/Bohémiens and the various subgroups were one bounded group of people endangering the nascent homogeneity of the national body (Crowe 2003; Piasere 2005; Willems 1997). Later on, nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific theories of races legitimized both political practice and academic knowledge, constructing Roma, as a whole, as a class of deviant individuals who were entitled to fewer social, political, and economic rights (Mayall 2004; Roccheggiani 2011). In the first half of the twentieth century, an elaboration of those racist theories contributed to enforce genocide policies and ethnic cleansing on Roma in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and France (Bravi 2009; Levy 1999; Picker 2012).

Moreover, the assumption of Roma’s cultural homogeneity was also empirically ungrounded. Among linguists and other scholars, the Romani language seems to be the clearest marker of what is called “Roma identity.” However, anthropologists highlighted the fact that it is not difficult to encounter individuals and collectives self-identifying as Roma who do not speak any Romani. Moreover, although linguists have shown that “there is no known record of a migration from India to Europe in Medieval times that can be connected indisputably with the ancestors of today’s Romani-speaking population” (Matras 2002, 14), anthropologists have criticized the accent put on the *origins* as part of the essentialization of Roma carried out for centuries by the dominant society. As Okely pointed out, “the extent to which Indian origin is emphasised depends on the extent to which the groups or individuals are exoticized, and, paradoxically, considered acceptable to the dominant society” (Okely 1983, 2; see also Gay y Blasco 2002, 173; Willems 1997).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, writing about his own research in Italy among a Romani grouping from Yugoslavia, Piasere warned about not assuming a priori any sort of “whole” with regards to “Gypsies”:

The data that I am going to present should in no way be generalized: I do not know if there are other Gypsies, in Italy or abroad, who behave like Romá [Yugoslav Roma] about the issue that I will deal with; I know on the other hand that there are many Gypsies who do not behave as Roma do. Therefore, if generalizations are to be made, they should be the result of precise and wide comparisons, and not of enlargement from a part (Romá) to the whole (Gypsies), in which “the whole,” by the way, poses categorization problems that is not easy to solve. (Piasere 1993, 68; my translation)

Because of my ignorance of these debates and stances, my research design was a naïve comparison of representations of Roma in Pescara and Cluj. Only once I had returned from the field did I become aware of the problems involved in that comparison. After sketching some of my most relevant ethnographic encounters in each city, I will extensively discuss those problems, showing how I learnt from them.

### *Media Silence, Urban Restructuring, and Everyday Racism in Cluj-Napoca (Romania)*

In summer 2007, I moved to Cluj-Napoca, and immediately encountered a significant gap between the silence of local media on Roma issues and the rootedness of everyday knowledge about Romani social life. At that time I was learning Romanian, which helped me to learn bits and pieces of local knowledge and to become acquainted with the city. In particular, I became aware of, and immediately interested in, a particularly socioeconomically deprived street in the peripheral neighborhood of Batik: Todom Street.<sup>6</sup> As time passed and I began chatting regularly with taxi drivers and shopkeepers both inside and outside the neighborhood, it became clear to me that Todom Street was not just any street. “Many *Țigani* [of which the closest translation is “Gypsies”] live there,” I was told, “and so, it’s dangerous—better not to go there in the evening.”

Since Todom Street was the most deprived and stereotyped area within the neighborhood, I decided to take it as the core location for my fieldwork. I first looked at local newspaper archives, in order to become familiar with the local history and with popular perceptions of the area. Batik was almost completely absent from local chronicles. When Roma appeared in local papers, they were portrayed exclusively as folk musicians and bearers of far-away traditions. Issues such as marginality, social exclusion, and discrimination were not discussed. I then moved on to the neighborhood itself, carrying out open-ended and semistructured interviews with shopkeepers close to Todom Street. The *media silence* not only clashed with taxi drivers’ representations but also

with shopkeepers' views. For many of them, the presence of "*Țigani*" in the neighborhood was a threat to the promised economic growth of the area as well as a burden on social life. However, when I asked about concrete events in which Roma had caused social unrest, none of the shopkeepers could provide any examples.

Digging deeper, I started spending more time in the neighborhood, often resting in pubs during hot summer afternoons. There, I became acquainted with many people, mainly workers and day laborers on their way back home. Their curiosity in seeing a young-looking man from abroad hanging out in a peripheral Clujean neighborhood allowed me to start conversations and discuss about Batik's social life. I often reported to them what shopkeepers had told me, and they partially agreed and partially disagreed with them. "Workers like Batik much more than shopkeepers do," I once wrote in my notebook. Those men in the pubs seemed to me less afraid of losing their own business due to the "threat" of *Țigani*. The main problems of Batik, they repeatedly pointed out, were structural, not social. "There is no canalization here, and the municipality does not care. They just built that huge shopping mall, but here many people's houses are in terrible condition," Arpad, a man in his late thirties, told me.

Indeed, the postindustrial character of Batik was reflected in the poor quality of many houses, many of which were constructed during the 1950s and 1960s to host the families of the nearby factories' workers. In almost all my dialogues about this issue, there was a sudden remark concerning the local administration's incapacity to understand people's social uneasiness with regard to housing. Moreover, the lack of leisure areas for children and youths was another complaint vis-à-vis the local council. More generally, when the subject of local administration came up in our conversations, the workers always complained about the fact that the municipality was turning Batik into a money-making area. The most visible sign of the municipality's economic interests in Batik was the project for the construction of a residential area, *Cartier Tineret* ("youth neighborhood") right in the neighborhood. This was the product of a partnership between a local private company, called "Cartier Tineret," and the municipality. The point was, from workers' perspectives, that the municipality was ignoring Batik's own material problems while investing money for business-oriented projects.

This prompted me to carry out some interviews with municipal civil servants in order to understand their plans as well as their representations of Batik's Romani families. Adrian, the head of the Municipal Office for Urbanism (*Biroul Locativ Administrare*), explained in an interview that *Cartier Tineret* was the biggest and most profitable investment in Batik in the last decade, and that Batik was a developing neighborhood (*cartier*



*dezvoltare*). This meant that it was incorporated within the local development plan as a site for crucial investments. Almost all investments in infrastructures and large interventions in Cluj were public–private partnerships, and Batik was no exception. In answering to my question about how he saw Batik’s social life, he immediately mentioned that “there are some Roma living there,” and immediately after that—surprisingly to me—pointed out that “in Italy too, you have many Roma, and they produce unrest [*fac scandal*].” It was summer 2008, and Romanian Roma in Italy were indeed the subjects of a highly criminalizing media and political campaign that resonated vividly across Europe, especially in Romania (Agentia de Monitorizare a Presei 2008; Woodcock 2009). Adrian then explained that

among ten Roma, eight cause problems. Police statistics reveal that a high percentage of infractions are caused by Roma, both in Romania and in Italy. [Roma] don’t pay the rent; they don’t pay water, electricity and gas; in general, they disturb the environment around them, exactly like among you [Italians]. It’s an attitude. They say they pay, but they don’t, and for this reason there is a conflict between the inhabitants of Batik and Roma families in general.

More generally, the national level was the main scale within which representations of (Clujean) Roma were displayed in everyday talks. I especially became aware of that as fieldwork unfolded—I also started digging into representations of Roma in Batik with workers during the evening. In particular, in talking continually about Roma, I understood that there was a particular folk taxonomy that was consistently used to frame them. Florin, in his fifties, explained to me that “they [Roma] don’t work! They take our money and don’t work.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because they don’t want to,” he replies. “They are not Romanians. You [Italians] in Italy have problems with the *Țigani*.”

I tell him that there are *Țigani* in Italy who have Romanian passports, and he replies, saying it does not matter.

“We are Romanians, they are *Țigani*. *Țiganu-i Țigan*, as we usually say. But *Țigani* are not all the same. There are the *Rromii* (Roma), who are usually street cleaners and live in little houses. Then there are the *Țigani*, who do business in livestock and have big houses. *Țigani* sometimes happen to be rich, they have villas, and so on. Also, *Rromii* emigrate more often than *Țigani*. Finally, there are Gabor, who have culture, they produce clothes and Gabor women knit the long skirts they usually wear.”

The taxonomy produced by Florin in this ten-minute-long conversation had been discussed several times during our dialogues in the pub, always with a general consensus agreeing with Florin's view. My understanding of such taxonomy as a constitutive element of local knowledge in Cluj was possible thanks to my observations of some other events. I used to go often to an Internet café in the city center run by a couple of students. Once I noticed a sign hanging on the door:

From the 22nd of July 2007, inside this Internet café those belonging to the Roma ethnîe (*etnia Rroma*) have no access, because we have had a great many problems with them. Evening after evening they produce unrest (*fac scandal*) and they beat each other. We apologize to those who are excluded for no reason, but we cannot select otherwise. The management.

Another clue regarding the making of this everyday racism was a conversation I had with a taxi driver. Having warned me about the dangerous character of Batik, in a natural and spontaneous way he added—"Gypsies are not human beings." This dehumanizing view was the most derogatory I encountered during my fieldwork. It was not widespread, as I did not encounter it anywhere else. However, this might, and still may, indicate the extent to which racism was a part of the ordinary opinions held by Clujeni (Picker 2013).

Once I decided to move out of Cluj, I arrived at some preliminary results. The *media silence* regarding the Roma in the town was coupled with an everyday racism, both within and outside Batik. Although Batik inhabitants experienced their neighborhood as lacking infrastructural maintenance, civil servants considered it as either an investment site (*Cartier Tineret*) or a social setting threatened by Roma. In this context of urban abandonment and restructuring, representations of Clujeni Roma were played out differently—shopkeepers mostly perceived them as a threat to social order, whereas local inhabitants who did not have businesses generally perceived Roma, albeit derogatorily, in a more complex way, drawing a composite taxonomy; civil servants, in turn, tended to embrace a simplistic and derogatory representation that was largely similar to that held by the shopkeepers. At the same time, in all cases Roma were framed not within the local, but rather the national context, excluding them from Romania rather than from Cluj-Napoca.

### *Neoliberal Policies, Narratives of Civilization, and Racial Stereotypes in Pescara (Italy)*

The neighborhood of Pescara in which the majority of local Roma reside bears two names: Celli and Adriatico. At the time of my first visit in summer

2008, the first name seemed the most famous in town: when I asked anyone in which district Lago Street was located, she or he answered “Celli.” Via Lago is famous for its big “trains” (*treni*): long three-floor social housing blocks of flats hosting, since their construction in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of Romani families. Indeed, in 2008 the majority of Romani Pescarians were living in Celli. The neighborhood’s second name, Adriatico, was introduced in 2004 by a local civic committee, aiming to improve Celli’s negative image. If one takes the main road from the city center to the southwest periphery, at about the fourth kilometer one encounters a road sign saying “*Benvenuti ad Adriatico*”—“Welcome to Adriatico.”<sup>7</sup>

The struggle over the neighborhood’s name provides a discursive wrapping of the infrastructural and institutional changes that the municipality has enforced in the area over the last three decades. Neoliberal policies, such as the withdrawal of local administration and healthcare offices from the neighborhood and the replacement of the local police with a big Carabinieri barracks,<sup>8</sup> has had a big impact on the inhabitants. When I arrived in Adriatico I began sitting in bars with local inhabitants who complained about having been abandoned by the municipality. There was a high level of discontent regarding the removal of municipal offices from the neighborhood, “as now—I was told—people have to go to the city center only for one certificate.” The removal of the local police was perceived particularly negatively, since Adriatico’s inhabitants had traditionally had very good relationships with local policemen. All the local politicians whom I interviewed told me that the level of criminality, primarily expressed in drug-dealing, had made it necessary to have a stronger presence of repressive forces in the neighborhood.<sup>9</sup>

In local press and everyday discourses, Adriatico/Celli was a “decayed neighborhood” (*quartiere degradato*). The vast majority of Pescarians living outside the neighborhood represented it as a very dangerous, no-go area. This did not only refer to the fact that its main features, according to media accounts, were deprivation and criminality. The word “Decay” (*degrado*) in this context also had a less direct meaning of “hopelessness”: it was generally believed that any public action which might be carried out in the neighborhood in order to reduce its level of “decay” would have had no concrete effects on the local “deviant” population. The reason for such hopelessness was that, for all Pescarians I met excluding Roma, the problem was viewed not as social (i.e., not rooted in social exclusion, social marginality, etc.) but individual—or, more precisely, “ethnic.” As long as those “ethnic” people remained—that is, Romani families—most Pescarians believed there could be no possible change.

By far, the dominant expression that I came across being used to identify Roma was “nomads.” Pescarian Roma were viewed as inherent “nomads”

who only stopped their itinerant way of life some decades ago, and so—as a local Celli resident told me—“Today they are Roma only as stock, as a race (*come ceppo, come razza*).” Thus, “nomads” was not used to describe Roma people’s current way of life, but rather indexed ancient and lost Romani traditions. Hence, the social uses of the word “nomad” have in itself a timeless, eternal character, echoing six centuries of exclusion in Europe that has consistently been predicated on the trope of the “wild Gypsy” (see Piasere 2006; Picker and Roccheggiani 2014).

This notwithstanding, the civilization narrative about “eternal others,” stuck in their traditions, was not abstract, that is, simply cast within a generic “nowhere,” as several other narratives about Roma in Italy are (see Bravi 2009; Piasere 2006; Tosi Cambini 2008). Rather, that narrative was always firmly related to the city, from which Romani Pescarians were depicted as excluded. One of the main local dimensions within which Pescarian Romas’ exclusion was articulated was that of housing. A local politician explained to me what I later found out to be a widely shared story among many non-Romani Pescarians:

You know, when you want to devalue a building and want to be nasty to a relative of yours, sell it to Gypsies and the building gets depreciated, because Gypsies have horses in their houses. Today maybe less than before, since the horse trade is not their business any longer. They are dirty, they keep music [at a] loud volume, they have arrogant ways of behaving and are often angry, they are involved in criminal activities, and therefore their house gets searched by the police. Thus, neighbours in the buildings where Gypsies live sell their own flats for little money, and in this way the building becomes devalued.

Another politician drew a very important distinction, which showed that Romani Pescarians were, discursively, primarily excluded from the city rather than from the nation:

The Roma community does not feel itself as [an] integral part of Pescara, and Pescarian citizens don’t recognize Roma as *Pescarian citizens*. Maybe in the next generations people will think in a different way. Today it is difficult, because the situations of crisis get attributed by citizens to the Roma community and this is not favourable for social integration, nor a synergic relationship between ethnies [*etnie*].

More generally, the most widely shared local narrative about Roma maintained that they used to be nomads, and due to this fact, they were at present at odds with living in a fixed adobe, and thus were radically different from sedentary non-Romani “Pescarian citizens.”

Along with “nomads,” I was told that another expression used to identify Romani Pescarians was *pigri*—a stereotype that to my best knowledge is not found anywhere else in Italy. In Italian *pigri* literally means “lazy” (in masculine plural form), but its social uses suggest that the word probably comes from the Spanish *picari*, meaning “tricksters” (see Piasere 2011)—from which the English “picaresque” is also derived. The evidence for this is that “*pigri*,” in the Pescarian local idiom, indexes an ostentation of material possession along with an idea of deviant borderline behaviors. For example, a group of people in a convertible driving around the streets of the city center listening to loud music, are considered *pigri*, as are people who wear big pieces of golden jewelry and leather clothes. Gender-wise, the stereotype applies equally to women and men.

### ***Back from the Field: “Juxtaposition,” “Partial Connections,” and “Problematic Comparisons”***

Once I returned from the field, as I started reading the social history works on the construction of “Romani otherness” in Europe and the related debates about Romani cultural sameness in Europe, the problem of comparability emerged. Those studies seemed to compromise my whole idea of comparing the representations of “Roma” in two different contexts. Because of the centuries-long history of essentializing, dominating, and annihilating many Roma, assuming any sort of a priori common ground between Romani Europeans living in disparate settings is empirically ungrounded and can perpetuate that very essentialization.<sup>10</sup> In order to come to terms with these problems, I started carefully going through my field notes, realizing for the first time two fundamental aspects of my fieldwork that helped me understand the limits of my comparison. First, in Pescara I was already doing a comparison, because I was continually thinking in terms of differences with my previous experience in Cluj. Second, the material I had collected during fieldwork seemed as influenced by my national and urban belonging as by everyday representations of local Roma that existed independently from my “being there.” In what follows, I will discuss these two fundamental issues, defining the first as “juxtaposition” (Nyiri 2013) and the second as “partial connections” (Strathern 2004 [1991]). Finally, I will discuss my research in terms of a “problematic comparison” (Niewoehner and Scheffer 2008).

As I discussed in the previous section, with the passing of time in Pescara I gradually observed that the stereotyping expressions I was coming across were exclusively local, not national. Nowhere else in Italy, for what I could grasp, did one find either the particular articulation of “nomads” or the “*pigri*”

expression that one finds in Pescara. *That awareness was possible only because I was juxtaposing those representations with the ones that I had come across in Cluj.* The presence in Pescara of many nationwide stereotypes about Roma was explicit in the local media coverage of an episode that happened in town. In May 2012, a Pescarian man was killed by someone whom local media immediately portrayed as a “nomad.” A few days after the killing, the friends of the deceased organized a demonstration in front of the municipality, and punitive forays into Adriatico against Pescarian Roma. Surprisingly—to me—the meticulous and unprecedentedly massive local media coverage of the those days never mentioned the stereotypes that I had encountered in 2008 and 2011. Instead, only common expressions that can be found throughout Italy were used in the reports, such as the trope of the dangerous and lazy criminal (Bravi 2009, 76). Although during those days the racist acts and speeches against Romani Pescarians continued intensively, “*pigri*” were not mentioned either in the demonstrations or in the press, and the housing issue, although raised in the mayor’s response to the demonstrations,<sup>11</sup> was largely absent. This event shows the disparity between the idioms and narratives that Pescarians disclosed to me, and those that were used independently from my “being there.”

I therefore propose to interpret my experience in Pescara drawing on what Nyiri (2013) names “juxtaposition.” Discussing her long-term ethnography with Chinese citizens, Nyiri writes that, “Indeed juxtaposition is perhaps a better term than comparison, for anthropology is far better at rendering situations comparable across place and time, thus forcing a change of perspective, than at actually comparing them” (Nyiri 2013, 371). The author refers to the Geertzian (1988) call for juxtaposing “experience-near” and “experience-distant” concepts, and to Marcus and Fischer’s (1986, 123) discussion of ethnography as a surrealist project juxtaposing, in a collage, social realities that have nothing in common with each other. My juxtaposition was not exactly surrealist, but more in line with Geertz’s “experience-near” “experience-distant” concepts: a diachronic juxtaposition of impressions, fragments and clues, which, little by little, I was coming across and deciphering.

But why, in the first place, did I collect only everyday local representations in Pescara, while in Cluj, I was only able to collect national ones? This leads us directly to the second fundamental aspect of my fieldwork. In December 2007, during my first five-day visit to Pescara, I wrote down in my diary that many Pescarians regarded me with a certain deference because I was from Milan. My self-presentation was always, “I am a researcher from Milan, and I am interested in Adriatico, or Celli, and its social life.” On December 21, 2007, I wrote down these lines:

I noticed that, at least during these first three days, it is very easy to set an appointment with local politicians and civil servants. More generally, it is rather easy to have a conversation about any issue I am interested in, with anyone here: the label “researcher from Milan” is overtly appreciated and induces a certain deference.

Here lay the answer. Milan is the richest city in Italy and it is widely regarded as one of the most “civilized” Italian cities. My urban belonging elicited answers that were intended to highlight very local idioms—assuming, probably, that since I was from Milan, and I was a researcher, I knew already about the nationwide stereotypes of Roma. Once I found out about this issue, I immediately related it to my experience in Cluj and I found out that—actually—the same was happening in the Romanian town. As I showed in my brief account about Cluj, my informants tended to associate Romanians and Italians, excluding Roma from Romania as a whole, while at the same time constructing a commonality between Romania and Italy. My Italian belonging was key in eliciting these kinds of associations. Also, my Italian belonging had a rather implicit value of “civilization”—in relation to which Romania was imagined as a fellow European “civilized nation.” This was possible, indeed, because in January 2007—in the midst of my fieldwork activities—Romania joined the EU, a fact accompanied in Romania by a large discourse widely showing “respect for anything that is Western” (Heintz 2002, 11). Yet my informants’ construction of Romania and Italy as joint “civilized” cultural worlds was happening by portraying Romanian Roma as “the uncivilized other.” And in the case of Pescara too, my relevant geocultural belonging as Milanese, coupled with my socio-professional role, that is, “researcher,” provided me with an aura of “civilization,” which my interlocutors tended to use in order to construct familiarity between themselves and me, in direct contrast to “uncivilized”/“nomadic” Romani Pescarians.

My different belongings—Milanese and Italian—elicited the *scale* on which exclusion was discursively performed—nation-framed in Cluj and urban-framed in Pescara. And yet, this configuration would have never become understandable to me without considering my differently located selves; this has fundamental implications for research on ethnographic comparison.

### *Situating the Eternal Elsewhere through a “Problematic Comparison”*

As a matter of fact, however, it might be more probable that nation-framed representations of Roma are the most widespread in Cluj, while urban-framed ones

are factually more widespread in Pescara. Indeed, in Cluj I cannot in any way account for the presence or absence of urban-framed idioms and narratives of exclusion, whereas in Pescara the May 2012 media account did prove that nationwide idioms of exclusion also circulate locally, and to which I had not given access. However, my interest and my argument here is that out of my ethnography I am only able to draw “partial connections” (Strathern [1991] 2004, 38) between representations of Roma in Cluj and in Pescara: that is, “connections without assumptions of comparability.” These connections are partial because there is no whole organic bounding phenomenon of representations of Roma across the two cities that allows a comprehensive systematic comparison. Writes Strathern (2004 [1991], 24): “In fact, places are not perceived as proper entities for comparison at all. . . . There is no proportion between them, no encompassing scale or common context that will make these places units of a comparable order. . . . People’s behaviour and interactions are so differently contextualized that similar actions . . . become incommensurable.”

At the same time, as Strathern suggests, “I must also do more than simply *juxtapose* them in my mind. There is a connection between them if their inhabitants entertain apparently similar ideas. As well as the connections to be found, then, are the connection they voice” ([1991] 2004, 25; my emphasis). Incommensurability in my ethnography got diverted and in a sense partially amended by the relevance of my positionality, as well as by the “apparently similar ideas” about Roma that my informants had in Pescara and Cluj. Indeed, I was reminded by the director of the Municipal Housing Office in Cluj of the presence of “Gypsies in Italy.” That was a clear and explicit connection “voiced” by him that helped me realize my positionality and my differently perceived selves.

As I discussed in the second section, my comparative research question was whether everyday representations of Roma in Western Europe were substantially more tolerant, pluralist and inclusive than those of their Eastern counterparts. As I have already discussed at length, this question was naive; this notwithstanding, I did dissect and concomitantly establish connections between the two sites, and those partial connections allowed me to—more or less intentionally—come up with a partial contextualization of the representations of Roma in two European cities—in Pescara, urban-framed within the context of neoliberal policies of Adriatico; and in Cluj, nation-framed, within the context of urban restructuring of Batik.

Stemming from these considerations I can conclude that, following Niewoehner and Scheffer (2008, 275–76), I carried out a “problematic” ethnographic comparison:

The impossibility to compare objects in their own totality or thickness (or to translate from one entire context to another) should not stifle productive



comparative research. It should rather instigate “problematic comparison”: we are able to learn from the problems (of comparing) and the resistances (to being compared) and not only from clear-cut solutions.

Once back from the field I learned a great deal about comparability in ethnography, and its not necessary desirability. I was able to learn from the resistances encountered in attempting to compare these two sites, realizing that what I was doing in the field was “juxtaposing”; this, in turn, led me to realize that my differently perceived and positioned “selves” functioned as elements in relation to which narratives and articulations of exclusion of local Roma were discursively constructed. From this, I could infer “partial connections” between the two contexts, without coming to a strictly comparative conclusion.

Ultimately, the most heuristic conclusion concerned the ways in which I could situate the “eternal elsewhere,” that is, Roma as represented in everyday life; in relation to myself and to the context, as I showed in this section, I could place those representations differently—in Pescara they were city-bounded, in Cluj they were nation-bounded. The series of partial connections between these two configurations were unconsciously produced during my ethnographic encounters and experiences, and consciously once I came back from the field. Now, every time I go back to visit someone in Cluj or in Pescara I experience once again, but in a fashion reshuffled according to the contingency, my partial selves at work, during talks about local Roma or about life as a partial and vulnerable experience of connections.

## Conclusion

Comparison, in sociological and anthropological ethnographic studies, has taken different forms, but has been developed and conceptualized as being largely external to and independent from the ethnographer. By contrast, in this article I have shown that my ethnographic comparison of everyday representations of Roma in Pescara and Cluj was possible primarily because of my “being there,” and because of the continuous “juxtapositions” (Nyiri 2013) I was carrying out in Pescara. I reflexively analyzed the ways in which I detected partial connections between two different contexts in which I conducted fieldwork. Following Okely’s (1994b, 23) message, quoted above as epigraph, “I allowed ideas to germinate in their own time”; after I came back from the field, I became aware that my initial intention of comparing the two contexts was ill informed. Rather than discouraging me from finding answers to my research question and from constructing my argument, the result of that inaccuracy became a source for data analysis. Over the course of five years

(summer 2007- summer 2011) I became aware of the importance of my differently perceived “selves,” and this contributed to establish the connections that allowed me to come to my research argument about the local situatedness of everyday representations of Roma.

As soon as I arrived in Cluj, I came across media silence, which was counterbalanced by the rooted representations of Roma among the people I encountered, as well as by the everyday racism. These processes of everyday exclusion occurred within the context of the economic policy of urban restructuring of Batik, the peripheral neighborhood in which a significant number of Romani families resided. From without, the neighborhood was perceived as dangerous because of the presence of Roma, while within it, shopkeepers felt threatened by the same presence. The *Cartier Tineret* development project was the main investment that the Municipality was involved in, and this was perceived by the workers I would regularly meet in Iris as the main cause of the Municipality’s neglect of the basic services, such as housing facilities, in the neighborhood. Against this socioeconomic background, Roma were stigmatized in everyday life by being imaginatively placed outside the boundaries of the nation, and I consider that my exposure to this discourse may have been to a substantial extent induced by my most salient identification, i.e. my Italian nationality.

In Pescara, the recent history of neoliberal measures and policies in the stigmatized “Gypsy neighborhood” was the main context within which I collected everyday representations of Roma. Those representations were articulated through locally rooted expressions such as “nomads,” with reference to housing, and “*pigri*,” meaning “tricksters.” Here too, the urban scale on which my informants articulated their own representations of Roma was again probably to some extent elicited by my relevant geocultural belonging, i.e. my Milanese background.

Being unaware at the beginning of my research of the scholarly debates questioning the cultural homogeneity of Roma across Europe, I only understood the importance of my differently perceived geocultural belongings in eliciting my informants’ representations when I performed a juxtaposition of the two contexts. In so doing I drew partial connections, which showed the situatedness of each configuration of the “eternal elsewhere,” that is, Roma in everyday local representations, within both the socio-historical local processes and my partial selves. “Partial connections” were partially “voiced” by my informants—as was the case in Cluj—and partially constructed by my differently located selves.

Ethnographic comparison is a fruitful and promising approach to fieldwork. However, it requires to be carefully and reflexively problematized, lest falling into superficial analyses. As such, the approach rarely becomes the

focus of ethnographers' reflexive analysis. I would therefore suggest more discussion on ethnographic comparison, as sharing experiences and reflexive analyses on that approach may well lead—consciously or not, expectedly or unexpectedly—to worth-findings. Learning from the resistance to comparison is probably more difficult than producing catchy pictures of wholes in which different elements are able to symmetrically explain each other. Yet it would probably allow us to explain the social, and the possible perspectives on it, in its varied fragmentations and partialities.

### **Acknowledgments**

I express my gratitude to the Clujeans and Pescarians who generously allowed me to conduct my fieldwork. I am also thankful to Jon Fox, Lili di Puppo, Sandy Ross, and an anonymous reviewer of *JCE* for their helpful remarks, suggestions, and hints on previous versions of this article. All mistakes are undoubtedly mine.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article:

This paper draws on reflections on my doctoral fieldwork, which was generously supported by a three-year Italian Ministry of Education doctoral scholarship, as well as on my postdoctoral fieldwork, which was generously supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project number POSDRU/89/1.5/S/61104 with the title “Social sciences and humanities in the context of global development – development and implementation of postdoctoral research”.

### **Notes**

1. These are some of European Romani subgroups. Classification is always problematic, not least because it often overlooks self-identification, endorecognition, and changes over time.
2. I am not here suggesting that full cultural sameness exists, neither in theory, let alone that is desirable. However, the extent of the heterogeneity of Romani groupings in different contexts seems to particularly defy any homogenizing gaze (see for instance Piasere 1993, 68).
3. It should be stressed that the two main streams of comparative ethnographic approaches that I am reviewing here also differ in terms of goals and objectives. While the first aims to epistemologically critique (Herzfeld 2001) or stress historical difference (Falk Moore 2006 and Gingrich 2000), the second aims to

- investigate the situatedness of forms of knowledge and social life. I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing at this important difference.
4. I am aware of the vastity of this claim, which I have no space here to discuss. I only flag the fundamental work by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999).
  5. The 2008–2009 fieldwork was part of my PhD in Sociology and that in 2011 was part of my postdoctoral work.
  6. In order to preserve the anonymity and the confidentiality of the information, I replaced all names of urban locations and persons with pseudonyms. Also, I will use the “ethnic” and “urban” identifications interchangeably (Clujean Roma/Pescarian Roma and Romani Clujeans/Romani Pescarians) in order to account for the lack of an a priori hierarchic relation between the two identifications.
  7. Here as well I replaced all names of persons and locations with pseudonyms
  8. The Carabinieri are a police force that, in contrast to the State police, do not belong to the Ministry of the Interior but to the Ministry of Defense.
  9. I interviewed two politicians—that is, Municipal councilmen—belonging to each of the three main political parties.
  10. As a matter of fact, indeed, essentialization can be seen as a shared characteristics of all Roma: to be *treated* as part of a “single” group implies that one will come to share at least *that* experience with other members of that “group.” However, if similarity would be considered as the mere result of essentialization, it is still not proved whether all self-identifying Roma are indistinctively essentialized.
  11. After the protest and the violent acts against Pescarian Roma, the mayor put up advertisements across the city reading: “Roma and criminals out of social housing!”
  12. For an overview of the debate, see Acton and Ryder (2012).

## References

- Acton, Thomas, and Andrew Ryder. 2012. “Recognising Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History and Culture.” In *Gypsies and Travellers: Empowerment and Inclusion in British Society*, edited by Richardson, Johanna and Andrew Ryder, 135–49. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Agentia de Monitorizare a Presei. 2008. *Cazul Mailat in preza. De la crima la criza*. Bucarest: Agentia de Monitorizare a Presei.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2002. *Le Bal des célibataires: crise de la société paysanne en Béarn*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Bravi, Luca. 2009. *Tra inclusione ed esclusione. Una storia sociale dell'educazione dei rom e dei sinti in Italia*. Milan: Unicopli.
- Burawoy, Michael. 2003. “Revisits: An Outline of a Theory of Reflexive Ethnography.” *American Sociological Review* 68:645–79.
- Costarelli, Sandro. 1999. L’immagine sociale degli zingari: un’indagine transnazionale. In *Italia Romani*, edited by L. Piasere. Rome: CISU.

- Crowe, David. 2003. "The International and Historical Dimensions of Romani Migration in Central and Eastern Europe." *Nationalities Papers* 31:81–94.
- Falk Moore, Sally. 2006. "Comparison. Possible and Impossible." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34:1–11.
- Gay y Blasco, P. 2002. "Gypsy/Roma Diasporas. A Comparative Perspective." *Social Anthropology* 10 (2): 173–88.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1988. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gingrich, Andreas. 2002. "When Ethnic Majorities Are 'Dethroned': Towards a Methodology of Self-Reflexive, Controlled Macro-Comparison." In *Anthropology, by Comparison*, edited by A. Gingrich and R. Fox, 225–49. London: Routledge.
- Gingrich, Andreas, and Richard Fox. 2002. *Anthropology, by Comparison*. London: Routledge.
- Haraway, Donna. 1985. "Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." *Socialist Review* 80:65–108.
- Heintz, Monica. 2002. "Changing Work Ethic in Post-socialist Romania." Phd Diss., University of Cambridge.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 2001. "Ethnography, Globetrotting and the Spaces of Social Knowledge." *Journal of Anthropological Research* 57:259–76.
- Levy, G. 1999. "The Gypsies and Jews under the Nazi." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 13:383–404.
- Marcus, George, and Michael Fischer. 1986. *Anthropology as a Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Matras, Yaron. 2002. *Romani: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mayall, David. 2004. *Gypsy Identities 1500-2000. From Egyptians and Moon-Men to the Ethnic Romany*. London: Routledge.
- Niewoehner, Jorg, and Thomas Scheffer. 2008. "Introduction." *Comparative Sociology*, Special issue on thick comparison. 7:273–85.
- Nyiri, Pál. 2013. "Lateral Visions: Juxtaposition as Method." *Ethnography* 14:369–83.
- Okely, Judith. 1983. *The Traveller-Gypsies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Okely, Judith. 1994a. "Constructing Difference. Gypsies as 'Other.'" *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 3 (2): 55–74.
- Okely, Judith. 1994b. "Thinking through Fieldwork." In *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, edited by A. Bryman and R. G. Burgess, 18–34. New York: Routledge.
- Piasere, Leonardo. 1993. "Uso dello spazio e forme di relazione tra i Roma." In *Zingari in Toscana. Una ricerca della fondazione Michelucci*, edited by Marcetti C., T. Mori and N. Solimano, 67–85. Florence: Angelo Pontecorboli.
- Piasere, Leonardo. 2005. *Un mondo di mondi. Antropologia delle culture Rom*. Napoli: L'Ancora.
- Piasere, Leonardo. 2006. "Che cos'è un campo nomadi?" *Achab. Rivista di antropologia* 8: 8–16.

- Piasere, Leonardo. 2011. "Horror Infiniti. Die Zigeuner als Europas Trickster." *Behemoth: A Journal of Civilisation* 4:57–85.
- Picker, Giovanni. 2012. "Territori postcoloniali ai limiti. I campi per rom in Italia e Francia tra doxa e storia." In *Lo spazio del rispetto*, edited by E. Ceva and M. E. Galeotti, 194–216. Milan: Bruno Mondadori.
- Picker, Giovanni. 2013. "'*Țiganu-i Țigan*". Verbal Icons and Urban Marginality in a Post-Socialist European City. *Civilisations. Revue internationales d'anthropologie et de sciences humaines*. 62(1): 51-69.
- Picker, Giovanni, and Gabriele Roccheggiani. 2014. "Abnormalizing Minorities. The State and Expert Knowledge Addressing the Roma in Italy." *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 21 (2): 185-201.
- Roccheggiani, Gabriele. 2011. "Le nomadisme: une anomalie ethnique? Le marquage biopsychologique des Roms et des Sintis in Italie en tant que régime de vérité." *Etudes Tsiganes* 46:96–113.
- Sallaz, Jeffrey J. 2008. "Deep Plays. A Comparative Ethnography of Gambling Contests in Two Post-colonies." *Ethnography* 9:5–33.
- Strathern, Marilyn. (1991) 2004. *Partial Connections* (Updated edition). New York: Roman & Littlefield.
- Topalova, Veilna. 2002. "Social Representations of Gypsies in Europe: East-West Comparison." *Sociological Problems* 34:129–39.
- Tosi Cambini, Sabrina. 2008. *La zingara rapitrice. Racconti, denunce, sentenze (1986-2007)*. Roma: CISU.
- Tremlett, Annabelle. 2009. "Bringing Hybridity to Heterogeneity in Romani Studies." *Romani Studies* 19:147–68.
- Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed Books
- Wacquant, Loïc. 2007. *Urban Outcasts. A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Willems, Will. 1997. *In Search of the True Gypsy: From Enlightenment to Final Solution*. London: Frank Cass.
- Woodcock, Shannon. 2009. "Gender as Catalyst for Racial Violence against Roma in Contemporary Italy." *Patterns of Prejudice* 41:493–515.

### Author Biography

**Giovanni Picker** is an honorary research fellow in sociology at the Central European University Institute for Advanced Study. His research focuses on the interplay between governance, social exclusion and ethnic/racial stigmatization in Eastern and Western European urban contexts. Prior to CEU, Giovanni was awarded two postdoctoral fellowships in Sociology at the Higher School of Economics (Moscow) and at the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities (Cluj-Napoca).