

## Stories with and about wall carpets. An anthropological account on the inhabitation of Ursari Romanian Roma

Andreea Racleş<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*The aim of this paper is to discuss the ways in which objects assist us in telling small stories about our positions in relation to our inhabited space, but also in relation to perceived dichotomised categories like us-others, the modern-the outmoded, civilized-backward. Acknowledging that narratives emerge from interactions between people, this paper is an attempt to show that an important role in the emergence of stories is played by interactions between people and objects. The wall carpets hung by Ursari Roma from a north-eastern Romanian town and the stories developed with and about these items constitute the main focus of this analysis. From an anthropological and material culture perspective, wall carpets are discussed as material presences in storytelling events and as objects of experience-centred stories that assist Roma people in negotiating and enacting their identities and belongings. Taking a cue from Georgakopoulou, who argues that narratives count on both discourses and activities (2007), home making practices and domestic activities (such as those related to the maintenance of the wall carpets) are essential to this paper, as they enable an understanding of the “performative narrative of daily life” (Langellier 2004). The analysis is based on ethnographic material collected in 2014 in the aforementioned community, while the unit of analysis consists of excerpts from discussions with two Roma families, which became storytelling episodes.<sup>2</sup>*

### Keywords

*Performative narrative of daily life, Roma families, Ursari, carpets*

<sup>1</sup> Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture, Justus Liebig University (Giessen), [andreea.racles@gmail.com](mailto:andreea.racles@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> The paper is based on a preliminary analysis of the empirical data (related to wall carpets) which I have collected for my PhD dissertation, with its working title: “Material attachments and the sense of belonging among Romanian Roma.” The ethnographic field research comprises 5 months of research among Roma from the aforementioned community (March-April, August-November), carried out in 2014.

Story goes that sometime in the eighteenth century, a Grand Vizier of the Ottoman Empire by the name of Pasha Selim bought three Europeans from slave-trading pirates. They were Constanze, a young Spanish woman from a wealthy family, her English maid, and Pedrillo, who was the servant of Belmonte, Constanze's fiancé. After managing to trace them, Belmonte attempted to free them, by ways of a scheme in which he gained the Pasha's trust. Together with Pedrillo, he attempted a daring escape from Pasha Selim's estate, only to be caught in the act by the Pasha and his guards.<sup>3</sup> The haste and panic of the run were immortalised as one of the most iconic images that can be found on the sort of wall carpets that became popular in the communist and early post-communist Romania. Apart from this visual and material representation, the whole story has also been enacted under names like "Die Entführung aus dem Serail" (The Serian Kidnapping) or "The Abduction from the Seraglio", as a three-act opera signed by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, successfully performed for the first time in 1782.

What is the story that a wall carpet which depicts the Serian Kidnapping tells? Would it be a story of the endangered love between beautiful Constanze and brave Belmonte, or would it be about Pasha Selim's anger and retribution? Perhaps it is but a visual representation of the plot of Mozart's first success. It might be that, for Romanian people, none of these stories would be anyhow linked to a dangled wall carpet illustrating Belmonte, Constanze and Pedrillo. They are associated with late communism years and, mostly, with the early post-communism years, recalling stories of Nicolae Ceausescu<sup>4</sup>'s good relations with countries like Libya, which facilitated the entrance of these carpets in Romania.

The following analysis is an attempt to make justice to the context and the material framework in which, and about which, stories are articulated and enacted. The basic premise is that the way in which houses look like and are made to look like is also part of the narrative expressed by people about who they are. Thus, the notion of place will be of paramount importance, as the small stories which will be referred to are verbal acts through which tellers negotiate their belongings and claim their place in the world.

In pursuing this analysis, houses and domestic objects will be seen as the material frame which has the aptitude "to prove to itself and to others, through the objectivation of practice, its competences and status as an element of collective life" (Rosales 2010: 516). Paraphrasing Clarke and Garvey, houses will be looked at in terms of 'actualisation', meaning that they enable occupants to actualise the vision they have of themselves in the eyes of others (Clarke 2001: 42, Garvey 2001: 49). The wall carpets dangled by Roma people in a north-eastern Romanian town constitute the main focus of the analysis and will be assessed as visual elements of the verbal narrative which assist people in telling experience-centred small stories.

Taking a cue from Georgakopoulou, this paper appreciates narratives both as discourses and as activities, constituting, thus, a type of shared resources that have the potential to create and maintain "communities of practice" (2007: 9). The social and

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<sup>3</sup> Information extracted from the Synopsis of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (The Metropolitan Opera)

<sup>4</sup> Romania's communist leader (1965-1989)

domestic practice of hanging wall carpets is crucial here, as it enables me to discuss the importance of objects in the act of story-telling. In this fashion, acknowledging that narratives emerge from interactions between people, the aim of the paper is to show that in the emergence of stories, an important role is played by interactions between people and objects. In brief, the wall carpets will be analysed here as material presences in storytelling events and as objects of experience-centred stories that assist Roma people in negotiating and enacting their identities and belongings.

My empirical data regarding the practice of hanging wall-carpets consists of 12 semi-structured interviews about wall carpets, mentions of these items which emerged spontaneously in discussions which had a more general scope, and field notes I produced as participant observer who took part in ethnographic episodes at home (mainly within household activities such as cleaning and wall-liming walls sessions). Thus, the material that serves the purpose of this paper consists of conversations about the wall carpets, stories evoked by wall carpets and stories displayed by the wall carpets.

What will be specifically looked at are two discussions that I had with two Roma families at their homes, which emerged from what were initially interviews and became storytelling episodes. Both of them developed into platforms of interaction between several family members and stimulated open negotiations of the belongings which reflect the intersectionality of their identities (ethnicity, gender, family role, social status, etc.). The stories, many times complemented by analytic accounts, were told to an audience consisting of the researcher and the other participants at the discussion. While the former is seen by the teller as a spectator who needs detailed and additional information, the latter are active or passive participants at the act of storytelling who legitimate or challenge the teller's version of the story concerning the whole family or community. Without entailing that the chosen stories are more worth analysing than others, the selection of the extracts designated for the analysis at stake was done according to three criteria. Firstly, the excerpts were chosen so that they could illustrate where the story stays in the sequentiality of talk. Secondly, reflections related to identity and belonging are important components of this sequentiality, prefiguring or following up the act of storytelling. Thirdly, the excerpts were also chosen with the objective of showing the interactional format in which people decided or felt the need to tell a story complemented by the specific negotiations which enforced or challenged the content of the story.

An important aspect for this paper is that in conversations I had in any of the aforementioned formats, the number of tellers varies. More than once, my plan of carrying out conventional face-to-face semi-structured interviews, turned into family interviews or small-group interviews in which more than one person contributed with his/her own version concerning the wall carpets. I never rejected this organic development of the methodological strategy, as I found the format people spontaneously created more fruitful for my inquiry and more adequate for triggering storytelling. An important role was also played by the house tours which allowed for an interaction between the teller(s) and the domestic objects.

### **Place, belonging and identity making in Roma studies**

Aspects related to Roma people's attachment to the inhabited space have been hardly examined by scholars in relation to the sense of belonging, both in Romania and other European countries. Moreover, scholars that have carried out ethnographic research in Roma communities, such as Michael Stewart in Hungary and Paloma Gay y Blasco in Spain, suggest that the sense of identity and togetherness is not attached to territory, history or attachment to state. Both anthropologists depict Gypsiness as a fluid identity which is reflected as such by its holders' relationships with their contemporaries and by the discourses anchored in the present. For instance, Stewart indicates that, although the Gypsies he lived with are not nomads, "a 'place of their own' was not in the end a place at all; rather, it was always fragile realization of an intangible quality of life together" (1997: 73).

One important suggestion that can be identified throughout the studies about Roma people is that they create their social space in order to feel at home departing from their own "ethic of relatedness" (Gay y Blasco 2002, Stewart 1997). Under this approach, the light falls on the examination of the processes of enclosing, boundary making and difference drawing as a strategies employed by Roma people in order to protect them from the hostile environment dominated by non-Roma (Stewart 1997). From this standpoint, the 'Roma identity' is a result of the Roma people's positioning in opposition to the significant other- the non-Roma.

An approach which indicates another way of studying belonging is focusing on processes of becoming Roma. It looks at the practices through which dispositions associated to the so called "ethic of communal life" (Stewart 1997) are being transmitted and safeguarded by its members, acknowledging people's belonging to the Roma community. For instance, Cătălina Tesar argues that young individuals among Romanian Cortorari Roma, become Cortorari as soon as they comply with the distinct expectations that the community has from girls and boys (proving their virginity at marriage and procreating for females, and getting married and having children for males). A similar approach can be found in Gay y Blasco's studies which enforce the idea that the sense of community is equivalent to the share of Gitano morality (2002: 178). Nevertheless, looking through the lens of non-belonging concept, a lot can be learnt about perceptions of commonalities and about boundary making mechanisms. From this perspective, ethnographic studies among Romanian Roma argue that their interactions with the non-Roma are relevant in that the later articulate narratives about their identity as being opposite to the "uncivilised and unmoral" Roma people's identity (Engebrigstein 2007).

What stems from these approaches is that Roma people are more often described as being created by and creating elements of distinctiveness in relation to the non-Roma. However, interest in the bridges between Roma and the others has been also shown. In this sense, the performative dimension of belonging and identity comes into play (Bell 1999, Fortier 1999) with some studies examining the strategies employed by Roma people in order to convey connections and interrelations with the non-Roma. For instance, Greek-Gypsies children's and their parents' aspirations of schooling have been

depicted as a way to achieve the sense of belonging (Daskalaki 2000). In the same vein, Theodosiou shows the ways in which, through Gypsies' musical performances, notions of locatedness and belonging overlap (2011: 99). Moreover, the concern with a "fluid Roma identity" anchored in a continuous present leaves out the aspects related to space and their relevance in processes related to belonging and identity making. As Theodosiou thoughtfully observes, "for the Gypsies, we are told, space, place and particular localities are a matter of convention after all: they are not used to ground experiences and do not contribute anything to their understanding of themselves" (2011: 100).

### **The living in a north-eastern Romanian town**

Despite the fact that studies on different Roma ethnic groups suggest that the level of social differentiation amongst Roma people is low and that their group-internal relationships tend to be egalitarian (Stewart 1997), Peter Berta argues that the relationships between *Gabori Roma* from Transilvania are "characterized by a significant hierarchy awareness and status sensitivity" (2007: 33). In the same vein, the case of the Ursari Roma reflects a great heterogeneity among the people who identify themselves or are identified as Roma. I will illustrate this heterogeneity by using the example of the housing situation in the north-eastern Romanian town where I am currently carrying out the ethnographic research that informs this paper.

Most of the Roma here live on the outskirts of the locality, in an area known as the "Gypsy area" located about one and a half kilometres from the town centre. The houses were raised either by them, their parents or grandparents, and the space is distributed in three rooms, at the most. A small number of houses in this area were built with support and materials offered by the local authorities. However, a panoramic view on the settlement indicates that a few people who are better-off live there in bigger and newer houses, but most of these belong to the Lipoveni<sup>5</sup>. These are enormous, concrete buildings, going up to as much as 16 rooms, which seem to be in an ongoing process of construction for a while. These houses seem to be a "demonstration of economic differences" (Berta 2007: 37), that is to say material presences with the "ability to represent resources" (Veblen 1994; cf Berta 2007). Apart from the Roma residing in this almost insulated area, other Roma people live among non-Roma, mostly in one nuclear family households. Nevertheless, a small number of Roma people live in flats, in a building which is known as the "Gypsies' block". This very basic description of the housing situation represents just a surface view on the materialisation of differences between Roma people in the location I refer to. It is significant to keep in mind these differences because, to a certain extent, the stories told by the wall carpets depend on the setting people find themselves in.

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<sup>5</sup> Denomination of the members of the Russian minority in Romania

## Identity making through stories of everyday life

Against the backdrop of the so called “the narrative turn”, sociologists and social-anthropologists became increasingly interested in narratives as a privileged means through which people construct realities and their selves (Georgakopoulou 2007: 2). But it was the psychologists’ endeavours which contributed seriously to the formation of a “narrative mode of thinking” (Bamberg 2008: 136). These achievements triggered a narrative way of knowing and understanding the self and the surrounding world, as for instance Bruner shows in “The narrative construction of reality” (1991) or Polkinghorne in “Narrative and the self-concept” (1991).

Analysis of narrative seems to be intrinsic to ethnography and, more generally, fundamental for the qualitative research. Anthropologists incorporate in their research the analysis of narrative and have holistic approaches which allow them to contextually interpret narratives. For instance, house tours or urban walking (Inglod 2008, Pink 2008) are methodological endeavours which treat narratives as essential components in the process place-making through the discourses developed instantly on-site. Sarah Pink examines pieces of narrative generated during the urban tour of Mold (UK), which enables an understanding of Cittàslow as a form of ‘slow’ urban contestation. Central to Pink’s account is the idea that places are made through walking and talking about it, but it is also essential for Katrin Lund’s work, who sees narratives as “invested through the bodily act of moving over the ground on foot” (2006). Among other empirical endeavours, Lund analyses ways of narrating mountaineering experiences in Scotland (2006) and narratives of belonging in Southern Spain, that emerge from the conjoint act of walking and viewing (2011).

Important advances in narrative analyses have been initiated by William Labov whose work is associated with the field of socio-linguistics. Interested in structures of narrative, Labov suggests that effectiveness and completeness of narrative constructions differ according to the various sub-groups, speech communities and cultures people identify with (Labov and Waletzky, 1966: 41). Nevertheless, recent approaches, more relevant for the purposes of this paper, criticize the Labovian approach for its tendency to essentialize narratives as fundamental means for constructing realities and identities. One of the main critiques invoked by De Fina and Georgakopoulou regarding the narrative analysis developed by Labov is that it presupposes what a good story or a “worth analysing story” is. According to them, this approach hinders the analysis of other important elements of a storytelling episode such as: “interactional dynamics”, time, place, relations between tellers, circumstances in which storytelling emerge, previous and subsequent conversations (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008: 381).

Scholars who seek to depart from what De Fina and Georgakopoulou called “the Labovian canonical paradigm” (2008), propose the “Social Interactional Approach” (SIA), which acknowledges the paramount importance of social practice for a contextually sensitive analysis, as developed by Georgakopoulou in “Small stories, interaction, and identities” (2007). This standpoint, which refuses to look at language structures without

relating them to socio-cultural dynamics, encourages an analysis of narratives as produced by and producers of social interactions. It goes without saying that these interactions take place in contexts with particular temporal and spatial features, which indubitably shape the “how” and the “about” aspect of the specific narratives. SIA has also the quality of acknowledging the performative and interactional dimension of narratives as being fundamental in the analysis of identity (Bamberg 2006, 2008; Georgakopoulou 2007, 2008). What Bamberg suggests is that the role of narration in processes of negotiating identity should not be reduced to the verbal act (2008: 134) insulated from its broader social and material context, because such an approach might limit identity to a discursive act of making. Instead, he proposes a view on the teller who is not only reflective, but rather an agentive actor with an active role in this constant process of negotiating identities.

An analysis of everyday conversations and small stories has been the alternative to the big story narrative research, developed by already cited scholars like Michael Bamberg and Alexandra Georgakopoulou. The analysis of stories told by the Roma people this paper is concerned with will follow Georgakopoulou’s perspective which proposes an understanding of narrative as “a discourse in the broad sense of a semiotic system that comprises habitual associations with its spatio-temporal contexts of occurrence” (2007: 1). The principles associated to SIA stated so far constitute important premises for how stories will be scrutinized in this paper. Thus, the discussion about stories will be based on three thematic pillars: everyday practices and materiality (which trigger conversations and storytelling); space and place (which contextualize and provide material referents for the narrated stories) and micro-macro mediation (in which stories play a significant role).

### ***Everyday practices and materiality***

In her account about the “performative narrative of daily life”, Kristin Langellier argues that it is a fourfold notion, namely: (1) embodied, (2) situated and material, (3) discursive, and (4) open to legitimation and critique. The second dimension, which is the one of most interest here, refers to the material conditions which shape the emergence of stories, performances of stories and performance practices (2004: 8). It is important to discuss the material conditions in which the acts of narration happen, as they play a significant role in either enabling or restricting stories (Madison, 2010: 37). Although stories are verbal acts par excellence, the material and visual dimensions of everyday life contribute greatly to the act of telling. For instance, Bamberg associates the audio-visual with the notion of performativity and suggests that it enables a contextualisation of the narration act, assisting identity formation processes (2008: 134). In fact, as scholars from the field of visual studies suggest “our use of images, our appreciation of certain kinds of imagery, performs a social function as well as an aesthetic one. It says something about who we are and how we want to be seen” (Rose 2007: 26).

By means of small stories expressed in everyday circumstances, people affirm a sense of who they are (Bamberg 2008: 134). This section is dedicated to an exploration of

houses and homes as spaces of everyday life in which people negotiate with fewer restrictions who they are and develop narratives about who they want to become.

That homes are spaces where aspirations are nurtured is not a new thought. In fact, aspirations articulate the affective dimension of belonging invoked by Anthias (2006) and Pfaff-Czarnecka (2011a, 2011b), enabling people to develop imaginings of belonging to certain collective units. It is a concept which refers to people's imaginings and narratives about who they are, who they want to be and who they cannot be, reiterated through social and domestic practices (Clarke 2001). One example is Garvey's focus on the relationship between the private and public domain in the Norwegian society and her endeavour to show the ways in which household routines impact the relationship between self-identity and domesticity (Garvey 2001). In this sense, housing practices are useful to analyse people movements between 'ideas of self-presentation and ideas of appropriate display' (Garvey 2001: 61).

All these accounts indicate that homes, as space of everyday life happenings par excellence, frame stories and performative conversations as parts of "definitional ceremonies." This interesting notion used by the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1982, in Madison 2010) emerges from a phenomenological standpoint and refers to the performative dimension of narrations. According to Madison, definitional ceremonies is what characterizes marginalized individuals' deeds to reflect themselves before significant others according to their own "internally provided interpretations" (in Madison 2011: 68-69).

If we agree that homes are spaces where people tell and enact stories about who people feel they are and who they want to become, objects which play an essential role in the everyday domestic practices are also relevant in the act of narrating selves. For the discussion that will follow about the wall carpets in the houses inhabited by Roma people, it is relevant to contemplate Daniel Miller's critique of a theory of representation. He suggests that a theory of representation which reduces things to a persons' agency, aspirations, and ultimately to their superiority, diminishes the role of "stuff" which in fact creates people to the same extent stuff is created by people. Instead, Miller proposes a theory of frames which intimates that material objects constitute the setting without necessarily calling the attention. It is a theory which relies on the humility of things, meaning that they act by being imperceptible due to the familiarity with which they coexist with other things and with the inhabitants of a certain space. The humility of things is related to the fact that things powerfully determine our expectations and behaviour specifically because they do not make their presence obvious. Their existence creates an order which people embody and internalize to the point where they may clearly distinguish what is appropriate, moral, and acceptable, or what is inappropriate, immoral, and unacceptable (2010). What could be drawn from Miller's account is that objects should not be disregarded in the attempt to analyse acts of storytelling, as objects themselves seem to have a great aptitude to trigger, assist and display stories which play an important role in people's negotiations of identity and belonging.



## Emplacing stories and storying places

The social and physical spaces of everyday interactions are essential in understanding how narration plays its role in people's enactment and negotiation of identities. Tracing and making visible the connections between the act of storytelling and the place in which it emerges, constitute here the first steps in departing from the canonical paradigm which reduces identity to "the referential or cognitive level of speech activities and disregards real life, where identities are under construction, formed, performed, and changed over time" (Bamberg 2008: 133). This section echoes Madan Sarup's suggestion according to which the space of home is essential for acts of narrating and enacting identities, and has the aptitude to illustrate that the story we tell of ourselves is a version of the story that others tell of us (1996: 3).

In order to serve the purpose of discussing the wall carpets in relation to story evocation, the domestic spaces and homes will be looked at as places in the phenomenological terms described by Edward Casey. One of the dominant ideas of his account is that places have the capacity to gather things (animate and inanimate entities), histories, languages and thoughts (Casey 1997: 24). In this frame, gathering does not entail amassing, but it supposes "holding". Holding means that places have: the capacity of holding together uncategorised things, the aptitude of holding in and out, the ability of framing the local landscape, the ability of keeping and last but not the least, the capacity of embedding memories (which are part of the place as much as they belong to the brain and the body) (see more Casey 1997: 25).

What is relevant here is Casey's main criticism which addresses the idea that space precedes the existence of a place. His attempt is to show how place deconstructs the time-space dichotomy, stating that both time and space "come together in place" as they are experiences that rise from being in place. Here, Casey invokes Leibniz and his definition of space as "the order of co-existence" and of time as "the order of succession" (Leibniz 1956: 1066; cf Casey 1997: 36), both being part of the "common matrix provided by place" (Casey 1997: 36). Let us keep in mind the statement that time and space are dimensions of place, both "experienced and expressed in place by the event of place" (1997: 38). As events of place, an important role is played by practices of everyday life which, complemented by performance and imagination, contribute greatly to "the production of both material and sensory realities and a phenomenological 'sense of place'" (Pink 2008: 178).

Taking a cue from Heidegger (1971), Casey enforces the crucial effects of places upon our lives and their quality as events with their own "duration and historicity of inhabitation." (1997: 39). Therefore, the spatial and temporal dimensions of places are relevant for the analysis of stories because any narrative genre demands that "we firmly locate narratives in place and time and scrutinize the social and discourse activities they are habitually associated with" (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008: 382).

## Stories and micro-macro mediation

Storytelling reflects different levels of human sociality, encompassing elements of how people negotiate, contest and experience them in their daily life. Thus, the stories are “intimately related to those macro-processes and practices that constitute them” (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008: 382). Although narratives-in-interaction are “irreducibly situational and locally occasioned” (Georgakopoulou 2007:4), a very important quality they have is that they work at a meso level, linking the micro perspective of subjectivities and grass-roots experiences to the macro dimension of human sociability (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008). Social practices are essential here as they, in Georgakopoulou’s words, entail “habituality and regularity in discourse in the sense of recurrent evolving responses to given situations while allowing for emergence and situational contingency” (2007: 6).

As a dynamic process, home itself is being made through processes of projections and imaginings (Brickwell and Datta 2011) and imagination, as Appadurai suggests, is in itself a social practice that enables connections between different places (2000). Beyond the material and immaterial boundaries of households which shape the local interactions and the stories people tell about their “positionality” (Anthias 20008), the notion of home as ‘a multi-scalar spatial imaginary’ developed by Gorman-Murray and Dowling (2007) is relevant here. By scales they mean different “layered arenas of everyday life: body, house, neighbourhood, city, region, nation and globe”. In the same vein, Morley talks about home as a space of belonging at different geographical scales, mentioning the local, national and transnational communities as scales in relation to which people may claim their sense of being at home (2001: 425).

Apart from individual stories that reflect the ways in which people experience locally the “powerful reconfigurations” generated by dynamics associated to notions of modernity/modernisation and globalisation (Pffaf-Czarnecka 2011b: XII), this paper is also concerned with the stories that existences of objects tell. For example, Pauline Garvey shows how the so called hytte – the mountain or shore-side cabin – conveys a “tale about two modernities.” These cabins were part from the twentieth century modernising projects which started to promote the outdoor life as leisure alternative for the increasingly urbanised life that Norwegians were having. Garvey shows that returning to a life seen as imprinted by “traditional” elements is in itself a symptom of modern times which do not necessarily opposes the traditional order of things (2008). A dimension of objects that is relevant here is their intimacy with notions of historical, technological and social progress, material culture being regarded in the nineteenth century as “the modernist super-artefact and supreme signifier of universal progress and modernity” (Buchli 2002: 4).

### With and about wall carpets

The wall carpets dangled by Roma people in a north-eastern Romanian town are the main focus of the analysis and will be discussed as visual elements of the verbal narrative which assist people in telling experience-centred small stories. Accordingly, wall carpets will be discussed both as part of the material framework in which stories are constructed and enacted, and objects of experience centred stories.

The economic, technical and social biographies of these items (Kopytoff 1986: 68) depend roughly on two types of carpets. The new ones started to be intensively purchased and dangled in Roma houses in the first post-communism years and Turkey is believed to be their origin. Four squared, these wall carpets are large enough (about 180x120cm) to cover a wall centrally, on its superior side. The stories visualised by wall carpets display natural landscapes where the protagonists acquire fairy-like dimensions: The Serian Kidnapping, the peacocks at the royal court, Jesus Christ in his cowshed, Jesus Christ's birth, the ship bearing away from the shore and leaving behind a boat, lions, tigers and deer. The same jazzy colours on dark coloured backgrounds and the dimensions of the characters make all these carpets seem as if they were part of the same story.

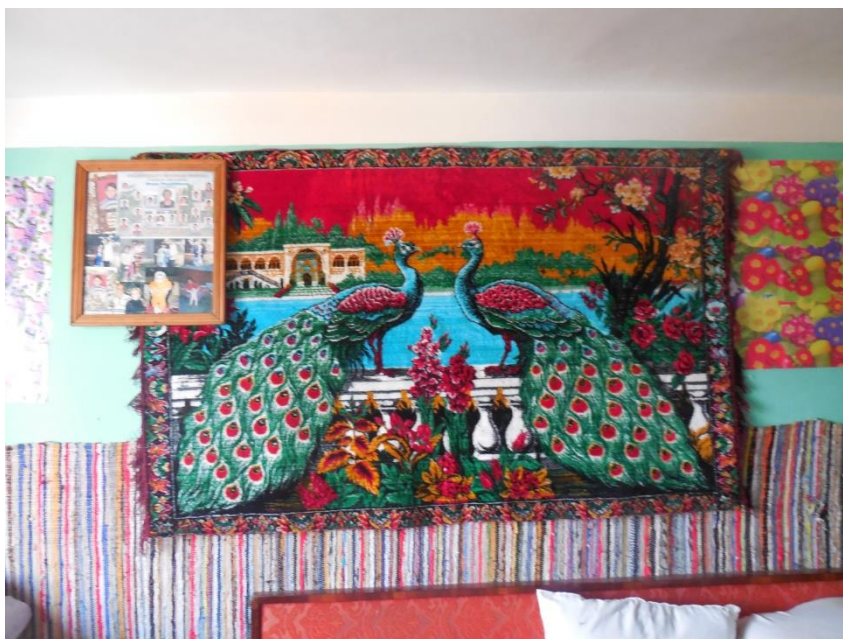


March, 2014

The old ones are the *țoale*<sup>6</sup> (darned rugs). *Țoalele* used to be made by Romanian women because they were those who had the weaver. Discussions about these items often stimulated small stories which inform about Roma women's relations with the non-

<sup>6</sup> The practice of darning used to be very important for Romanian women living in the countryside since that constituted their primary activity during winter time. Moreover, darning and owning a weaver were indicators of a well off family and of hardworking women.

Roma, providers of the “weaving service.” One of my interview partners remembers that her grandmother used to collect leftovers of webs of clothes from the garbage and to give them to Romanian women to darn *țoale*. The difference between the two types are not described by my research participants in terms of what they depict, but in relation to who produced them, to how they obtained them and to other stories about their lives in previous houses. It has to be mentioned that the carpets I refer to as the new ones did replace the *țoale*, but not completely, some of the houses displaying the cohabitation of the two. An important clarification is the fact that in this paper I discuss the industrialised wall carpets, associated by my research participants with the early post-communism times.



April, 2014

## Storytelling in and about everyday life

### *About “punching” the neighbour*

The first storytelling act which will be referred to belongs to Georgiana’s family. I met Georgiana during an activity I organised together with a local NGO in the town where I am carrying out my field research. As she is a teenager, I met her parents mainly to inform them about the workshop at which their daughter was going to take part. At the same time, they knew I was interested in the practice of hanging the carpets, so the premises for a discussion about these items were already there. In the first part of the two-hour discussion we had, the mother was the one talking about the practice of dangling carpets, her description being very much alike the depictions made by other

women I had talked with before. She bought the carpets when she moved in the house of her husband's family and replaced those which her mother in law used to have on the walls. It is not a particular situation that the biography of the wall carpets begins with this home-making act of hanging new carpets in a household in which newly arrived women don't feel they belong to.

The way in which the teller reconstructs the biography of wall carpets shows that it is always done in conjunction with the family's biography. "I bought them after I gave birth to Georgiana, she is 15 now, so... ya... about 10 years ago" is what the mother highlights when she seeks to approximate the first wall carpet purchase. Our teller also alludes to the special treatment required by carpets in order to keep warm the colours and to preserve their texture. As for the way in which she reasons this practice, the mother invokes the same reluctance in having bare walls, like other Roma women did in my previous discussions.

After 40 minutes of talk, Georgiana's father joins the discussion we were having in the only room the five-member family lives:

(1) G'F: The carpets... this is a *țigănie*... I don't know, I told you we are different, right? Ok, I don't have conditions; I don't have conditions to create a certain... that's why... I really struggle internally, in my heart, but I don't have the conditions. I wouldn't hang such things on the walls. But this is the situation; we accept it as it is, if you can get it... No, I would personally like something simple, if you can understand me... something simple. I don't really agree, the room is too crowded like that, there's no air, there's no space, one can see that... if you fill in the walls as well, you make it seem even smaller, you... Well... one cannot see the space, the room. That's the thing with these carpets. It's not that... that I don't agree with Jesus<sup>7</sup>...

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(2) A: Do people sell the wall carpets when they have financial shortages?

G'F: Carpets only you think? Here we go again... uneducated Gypsies, backward, who don't get the point. Why wouldn't I go and work for 50 lei only? Why to sell this carpet? Why shall I sell that TV for 20 lei<sup>8</sup>? Why not to go the whole day to work? Oh well... work... it's not good... that's the problem, it's easier to take this backpack and to... „take it, for 100 lei.” And what does [he/she] do with the money? What can [he/she] do with the money? Let me tell you what, they buy cigarettes, coffee, that's the first thing, I tell you! If there's something left, they buy something for the kids. But that's on the forefront, „give me something 'cause I don't have cigarettes,” they won't ask anything else, something like „[I need] to feed the kids.” No! „I don't have cigarettes, I don't have that... and I don't have coffee, I didn't drink coffee the whole day.” „Well... go to work, and then you'll have!” Or not?

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<sup>7</sup> The wall carpet the teller was referring to is a religious representation with the figure of Jesus Christ.

<sup>8</sup> The Romanian currency

(3) G'F: „I lived there, a sister had a house there, and I have two more sisters in Bucharest. And the oldest had a house there. And... I don't know... I had had a fight with my parents, we had Georgiana only at that time, she was a baby, we took our stuff and we went there, we stayed separated. We stayed [there] few months, we stayed... few months, but I thought I would go to jail. What I already told you... I couldn't resist there, I just couldn't! Ask my wife, once I took one [neighbour] and I punched him that he didn't know what was going on with him. [All that] because he jumped over the fence. They enter your house there, they're *huni*<sup>9</sup>, they don't know of shame, fear, maybe of fear... only if... but one needs to punch someone in order [for a change] to happen, otherwise... no. I lived there about 2-3 months, I don't know... but I couldn't stand it anymore, there's a big difference.” (September 2014)

In the context of the discussion I was having with Georgiana's mother, the father intervenes with this rhetoric against the wall carpets. He seems to perceive them as a Gypsy like practice, seen, thus, as backward and tasteless, according to his description. Subsequently, his account is a justification of the existence of wall carpets in their house which uses as an explanation the lack of resources for an improvement of the family's living conditions. In this sense, the first excerpt is illustrative for the way in which the teller refers to wall carpets as an ethnicized item, imbued with pejorative connotations, from which he constantly tries to distance himself and his family throughout the discussion. Before small stories and other reflections which enabled Georgiana's father to argue that he and his family do not subscribe to what he assumed the Gypsy way of living consisted of, he clearly states: “I told you we're different, right?” His approach reminds of Myerhoff's notion of “definitional ceremonies” as what we see here is an attempt to articulate aspects of their identities which allow the teller to detach himself and his family from the assigned ethnical belonging infused with negative connotations.

In terms of interactional dynamics, what is interesting is the switch of roles as the father took the mother's role of the teller as soon as he arrived home. This unchallenged shift informs about power hierarchies in the family, showing that the husband is the one authorized and acknowledged as the legitimate teller of the family's stories. While the mother referred to wall carpets as agents which configure the domestic space and the home-making practices, the father discussed them as signifiers of the content of an ethnic identity he does not want to be associated with. Thus, the father's narrative is the one which becomes dominant in the discussion at stake. The dynamic of this four-interlocutor conversation is illustrative for the way in which the narrative goes hand in hand with the act of performing. By taking control of the conversation and by hardly allowing anyone else to intervene in his speech, the father performs his familial authority by giving the legitimate version of the story about the wall carpets and about “the Roma way.” Similarly, the researcher was also treated like an audience, the teller trying to provide small stories which could meet the researcher's curiosity and need to comprehend the identity related statements. Constructions which Georgiana's father

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<sup>9</sup> Savage, barbaric, vandal.

addressed me constantly, such as “if you can understand me,” “Or not?” or “ask Georgiana’s mother” are articulations of the performative dimension of the narrative, indicating the verbal act of negotiating his family’s identity.

The second paragraph illustrates the wall carpet as an element of intrigue which triggers reflections and critiques of the Gypsy’s attitude towards goods. Laziness, lack of responsibility towards offspring, incapacity of setting priorities are some of the elements Georgiana’s father contemplates as being representative for what he calls “the Gypsies’ behaviour.” Within his rhetoric, the teller ironically gives voice to those he criticizes, not to talk for them, but rather to sustain the argument of the lazy, irresponsible and petty Roma.

The last interview excerpt consists of a story which Georgiana’s father tells in order to reinforce what he had stated at the beginning of the interview: “I told you we are different.” As an experience-centred story, the teller reconstructs an episode which allows him to strengthen the claim of discrepancy between him (and his family) and “the other Gypsies.” In the emerging structure of the discussion, this story seems to be the climax of Georgiana’s father’s talk. It clearly throws light on the teller as an agent who does more than negotiate his identity and riposte to external challenges, but it mostly pictures him as an agent who goes beyond the verbal act of telling who they are. The act of “punching” the man who trespassed the social norm by trespassing the physical fence is recounted as a reaction against the deviant behaviour of one of the Gypsy neighbours who, according to the teller, has no capacity to understand the meaning of social order.

In fact, the whole development of the argument which Georgiana’s father put forward indicates that a discursive act of identity making is based on the teller’s actions which he/she uses in order to convince the audience about the rhetoric at stake. This reminds of Bamberg’s suggestion that the role of narration in processes of negotiating identity should not be reduced to the verbal act (2008: 134) and isolated from their broader social and material context. Thus, the story he tells enables our protagonist to perform as an agent who does more than reflect on the challenges he meets in the process of identity (re)configuration, by taking self-evaluative action against the emerging challenges.

### **About saving the wall carpets from flooding**

The second act of storytelling discussed here emerged from an ethnographic episode that took place in August 2014, in the house inhabited by a family who moved there due to the floods that occurred in 2005. This house is one of the 14 dwellings offered by the local authorities to people who were victims of the natural disaster. These houses were built in an area evaluated by the Roma relocated there as being too disconnected from the residential area and economic centre of the town. As suggested by the research participant that I was going to visit, the distance was too long to walk to, therefore taking a taxi was very much advised. The taxi took me right in front of what was to be my field site for about two hours. The 14 houses looked as if they had been recently built; no fences or any other sort of delimitation between the houses, no exterior plastering, but



instead with “naked” walls made of concrete bricks. All the houses have the same appearance and structure, consisting of two rooms (entering from one into the other), a kitchen and a bathroom.

The taxi driver stopped in front of the only house which had one pink exterior wall and realised that the house was inhabited by the family of the one who teaches Romani language in town. The teacher welcomed me and invited me inside the house. Many grandchildren were jumping from one room to another and his wife was trying to put to sleep one of the youngest ones. She seemed to be a bit annoyed by my presence. However, she came in the room I was invited to sit, together with one of their daughters who had recently come back from Italy. They both took a sit on the bed waiting for me to start talking. In a little while, when I started to relate our conversation to the only wall carpet hung in the room, the daughter started to banter her mother enforcing that hanging wall carpets was something out of fashion and that valuable pictures should take their place. Although the mother agreed that the practice is outmoded, she insisted that she would keep them because that was her taste: “you do whatever you want at your place, I’ll keep them because I like them.” The daughter remembers that the mother bought that carpet with the Serai Kidnapping about 20 years ago, together with other two smaller wall carpets. The mother adds: “I don’t like having empty walls, that’s why I use them.”

This conversation between the two had a polemic character and provoked the mother to tell the story of the rescued carpets from their previous house which was destroyed by floods.

The teacher’s wife: It took everything... we couldn’t save anything. I got crazy, we spent that night on the railway although it was raining and raining, but I stayed there to see what was going to happen with the house, if it was going to fall or what... In the end it did and we couldn’t save anything. Apart from the carpets... I entered and took them, as they were floating in mud (...) The problem was that I had previously made a bank loan to renew it inside, we had parquet, fridge... but the water took everything, we couldn’t enjoy the renewal more than one year and a half because the water took us all. What I managed to save was my son’s TV and his computer, nothing more! (...) I was happy that they gave us this house here. The mayor came and gave us the keys two days before Christmas that year. We had stayed in the high school building where they hosted us all. We were there about three-four families, but with the time they all left, they rented something or went to their relatives, others went back and tried to rebuild what was left, but we couldn’t reconstruct anything. So we stayed there until they gave us this house; but we were the last ones staying where they hosted us. Because I didn’t want to go anywhere, I don’t like staying in nobody’s house, I was hoping for one room, nothing more, where I could come and stay. And thanks God we received this house. We couldn’t move in immediately because it was cold, two days before Christmas, and we could come here from the start, but then we did come.

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The teacher's daughter: Yes... these carpets are a kind of old-fashioned thing... Nowadays nobody likes them, now one wants something like valuable paintings or something alike (...) but we were not that kind of traditional Roma... you know... the only thing of traditions that our father insisted on us to keep, you know what was? Being virgins until getting married. He always imposed us saying that he doesn't have money to provide us any dowry, therefore we had to keep that as our and his most valuable treasure". (August 2014)

The teacher's daughter, together with her mother, was the main teller. The 30 years old woman works in Italy for almost 10 years, doing house-care work and looking after an old lady: "I go to Italy for about 10 years now, but I escape from there and come every 4-5 months, I can't resist more without the kids (...) Well, it might be nice there, but nowhere is it better than home, than your own land". The daughter's tone is charged with irony regarding the elements she refers to as traditional, from the act of hanging wall carpets to the cherishment of young women's virginity. Her attitude is similar to other people's depictions, which describe wall carpets as items which belong to a past and rural order of the domestic space, by definition considered to be traditionalist and lacking harmony with the present times.

The discussions between the two women indicate that wall carpets are subjected to elimination and replacement. In fact, the daughter is far from being the only one who invokes notions of backwardness or old-fashion when it comes to the practice of dangling carpets. A few of the women I had talked with before said they will soon renounce at them ("next time I'll lime the walls I won't dangle them anymore"). Others even denied having carpets on the walls although later I could identify them in their house. From a different angle, the narrative of the teacher's wife (which coincides with other women's arguments) suggests that the practice of hanging the walls is one of women's ways of resisting the modernizing trends regarding house arranging and home making. Moreover, the attachment to the practices related to wall carpets and the need to keep the links with past households and past ways of living encourage women to resist their own children's insistence on giving up dangling carpets due to the outmoded character of this practice.

This discussion which was dominated by the contradictory accounts of the two women, mother and daughter, mirrors two parallel narratives about the wall carpets. The verbal interaction between the two stimulated small stories which place the wall carpets at an imagined limit between what is understood as modern and traditional. Beyond the content of the small stories (such as the reconstruction of the flooding events or as the evocation of episodes when the mother bought the wall carpets), the dynamic of this discussion about wall carpets informs about generational rapports and ruptures triggered by the underlying cultural and socio-economic forces.

From previous discussions I have had with women who still fancy the wall carpets, it has emerged that they do not question the practice, but reason it by invoking (probably their mothers') practical and aesthetic arguments. Nevertheless, most of their children (both men and female) express their disinclination towards the use of wall

carpets. That they are outmoded or that they are not part of the actual (modern) interior decoration codes are the main aspects considered when the youngsters show an attitude of rejection towards the use of wall carpets. However, the mothers are not unacquainted with this perspective, most of them admitting that despite the new trends and their children's will, they will not give up the wall carpets. Going beyond women's agency and referring more to home's agency, it makes sense to recall Mary Douglas's remark about "the tyrannies of homes" (1993: 277) which control minds, bodies, and also narratives. Apparently, in order to escape those tyrannies, new generations tend to refuse reproducing certain domestic practices such as dangling the wall carpets.

## Discussion

### *Hangin wall carpets – stories about having/making a place in the world*

As buildings have the capacity for memory and anticipation (Douglas 1993: 268), so objects like the walls carpets have the aptitude to recall pasts and to reify continuities between the tellers' life stories. The ethnographic episodes invoked here as illustrative for the ways in which wall-carpets operate also as vehicles of memories, their biographies being linked with previously inhabited space and their cohabitants.

Taking a cue from Langellier who states that the "performative narrative of daily life" is also material (2008), this section discusses the implications of the experience-centred narratives triggered by wall carpets which reflect people's endeavours, enactments and claims to a physical and social place in the world. Thus, what small stories with and about wall carpets reflect is their propensity to materialize this interaction between body, places and motion, enabling people to affirm a sense of who they are, who they want to become and a sense of a place in the world.

Getting back to Casey's notion of "being in place", which means knowing and sensing the given place, it must be underlined that the sensuous experience is only possible due to the bodies' capacity to register sensuous presentations of place. These registrations, as Casey states, happen through the "crucial interaction between body, place and motion" which takes three configurations: staying in place, moving within a place and moving between places (1997: 23). While staying in place is related to position and moving the body within a place displays the limits of that place, moving between places corresponds to the movement within a region defined as "an area concatenated by peregrinations between the places it connects." (italics in original) (1997: 24). When staying in place, hanging wall carpets means creating a certain atmosphere within the domestic space which is not compatible with the "naked walls." All my research participants stress: "we don't like bare walls, it makes the house look as if it was empty," what I call the hollowness of the space. Moving within a place requires more dynamism of the bodies which makes possible the maintenance of the order and inscription of the morality of the domestic space. Coordinates: like on (hanging the carpets on the walls)-off (taking them off), up- down, inside- outside (the carpets are washed outside), left-right (when carpets are hung again on the wall), orientate the individuals' endeavours

entailed by place-(re)making processes, but they especially configure bodies' movement within the place and the consciousness of their being in place. Last but not the least, wall carpets tell different stories about moving between places. Many of my research participants have moved from a house to another. Either because they moved with their partners, because they could not stand intra-familial tensions, or because they had to leave their houses jeopardised by floods, women took wall carpets to the new houses, with which they were able to reproduce the atmosphere characteristic to their previous places.

Therefore, the trajectories of these items create continuities between places, but also webs of places of belonging, belonging as defined by people's effort to make a place in the world for themselves. As one of the women I talked with stated: "having a place for oneself (meaning for one's family), having a home, means living in place from where nobody can kick you out." What Casey argues in this sense is that "the living-moving body is essential for the process of emplacement" and explains the inextricably interlinked relation between place and body, which acknowledges that "lived bodies belong to places and help to constitute them" (1997: 24).

### ***The capacity of projection and anticipation of the wall carpets***

What precedes these place-making activities is the act of purchasing/transferring the wall carpets which demonstrate the capacity of projection held by these items. On the one hand, the act of purchasing the wall carpets became stories about: losing their houses, moving from one household to another, intergenerational conflicts, mother-daughter relations, inter-ethnic relations or simply about women's efforts of saving money in order to be able to buy rugs. On the other hand, confessions about the ways in which wall carpets were bought, taken from their mothers' houses or given by any other family member locate these women at a far point in time from the recent point of our discussion. In other words, wall carpets have the aptitude to evoke biographical pasts and unrepeatable moments from their houses' lifecycle. Being outmoded, as many of the women nostalgically acknowledge and many of the young people stress, wall carpets seem to be subjected to anachronism.

In what concerns their capacity to anticipate, the discussions I have had with my Roma women research participants reveal that wall carpets play a protective role. Children not being able to begrime the walls or the cold not penetrating through the thin, uncoated walls constitute the main rationales that women invoke when they explain the practice of hanging the carpets. I would say that more than anticipative capacity, wall carpets play a projective role. Dangling carpets enable women to control the atmosphere of the house and to protect the domestic space from cold and dirt. The projection women make on the wall carpets is that they will counter undesired sensorial effects. But what is interesting is that this projection comes from what was previously mentioned: regularity. Since hanging carpets is a practice learned from their mothers, nowadays women continue dangling them and perhaps reproducing the same reasoning line.

### ***Wall carpets - two parallel narratives about identity***

From a material culture perspective, Peter Berta analyses practices related to items highly valued by the Gabors (one of the Romani ethnic subgroups), namely: the silver beakers and tankards. His ethnographic study shows that these ethnicised goods and the practice of collecting them are part of their strategy of performing the ethnic identity. But in how far the display of carpets in the intimacy of the domestic space can be considered a question of performing ethnic identity? The question becomes even more pertinent taking into consideration that in the locality at stake, not many Roma people seek to be distinguished through their ethnic background, and their sense of solidarity and of commonality is not necessarily salient.

Although these walls-carpet used to be dangled on interior house walls of non-Roma, in the discourse of some of my research participants these items appear as ethnicised: “Well... the carpets... this is a Gypsy thing”. Igor Kopytoff describes the process of singularisation as being employed by groups, a process which “bears the stamp of collective approval, channels the individual drive for singularisation, and takes on the weight of cultural sacredness” (1986: 81). Kopytoff also utters that “behind the extraordinary vehement assertions of aesthetic values may stand conflicts of culture, class and ethnic identity, and the struggle over power of what one might label the ‘public institution of singularization’” (idem). Without going so far and talk about “institutions of singularization”, I will provide a comparison between the attitudes of two of my research participants. On the one hand, I. is a kind of informal leader of the Roma people in the town. He lives with his wife and the 4 children in the middle of the “Gypsy area”, in a three-room house, and has a brother who is a Romani teacher at the school most of the Roma children go. He performs quite intensely his Roma identity awareness and has relatively close contact with political representatives at local and county level. On the other hand, L. is a mother of 6 girls and lives in one of the houses built with support from the local authorities, where other people, who lost their houses due to floods, were placed. Her identity rhetoric is rather a contra-rhetoric since she seems to constantly distance herself (as well as her husband) from the Roma. “I am not a good example of what Gypsies are”, “I don’t like having anything to do with them”, “I never like wearing clothes from Gypsies, I just receive from Romanians”, “I forbid my children taking classes of Romani language (...) I don’t want their accent to be marked by this Gypsy way of speaking”. These are few of the remarks that exemplify the distancing from the Roma that she discursively performs. Unlike L., I. and his wife talk about the walls-carpet as being symbols of their ethnic identity and who singularise this item. They suggest that, if there was a style of the Roma house arrangement, walls-carpet would be then one of the features of this style. L. explains that she hangs carpets in practical terms, “because they impede the little girls to begrime the walls”. This difference between these two persons illustrates the importance of materiality in the process of imagining identities, singularizing and enforcing perceived markers of difference. An interesting unique case is of someone who says she does not hang carpets on the walls anymore, although she

does have few of them: “No, we don’t like [carpets] anymore. We prefer empty walls, perhaps a picture or a photo of us or of our children...”.

## Conclusions

The wall carpets dangled by Roma people in a north-eastern Romanian town were the subject matter of this paper which intended to make justice to the material framework in which, and about which, stories are articulated and enacted. Bearing in mind Georgakopoulou’s account on narratives both as discourses and as activities (2007), this paper explores the domestic sphere of everyday living by shedding light on home-making and place-making practices. But the small stories the inhabitants create around these activities constitute the core of this analysis, relying on wall carpets as visual elements of the verbal narrative which assist people in telling experience-centred small stories.

Making use of the conversations and small stories told by Georgiana’s parents and the Romani teacher’s wife and daughter, the paper discussed the implications that wall carpets have for the narratives developed by people about their “being in a place”. At the same time, the excerpts under analysis showed the aptitude of wall carpets to nurture stories and to assist people in telling stories about what they think they are and what they want to become. Moreover, wall carpets become objectified memories, materialisations of people’s claims to space, and reifications of their connections to former times and previous inhabited spaces. An indirect analysis of the biography of the wall carpets shows that their trajectories create continuities between places, but also webs of places of belonging, belonging as defined by people’s effort to make a place in the world for them.

Although stories are verbal acts par excellence, the material and visual dimensions of everyday life contribute greatly to the act of telling. Discussing wall carpets from this standpoint is perhaps the main contribution this paper comes with. Nevertheless, I suggest it is a misleading pathway to symbolically analyse the visual content of the wall carpets, although they display oriental-like landscapes and characters which could be simplistically related to Roma people’s history. Instead, I analyse the intrinsic qualities of the wall carpets as material objects which are part of the domestic order, having the aptitude to configure the hollowness of space and to create the atmosphere of their home. At the same time, their intrinsic qualities as materials mediate people’s (especially women’s) interactions with their built environment, enabling the constant process of place (re)making, which entails touching, smelling and sensing the texture of the carpets and of all the other objects that coexist within the rooms. Hence, wall carpets are stories told by their materiality, and not only by their mere visuality. None of drawings pictured by the carpets, neither *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, nor the animals or landscapes (except the religious representations), are explained or told to have any particular meaning for the inhabitants. “These were the ones I liked from the carpets they were selling” is the only way in which women justify the content of the images displayed on the walls. As previously entailed, covering the walls is rather a practice explained through its aptitude to narrow the hollowness of the space and to make it habitable. Thus, before

being in any way symbolic due to the images they display, the wall carpets are material and suppose sensorial experience.

Instead of other conclusions, I will end with another type of narrative in which the wall carpet plays the protagonist role. In August 2014, I was introduced to a Roma woman as someone interested in the practice of hanging wall carpets. Shortly after providing her with the basic details about my research, ironically smiling, the woman started to murmur the lyrics of well-known piece sang by the Roma singer Romica Puceanu<sup>10</sup>: “Am acasa pe perete/ O carpeta ca-n poveste/ Cu rapirea din Serai/ Numai tu hotule o ai!” (I have at home, on the wall/ A story-like carpet/ With the kidnapping from Serai/ As a bandit you are, only you have it!). But the stories behind these lyrics need a lot more analysis which needs to transgress stereotypical connotations and pejorative undertones.

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<sup>10</sup> Interpreter of urban lăutărească who lived between 1926 and 1996.

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**Andreea Racleş** is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture in Giessen and is affiliated to the Sociology department at Justus Liebig University. Her research project, with the working title “Material attachments and the sense of belonging among Romanian Ursari Roma”, lays at the intersection of material culture and ethnicity studies. She studied anthropology and sociology at the University of Bielefeld, the University of Copenhagen, The National School of Political and Administrative Studies (Bucharest) and the University of Bucharest. Her research interests gyrate around anthropology of home, material culture approaches, anthropology of smells, urban ethnography. Apart from the long term engagement in ethnographic research among Roma people, she worked for three years at the Centre for Research and Consultancy on Culture (Bucharest) and she still collaborates with the European Centre for Minority Issues (Flensburg).