

The stable stranger

Constructing “the Roma” within the European neoliberal culture complex

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Abstract: Drawing on ethnographic material from Gitanos of Spain and current EU Roma integration policies, we explore the contemporary construction of the Roma ethnic group category as a specific type of “stranger” in the context of the European neoliberal culture complex. Our argument is that this classificatory reconstruction can be seen to work as a cultural prerequisite for the socio-political shaping and management of the Roma as a neoliberal “stable stranger.” This new stranger is based on constructing Roma as a potential unused labor pool and as recent immigrants, in contrast to the Gitanos’ own ideology and locally grounded identity of self-employment and anti-proletarianism. The paradoxical consequence of the integration policies, therefore, is the potential pushing of the Gitanos further away from Spanish mainstream society.

Keywords: ethnicity, EU policies, Gitanos, ideology, integration, proletarianization, Roma, the stranger

Our ethnographic point of departure is the self-employed merchant “middle class” Gitanos of El Rastro in Madrid. The article contrasts their locally produced livelihood and identity—epitomized by its highly contextual, performative, historical, and ideologically created nature—with the fashioning of the reifying and all-embracing “Roma ethnic group” category by contemporary EU documents and policies.

We explore a thesis regarding the ongoing redefinition, relabeling, and refunctionalization of the category of people labeled “Roma,”¹ as a new type of stranger in the context of Europe’s neoliberal culture complex. Although a contested term (Brenner et al. 2010), the emergence over the last decades of a “culture of neoliberalism

of global reach” is well documented (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism shapes people and institutions and create new forms of subjectivity and control. Governing and power both within and beyond the state is in neoliberalism mainly working as a “flowing and flexible conglomeration of calculative notions, strategies, and technologies aimed at fashioning populations and people” (Wacquant 2012: 69). In our case, it is central to the European Union’s efforts of creating and implementing common integration policies in regard to Europe’s Gypsy populations.

A key instrument in the process of shaping Gypsy populations is the official construction and use of the term “Roma” as a common ethnic



label to include all the diverse groups of Gypsies living throughout Europe—with its alleged 11–12 million members, thus being the largest ethnic minority in Europe, with such and such living conditions, life expectancies, number of illiterates, common origin and migration history. We acknowledge that this conceptual reification is aimed at facilitating the universalization of integration strategies and politics of “good intentions” and also that the term has been heavily challenged (e.g., Law and Kovats 2018; Sigona and Trehan 2009; Simhandl 2009), also in the Spanish context (Magazzini and Piemtonese 2016). Through the current processes of reconstruction and relabeling, we nevertheless see the creation of a new object (Simhandl 2006), a new ethnic “entity”, and the emergence of what we call a “neoliberal stable stranger,” made available as an “unused labor force” not least to perform “dirty jobs” (Karakayali 2006) and other tasks at the periphery of the culture of neoliberalism.

The Gitanos that make up our ethnographic material function as an interesting ethnographic case in (at least) two ways. First, it stands in stark contrast to the Eastern European, highly marginalized Roma groups with whom the EU policies can be said to be particularly targeting. Second, the case of our informants is a complement to former ethnographic studies done on poor and deprived Gitanos in Spain (e.g., Gay y Blasco 1999; Kaprow 1978; San Román 1975). How public policies play an active role in the production of cheap racialized labor pools of Roma in Eastern Europe is well documented (Vincze et al. 2018). We focus on how such processes are being played out (differently) in the case of middle class Gitanos in Spain. The Gitanos of El Rastro can be perceived as a kind of middle class in terms of both their economic organization as largely self-employed in family businesses, including their economic wealth, and also by their market orientation, cultural values, and explicit anti-proletarianization ideology. Teresa San Román (Dolz and Oleaque 2006) estimates that 80 percent of the Gitanos in Spain can be described as well integrated and belonging to an “invisible” middle class majority.

The aim of the article is to contribute to an understanding of Gypsies/Roma, especially the Spanish Gitanos, within the contemporary European integration project, how this relates to tropes of the stranger and conceptions of strangerhood, and again to the social division of labor. By looking at the tacit presuppositions and ideological premises upon which the Roma category is (re)created by EU policies, we can discern both overt and tacit ideological aims and desires to “mainstream” and manage the new Roma category of people, all seemingly with good intentions, but arguably with the consequence of pushing these groups, such as the Gitanos of El Rastro, away from their social organization and mode of work and subsistence, and of subverting their identity and ideology of self-employment and anti-proletarianism.

We claim that the contemporary reification and efforts of managing the various European Roma/Gypsy populations—resulting in a stabilized position as neoliberal strangers—is based on constructing the ethnic Roma category as an unused labor force as opposed to, in our case, the Gitanos’ own ideology of self-employment and anti-proletarianism and of depicting the Roma as recent and ongoing migrants to the European Union and the “Western world”—as opposed to the native Spanish Gitano identity and their patterns of strategic economic mobility. Furthermore, by making the Gitanos in Spain part of a global ethnic Roma diaspora community of Indian origin, the standardization of classification and common governing policies of integration brought forward by the European Union have in sum the paradoxical, and presumably unintended, consequence of also pushing the Gitanos further away from Spanish mainstream society.

The Gitanos of El Rastro protest against these neoliberal governance processes but are nevertheless targeted and impacted. As such, it is a case of the familiar problem of how social policies frame its target population in violent ways and not corresponding with their own beliefs, needs, and practices. Our focus is not to document the consequences of the EU policies

for Gitanos locally but to contrast the EU policies and practices with the Gitano practices and notions of identity, that is, their particular ways of “doing Gitano.” Through that comparison, we see the emergence of the figure of the new neoliberal stranger. Based on our own empirical studies and supported by San Román,² we can nevertheless reason that as long as the Gitanos of El Rastro have the resources and possibilities to maintain a lifestyle and business model as self-employed traders and uphold their social boundary to the Payos (non-Gitanos), they will also manage to escape the forces that are shaping the new ethnic Roma—and its related figure of the neoliberal stranger. On the other hand, the last 10 to 15 years several of our informants have, in tandem with developments in the global capitalist and Spanish economy, experienced great downward mobility. This is an ongoing downfall that has increasingly enrolled many of the Rastro Gitanos into both state, local, and nongovernmental organization (NGO) social security programs, potentially enrolling them in same ethnic and social category as newly arrived Roma migrants in Spain.

In the following we first position our argument within anthropological theories of ethnicity in relation to Gypsies and Roma and to concepts of the stranger. Then, we empirically explore the Gitanos’ own identity and livelihood as middleman traders and their locally enacted ideology of self-employment and anti-proletarianism. This is followed by a contrasting empirical description and analysis of the current EU Roma integration policies and their enactment through local, regional, and national NGOs in Spain. Finally, we reconceptualize the tropes of the stranger and conclude by proposing that current European efforts to construct a shared Roma ethnic minority group category paradoxically serve an ideological function that enables the reification of the “Roma” as a new kind of stable neoliberal stranger in a manner that drives groups, such as the Gitanos of El Rastro, away from their own ethos and mode of subsistence and ideology of self-employment and anti-proletarianism.

Ethnic groups and the Roma

In a discussion of the relabeling and refunctioning of Europe’s diverse Gypsy peoples as a single ethnic minority group called “Roma,” and its counterpart in the multifaceted ethnographic field and identity constructions among the Gitanos of El Rastro, theories of ethnicity, ethnic classification, and categorization become central for analysis. Importantly, the creation and use of the all-inclusive “Roma” label is simultaneously an attribution of shared “ethnicity” to this socio-political category (Sigona and Trehan 2009; Simhandl 2009). This “ethnification” of various Gypsy peoples through the application of the Roma category makes these people comparable with each other through their common ethnicity, and at a certain level ethnically “the same.” Furthermore, this creates the “Roma ethnic group” as comparable to other ethnic groups, such as the Spanish or the French. The label “Gitano” and other labels used by various Gypsy populations is not ethnic in the same sense as the standard use of the term ethnic groups, which relates to the notion of nations and nation-states.

The shift from folklorist to anthropological inquiries of Gypsies/Roma communities arrived with Fredrik Barth (1969), the seminal work that changed the field completely, and in due course, Gypsy/Roma studies have highlighted the limits of a notion of ethnicity drawn from a model of autonomous nation-states (Stewart 2013). While, for example, Judith Okely (1983) explained English Gypsy pollution beliefs as expressions of the symbolically enforced socio-ethnic boundary between them and non-Gypsies, Patrick Williams (1984) and Leonardo Piasere (1985) moved away from how ethnic boundaries are maintained to an emphasis on internally created holism and hierarchy. Later, with Williams (2003) a view on Gypsy/Roma livelihoods as something intrinsically different and incommensurable to non-Gypsy worlds has become center of attention. Along these lines of reasoning, to call Gypsy groups’ identities “ethnic” would miss the important point that Gypsy/Roma systems of value are created *sui generis*

(Jacobs and Ries 2008) with other notions of identity, commonality/community, personhood, and so on (e.g., Gay y Blasco 1999). The re-labeling and refunctioning of Gitanos and other Gypsy populations under the common umbrella “Roma ethnic minority group” can thus be seen as a powerful neoliberal governing practice of fashioning these peoples in an image that makes them comparable to other ethnic groups and manageable for neoliberal policy interventions under the hegemonic order of nation-states.

Conceptualizing the stranger

The role of strangers is intimately connected to the social division of labor and the way in which it affects the process of social differentiation (Karakayali 2006). Supported by Georg Simmel’s (1908) writings, although not explicitly referring to Gypsy or Roma groups, Karakayali (2006) elaborates on four domains in which strangers often have been employed throughout history: (1) providing circulation (of goods, money, and information); (2) arbitration and conflict resolution; (3) the management or policing of secret/sacred domains; and (4) cleansing the group from its impurities by doing unskilled, disreputable, and “dirty jobs.” In contrast to the “old” stranger type, which occupied a more privileged position in society, it is through various types of underprivileged jobs that contemporary strangers are being shaped and functionalized.

In his classic essay, Simmel (1908) identifies two types of stranger relations: The first he describes as a “non-relation,” exemplified by the Greek-Barbarian relation. We term this type of stranger a “negative stranger”—the non-human. The other type of strangeness is a positive relation, not in the normative sense but rather as formal relation. We might label this a “positive stranger,” and mostly concerned with this type, Simmel defined it as someone who is accepted to the group as a member but who nevertheless remains detached from it. The ideal type of this Simmelian “positive” stranger is the trader who settles down in a closed economic group,

and the classic example of this trader is the story of the European Jews. As we will show, the self-employed middleman Gitano traders of El Rastro in Madrid, also (still) signify the merchant version of this positive stranger trope. However, with the increasing pressure from EU integration policies, including the subsumption of the Gitanos under the all-embracing “Roma ethnic category,” we perceive the emergence of a new figure of the stranger as emblematic also for the middle class Gitanos of Spain—the proletarianized and underprivileged neoliberal stranger made available as an unused labor force to do dirty jobs.

Several studies apply the concept of the stranger in analysis of Gypsy/Roma relations to state and mainstream society (e.g., Grill 2012; Hadziavdic 2012; Myers 2016). Joseph Berland and Aparna Rao (2004) suggested the concept of “Customary Strangers,” and Marlene Sway (1988) called the California Gypsies in her study “Familiar Strangers.” Both of these stranger types play with Simmel’s (1908) figure of the stranger by underscoring the dual status of these peoples within society as being both inside and outside, near and remote at the same time. For Zygmunt Bauman (1991: 55) strangers, by being neither friend nor enemy, can be seen as the “undecidables” of the modern world that often are depicted as a threat to the hegemonical social order. Studies building on Bauman’s figure of the stranger (e.g., 1991, 1995) include analyses of the ambivalent place of Roma in European modernity (Bancroft 1999); how Gypsies are perceived as both part and apart of “white culture” or “whiteness” in Britain (Bhopal and Myers 2008), and not least how through official labels Gypsies are being conceptualized as “enemies in our midst” (Sigona 2003: 70).

Martin Fotta challenges the way common operationalizations of the stranger concept “rest on an assumption of fixed social relations, closed economies, demarcated identities, and shared common features” (2018: 214), while simultaneously recognizing the potential relevance of Simmel’s stranger trope as “a *form of interaction* that is present in all human relationships, even

the most intimate ones” (Fotta 2018: 219, italics in original). In this perspective, the stranger relation might thus better be perceived of as a formal and not a substantive relation (Han 2012). The merchant Gitanos of El Rastro’s relation to mainstream society historically, and to a large extent still today, can be fruitfully understood using Simmel’s formal notion of the old “positive” stranger relation. We argue, however, that current EU policies, including ethnic reclassification of Gitanos into Roma, are potentially transforming this positive stranger relation into an underprivileged neoliberal stable stranger.

In the following section, we present the situation among the Gitanos of El Rastro through local lenses; the multifaceted economic, social, and cultural differentiations through which Gitano livelihood and identity is produced and reproduced in relation to a locally created ideology of self-employment and resistance toward proletarianization.

Los Gitanos and El Rastro in Madrid

It is estimated that there are between seven hundred thousand and one million Spanish Gitanos living in Spain (Mirga 2016: 127). In official EU language, the Gitano population in Spain is considered the second largest Roma population in Europe, after Romania. Many Romani leaders nevertheless challenge the Spanish estimates arguing that they have been identical for decades (Mirga 2016). There are estimated between 50,000 and 170,000 Romanian and Bulgarian Roma citizens living in Spain (Magazzini and Piemontese 2016: 232).

Most of the Gitanos referred to in this study are self-employed middleman traders or belong to such families, and, although a problematic term, they fit with what we previously called middle class. Gitanos have probably inhabited the open-air market area of El Rastro for hundreds of years, illustrated, for instance, in Miguel de Cervantes’ novel *La gitanilla* (*The little Gypsy girl* [1613]). In the present, most of our informants and their families refer to themselves

as being of Spanish Andalusian origin and have lived and worked in El Rastro for one, two, or three generations. Most are Evangelical Christians (“*Pentecostales*”) who attend church nearly every day. Commercial activity has defined the area of El Rastro since late fifteenth century, and each Sunday of present-day Madrid, thousands of eager Madrileños and tourists fill the streets of El Rastro to make a good buy from one of the about two thousand stands where everything from antiques to secondhand clothes to cheap Chinese wholesale wares are sold.

There are significant symbolic, social, and economic differences among the various Gitano groups living in the region of Madrid. We must, therefore, clarify at this point that the generalizations made in this article about the Gitanos are based on ethnographic material gathered from one year of ethnographic fieldwork among the Gitanos of Spain. In particular, fieldwork has focused on the evangelical, self-employed merchant Gitanos of Madrid, centering on the district of El Rastro. Middleman Gitano traders like the ones in El Rastro are also found in other Spanish cities, such as Barcelona and Seville. Fieldwork included participant observation in people’s homes, at cafés and city plazas, and most significantly, in *el culto*,³ the Gitano Pentecostal ritual that the Rastro Gitanos attend six days a week, two hours each night, as well as the large open-air market area of El Rastro and its surrounding areas, in the city center of Madrid. In addition, fieldwork and interviews were conducted in Madridian suburbs (for example, Carabanchel and Vallecas), Barcelona, Valencia, Seville, and Granada.

A large amount of formal and informal interviews have been conducted with Gitano and non-Gitano antique dealers, marketplace Gitano businesspeople, wholesale businesses (mainly Chinese), Gitano Pentecostal churchgoers, various Gitano NGOs in Madrid, Valencia, and Barcelona (with both Gitano and non-Gitano employees), as well as other Gitano and non-Gitano friends and informants. Finally, the material on the various EU measures and policies has been accessed mainly via participant observation and

interviews with and among actors in national, regional, and local NGOs, as well as through document analysis.

Gitanos and their differentiations

In the following sections, we show the multiplicity of ways in which the Gitanos create and construct identity and how this works in tandem with the social division of labor (e.g., Karakayali 2006). Local forms of social differentiation must also, thus, be understood as explicit manifestations of local identities and ideologies. From this perspective, and in opposition to the EU-Roma attempts that we will present further in this article, being Gitano, or even more precise, doing Gitano (Gay y Blasco 1999) is created *sui generis* and is not reducible to one single thing and category (“Roma”) that mirrors the non-Gitano category. Illustrating the inherent complexity, plurivocality, and multidimensionality of these creation processes, the following empirical sections will elaborate the variety of ways in which the Gitanos make their social and symbolic evaluations and differentiations through which identity and livelihood is produced in relation to the social division of labor in society.

Occupational flexibility

From fieldwork, told as personal narratives by the older Gitanos of El Rastro, we learned that up until the 1950s and 1960s, a majority of the Gitano families of El Rastro and elsewhere in Spain were involved in horse trade and horse handling. Being a *tratante de caballo* included the breeding and training of horses, going to *ferias* for buying and selling, attending shows and competitions, applying the animals in different kinds of services such as transportation of goods and materials, or facilitating work in agriculture. Up until the Spanish Civil War of 1936, the horses also functioned as public transportation for the urban populace of Madrid. When the animals got either too sick or too old to serve their purpose, they were slaughtered and sold

as meat. Although the *ferias* still lived on with some relevance for a while, by the 1950s, the horses had been displaced by mechanized machinery in most spheres of both urban and rural life, and many Gitanos turned their knowledge of horses and their abilities as *jinetes de caballo*, horse riders, to the movie industry and were greatly engaged with both horses and stunt riding in the films of Hollywood movie mogul Samuel Bronston (for example, *El Cid* [1961] and *The fall of the Roman Empire* [1964]).

The years from 1966 to the 1980s included the rise in the production and distribution of textiles among the Gitanos of El Rastro. These years also involved a high frequency of Gitanos traveling back and forth to countries such as Argentina, Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, and Colombia, trading in textiles and creating large fortunes from their businesses. The 1970s marked the entrance of a variety of digital technological gadgetry, such as calculators, digital watches, alarm clocks, and so on to Madrid and El Rastro, and the Gitanos were in the forefront of trading these goods. From around 1975, the turnover of leather and skin flourished. At the same time, “the golden age of antiquities” (ca. 1975–1995) started. Several of the Gitanos of El Rastro connected the golden age of antiques to the death of General Franco and the fall of the Francoist dictatorship; many high-standing people lost their privileges, political, economic, and social capital and values exchanged hands with great turnover, and as a consequence, the trade of luxury items and expensive antiques flourished. Even today some of the richest Gitanos of El Rastro come from families with large antiquity houses and a long list of high-end clientele.

Despite long working hours and heavy workloads, often including the entire family and unstable incomes and lacking predictability, the Rastro Gitanos of the present express that the freedom and flexibility given them by their economic model and practice make up for the potential precariousness they might experience. For instance, two of our main informants, Manuel and Bobola, have two sons, both in their thirties. Yoans is an economist and works in

a multinational company. Xavier plays online poker games for a living. Although proud as they are of the success of Yoans the economist and his accomplishments in “*el mundo de los Payos*” (“the world of the Payos”), Bobola and Manuel value the life style of Xavier higher, they say, because it gives larger flexibility, freedom, and at times, surprisingly large incomes. Working nine to ten hours daily for nothing more than an average pay and an even worse pension, with the same work tasks and work relations day in and day out, all to satisfy the management and owners of this multinational corporation, no, they cannot really understand Yoans’ prioritizations. Rather it exemplifies their negative feelings toward unnecessary submission to non-Gitano authorities and enforcing power relations. Moreover, it also becomes a question of identity; they see Xavier the poker player as “more Gitano” than Yoans the economist. While the former is described as impulsive, humoristic, passionate, and “warm,” they take the latter to be controlled, well-planned, somewhat upright, serious, and “cold.” Moreover, they connect the inner characterizations of the two sons to their physical appearances, that is, with Xavier’s dark hair and skin and Yoans’ blond hair and light skin. Hence, we see in this example a tightly knit understanding of identity, economic practice, way of living, ethos of being their own masters, personhood, and even physiognomy woven together in the parents’ evaluation of their two sons.

As self-employed middleman traders, understandings about how one conduct one’s business, and in what manner one’s profits are utilized are strongly evaluated by symbolic and moral standards and fundamentally connected to notions of identity. For example, people having or not having *cultura* and *educación* marks the difference between bourgeois and boisterous demeanor and people. The emic signification of *chulo* (and *bruto*) refers to a person who lacks *educación* and *cultura* but who might wield a trickster’s wit and knowhow, as well as the flux and flexibility of the flâneur, skills highly needed in the profession of the middleman trader. As

Paolo, a Gitano in his forties expressed it, “people of the lower classes such as the Vallecás Gitanos are *chulos*,” he said, “they lack *educación* and *cultura*.” He described the working-class non-Gitanos of El Rastro in a similar manner. Characterizations of others as being or not being *sincero* (earnest), *puro* (pure), and *sencillo* (sincere) are also criteria used to maneuver about and evaluate people’s actions and demeanor. “*Soy un gitaniko simple y sencillo*” (“I am a simple and sincere little Gitano”), the pastor could, for instance, say from the pulpit of *el culto*. These notions are not only moral evaluations; they are also religious concepts, and they arguably form the backbone of both Gitano as a moral being and as the primary criteria for the Gitano-Payo and Gitano-Gitano differentiations. With various degrees of conviction, the evangelical Gitanos of El Rastro often depict themselves as “*el pueblo sin pueblo*” (“the people without land”) and also “*el pueblo de Dios*” (“God’s chosen people”). Thus, from their own perspective, being a Gitano of El Rastro is immanently connected to his or her actions, as a *comerciante* (merchant), as a *creyente* (a Pentecostal believer), and as a Gitano; a moral being living a life in accordance with Gitano conduct and values—of “doing Gitano.” It is thus not attributed to common origin or ideas about shared land and common ethnicity as promoted by the “Roma ethnic category.”

Self-employment as ideology

Okely (1983) has described self-employment among her *Traveller* informants as “ideology.” Wage labor was looked upon as a last resort, and if they were to take on salaried work, the compensation had to be high. According to Okely, “the Gypsies’ history is also the history of their refusal to be proletarianized” (1983: 53). Likewise, Kaprow (1978, 1982, 1984) has emphasized the Gitanos’ anti-proletarian, anti-bourgeois and even anarchistic attitudes and livelihoods. For our informants, “*el mundo de los Payos*” (“the world of the Payos”) was seen as “all about the money” and “all about numbers”; “we are all made into numbers in the Payo

world” one informant told us. Another said, “in the Payo world, the big fish eat the small fish.”

Among the Rastro Gitanos there were many examples of people who could have gotten (low paid) regular work but who chose differently. Raquel, for example, a *Gitana* in her late forties, chose to make *bocadillos* (baguettes) at home before bringing them to various restaurants on appointment. She had more than once been offered a more fixed arrangement as employed chef but had refused the offers. She preferred the flexibility and value of being her own boss. The same went for Manuel in the midst of a combined economic crisis and a crisis connected to his own and his wife’s illnesses. He had to sell his previous prosperous business and begin to sell clothes from the back of his truck. He could have taken on a regular, low-paying job, but preferred the flexibility in time and venue that went with the itinerant trade. Doing the same thing every day, at the same times, with the same people at the same place, sounded dreadful to most of our informants. In Gitano terms, the ethos of “being their own masters” is a vital concern and is related to terms such as “*ser capaz*” (“being capable”) and “*ser fuerte*” (“being strong”). The honor and respect associated with these terms are not first and foremost connected to monetary achievements but to the way you live your life and conduct your business (see also San Román 1975: 197). The rationality behind the Gitanos’ resistance to either forced or guided vocation and wage labor is completely adequate also when taking into account the massive increase in unemployment in Spain following the financial crisis of 2007–2008.

The emic terms of social differentiation previously described are all examples of concepts related to local understandings of proper skills and knowledge, and conduct and moralities acquired to maneuver, manage, and succeed as middleman traders within their socio-economic niche. They are also strongly connected to notions of identity resting upon the distinction made between the ideology of self-employment and anti-proletarianism of “*el pueblo gitano*,” on the one side, and the ideology of vocation

training, wage labor, and the associated cultural values, logics, and practices related to such activities of “*el mundo de los Payos*,” on the other.

The next empirical section deals with how the Gitanos (and Gypsies/Roma) are being perceived and objectified from an EU policy perspective through strategies and measures of integration, mainstreaming, and refunctioning them into the ethnic Roma category.

The European Union and the “Spanish model”

Based on our ethnographic studies of local and national NGOs in Spain as well as EU document analysis and extant literature, we will see how the neoliberal apparatus of governmentality and technocratic models of control is acted out through present EU Roma integration policy, and the crucial role of the Gitano/Roma NGOs.

The EURoma Network was created in 2007 within the framework of the 2007–2013 European Social Fund (SF). The main target of EURoma and the SF is the mainstreaming of all Roma-related issues and policies directed toward Roma. “In fact, promoting the Roma in mainstream society should be the ultimate aim of all policies” (EURoma 2013: 50). The main task and aim of the European Platform for Roma Inclusion, set up in 2008, is to organize and exchange good practice and experiences between the member states in dealing with the Roma. At the first meeting of the Platform, held in 2009, the Ten Common Principles for Roma Integration were discussed and agreed upon. Together with the EU framework for national Roma integration strategies (IEI 2014), these principles have become the foundation of the EU approach to Roma integration, and “aiming for the mainstream” is one of its main goals (EURoma 2013: 73) while the creation of the ethnic Roma label is a central instrument of this process.

The Spanish treatment and integration of the country’s Gitano population is held up by the European Union as an example of “good

practice” (EURoma 2010: 98), whereby integration is achieved through the four domains of housing, health care, education, and vocation training. The largest and most prominent Roma NGO in Spain is the *Fundación Secretariado Gitano* (FSG). FSG is Technical Secretariat under the SF program, with the Spanish government as initiator and managing authority (EURoma 2013). The FSG’s *Acceder* employment program has notably been one main reason for the presumed success of the “Spanish model.” On a further remove, “the Spanish model” has undergone formalization and standardization to serve as model for other EU countries. Although a topic stretching beyond the frames of this article, the “success story” of Spain’s integration of its country’s Gitanos has been heavily challenged (e.g., Alfaro 1993, 2009; Bereményi and Mirga 2012; Gay y Blasco 2003, 2016; Ovalle and Mirga 2014).

The role of the NGOs: Reifying Roma

“Gitano” is the self-ascriptive term used by the Gitanos, and from the perspective of our Gitano informants, the Roma category is perceived as something produced externally by NGOs, and state and EU apparatus, rather than by the Gitanos themselves. It was clear from the conversations we had with them that being associated with Eastern European Roma created alienation and discomfort, as commented by one informant (incidentally invoking the negative stranger trope): “they smoke and beg, they are barbarians.” Furthermore, the Rastro Gitanos at times thought of themselves as “*la raza gitana*” (“the Gitano race”), but then only referring to Spanish Gitanos. They also noticed an increased promotion of them as being part of a pan-European Roma ethnic group, as one key informant noted with disapproval: “we have supposedly become an ethnic group now”; but neither this unity nor the ethnic Roma category was embraced by the Rastro Gitanos.

Several studies discuss how “Roma” has become the leading umbrella term when referring

to the various Gypsy and Roma peoples in Europe, including the politicization and Europeanization of the Roma (e.g., Bunescu 2014; McGarry 2014; van Baar 2011). Peter Vermeersch (2006, 2012) emphasizes how Romani activists have used the term “Roma” for political purposes to produce a more positive and less stigmatized and romanticized image of Roma identity. Yet, he also emphasizes how the EU reframing of the Roma provides new discursive material for nationalist politicians with an anti-Romani agenda, with their aim of moving national responsibilities for the Roma on to the European Union, and their application of the alleged “Europeanness” of the Roma as a way of symbolically excluding these groups from their national body. Yaron Matras (2013: 230) sees the Western “fear” of Roma migration from Eastern countries as one reason for the increasing Europeanization of Roma, that is, the inclusion of Roma as a priority issue for European organizations over the last decade.

Anna Mirga combines these perspectives and looks at how the political category “Roma” and its related policies have “evolved from a general, non-discrimination, minority and human rights protection approach towards the centralist, ethnic-based and targeted approach of the current EU Roma Framework” (2016: 80). Mihai Surdu and Martin Kovats argue that the politicization of Roma identity and the institutional reconstruction of the ethnic frame tend “toward the reinforcement of the exclusion of those categorized as Roma, thus increasing the need for Roma initiatives” (2015: 1). In the Spanish context, studies have shown that there is a widespread strategy of including newly arrived Eastern European Roma migrants into already existing aid programs directed toward Gitanos and how this inclusion rests on the ideological construct of the pan-European ethnic category “Roma” (Magazzini and Piemontese 2016). A problem they highlight is that stereotyped and racialized perceptions might transfer from one group to the other, and they also show how the local Gitano population looks upon the newly

arrived Roma migrants as competitors for scarce resources.

Gitano NGOs use the term “Roma” widely when referring to Gitanos and the Gitano community in Spain, at their websites and their reports the examples are numerous, and we learned from our NGO informants that they needed to use the Roma label when applying for EU money. Yet, in conversations we had with NGO representatives, most often they referred to the Spanish Gitano population as “*Gitanos*.” Nevertheless, we observed several instances of discord; for example, one time at a vocation training class, between the participating Gitanos and a female non-Gitano NGO worker. The latter described the Gitanos’ origin in India. “India?! No, we are from Israel, just look at the Bible!” The participating Gitanos laughed back at her. Just seconds earlier they had discussed with great eagerness how they did not have any origin at all. “We live in the present, not in the past!” they said.

Toward a neoliberal stable stranger?

Our ethnographic material and theoretical resources call for a discussion of how processes of ethnic classification and labeling relate to the trope of the stranger, and again, how the production of stranger relations in a society is inherently connected to the social division of labor and the realization of interests. In the following section, we show how the establishment of “Roma” as a stable stranger within the neoliberal culture complex is enabled through mainly two principal presuppositions; the “Roma” as an unused labor force and as recent and ongoing migrants.

The Roma migrant worker

Two main elements are cited in the EU reports to justify the increased interest in Roma issues. First of all, the need for a “sustainable integration of minorities in the labor market” (EURoma 2010: 6) implies that the Roma are at

present poorly integrated in the labor market—that they should be, and that this will be brought about by the mainstreaming approach and EU policies. Or as George Soros writes in *The Guardian* (2013): “Roma represent more than 20 percent of new entrants into the labor force in the European Union’s newest member states. . . . A lasting solution requires Europe to build a Roma working class.” The aim of including the European Roma populations in mainstream society by creating suitable workers through formal education, vocation training, and wage labor can all be seen as attempts on proletarianization. “Proletarianization—the loss of control over the planning, organization, and completion of one’s own work” (Kaprow 1982: 5), thus becomes a crucial contrast to the locally produced ideology of self-employment and resistance toward processes of proletarianization among the Gitanos of El Rastro.

We find echoes of such ideology of proletarianization in the EURoma reports, for example, through images of Roma in a number of labor positions. The *Acceder* program has been successful in achieving work for Roma (Gitanos) in Spain, including: cleaning and laundry services (Nabut); gardening and forestry work (Vedelar); auxiliary services (hostesses) for congresses (Ecotur); and remodeling, maintenance, and cleaning (Uzipen).⁴ While self-employment rates among the Gitanos in Spain are significant (more than 60 percent, according to some estimates) and much higher than in the population as a whole,⁵ in the EURoma reports (e.g., 2010: 113), self-employment is just briefly mentioned as one way of achieving access to the labor market. It is underscored that in Spain, and especially through the *Acceder* program,⁶ salaried work is the preferred strategy of integration relative to other approaches.

The second main factor and characterization of the Roma made by the EU reports relates to “the expansion of the EU to countries with large Roma minorities, accompanied by large-scale Roma migratory movements towards Western Europe” (EURoma 2010: 10). The concerns over

the larger Roma population in Eastern Europe signals fear of a new and unwelcome “wave” of Roma immigrants, as well as a warning of what might come if the situation is left unchecked. Words such as “invasion” and “wave” often appear in the daily press, while serving as telling indicators of how this intercultural present and future meeting is understood in a larger context. When we argue that contemporary EU policies toward Roma/Gypsies, through processes of standardization and mainstreaming, can be understood as attempts to stabilize the various Roma/Gypsy groups as neoliberal strangers, we add with Everett Rogers (1999: 61) that it is a stabilizing of these peoples as ongoing “recent migrants to the system.” In the Spanish case, it implies a drastic move from being native Spanish Gitanos to becoming European ethnic “Roma” of Indian origin.

“Ethnification” of Gypsy groups

Through the analysis of the tropes of the stranger made in this article, we have shed light on contemporary ethnic reconstruction processes in relation to ideology and the social division of labor. The current European efforts of constructing and unifying a standard Roma ethnic minority group category imply a significant move away from the complex, plurivocal, and multidimensional field in which “*lo gitano*” is created and conceptualized locally, as illustrated by the material of the Gitanos of El Rastro presented in this article.

Contemporary processes of reification of identities follow particular patterns of objectification in the context of the neoliberal culture complex. With its enactments of neoliberal governmentality and technocratic models of management and control, the contemporary EU Roma integration rhetoric and policies employ instruments of reification in its “id-entification” of Europe’s various Gypsy peoples with the Roma category and ethnic label. These instruments of reification include the creation of a new “object” or “entity”: the “Roma ethnic minority group.”

According to Tord Larsen (2009), such forms of “entification,” the creation of new classificatory “objects” are premises of contemporary neoliberal forms of management, intervention, and control.

The entification of the various Gypsy populations in Europe today—into one ethnic minority group, the largest in Europe, and with common ancestry and migration history, cultural and social props and traditions, and so on—can thus also be seen as a process of “ethnification.” The creation of a new ethnic entity. This function as a tool of commensuration that provide some of the cultural prerequisites for the socio-political and economic management of the Roma as a stable stranger in the neoliberal world. In our case, we argue that Gitano and other Gypsy/Roma peoples’ cultural attributes are being formed and transformed into an ethnic group unit and category to accommodate the demands of EU intervention and integration policies (including state, local, and NGOs) within the neoliberal modes of capitalist production and social division of labor.

The power of ideology consists in its ability to convince people of a certain model of the world, and acts of classification simultaneously enables new, politically functional realities. Constructing the “Roma” ethnic category as an umbrella term for all Gypsy groups in Europe must be seen as a classificatory, functional, and ideological division in and of the world. With their continuing ideology of self-employment and anti-proletarianism, and practices of *lo gitano*, we can argue that the Gitanos of El Rastro explicitly seek to protest and maintain a position as the more privileged “old” positive stranger. However, the current EU politics of mainstreaming, ethnification, and proletarianization; including formal education, vocation training, and wage labor, contribute in pushing them in the direction of a newer and more socially disadvantaged type of stranger, a recent and ongoing migrant of Indian origin that potentially may serve as a large underprivileged class and relatively untapped source of low-wage labor in Europe.

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Notes

1. Common terms describing the Gypsies are all contested. Without entering into the cultural, normative, and ethical debates surrounding the

terms, we will use the designation “Gypsies” to include all people identified or identifying with any Gypsy group, “Gitano” when we speak about the majority of Spanish Gypsies, and “Roma” when referring to Gypsies/Gitanos in the framework of the EU Roma policy “mainstreaming” processes.

2. San Román, Teresa. 2016. Personal communication, 5 November.
3. *El culto* is the name the Gitanos apply on the Gitano Pentecostal ritual held six days a week from eight to ten o’clock each night. In addition to this more “formal” *culto* held in church, the Gitanos of El Rastro also hold smaller *cultos* in each other’s homes. Due to both the frequency and depth of their cultic engagement, *el culto* is obviously of major relevance in their lives, their way of living, and their identity.
4. Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG), *15 years of acceder promoting Roma social inclusion*. http://www.gitanos.org/upload/52/37/Folleto-ENG_qr.pdf.
5. Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG). (2011). *Población Gitana, empleo e inclusion social*. https://www.gitanos.org/upload/60/99/empleo_e_inclusion_social.pdf.
6. Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG). *Programa Acceder*. https://www.gitanos.org/que-hacemos/areas/empleo_y_formacion_profesional/acceder.html.

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