

LAYERED ENCOUNTERS: PERFORMING MULTICULTURALISM AND THE URBAN PALIMPSEST AT THE ‘GATEWAY OF EUROPE’

Kristof Van Assche, Minnesota State Universities – St. Cloud State

Petruța Teampău, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj Napoca

Introduction

In this paper, we will explore the performance of multiculturalism in Sulina, a small town on the eastern edge of the Romanian Danube Delta. Similar to places such as Odessa (Richardson 2005, 2006) and Trieste (Magris 1989, Ballinger 2003), Sulina has a cosmopolitan heritage and a nostalgia for empire – a nostalgia for the glory days of hustle and bustle in the port, economic prosperity, political relevance, international networks, and cultural sophistication. Sulina was the product of the European Danube Committee (CED), an international organization long defunct. Yet images of the glorious CED period (late 19th century and early 20th century) pervade both local discourses about place and cultural identity and discourses emanating elsewhere that promotes tourism and the project of European integration (Teampău and Van Assche 2007). A feature of the current imagery of cosmopolitan glory days under the CED is the peaceful coexistence of various ethnic groups –Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Brits, Jews, Romanians and others. This coexistence is not reflected upon and is unproblematically assimilated to present-day “European” ideals of multiculturalism.

The local myth of cosmopolitanism long gone is, as usual, far removed from the historical realities of accommodations between various cultural groups (Ballinger 2003, Malcolmson 1998). What interests us more in this paper is the function of that local myth in everyday life in Sulina, its appropriation in tourist and political discourses, and, finally, the response and re-appropriation by the locals of a myth that is increasingly becoming an economic asset. During fieldwork conducted in 2003, 2006, 2007, and 2008, in Sulina, and in Tulcea, the regional capital, we studied discourses on Sulina, its histories, and its cultural complexity. We attempted to unveil different versions of the local imagery of cosmopolitanism and contrast them with observed performances of multiculturalism, the present-day construction and use of ethnic/cultural categories, and categories of cooperation, coexistence, assimilation.¹

Sulina’s modest size, its relatively modest stock of historical buildings,

infrastructure and public space assist us in deconstructing the glorious CED narrative given that these things do not say much about the kind of multiculturalism that prevailed. Interviews establish that few ethnic “neighborhoods” existed. In general, first and second streets were more urban, more expensive, and more Greek/Armenian/Jewish. However, there were exceptions to this general pattern. Older people who still acknowledge their Lipovan (Old Believer) roots ascribe their quick assimilation to their scattering throughout the city, including the more urban streets (where some houses were vacated by the other groups).

What emerged from our investigations was a highly complex picture. Local identity (“I am from Sulina”) was more relevant in self-identification than ethnic/cultural identity while the unifying myth of cosmopolitanism, reinvigorated under tourism and under the European Union, underlies this apparent homogeneity. Simultaneously, ethnic identity still exists, and different versions of the myth together with other legacies from the past produce patterns of social interaction and performances of multiculturalism, where, depending on the occasion fragments of a multitude of discourses are actualized and integrated. It is, we argue, in the variety of everyday encounters that one can study the functioning of the local discourses on self, other, and cosmopolis, and, simultaneously, map out the diversity in discourses. While we did not originally envisage the use of the metaphor of the palimpsest, it emerged as an appropriate tool to analyze the layered and fragmentary potentiality of identity discourse in Sulina (Van Assche and Teampau 2008).

Palimpsest Revisited

According to recent developments in the fields of urban anthropology, postmodern human geography, and cultural studies, places, as objects of study, are no longer considered innocent, stable settings, but should be analyzed as social and political products and contexts of social interactions, always embedded in relations of power. This perspective upholds a new social “reading” of urban space, emphasizing its unique

polymorphy, as well as the plurivocality of city-stories and, consequently, the richness of potential inquiry into the most “familiar” and closed spaces. Urban places, as dynamic contexts of social interaction and memory, are not only ideology-informed, but also have the power to coalesce and sustain a community. Recent discussions in urban studies and social sciences focus on the diversity of urban life, in viewing cities as “encounters, as spatial formations resulting from dense networks of interaction and as places of meeting with ‘the stranger’” and with his/her “difference” (Simonsen 2008: 145).

Sulina, our site of observation, is located at the mouth of the Danube, a region that has always been of political and economic interest. Sulina covers a small limb of land in-between the Danube and the Black Sea. It can be argued that the landscapes of most Romanian post-socialist cities are palimpsests with different layers of meaning, where stories and discourses collide to establish a new reading of the city that puts the communist past out of sight. New business networks, new places, new power relations, are being inscribed on pre-existing spaces, while abandoned industrial landscapes are being reinterpreted. In the case of Sulina, memory plays a vital role in (re) inscribing the landscape with fresh meanings, erasing or obliterating other (and others’) denotations, and in giving a sense to “our” city. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork (interviews with local people, authorities, decision makers, tourists, and extended participant observation) our paper describes the official strategies for marketing diversity and multiculturalism – an important local resource crucial for forging a local/global (European) identity. We also describe the gaps between, on the one hand, the official discourse on history and the urban palimpsest of the city, and, on the other hand, between the former and the day-to-day intercultural experience, as recalled by elderly people as part of their personal biographies (Teampau and Van Assche 2009).

“Palimpsest” thus acquires a double meaning in our analyses. Whereas the geographical literature of the 1990s (indebted to the investigations of Swiss geographer Claude Raffestin in the 1970s) usually sees the physical landscape as the palimpsest, the manuscript with older layers of text shimmering through in fragmentary fashion, we also want to consider the landscape of social encounters as a palimpsest in Sulina: a palimpsest of

multiculturalism. In geography, the metaphor of the landscape as palimpsest is traditionally embedded in the metaphor of landscape as text, a metaphor that has generated an impressive amount of research (Daniels 1988, Barnes and Duncan 1992). However, due to the limitations of the underlying semiotic model (interpretation as reading of text, discourse as text), the resulting palimpsest metaphor does not capture much of the complexity brought forth by the discursive construction of reality, as understood by Foucault (as exemplified by Foucault 1968).

If we understand reality as discursively constructed, then every observable aspect of reality, including human actions and interactions, can be interpreted as discursively articulated (Foucault 1968, Barnes and Duncan 1992, Bowers and Iwi 1992). This in turn implies that both communication and action can be the locus of observation for competing discourses, dissonant voices, for traces of older discourses shimmering through. In other words, the landscape of social interaction, consisting of communication and action, can be interpreted as a palimpsest, offering glimpses of the genealogy of concepts (like multiculturalism, ethnic categories) and glimpses of competing discourses, just like a physical landscape, or city space, shows us traces of older orders and competing orders. For the people in Sulina, urban space and the urban palimpsest is always available as a source of identity discourses. For them, and not just for the researcher, as is often assumed in geographical research, city space functions as a palimpsest. For us, as researchers, this function of urban space as palimpsest for the locals was an integral part of everyday multiculturalism we were interested in. In our reading and reconstruction of the palimpsest of social interaction, the situational interpretation of the spatial palimpsest by the locals offered us valuable clues. Urban space provides an indispensable substratum for the reproduction of the local myth of cosmopolitanism in all its variations.

Learning (from) the past of one’s city is part of the process of building an identity and of self-positioning in one’s environment, that “complex mental map or significance by which the city might be recognized as ‘home’” (Bridge and Watson 2002: 4). Admittedly, this is not to say that there is a perfect coherence and integration of the individual in the texture and life of the city. On the contrary, there is no single city, nor one unitary narrative of it. People and

groups “live” differently the space of the city, they imagine and construct urban places in diverse manners, and in this process, memory and nostalgia have a special role in inscribing the city with certain meanings while concealing others.

The Narrative City: Stories and the Urban Palimpsest

Stories people tell about places serve not only to position them in a desired location, but also, to delineate social boundaries, to assert who “belongs” and who doesn’t, to clarify *who we are* (Bird 2002). In other words, “narratives make places habitable and believable, [...] they organize the invisible meanings of the city” (Simonsen 2008: 146). If we look at the discursive makeup of landscape, we can notice that contesting meanings of urban belonging and divergent stories and memories are crucial for local identity and for articulating the future of the city. Since every city is a privileged space of diversity and heterogeneity, “collective memory” is just a rhetorical construction, while in fact “there is a plurality of social memories in every city – each particular to a different group and routed in the material and mental spaces it has experienced” (Bélanger 2002: 78).

Sulina was originally built following a grid pattern of six streets paralleling the flow of the Danube. Its architectural mix of nineteenth century buildings (most of Turkish and Greek design), interwar buildings, modern terraces and socialist blocks of flats testify to different historical epochs and functionalities. Passing from Street I to the other five parallel streets of the city entails a unique gradual translation from urban to rural, each with specific architecture and routines. However, in Sulina the urban palimpsest currently speaks the language of decay and transformation. Yet it also stands as a witness to the city’s better epochs and to subsequent political upheavals. The ruins in the urban scenery of Sulina (old damaged houses, sometimes just a façade still standing while on the inside vegetation has literally consumed the walls; abandoned shops still bearing “communist” inscriptions) speak different memories and evoke different stories and ghosts. They comprise a contradictory and heterogeneous urban landscape with restaurants full of lights and voices adjacent to a silent and dim empty house; hidden behind the former communist market deserted for years and suddenly transformed into the most fashionable

open air restaurant for tourists are the unpretentious local taverns mostly frequented by Lipoveni.

This first street, paralleling the Danube and full of sounds and lights in the warm summer evenings, overlooks the old shipyard and the Prospect fishermen neighborhood across the Danube, where life has a different rhythm, prices are lower and there are hardly any lights at night. This heterogeneous physical landscape is wrapped in multiple overlapping semiotic strata: stories of people born in Sulina, whose lives are intimately intricate with its history; stories of people who came “to the city” from the deep of the swamp, for whom the space of the urban is a collection of ill-fated places and magical spots, of supernatural interdictions and witchcraft; stories of people who try to find the stories of the city; and the mainstream narrative about “how this city used to be,” a narrative that feeds the local pride and substantiates the identity of the place.

Stories people tell about place and their memories about it are neither innocent nor without consequences. The city is cut through by ethnic/group differences that sometimes translate into spatial differences; imagining the city involves also visualizing and enforcing boundaries, whether practical or discursive, material or symbolic and always delineate networks of inclusion/exclusion. This “politics of belonging” as Daniel Trudeau calls it, pertains to “the discourses and practices that establish and maintain discursive and material boundaries that correspond to the imagined geographies of a polity and to the spaces that normatively embody the polity” (Trudeau 2006: 422).

However, the imaginary map of the city and its symbolic construction does not only comprise boundaries between its communities, but also bears witness to another type of encounters. In the case of Sulina, the constant influx of tourists (at least during the summer) has had an impact on re-inventing local identity and on re-enforcing local pride. As Fiona Allon argues, in such encounters, “the city is produced as a distinctive and marketable place with a particular myth of identity at the same time as it is being rewritten by global economic forces operating above and beyond its boundaries” (Allon 2004: 55).

Sulina: Diversity and Local Narratives

For most of its history, Sulina was a

pirates' nest and a humble rural settlement. However, Sulina's golden age began with the establishment here of the European Commission of Danube (CED) in 1856. CED was a supranational organization composed of representatives of France, England, Austria, Prussia, Russia, Sardinia, and Turkey (See Teampau and Van Assche 2007 for more historical background). In addition to its role in dredging the Danube and improving navigation, the Commission was actively involved in the life of the town in a kind of beneficial colonization which included sponsoring all churches and building confessional cemeteries, hospitals and schools. By 1939, CED had transformed Sulina into a modern city, a fashionable resort, and a flourishing *Porto Franco* of over 10,000 inhabitants. Proudly presented in the media as "the most cosmopolitan city in the country", until the Second World War Sulina was the main Romanian harbor on the Danube and home to consulates of all the important European countries.

Before World War II, the social and political landscape of Sulina changed dramatically. Most "Europeans" disappeared with the dissolution of CED in 1939, while Jews, Armenians, and most Greeks left shortly after World War II. During the communist period, the population was heavily "Romanianised" and efforts were made to erase all signs of "imperialist" prosperity in the urban landscape. While Sulina possessed a prosperous local industry during communism, today it is characterized by decay like of many of Romania's small cities. In addition, Sulina is only accessible by water; the local favorite catchphrase, "we are the first to see the light and the last to see justice" speaks both of the geographical and political marginality. Local authorities try to conceal this disadvantage by arguing that Sulina, the most Eastern city of the European Union, is not some long-forgotten place, but the very "gateway of Europe." This argument visibly follows from a nostalgic vision in which Sulina, and the whole region, played a vital role in European trade and communication. However, they seem to ignore the fact that the political and geo-strategical relevance of the lower Danube region has changed dramatically over the past century, and a more appropriate understanding of Sulina's role and place on the map of Europe would have to look more closely at the interplay of global-local identities and interactions, in which the European Union is just one actor (Van Assche and Teampau 2009).

According to the official website of Sulina's town hall, "The city of Sulina has been characterized as a multiethnic settlement from its earliest documents, a 'Europolis' in which inhabitants of different origins have lived together in a perfect harmony, a fact which has been passed down through centuries until today." Moreover, "the inhabitants of the city, whose geographical, cultural and especially financial isolation did not always favour them, have always had the feeling of belonging to the big melting pot named DOBROGEA (where we can meet Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Italians, Aromanians, Megleno-Romanians, Ukrainians, Lipoveni Russians, Gypsies etc.). This was an internationally recognized example of peaceful multiethnic coexistence." This self-presentation speaks, once again, about the complexity of local identification. While feeling alienated from a political system they do not really identify with ("the first to see the sun and the last to see justice") and having changed, for that matter, several political-administrative authorities in the past two centuries (Turk, Russian, European, and finally Romanian), since 1939, most people of Sulina would rather identify themselves either as "European" (to which their unique history entitles them), or "Sulinean" (again, as symbol of their peculiarity and marginality). However, they seem reluctant to identify as "part of the Delta", to which the urbanites refer as "the swamp" (and which is "out there"); this official presentation actually places Sulina as part of the historical region of Dobrogea, between the Delta, the Black Sea and the Danube, a region recognized as a multicultural area.

After the communist demise in 1989, local authorities began recuperating the previously forbidden pre-World War II history of the city and emphasized its multiculturalism and prosperity as part of the new "European" discourse. They presented a mythologized general narrative of urban history in which the city's residents participated optimistically in constructing a city of incredible affluence with "over 40,000 inhabitants" (compared to 5,000 today), "27 ethnicities", several confessions and ethnic schools. While the remaining buildings are a testament to this past and while the official discourse is attractive on tourist brochures and sometimes "sells" to uninformed visitors, there is clearly a gap between this official narrative and the local urban landscape. With a Romanian majority, a minority of Lipoveni (Russian Old Believers) and less than two percent Greeks left (not to mention only two Armenians), local

authorities still try to present Sulina as a city of diversity with a unique history and destiny as “the gateway of Europe.”

However, the historical Sulina of official discourse does not match up with the urban landscape of the present. While history visibly lingers in the decayed walls of old houses we are not presented with information about those buildings but rather an abstract narrative of a once prosperous city that does not need “proof” or material remains to hold true. A local museum in a former lighthouse is primarily focused on the local hero and writer Jean Bart and the activities of CED, but does not portray the multicultural life of the prewar city. Further, prewar multicultural life is reflected in neither the annual Festival of Minorities which attempts to showcase the ethnic diversity of the region (Greeks, Lipoveni, Turks, Tatars, Armenians etc.) and retains the overtone of propaganda, nor the widely advertised “maritime cemetery” with its separate sections for Christians, Jews, Muslims and Lipoveni Old Believers. All these mnemonic places seem to be isolated items in the complex web of local history. There are almost no narrative links between the existence of this unique cemetery and the peculiar urban life of multicultural Sulina that enabled it. One notable exception is the local legend of “the princess/dancer and her lover buried together” which is netted around two graves in the cemetery. While most nineteenth century tombstones with English, Italian, French names on them offer no explanation and no inquiry in the collective imaginary; this local legend is in fact largely based on the fictional plot of the “Europolis” novel by local writer Jean Bart.

Nonetheless, narrative interviews with elderly people can bring us a little closer to the specificities of everyday multicultural life in Sulina. Thus, some accounts indicate that while the city flourished, it was split symbolically, and even physically, between the spaces of the European employees of CED – usually temporary residents of western European origin – and local workers and merchants. What seemed to be a “big happy family” could have been a city in which symbolic and material boundaries delimited spaces of interethnic community life.

Baumann cautioned us about the peril of reification of cultures in discussions of multiculturalism, arguing “multicultural society is not a patchwork of five or ten cultural identities, but an elastic web of crosscutting and

always mutually situational identification” (*apud* Simonsen 2008: 152). Developing this idea, Simonsen advocates a “*practical orientalism*”, one that can “grasp how hegemonic ideas translate into everyday practices and infiltrate the ‘banal’ spaces of ordinary life, including everyday sociality and sensual experience” (Simonsen 2008: 153). A number of analyses of the multicultural city connect the narratives of difference to “banal” everyday experiences, to everyday embodied practices and particularly to meals and food. In Sulina, most biographical narratives are accounts of people growing up and playing together, learning each other’s language, participating in ethnic ceremonies and life course rituals (weddings, funerals), even attending the other’s church, mixed with anecdotes of daily interaction with so many “others”, all of which reconstruct a grassroots vision of intercultural city life.

“Well, the old ones are gone, now there are only Lipoveni and haholi”: Memory, Nostalgia and Community

In Sulina, people tend to recollect the past in the frame of two main intertwining narratives: that of prosperity and that of intercultural tolerance. In a forthcoming article (Teampau and Van Assche 2009) we investigate the mutual relationship between collective remembering and personal memories by looking at how individual – autobiographical – accounts are socially and politically framed and shaped, and how the unique and particular context of each personal account is negotiated – through narrative – to comply with the official version of collective memory. Sulina was a *Porto Franco* and a harbor where people came and went. There was indeed a unique blend of ethnicities, religious confessions and languages. Nevertheless, nostalgia tends to even out the rough edges, facilitate the “forgetting” of conflicts and present the past through rose-coloured spectacles.

The very ethnic groups that made Sulina the “most cosmopolitan city in the country” are no longer there. The functioning of CED with its many representatives and employees of different ethnicities who worked together and communicated on a daily basis likely had an important role in generating the “cosmopolitan” outlook of the city. However, the French, the British, the Dutch, Italians, Germans etc. are not “remembered” by contemporary residents (except for few cases where the informants’

family had personal connections to them), perhaps due to the boundaries mentioned above. Ethnic groups that remain in the collective memory are people who were part of the multicultural day-to-day life of the city and involved in its social networks and in the fabric of urban co-existence. Jews, Armenians, Turks, and Greeks were traditionally urban populations involved in commerce and trade (Van Assche and Teampau 2009). Their involvement in these professions had a significant influence on the built environment and forms of urban sociality in the city. Similar to what Amy Mills has noted in the case of Istanbul “the Greeks, Jews and Armenians took the character of the city with them when they departed” (Mills 2006: 371).

Most of the contemporary inhabitants of Sulina are either Romanians or Lipoveni who came to “to the city” from neighboring villages. According to the last census, of a total population of 5140, 82.5% are Romanians, 10.6% Lipoveni, 2.14% Ukrainians, 1.3% Greeks, and 0.2% Turks. Very few are old enough to actually remember Sulina before the war. Since many of them learn anew about Sulina’s glorious past, one would think that they would be less likely to long for a past they have no connection to (biographical and/or affective). Nonetheless, as Pine, Kaneff and Haukanes have made clear, conflicts over memory are not only about the historical truth, but also about identity claims and power (Pine, Kaneff and Haukanes 2004: 3-4). In this case, divergence over memory can hide an underlying, tacit divergence between groups, who develop loyalties and memories of different times. After all, many of the Lipoveni and Romanians used to work for the Greeks and Armenians – the main characters in the nostalgic narratives – not infrequently as domestic servants. Even when they participate in a common mnemonic account of Sulina’s “good times,” details of their own biography locate them in different social strata and places.

Writing about a certain melancholy of remembering the mahalle in Istanbul, Amy Mills argues that “the narrative of peace and tolerance embedded in the landscape of social memory obscures other, untold stories of the mahalle’s past: the traumatic events that pushed out the minority communities” (Mills 2006: 379). Very few people in Sulina actually remember that Greeks were forced to leave during the Second World War, even without papers, while the absence of Armenians from collective memory and the urban landscape has a peculiar

explanation: “they left and took their tombstones with them.” In Sulina, remembering “the old ones” and their absence in the contemporary life of the city is performed in a special frame: the narrative of the peculiar “ethnic” personality (as the quintessence of an entire community now gone). Although there are some exceptions such as Mr. Zachis who has detailed knowledge of the cosmopolitan life of the interwar city, most respondents remember interesting characters. One example of such a character is Mr. Ardaş, an Armenian who owned a soda and lemonade shop and who married a former prostitute from Bessarabia, a very beautiful woman. Another example is Zadik Ervant, the uncle of the last Armenian of Sulina who was homeless and was the origin of the local saying about vagrants: “he is like Zadik.” A third character is the Greek Camberis, the rich owner of an elegant hotel, still remembered as a man of his habits. A final individual is the Armenian dentist, formerly a housepainter, who was a short fat man who smoked a lot and walked around with his dentists’ instruments, a pipe, and a little bag of tobacco.

Trauma

Historical trauma can mark a community long after the most affected groups have departed (Antze and Lambek 1996). In the community left traumatized, the coping mechanisms can be complex and manifold. Sulina narratives speak of a strong desire for unity and harmony, for an absence of difference, in this case disguised as an unproblematic coexistence of difference. Reconstructions of the narratives of group identity and place history imply systematic forgetting. A Freudian therapeutic *anamnesis* in Sulina is all the more difficult because the present inhabitants, even if they assimilated into older narratives of place, are so radically different. The Halbwachsian “social frames,” conceptual spaces from which to remember, have vanished; the vantage points are gone.

In referring to the absent Armenians so prominent in prewar Sulina, residents often said, “they even took their graves with them” which implies ungratefulness or even guilt. What remains of the Armenians are characters like Mr. Ervant and Mr. Ardaş. They figure in the dominant narrative of the prosperous CED Sulina as sidekicks in a story that is driven by very generic characters and episodes: “the Europeans” came; they developed the town;

Sulina became prosperous; “everyone” lived together peacefully in close proximity without real tensions. In the stories of elderly residents, “The Europeans” are not specified and the other groups are reduced to cartoonish individual characters while stories’ development and harmony are systematically embellished.

After the Second World War, groups that had previously worked for the now-vanished urban elites (Greeks, Armenians, Jews) became the dominant groups in the city. Despite this, it is still possible to trace the embellishment of these narratives, some old tensions, and some counter-narratives. In longer interviews, Sulina’s elderly residents refer to significant hardships, distrust, and class inequality partly tied to ethnic distinctions. Autobiographical narratives that do not hide the negative aspects of pre-war life, dramatic family histories stretching back to the CED period, do clash frequently with the positive Sulina myth of prosperous, tolerant cosmopolitanism. The tensions between the rosy Sulina myth and more gritty stories are often not observed by the local storytellers who switch effortlessly from one register to another. Anecdotes about the tragedies of the war reveal the quick dissolution of the social fabric of the CED period, a fabric that had been deteriorating earlier. As in many other places, the war brought simmering tensions, envy, and distrust to the surface. The sheer quantity of stories about the riches of the urban elites, their fate, and the enduring suspicions among Sulinese regarding the appropriation of that old wealth betray, on the one hand, the power of the glorified CED-narrative, and on the other hand, fissures in that same narrative. Longer interviews reveal that few people had any objection to the departure of other ethnic groups. What happened to their assets was far more important. Few stories acknowledged the role of the networks and geopolitics of Western Europeans, Greeks, Armenians and Jews in the rise and functioning of Sulina.

As mentioned earlier, most of the present residents identify themselves as “from Sulina” or “Romanian” even though family histories reveal strong Lipovan or Ukrainian roots. The majority of the current residents moved to Sulina from villages in the Delta after the war or were resettled from other regions in Romania. They did adopt the story of the glorious prewar Sulina as part of their identity. We have noted only fragmentary and indirect resistance to the dominant narrative derived from

CED self-representations, which portray the CED as a benevolent ruler that brought civilization, European values and prosperity. Older counter-narratives to the CED self-presentations, possibly held by under-privileged groups or their descendants, can hardly be traced. A historical anthropology of multiculturalism in prewar Sulina would prove extremely hard because of lack of sources (the CED does have extensive archives but most of the archives of the other groups have disappeared together with the people) and the memories of the present do not allow for a reconstruction of the old positionalities or the complexity of the old encounters.

Historic Ruptures and the Legibility of the Palimpsest: Communism

As stated before, we have scrutinized contemporary multiculturalism as a palimpsest where old patterns of encounters and localized identity constructions shimmer through in present relations and identifications. In order to understand contemporary forms of multiculturalism and its spatial forms, it is important to attend to the traces of communist histories and ethnic policies. The transformations and permutations of CED-era narratives and counter-narratives might be extremely hard to trace (the re-appropriation of CED propaganda is about the only clear issue) but much more is known about the communist narratives. Consequently, the palimpsest of multiculturalism will more easily yield fragments of the communist narrative. The festival of minorities we observed from 2006-2008 still bears the mark of communist conceptions of ethnic identity – the notion of the peaceful coexistence of different groups that have entered a new era, leaving irrelevant differences and quarrels behind. Ethnicities were reified and reduced to costume, dance, food, and music to be displayed on certain occasions (festivals) and in certain places (folklore museums). Power differentials and differences in groups’ position within the Romanian communist state were systematically ignored. More complex patterns of identification, and by implication, of multiculturalism, were not acknowledged or analyzed. In accordance with these ideas, the inscription of identity in urban space was either ignored or actively opposed. Ethnic neighborhoods were ignored in scholarly analysis and policy-making or simply torn down.

In Sulina, the construction of communist apartment blocks deliberately

defaced the “imperialist” and “foreign” first and second streets, while simultaneously signaling the efforts of the regime to bring progress, order and rationality to this remote corner of the state. The policy of Romanization minimized the presence of “minorities” effectively and propagated a folklorized concept of minority culture. Local (Sulina) and regional (Tulcea) policy-makers continue to operate with very similar assumptions about culture, ethnicity, and multiculturalism. Events such as the festival are meant to prove that the Greeks and the Roma have a place and that their rights are protected. However, although communist discourse may have transformed social relations and urban space, it did not replace other types of encounters, identifications, and spatial inscriptions in postwar Sulina as if it were a blank slate. People like Mr. Zachis preserved and transmitted memories of cosmopolitan Sulina. Lipoveni, Ukrainians and Romanians from other regions brought their own memories to the city. Therefore, the particular ecological location and material character of Sulina produced patterns of interaction and identification that are far richer than the official communist discourse on identity and multiculturalism.

In part due to Sulina’s isolation, memories, and the urban palimpsest, people very quickly became “from Sulina.” A local identity was revived. Despite ongoing contact with the villages in the Delta, the Lipoveni and Ukrainians, came to identify themselves as coming from the city. The “Sulina” identity calmed lingering tensions and was used both externally (to distinguish oneself from “the villages” and from “Bucharest”) and internally (occasionally overriding other categorizations). With its latent references to a more cosmopolitan and multicultural past, “Sulina” served as a powerful synthetic image of successful multiculturalism. Such an image, which is assumed to be shared by all participants in a social encounter, frequently simplifies the positioning in everyday interactions. This mechanism is still very strong today.

At the same time, the synthetic image cannot replace all the complexity of identity construction in the presence of other identities. Old labels, old prejudices, and old expectations return in certain situations while new ones are produced. Although Lipoveni were “from Sulina” in a bar after a lot of drinking, people would still say “hey, Lipovan” or “how’s your

Russian wife?” At weddings, fissures in the “Sulina” identity come to the surface and accusation of witchcraft seem connected to perceived differences based on one’s former ethnic identity. Language is still a marker but not in a monolithic manner. Residents commonly refer to “the old Sulina where everyone spoke four or five languages,” which stresses unity in diversity, peaceful communication and cohabitation, and the flexibility of ethnic boundaries.

Now few people speak more than two languages and non-Romanian languages are largely confined to private spaces or one neighborhood, which is the liminal zone between city and swamp where Sulina fades into a narrow strip of higher land – the location of a Lipoveni neighborhood. The dominance of Romanian operates as a sign of unity and practices at a different level, a nationalist unity also reinforced under communism. However, other languages are still present and do present barriers. Minority languages are signs of otherness that cannot be completely reinterpreted under the banner of cosmopolitanism. Under the CED people probably did not speak four or five languages except for the multilingual CED-administration (to which their archives bear witness) and some of the more cosmopolitan merchants (who had at the very least a working knowledge of the languages of various customers). Yet many people did speak more languages than they do today while the fluidity and complexity of group boundaries was clearly greater.

Forces Shaping Contemporary Performances of Multiculturalism

We argue that in Sulina, the local performance of multiculturalism is shaped by communist policies and practices and the “Sulina” synthetic image – the local myth of cosmopolitanism. The catastrophic episodes of war and dismantling of CED allowed for the present functioning of the Sulina myth, since the systematic loss of connections with the CED past, its networks, and its people made it possible to alter the image of the CED era more freely. More recently, democratization, conversion to a market economy, tourism, and European integration have further transformed the performance of multiculturalism. These processes continue to influence how images of place, self, and other invoked and marketed.

The rupture caused by the disintegration of the CED and by World War II allowed for the

appropriation and transformation of the CED myth underground in postwar communist Sulina and later in the open after the end of socialism. After the end of communist rule, Romanians decided they wanted to be European again and join the European Union. The marginal city of Sulina represented an opportunity to construct and market a European past as a key to the European future. Europe pushed actively for institutional reform, for the cultivation of democratic values including multiculturalism, and the protection of the heritage of various communities. In Sulina, European grants and subsidies have been pursued by invoking a multicultural past and present that is based on a reified conception of cultural identity. The promotion of Sulina in the city and region consistently refers to the CED myth, and contemporary multiculturalism, which is assumed to be similar to earlier forms. The city is presented as an example of modern European multiculturalism.

One could say that the myth of CED Sulina feeds off the modern European mythologies (including their version of culture and multiculturalism) and vice versa. Both the localized myth of the past of Sulina and the myth of a European common destiny in diversity reinforce each other locally. Local and regional governments try to market the city in those terms. The local palimpsest of multiculturalism is therefore connected not only to images of a cosmopolitan past, but also images of a cosmopolitan future. CED and EU are conflated, and the local and temporal features of cosmopolitanism forgotten.

The local tourist industry has been growing in recent years, and particularly in 2008. However, tourists do not seem particularly interested in local cultural diversity or the architectural heritage of the CED. Rather, the remote location of the town and curiosity about its location in a place surrounded by sea, swamp and Danube seems to be what attracts tourists. They were only secondarily drawn by the town's special history and identity. The landscape attracts visitors more for the beach and the fishing opportunities than for its unique ecology. Cooperation among people in Sulina was traditionally fraught with challenges and suspicion was rampant. This continues to be the case. The more tourists come, the more they will reveal the limitations of the local tourist industry which is still deliberately marginal due to tax evasion, minimal investment, non-cooperation,

and which is marked by short-term thinking.

Marginality and Multiculturalism

The multicultural past and present that attracted some tourists also functioned as a sign of Sulina's marginality. We argue that the reading of the palimpsest of multiculturalism should be informed by the local history of marginality. An event like the festival of minorities does not reflect the everyday practices of multiculturalism in Sulina, but it does reflect a feature of local culture that stems from a history of marginality: an us-them distinction that opposes "all this" (all these minorities, us) to the rest of the world (seen as homogeneous and in largely negative terms). The festival thus functions as a sign of the unity of the community in a world that does not understand them and is not well understood itself.

We also argue that the success of other boundary-maintaining mechanisms such as the CED myth can be partly attributed to residents' perception of isolation, neglect, and opaque, poorly enforced rules emanating from the center. The collective perception of being in the margin is fertile ground for the production of new signs of difference from the outside world as well as local unity. A similar attitude can also be observed in the dealings of local government in Sulina with the regional (and national) governments. City hall prefers to develop plans and policies with minimal communication with the other levels of government because these other levels cannot be trusted and it is better to rely on oneself. Policies developed at other levels are rarely implemented in Sulina.

Older layers of the palimpsest of multiculturalism are fading quickly. The impact of recently intensified official rhetoric of unity and of diversity is high; discourse with locals and on locals is pervaded by standardized and repeatedly appropriated images of unity and diversity (provoking each other, provoking new images of unity and diversity) which makes it extremely difficult to observe other patterns of cultural encounters or multiculturalism. It is clear that although other more subtle and complex patterns that exist under the radar are not very old, they are nevertheless real.

Many local residents were ambivalent about the "revival" of the idea of a monolithic ethnicity, minority ethnic identity, as a result of the development of tourism, political and economic transition, and the influence of EU

policies and subsidies. Residents often wanted to understand our intentions better before addressing the “minority” theme more than superficially. Trust is scarce in Sulina and is necessary in order to discuss ethnic and cultural identity and multiculturalism in everyday life. In our view, the political history of ethnic categories and the term “minority” has had a major influence on how residents speak about multiculturalism in the present. Although being identified as a member of a distinctive group was of some interest and could bring rewards, many still felt it to be unsafe. When people do speak up, the official “Sulina” narrative offers safe ground on which to talk about multiculturalism.

Belonging can be expressed and experienced through various senses. When experienced, it can be articulated or not articulated. Sulina residents have many concerns; their ethnic belonging and interethnic encounters are not high on their agendas. This is partly the consequence of tragic histories, some of which are remembered and others of which are not. It is also the consequences of short-term thinking and short-term concerns in this harsh marginal environment, which means there is little place for excessive ethnic pride. It is also the result of a history of the mixing of identities through marriage, assimilation, and forgetting, however the “original” identities are conceived.

Conclusion: The Palimpsest of Multiculturalism and Hybridism of the Margin

We believe that the reasons discussed above are behind the current, often-observed confusion on cultural identity. In positive terms, the hybridism of the margin produced blurred boundaries in most everyday situations. The groups that were clearly identifiable under the CED have either gone or merged in complex patterns with “Romanian” emerging as the dominant identity. In prewar Sulina, interactions between those groups and the patterns of interactions could be studied as performances of multiculturalism. Today, both the discourses from above (tourism, policy, etc) and the truly hybrid/confused character of ethnic identity make the palimpsest of multiculturalism extremely hard to read. In the case of the Lipoveni, the largest group that was identified as non-Romanian, most young people are turning away from their religion, and no longer grow beards or speak Russian. Often they move to Tulcea, Bucharest, Italy or Spain. Spanish is

more popular in the Danube Delta (schools) than Russian nowadays and the keepers of Lipoveni traditions feel they are fighting a rising tide.

In the case of the Lipoveni, their long history of flight and self-styled marginality (being adherents of an ostracized faith in Russia) makes it difficult to write their history. Many of the villages in the Delta where they lived before coming to Sulina had short histories and an ephemeral existence. The variety of groups that filtered into the Delta area all had different histories and reasons to move. The result is a confused history and a social memory that is extremely simplified (“we came when Peter cut the beards”) and, for many Lipoveni themselves, not entirely convincing. Individuals often expressed their doubts after relating the story or told it with some hesitation.

In this marginal hybridism, any clear-cut representation of physical space and social space marketed as multicultural is bound to be remote from the experiences of most locals. At the same time, the new or re-emerging discourses can be easily manipulated because of this distance from actual practice. Moreover, those discourses might in time reshape the identities and the practices of people in Sulina. Revivals can be artificial at first and wholeheartedly felt and embraced later. Our analyses might evoke cynicism among readers expecting a narrative of stable groups working together in a stable community, threatened by alien bureaucratic and economic discourses. We would like to counter that the patterns of multiculturalism were hard to read, not always important for the people themselves, and highly disrupted despite tales of continuity. Yet we argue that “community” can be a remarkably resilient concept, that “Sulina” is remarkably strong as a unifying myth, and that community ties can be present even if they are unarticulated adaptations to difference, visible in everyday encounters and unreflected practices.

In the layered encounters we observed, reading the layers in the palimpsest of multiculturalism was difficult because of the hybridism of the margin and because of the ruptures and discontinuities in local history. The unifying myth of Sulina brought continuity and structure to the palimpsest. Our attempt to reconstruct the palimpsest of multiculturalism often had to take slight variations of the Sulina myth as starting point. By dissecting variations of the prevalent myth, conducting a contextual analysis of its use, and juxtaposing the CED

myth with other circulating narratives, we were able to map out part of the terrain. A continuously reinterpreted Sulina myth glosses over some difference and creates new differences in advocating a simplified ethnic identity marketable for tourism under the banner of the European future.

Sulinese interpretations of urban space in their readings of the urban palimpsest informed our interpretation of the palimpsest of multiculturalism. For most contemporary residents, the myth of Sulina is anchored in urban space only in a very general sense. "The harbor," "the Danube," "First Street," and the churches are markers of cosmopolitan Sulina. Other than that, few memories exist of the symbolic topography of CED-Sulina. City space – the urban palimpsest – is interpreted freely, following the fleeting categorizations of marginal hybridism. It is thanks to this loose coupling of the urban palimpsest and the performance of multiculturalism that the reinterpreted CED myth can shape new encounters so profoundly.

Endnotes

¹This research was part of a larger research project under the title 'Nature, culture, planning in the Danube Delta', a cooperation of Minnesota State Universities- St Cloud, Babes Bolyai University, Cluj- Napoca, Leuven University, and Wageningen University, investigating cultural and ecological complexity in the Danube Delta, and the potential for spatial planning to accommodate humans and nature.

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