Old Blouses, Old Houses: Hauntings of Romani Slavery in the Production of Romanian Nationalism

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Abstract

International organizations often hide under a veil of multiculturalism and inclusivity to enable neoliberal and nationalistic governmentalities in postsocialist Eastern Europe. In the context of UNESCO's admittance of Romania's hand-embroidered blouse on its Intangible Cultural Heritage list, I symptomatically read a project coordinated by Eugen Vaida, an influential architect famed for restoring heritage sites in Romania. Vaida's project engages in a selective erasure of Romani women's oppression by validating their subaltern's experience only through their saving of nationalistic elements of the dominant culture. Further, I make conscious the unconscious intentions behind Vaida's project and behind the ideology of international standards. Through this critique, I address the often-marginalized Eastern European spaces in academia and foreground the history of Romani people's oppression in Europe.

Keywords

- Heritage
- *Ia cu altiță*
- Ideology
- Nationalism
- Postsocialist Romania
- Romani slavery
- UNESCO

Introduction

While perhaps not as immediately recognizable as Ukrainian borscht or French baguettes, but certainly just as symbolic of national pride, the Romanian *ia cu altiță* took its place of honour on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List in December 2022. *Ia cu altiță,* a hand-embroidered blouse, has been worn by Romanians for centuries and is a quintessential part of their folkloric traditions and customs. While the motifs of this blouse vary across Romania's regions, villages, and even families, the distinctive features they share have helped stitch together a common sense of identity, one that is highly specific to Romania's historical experiments with nationalism. Recently, this nationalism has been driven by the desire for belonging in a post-Cold War neoliberal order – and particularly for the prestige and economic growth that such belonging supposedly entails. With the advent of democracy and globalism, the country's elites became enticed by the profitability that progressive ideologies such as "inclusivity" and "diversity" might bring. The blouse's addition on UNESCO's Heritage list is part and parcel of Romania's larger turn towards Western modernity, which includes the push to turn the blouse into a leading symbol of a traditional and mythical, yet modern, Romanian identity – an identity that also happens to be tailored to the preferences of multilateral institutions and international investors.

A year before the blouse's inclusion on UNESCO's list, Eugen Vaida – a renowned Romanian architect known for his restoration of medieval cities and Transylvanian houses – inaugurated his research project "*Salvând Cultura Celuilalt*" or "Saving the Other's Culture." While the official purpose of the project is to show the beauty and originality of these blouses as a symbol of Romanian-ness, Vaida also claims it is an effort to highlight the way they are a piece of "shared heritage" between white, or *gadjo,* Romanian, and Romani communities. Ultimately, the team concluded that Romani women "saved" this blouse out of reverence for its aesthetics.

By including the often marginalized and discriminated Romani community in his project, Vaida's efforts appear to be in concordance with the progressive, liberal characteristics that are promoted by the Romanian government in its attempts to Westernize the country through alignment to international standards and principles. Behind this project's thin veil of multiculturality, Vaida and his team have neatly buried centuries of oppression and injustice as well as the material and intangible exploitation of the Romani community in Romania. Such a project is also consistent with an expression of Romania's neoliberal turn, which involves transforming the ongoing oppression of Roma into an exchangeable commodity that is being traded for profit and prestige to gain currency within the multilateral order enacted by international organizations. Neoliberalism allows for conditions of racialized oppression to be subordinated anew to the logic of the market – a market that depends on the ongoing refinement of categories of difference for the perpetual accumulation of wealth and power.[1]

1 While I contextualize neoliberalism in the geopolitical landscape of postsocialist Eastern Europe and analyze how it acts through various systems of power in Romania (some more overt and some more covert than others), it is not in the purview of this article to undertake a deeper analysis or historiography of neoliberalism. For more on neoliberalism, and neoliberalism's entanglement with anti-Roma racism, see Harvey (2005), Picker (2017), and Singh and Trehan (2009).

What are Vaida and his team not saying by perpetuating the vague and elusive language of UNESCO? How are they doing exactly that which they condemn – discriminating against and excluding Roma – by building their team with only white Romanian academics and professionals? This essay examines the ideology behind a nationalistic infatuation with the superiority of Romanian identity, whereby Vaida and his team overlook how Romani women were part of a group of people who had been enslaved for almost five centuries on the former principates which make up present-day Romania (Achim 1998; Petcuț 2016; Furtună 2019). This essay will show what Vaida fails to show – the non-vision that constitutes the vision of his project. As Althusser (2001) notes in his writings on the ideological nature of myopia, the failure to see something that exists in plain sight is always constitutive of the act of seeing. Therefore, it is not what Vaida and his team's project does not see, it is what it does see; "it is not what it lacks, on the contrary, it is *what it does not miss*. The oversight, then, is not to see what one sees, the oversight no longer concerns the object, but *the sight* itself. The oversight is an oversight that concerns *vision*: non-vision is therefore inside vision, it is a form of vision and hence has a necessary relationship with vision" (21).

Roma have been continuously ostracized by Romania's majority white community as Romania became a nation-state in the early twentieth century. They never were provided any reparations for their enslavement, especially as institutionalized power structures erased memories of those times by excluding Romani history from any national, public, or official historical narratives. Therefore, Vaida's project is *symptomatic* of the way in which Romanian society is structured upon the building of a national myth grounded in the exclusion and marginalization of the Romani Other – a national myth that also aspires towards Western ideals of modernity and progress through the pursuit of relations with international entities that help dress up its oppressive endeavours into the synthetic clothes of inclusivity and diversity.[2]

While this essay engages in a close reading of a particular object, namely the "Saving the Other's Culture" monograph-catalogue, it argues that this close reading is contingent upon a symptomatic analysis of the project to examine its underlying conditions of possibility. The essay will emphasize how the project is one of many examples that are framed by nationalist yearnings that necessitate to be examined through a symptomatic reading. Ultimately, this article will show how the same neoliberal governmentality Vaida perpetuates with his work is born out of socio-economic contexts in which Romania, with its collapsed government after 1989, came under the control of American imperialism and Western capitalist policies in which international organizations imposed regulations and norms for establishing and sustaining their hegemony in the region.

This article employs a symptomatic reading approach to uncover the ideological work performed by "Saving the Other's Culture." Symptomatic reading allows us to interrogate not only the explicit claims of Vaida's work but also the silences, omissions, and ideological underpinnings that sustain its narrative. Drawing from the tradition of Marxist critique and Althusserian theory, this method reveals

2 While this article focuses on the exclusion and instrumentalization of Roma in the formation of Romanian national identity, it is worth noting that the national myth also marginalizes other ethnic minorities such as Hungarians, Motts, and Saxons. A full analysis of these dynamics exceeds the scope of this article but remains crucial for understanding the layered nature of Romanian nationalist discourse. For more on these dynamics, see Verdery (1991), Todorova (2006), Imre (2016), and Boia (2017).

how the project's seemingly progressive multiculturalism operates within a neoliberal framework that instrumentalizes Romani identity while erasing the histories of oppression that structure contemporary racialized hierarchies. My intervention situates itself at the intersection of anthropology, critical theory, and cultural studies, engaging with scholarship that examines the entanglements of nationalism, neoliberal governance, and race. Theoretically, I extend the insights of postcolonial and postsocialist critique by demonstrating that the racialization of Romani communities is not an incidental by-product of Romanian nationalism but a necessary and constitutive element of its historical development. While Eastern Europe is often treated as peripheral in conversations about race and empire, I argue that Romania's national mythmaking operates through processes akin to settler-colonial racial formations, albeit through a distinct set of historical conditions. By bringing together symptomatic reading, ideology critique, and transnational approaches to race, this article contributes to a broader theoretical project that challenges a Eurocentric framing of race and nationalism, foregrounding Eastern Europe as a critical site for understanding global structures of racialization.

1. The Building of a National Myth

Postcolonial critique and nationalism studies show that ethnicity-based nationalism can be an ever-present force behind the shaping of a country's historical narrative. Partha Chatterjee (1960) addresses the complicated ways that legacies of colonialism affect the building of new nation-states: on the one hand, emerging nation-states must define themselves against their previous colonial dominator by surpassing its own standards, while, on the other hand, they must also keep true to certain traditional ways as markers of their identity, which are also paradoxically rejected because of their supposed backwardness. This contradiction between two types of nationalisms, one modernity-aspiring and one ancestrally rooted (Plamenatz 1960), is a colonization-like phenomenon essential to understanding the way Romania has used the Romani Other in the building of its national identity.

Although not a postcolonial state *per se*, Romania also built its national myth through pre-existing notions of ethnicity, race, language, identity, and its aspirations to Western standards of modernity. For example, the unification of Romania's territories – Moldavia, Transylvania, and Wallachia – is in keeping with the many European independence and nationalist movements of 1848. The abolition of Romani slavery in Wallachia began with partial emancipation laws in 1843 and was fully realized by 1855, while in Moldavia, complete abolition was finalized in 1856 (Achim 2004; Petcuț 2016). During the Second World War, Romanian nationalism was expressed through fascism. Romanian dictator Ion Antonescu, arguably Hitler's closest ally after Mussolini, provided 585,000 troops to the Nazi war efforts and became Germany's main supplier of petroleum and wheat (Kaplan 2016; Chiriac 2018). During Nicolae Ceaușescu's socialist regime, nationalism took on the face of industrialization. It is also worth mentioning that many socialist Eastern European states, including Romania, built their nations through "a process of homogenization to which unruly nationalities posed potential obstacles" (Barany 2001, 422). Roma are an example of such "threats" and became the Other against which national identity was formed as early as the incipient building of the Romanian nation-state in the late 1840s (Barany 2001). After Ceaușescu's fall in 1989, nationalism put on the ideological clothes of Western modernity, neoliberalism, inclusivity, and multiculturalism. This nationalism marks the current predicament in which Romania's aspiration

towards the West and its lean towards ideologies of multiculturalism – like current efforts to cultivate support from multilateral institutions and international investors – is supported by the manipulation of ideas and symbols representing *das Volk* (Plamenatz 1960), an imagined community based on common ethnicity or race, religion, and ancestral ties to the land.

Ia cu altiță is an example of a *Volk* symbol throughout Romanian history. Now, the blouse is visible in Romanian public spaces, appearing on national sports teams' uniforms, celebrities' outfits, and supermarket ads. Museums have exhibitions dedicated to the blouse and universities offer courses on how to embroider it. Politicians publicly wear it, as was done by George Simion, the leader of Romania's neofascist party, Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR). Simion held his wedding publicly with over 4,000 blouse-wearing guests in attendance. Many likened it to the wedding of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, a leader of Romania's 1930s fascist party, for which the bride and groom also invited thousands of Romanians and wore blouses as their ceremonial garments (along with swastikas on their head garb) (Șerban 2022).

On UNESCO's website, the entry about this blouse is tagged within the categories of "gender equality," "women workers," and "social inclusion," among others (UNESCO 2022b). It seems UNESCO's take on the *ia cu altiță* fits with the ethos of diversity and inclusivity that sits at the core of the organization's seemingly well-intended practices, but what does UNESCO not say when it chooses to take this position?[3] How is it ignoring the historical and political implications behind this nationalistic symbol, and why?

International organizations have had a significant presence in Romania ever since the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989, assuring the propagation of Western influence in the formation of a neoliberal, democratic government. One example is Romania's first independent television station, *Societatea pentru Organizarea unei Televiziuni Independente* (SOTI), which was financed by the Washington-based International Media Fund, and by a CIA and Department of State-funded "NGO," the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) (U.S. Department of State n.d.).[4] Western propaganda continued to grow as Romania tried to gain membership in organizations such as the EU and NATO. By now Romanians are used to international corporations putting local farmers out of work, for example, to build the largest NATO and US military complexes in Europe on their land. In this context, Romanian state agencies, but also newly founded NGOs, have been receiving finances for development projects from international sponsors. Recent studies and investigations have shown how problematic Romania's management of such funds has been, pointing to corruption not only in the way the money was allocated and used on the ground (such as cash being spent on purchases of premium vehicles or bribing of political appointees) and also pointing to lacklustre procedural compliance by the international sponsors themselves when it came to keeping agencies accountable for dedicating the funds to the designated projects (Prisacariu and Ozone 2018; Rettman 2019). As was discovered in May 2023, approximately twenty million euros were money laundered by Romanian public authorities, exemplifying how the fraud that came packaged with democracy continues to be seen (L 2023).

3 I am not seeking to engage in a thorough exploration of UNESCO's history and heritage politics in this article. For more information on the complex nature of its activities, see Hafstein and Skrydstrup (2020).

4 For more on the problematics of the NED see, Søndergaard (2022).

Pertinently, scholars have also brought attention to the way these international organizations perpetuate not just neoliberal corruption through their implementation of these projects but also the oppression and marginalization of Roma throughout Europe. Romani scholar Magda Matache (2017) shows the way the policies put forth by the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies are, at best, merely performative since Roma continue to maintain a "racialized and exotic 'other' status" in society. Moreover, Enikó Vincze (2019) writes about the way international policies depoliticize the poverty of Roma in precarious situations through their neoliberal nature. This research brings to the fore the question of race and ethnicity, and the way they are weaponized in the Romanian context, together with the way they have shaped Eastern European identity and wider international politics.

Dimensions of race and ethnicity change from moment to moment, but they are categories of difference that are entangled in the making of a superior sense of nationhood for dominant groups at the expense of the subaltern's oppression. Race and ethnicity often are used in complementing and intersecting ways, and to better understand the role of these slippery terms, it is necessary to examine the scholarship that has (or has not) addressed them. Eastern Europe has time and again been seen as ambivalent, considered part of Europe, and at the same time its periphery (Baker 2018). The concepts of race and whiteness have been excluded from critical histories and scholarship about Eastern Europe since such conversations most often are framed as pertaining to those parts of the world that have had direct contact with, or have been affected by, colonialism and imperialism (Spivak 1988). Despite that, recent scholarship is showing that an internal orientalist and colonial process has been taking place in Eastern Europe wherein an unspoken racism has not only permeated aspects of identity politics and nationalism but has sustained them as founding pillars of these phenomena (Gilroy 1991; Todorova 2006; Shared and Verdery 2009). Anikó Imre (2016) writes that the concept of race is obscured from view by the concept of ethnicity, which is often synonymous with nationality because of its association with culture, language, and religion as indicators of identity.[5]

> [Race] has a hidden trajectory in Eastern Europe because the region's nations see themselves outside of colonial processes and thus exempt from the post-decolonization struggles with racial mixing and prejudice. As a result, Eastern Europe may be the only, or the last, region on Earth where whiteness is seen as morally transparent, its alleged innocence preserved by a claim of exception to the history of imperialism (Imre 2016,110).

Because history does not take place on parallel tracks but rather resembles a spaghetti junction, the *global* and systemic structure of race (Mills and McCoy 2015) has silently affected the Eastern European region under the guise of ethnicity, as is also analysed by postsocialist feminist scholarship, one of the few perspectives that has criticized the non-existence of whiteness and race as a prevailing concept in the region (Baker 2018). This scholarship emphasizes transnational connections that establish Eastern Europe as a global "contact zone" to illuminate its ties to the historiography of race and racism (Pratt 2008). To begin looking at how Roma have been racialized, feminist scholar Fatima El-Tayeb (2011) describes the way this phenomenon takes place even in other parts of Europe such as in France and Italy, where mass

5 For more, see Fatima El Tayeb's (2011) work, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe.*

expulsions of Roma happened in 2008 and 2010 despite their purported citizenship status and associated rights to move freely across European borders. El-Tayeb writes that, in fact, despite these citizenship or long-term residency statuses, foreigners – Others – are only guaranteed their right to live in Europe based on the "majority's goodwill" (El-Tayeb 2011, xvii). Angela Kóczé's research also highlights how racialization processes position Romani communities within hierarchical classifications, rendering them as "other" or sub-human. These processes are reinforced through both discursive practices and structural mechanisms, leading to systemic marginalization. Kóczé emphasizes that such racial oppression is deeply embedded in societal structures, affecting Romani people's everyday lives (Kóczé 2020).

Clearly these processes are at play in Romania and are visible in the continuous racialization of Roma in the building of Romanian national identity. Margareta Matache (2016) further theorizes whiteness as a concept in Europe by introducing the term *gadjo*-ness, which emphasizes "a Euro-specific form of whiteness that grants social, economic, cultural and institutional privileges and entitlements to non-Roma, or more precisely, to dominant majority groups." To echo Ioanida Costache's (2019) allusion to Sylvia Wynter, this racialized ethno-nationalist ideology is based upon the marking of the Romani figure as an "internal Orient" against which Romanian-ness is built.

2. A Symptomatic Reading of Saving the Other's Culture

This section turns to the project "Saving the Other's Culture," and how it is symptomatic of larger phenomena that are imbricated in the perpetuation of oppression and corruption in Romania. This project's vision – both what it sees and what it fails to see – is best understood in the context of Eugen Vaida's activity as an architect through which he is known as an avid defender of Romanian culture and identity. He has been restoring and preserving historically significant buildings throughout Romania that have been in danger of collapsing or being destroyed. Some of his accomplishments include restoring remote Transylvanian Saxon villages, churches built in the twelfth century, medieval city gates in highly visited areas of the country, and even UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Vaida's rendition of patriotic zeal in his work plays along with the state-backed building of Romania's national myth by upholding notions of ethnicity, race, and Western progress, while at the same time maintaining a distinctiveness of the original Romanian *Volk*. I argue that, in fact, *Volk*-based nationalism is at the core of "Saving the Other's Culture."

Supporting Vaida for his project were ethnologists, professors, sociologists, and three renowned ethnographic museums. Their focus was to record the way the Romanian *ia cu altiță* had survived through the ages in villages along the Hârtibaciu River Valley. The project culminated in a monograph-style catalogue, in which the team published five essays, along with a photography collection of the blouses they saw in villages on their research journey. This research is presented as a scientific effort backed by official institutions of knowledge production. In this way, Vaida used the *institution* of science and the power of its systemic influence to enact his ideology.

A symptomatic reading of "Saving the Other's Culture" encourages the understanding of knowledge as a process of production, a process of which the causes and effects are rarely acknowledged or discussed by those who enact it (Marx 1857). A symptomatic reading makes the unconscious conscious through problematizing the way acknowledgment of ideological influence in the act of reading further informs and shapes this act. A symptomatic reader asks, what is a text saying by choosing to say what it does (and what it does not)?

The "Saving the Other's Culture" monograph-catalogue starts with an introduction by Vaida in which he reminisces about his childhood in the same villages where the team conducts the study. Following this piece is a geographic description of the Hârtibaciu River Valley by ethnologist Elena Găvan, which includes a brief mention of the "multiethnic population made up of Romanians, Germans, Hungarians, and Roma" (Găvan 2021, 18). The next essay is co-authored by two museum directors and includes a historical reconstruction of the *ia*'s "survival" in the region. This survival was predicated on the importance placed by the Romanian state in ensuring the "construction of Romanian identity, of which a big part was the promotion of the popular peasant costume by the elites of Transylvania and the region" (Fulga and Crețu 2021, 20). Without analysing the overwhelming nationalistic context of these historical facts, the authors move on to emphasize that these identity-constructing efforts were solidified by state-sponsored programs in which young women in these villages were "educated and re-taught" sewing and embroidering techniques, after which state- and church-sponsored educational institutions in the area opened exhibits displaying their work in urban centres (*Ibid.*). (This is similar to a contemporary NGO, Semne Cusute, in which Ioana Corduneanu, one of the contributors to Vaida's project, organizes educational programs and workshops for women to learn how to produce the hand embroidered blouse) (Semne Cusute n.d.). Continuing their essay, the two museum directors hastily move past problematic examples of how women were exploited by the state apparatus in the reproduction of the Romanian nation and instead emphasize how Eugen Vaida's collection of blouses in his own private museum is reminiscent of early elite-sponsored exhibits from the early twentieth century (Fulga and Crețu 2021, 31).

The next 165 pages of the book are mostly concerned with a photo-catalogue of these blouses. Only in the last third of the book do the authors start mentioning the Romani community, with an essay written by ethnologist Doina Ișfănoni (2021). She starts out by painting the Roma romantically, as a nomadic people, who would only stop and work in villages for three weeks at a time while camping in tents and caravans at the edges of the community, without giving any sources for her historicizing. She claims that Romani women were particularly interested in old, unused clothing and would have rather been paid in these items than money in exchange for their labour. Ișfănoni writes that there were periods throughout time in which people stopped wearing the blouses because they went out of fashion, but because of Romani women's interest in the blouse, it was saved from oblivion. In the online launch of the project, Ișfănoni expresses awe at how "well" Roma had taken care of this piece of white Romanian culture when they very often are "known for throwing out their clothes" (Asociația Monumentum 2021). She then claims that Romani families paid amounts such as a horse, other livestock, precious metals, and hard physical labour to obtain these blouses from white Romanian peasants who had handcrafted them. Even though Ișfănoni emphasizes the way Roma have been "safekeeping" this blouse for centuries, she never mentions the history of Romani enslavement in Romania. She speaks for Romani women and tells the audience how this blouse represented more than just a fashionable object but also gave "dignity" to a Romani

"clan" by allowing them to associate with the majority white Romanian population (Ișfănoni 2021, 55). A symptomatic reader now would inquire, what is Ișfănoni not saying by choosing to highlight these findings from her team's research? What ideological function does this selective representation serve, and how does it align with broader nationalist and neoliberal narratives that instrumentalize the Romani past while erasing the material conditions of their historical oppression? By engaging in symptomatic reading, this article uncovers the implicit logic that undergirds Ișfănoni's framing – one that privileges a sanitized vision of Romani cultural participation while occluding the coercive structures that shaped their engagement with Romania's heritage. This approach allows us to interrogate not only the omissions in Ișfănoni's text but also the deeper ideological mechanisms that make such omissions appear natural or even necessary in the construction of Romania's national identity.

3. The Hauntings of Romani Slavery

This unconscious, guilty reading of the research that the team has chosen to produce as knowledge is best juxtaposed to the material, historical conditions of Romani people in Romania – conditions that "do not belong" in official state narratives of Romania's history.

Roma were enslaved for almost half of a millennium from 1385 until abolition in 1865 (Achim 1998). One way to better understand the conditions of this slavery that paralleled the nature of transatlantic slavery is to consult abolitionist Mihail Kogălniceanu's accounts of the conditions of slaves:

> Even on the streets of Iasi, in my youth I saw human beings wearing chains at their hands or feet, and even some of them wearing iron horns clenched on their forehead and connected by columns around their neck. Beatings, cruel condemnations to hunger and fumigation, placed in private prisons, thrown naked in the snow or in the frozen rivers, that is the fate of the Gypsyes! (Kogălniceanu 1891, quoted in Furtună 37, 2019).

After abolition, continuing exclusionary policies targeted Roma and ensured they were not assimilated into the peasantry. Roma were forced to settle in segregated communities outside cities, had few options but to continue working for former masters, were denied schooling, and were generally rejected from public life. The current marginalization of Roma, with many communities living in extreme poverty at the borders of towns in ghettos without running water or electricity, or some, without walls or a roof above their heads, can be seen as having started after slavery's abolition in the late 1800s (Barany 2001).

Marginalization and oppression of Roma continued with eugenics policies during the 1930s and '40s when Romanian scientists and politicians conducted academic exchanges in Germany where they were influenced by Nazi eugenicists. One such example is that of Iordache Făcăoaru, an anthropologist who studied in Munich in 1931 and who researched the supposed racial inferiority of Roma and the perceived threat they posed to Romanian racial purity. Upon his return to the country, he joined the rising Legionary Movement (a religious, militaristic movement that demanded the creation of an "ethnocratic state" in which pure Romanian-ness was based upon ideas of kinship, racial purity, and Orthodoxy) (Crainic 1997).

By the late 1930s, Roma started being targeted by various state policies. For example, during the Holocaust, around 25,000 Roma were deported to Transnistria where they were either immediately executed or subjected to forced labour, extreme cold, hunger, and contagious diseases (Turda and Furtună 2021).[6] Later, during Romania's socialist regime led by Ceaușescu, Roma had no political representation in the Communist Party, continuing a long history of underrepresentation in the country's political processes (Barany 2001). This erasure of Romani presence was reflected in the state policy of the socialist regime which strongly pushed towards the "integration" and "assimilation" of Roma and other minority groups into the cultural and social standards of white Romanians. Racism and hate towards Roma only worsened after Ceaușescu was ousted from power, as exemplified by a pattern of violence, with lynching, murder, and group-led arson in many regions of the country. Ironically, seventeen days before Romania was admitted into the Council of Europe in October 1993, a group of white Romanians:

> (…) attacked four Gypsies. While fleeing, one of the Gypsies fatally wounded an attacker with a knife. The Gypsies took refuge in a house across the road. The pursuers, who by then numbered most of the non-Gypsy population of about 750 ethnic Romanians and Hungarians, sprayed the house with gasoline and set it aflame. Three Gypsies were lynched as they tried to flee; the fourth managed to escape. Thirteen Gypsy homes were burned to the ground; four more were wrecked and ransacked. Most of the Gypsy population of about 130 fled (Kamm 1993).

The trials following these crimes only ended in 2012, with most of the perpetrators left unpunished, despite the involvement of international organizations (such as the UN and Human Rights Watch). Moreover, a strongly nationalistic discourse that continues to be diffused in the cultural, political and economic space of the country is only strengthened by the lack of accurate historical accounting of the material reality in which people live.

Despite its ostensible embrace of multicultural belonging and tolerance, these trends are nonetheless highly visible in the "Saving the Other's Culture" project. Romani women looked after the hand-embroidered blouse – which could symbolize their integration and belonging to white Romanian culture. In fact, while the historical experience of Roma is not uniform, and the experience of passing varies a lot among different Romani communities, scholars argue this is still the case, with many Roma denying their background to assimilate (Matache 2021a). In Vaida's project, Romani identity is rendered valuable to the extent that it helps consolidate a falsely inclusive, national, Romanian identity that presents itself as embracing of difference. The narrative of "Saving the Other's Culture" fails to acknowledge that Romani people assimilate under conditions of domination and not for a benevolent desire to protect the cultural heritage of greater Romanian society. By omitting the violent and oppressive conditions that coerced Romani people to interact with the hand-embroidered blouse in the first place, Vaida and his team only contribute to justifying that violence and oppression.

Through my symptomatic reading of "Saving the Other's Culture," I examine the silences that pollute the study's findings. Through this process, I notice that the focus on this blouse as a national symbol

6 For a survivor's account of the deportation, see Kelso and Cioabă (2009).

strengthens the neoliberal system that sustains entities like UNESCO but also the historic oppression of the lower class and, particularly, a Romani lower class. The injustice rings true especially in the contemporary living situations and conditions of Roma. According to the 2022 Romanian census, Roma represent the largest minority group in the country, making Romani home to Europe's largest Romani population. The 2022 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) reports about Roma in Romania are staggering: 70 percent of Roma live with no running water, sewerage, or electricity, and lynchings, police brutality, and everyday acts of racism and discrimination abound in the Romanian space beyond what these statistics depict.

These present circumstances have roots in the repressed past of slavery, which has become the unspoken trauma of contemporary Romanian society. By pervasively hiding behind discourses of conviviality, Vaida and others who entertain such nationalistic projects engage in the perpetuation of this trauma and only deepen the chasms between Roma and white Romanians in contemporary society. Ultimately, Vaida's project and state-led efforts to work with international organizations, which purport to spread "human rights, freedom, and democracy," engage in what Asli Iğsız (2018) calls the museumization of culture.

4. Heritage Politics

The museumization of culture is a process in which "official policies appropriate the notion of cultural heritage and transform it into a liberal mode of culturalism informed by humanist discourses that reduce visibility to recognition" (Iğsız 2018, 175). This process, accompanied by the lack of historical and political context, manages to overlook subversive power imbalances, socio-economic disparity, and systemic violence and oppression. Postsocialist policies developed in Romania after 1989 carry the shadow of this phenomenon for which UNESCO, the EU or other multinationals are responsible. From Timișoara and Sibiu being awarded the title "European Capital of Culture," to Vaida's project and UNESCO's recognition of the blouse, these efforts exemplify the museumization of culture in Romania.

A symptomatic reader might now ask: how is this phenomenon produced by international organizations such as UNESCO? Iğsız argues that such organizations turn "alterity into human capital for display," through the marketing of "diversity, coexistence, and tolerance" (Iğsız 2018, 191). These sorts of neoliberal motivations are evident from the very first appearances of the United Nations, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), or the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in Romania, which happened simultaneously with the arrival of multinational corporations. Among some of the first companies operating in the country after the fall of Ceaușescu's regime were Japan Tobacco International (JTI), International Business Machines (IBM), Monsanto, and Pfizer; since then, the list has only continued to grow (USAID 1996). "Aid" organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross or USAID partner with corporations who use these relationships to influence public policy and break into new economic markets in places such as Romania (Kennard and Provost 2016). For an example of how these corporations are also directly in relationship to the process by which "culture" is made available for profiteering, one can look at how JTI is a major sponsor for two of the most important cultural events in Romania: the Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF) and the Sibiu International Theater Festival (FITS) (TIFF n.d.; JTI n.d.). Today, instead of overtly pushing neoliberalism to the forefront of their

agendas, multinational corporations obscure these sorts of intentions with language that claims "culture" to be a field ripe for capitalist exploitation.

These efforts, as present in postsocialist Romania, and symptomatically in Vaida's project, instrumentalize alterity into a ready-to-consume material by detaching the Other from the historical oppression to which they have been subjected, essentially vacuum-sealing them from the political context as to objectify them for "a neoliberal window display" (Iğsız 2018, 196). While UNESCO and Vaida claim to be bringing to the fore the Romani community, they recklessly ignore that "recognition cannot be reduced to visibility, and commodification and popularity rarely point toward social justice" (Iğsız 2018, 196).

Figure 1. "Elisabeta Căldărar."
Source: Salvând Cultura Celuilalt. 2021. Edited by Eugen Vaida, Ioana Corduneanu, Mirela Crețu, Ligia Fulga, Elena Găvan, Doina Ișfănoni, and Sebastian Paic.

To further think about what "Saving the Other's Culture" is not saying by choosing to say what it does, the audience can engage visually with the monograph-catalogue that was published as the culmination of the project. Visually, the book further emphasizes the separation of Roma and white Romanians with the images it has selected for display. For example, the blouse is portrayed as being worn by white Romanian models, or even faceless, plastic mannequins as opposed to being held in front of the bodies – but not on them – by the Romani women who were interviewed (Figures 1 and 2). In line with the eugenicist tradition that marked Romania's progress through modernity, from the murders of the Holocaust to the neo-fascist movement of the late 2010's, "Saving the Other's Culture" seems to be avoiding a soiling of the purity of the Romanian blouse by keeping it as separate from Romani women's bodies as possible. The othering of Roma is so extreme in this case, even a faceless mannequin was deemed a better choice for wearing and displaying the blouse than the Romani research participants they interviewed and credited with "saving" the blouse as the ultimate signifier of Romanian culture and nation. First, all images in the catalogue are photographs of women. Not once do any of the authors address this fact, and not once is the

Figure 2. "Costum de nevastă cu păstură cu conci."
Source: Salvând Cultura Celuilalt. 2021. Edited by Eugen Vaida, Ioana Corduneanu, Mirela Cretu, Ligia Fulga, Elena Găvan, Doina Ișfănoni, and Sebastian Paic.

question asked: what does naming the Romani woman as a saviour of white Romanian identity say about how women are used as vessels of reproducing national identity and the nation itself? What does it say about the legacy of Romani enslavement? This is a continuation of the othering of Romani women, and another brick in the wall of nationalist myth building. The following questions are therefore indispensable and must be analysed through a feminist lens: how has the state crafted an image of the woman as the maker of the Romanian nation through time, especially when considering that only women are the creators of the hand-embroidered blouse – a symbol of traditional roots and ethno-racial purity? How is gender weaponized in the making of modern, white Romanian identity? Second, the gender- and race-based segregation of Romani women reaches its climax when their alterity is deemed less worthy of wearing the blouse than an inanimate object such as the mannequins that appear in most of the catalogue. Furthermore, the Romani women who participated in this study are not only instrumentalized but also silenced, as the reader does not gain any insight into how they might have perceived their role in the preservation of the blouse. Did they present themselves as saviours of this tradition? Vaida's study leaves these questions unanswered. The project's portrayal and representation of Romani women reinforces the class, gender, and race separation between Roma and white Romanians instead of exemplifying conviviality or gender equality as the project claims to do in the name of UNESCO's international values and standards.

Conclusion

The neoliberal governmentality Vaida perpetuates is born out of socio-economic contexts in which Romania, with its collapsed government after 1989, came under the control of American imperialism and Western capitalist policies in which international organizations imposed regulations and norms for establishing and sustaining their hegemony in the region. "Saving the Other's Culture" is a project rooted in a UNESCO-perpetuated ideology that engages in a selective destruction of historical, political, and socio-economic backgrounds. As is typical of a neoliberal order, which commodifies French baguettes, Ukrainian borscht, and, lately, Romanian blouses, oppression is hidden under seemingly progressive values such as post-racist myths of diversity that relegate historic oppression to the void of history.

Romanian national identity has its roots in the systemic domination and exclusion of Romani people. Nationalism is dressed in the clothes of multiculturalism while getting political and economic support from international organizations. This phenomenon is dictated by the contemporary conjuncture of a neoliberal democracy that has spread its tentacles in Romania, a nation that emerged out of a deeply problematic past entangled with fascism and slavery. The Roma and their "deviant" lifestyle have never fit into the fabric of Romanian nationalism, and they have been used as the subaltern scapegoat against which to build an ideal, pure-blooded Romanian citizen ever since the making of the Romanian nation-state after the abolishment of slavery. By considering how white Romanian elites aspired to Europeanness and Western ideals early in the nineteenth century, while also perpetuating an ethno-racial nationalism with which to upholster Romanian identity in ideas of ancestral roots, blood, and country, this paper shows how these concepts heavily shape the status quo in which fascism and eugenics are continuing to wreak havoc while swiftly hidden under a veil of diversity and inclusivity that is promoted by neoliberal international organizations.

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