

# **Researching migrants' diverse social relationships: from ethnic to cosmopolitan sociability?**

**Laura Moroşanu**

School of Law, Politics and Sociology

University of Sussex

Brighton BN1 9QE

[L.Morosanu@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:L.Morosanu@sussex.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

This paper critically examines 'everyday' cosmopolitanist approaches to migrants' social relationships to call for a more nuanced understanding of how ethnicity may inform cosmopolitan ties and aspirations. Research on migrants' everyday cosmopolitanism tends to either focus on individuals' engagement with ethnic difference, or highlight commonalities that unite people across ethnic boundaries, treating ethnicity as a coexisting form of identity or solidarity. This paper challenges this divide, proposing a framework for a more systematic examination of how ethnicity may facilitate, fragment or fade in cosmopolitan encounters or aspirations, starting from migrants' perspective. Using examples from empirical research with Romanians in London, and other studies of everyday cosmopolitanism, the analysis illustrates the multiple ways in which ethnicity may shape the development and management of cosmopolitan ties, beyond the celebration of ethnic difference or recognition of persisting ethnic identities that predominate in extant research. Furthermore, it problematises the notion of 'rooted' cosmopolitanism, exposing some of the difficulties to achieve this in practice. Whilst expanding our understanding of ethnicity within cosmopolitan sociability, the paper thus calls for further reflection on how different participants imagine and negotiate

cosmopolitan ventures, ethnic difference and boundaries, instead of assuming, as often done, that they can simply reconcile them

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## **Introduction**

The study of migrants' diverse social relationships and interactions has been increasingly informed by 'everyday' cosmopolitanism perspectives. Contrary to the philosophical debates around cosmopolitanism understood in normative terms, these deal with 'actual cosmopolitanism' (Delanty 2012a), and involve ordinary people's discourses and practices of openness towards different others, as the term 'everyday' (Datta 2009) or its variants (e.g. 'ordinary' cosmopolitanism, see Lamont and Aksartova 2002) suggest. Everyday cosmopolitanism perspectives usefully challenge common tendencies to research migrants through the lens of ethnic networks, identities, and communities (Glick Schiller et al. 2011), by highlighting cross-ethnic ties and attachments. Nevertheless, how ethnicity is approached in studying migrants' cosmopolitan pursuits requires further attention.

This paper critically examines two aspects of everyday cosmopolitanism perspectives, calling for a more systematic exploration of how ethnicity (and ethnic difference) matters or not in migrants' cosmopolitan ties and aspirations. Specifically, it seeks to move beyond the divide which tends to characterise the everyday cosmopolitanism literature, between studies that explore migrants' engagement with ethnic difference and thus prioritise ethnicity, and those that highlight common interests, values or experiences uniting people across ethnic and related divides (Glick Schiller et al. 2011). Second, it exposes some limitations of the common tendency to view cosmopolitanism as 'rooted', i.e. coexisting with, rather than displacing, ethnic forms of identity, shared by proponents of everyday cosmopolitanism, irrespective of whether they prioritise ethnicity or not in their analyses.

Drawing on examples from my research with Romanians in London and other studies of migrant cosmopolitanism, I show that ethnicity may take a variety of positive and negative roles in the development and experience of cosmopolitan ties, alongside similarities across ethnic boundaries, and indifference to ethnic difference. I propose an analytic framework that

enables a more nuanced view of migrants' cosmopolitan ventures and how they may be ethnicised or not, challenging the emphasis on either ethnic difference or non-ethnic commonalities, which broadly defines current approaches to everyday cosmopolitanism. Furthermore, I cast some doubt over the notion of 'rooted' cosmopolitanism, which sometimes proves difficult to sustain in practice.

### **From ethnic to cosmopolitan sociability?**

Cosmopolitanism has a long history and has been approached from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Migration researchers have focused particularly on 'lived cosmopolitanism' and everyday encounters with diversity, as opposed to the more abstract discussions around moral and political cosmopolitanism (see Rovisco and Nowicka 2011). The recent interest in cosmopolitanism in migration studies is partly related to the advance of globalisation (Kothari 2008), increased mobility across borders (Hannerz 2004; Skey 2013), the growing heterogeneity of contemporary migrants, and the conspicuous diversity of their societies of settlement (see also Vertovec and Cohen 2002; Wessendorf 2014).

Migrants' frequent encounters with diversity in everyday life question previous understandings of cosmopolitanism associated with global elites' lifestyles and identities (cf. Calhoun 2002). Whilst cosmopolitanism may be easier to accomplish by those in privileged positions, with sufficient resources to travel and engage with other cultures, it expands well beyond this social category (Hannerz 2004: 76). Cross-ethnic exchanges are common amongst non-elite, often vulnerable, migrants too, as analyses of migrant workers in the Gulf (Werbner 1999), Bangladeshi and Senegalese street traders in Barcelona (Kothari 2008) or Polish construction workers in London (Datta 2009) aptly demonstrate (see also Glick Schiller et al. 2011; Hannerz 2004). Cosmopolitanism has also been a recurrent feature of the experience of 'middling' migrants, often young, educated people, whose mobility is partly

motivated by cosmopolitan aspirations or leads to the development of cosmopolitan ties and identities, as illustrated by the experience of Tamil students in the UK (Jones 2013), Romanians in London (Moroşanu 2013), other EU graduates and professionals moving to various European cities (Favell 2008; Kennedy 2010) or Canadian consultants and youth travellers, whose journeys abroad could bring excitement and self-transformation, alongside professional gain (Amit 2015).

These and other studies of migrant everyday cosmopolitanism move away from the traditional focus on ethnic groups, identities, and solidarities in migration research, highlighting the remarkable diversity of social interactions, and the variety of skills, knowledge, and forms of belonging ordinary migrants develop. As Glick Schiller et al. (2006) argued, traditional migration research often reflects an ‘ethnic bias’, prioritising ethnicity as a lens to studying migrants, and taking ‘ethnic groups’ for granted as the obvious units and objects of analysis; this produces a limited picture of migrants’ lives, seemingly unfolding within ethnic boundaries, neglecting the ties and affiliations that cross them. In this context, exploring migrants’ cosmopolitan ties and ventures offers a fruitful strategy to challenge common assumptions about migrants as socialising primarily with coethnics and emphasising ethnic identities, and thus overcome the increasingly criticised ‘ethnic bias’ (eg Fox and Jones 2013; Wimmer 2013). Nevertheless, the extent to which this is fully achieved in studies of everyday cosmopolitanism is debatable, particularly when the focus of mixed interactions is the negotiation of ethnic or cultural difference (Glick Schiller et al. 2011).

The literature on everyday cosmopolitanism can be divided into two broad approaches to ethnicity and ethnic difference, which reflect different views of cosmopolitanism. In many, if not most accounts, cosmopolitanism is broadly seen to involve openness to ethnic (or cultural) difference (see Skey 2013: 238). Usually drawing on Hannerz’s (1990: 239) understanding of cosmopolitanism as ‘openness toward divergent cultural experiences’ and

‘willingness to engage with the Other’, such studies tend to focus on daily encounters with ethnic difference, celebrating opportunities for cross-cultural engagement for personal or professional gain. For example, Mee (2015) examines how favourable work conditions encourage ‘cultural receptivity’ amongst Indonesian migrant women, who acquire new language skills, technical competences, and business know-how, which broaden their horizons and challenge the meaning and relevance of ethnic (and other) divisions. Or as Werbner (1999) finds, working in diverse environments may expand one’s knowledge of other cultures and languages, and make one increasingly at ease in movement. Whilst such studies depict cosmopolitanism as an *outcome* of participating in mixed environments, others focus on migrants’ conscious *search* for cosmopolitan experiences. This is evident in Jones’s (2013) study of Tamil students in the UK, who yearned for cosmopolitan experiences, or Horst’s (2015) analysis of middle-class families in Silicon Valley, who sought to ‘cultivate’ cosmopolitanism in their children, exposing them to cross-cultural experiences via education, travelling, and philanthropic activities. Although tackling different themes, such studies of everyday cosmopolitanism share a preoccupation with, and celebration of, ethnic difference. In this view, cosmopolitan openness predominantly involves curiosity towards and engagement with different people and cultures, acquiring new skills and knowledge to navigate cross-ethnic encounters.

By contrast, another line of research into everyday cosmopolitanism foregrounds commonalities of experience and solidarities beyond or despite ethnic, national or related differences (Glick Schiller et al. 2011: 403; see also Lamont and Aksartova 2002). Glick Schiller and her colleagues (2011: 402) conceptualise ‘cosmopolitan sociability’ as ‘forms of competence and communication skills that are based on the human capacity to create social relations of inclusiveness and openness to the world’. Cautioning against reinstating an ‘ethnic lens’ by celebrating ethnic difference in everyday cosmopolitanism, the authors focus

instead on how individuals develop affiliations based on their shared humanity despite ethnic (or related) difference. Such cosmopolitan forms of sociability are, nevertheless, not seen as replacing but potentially coexisting with ethnic attachments. For example, analysing Armenian Americans' ties to their 'ancestral homeland', Darieva (2011) sees the youth's participation in landscape development projects in Armenia as reflecting cosmopolitan values and concerns with global (environmental) issues beyond mere ethnicised attachment. Similarly, Gruner-Domic highlights Latin American migrants' diverse interactions in Berlin, and the 'more universalistic ideas of openness and belonging' asserted through their lifestyle choices, alongside ethnic belonging (2011: 476-477).

Whilst both of these approaches to everyday cosmopolitanism usefully reveal different facets of relationships crossing ethnic boundaries, neither fully captures the variety of ways in which ethnicity and ethnic difference may shape cosmopolitan encounters or aspirations towards them. The former approach brings back ethnicity into focus, albeit in new and intriguing ways, focusing on inter- rather than intra-ethnic relationships and migrants' (typically positively-perceived) encounters with ethnic difference rather than similarity. In the latter, ethnicity is downplayed as a complementary form of identity that does not preclude shared interests, values, and concerns from uniting people of different backgrounds. Furthermore, irrespective of whether they highlight ethnicised or non-ethnicised dimensions of everyday cosmopolitanism, scholars tend to see cosmopolitanism as 'rooted'. Cosmopolitans were traditionally depicted as 'citizens of the world', who transcended 'particularistic modes of collective identification' (Glick Schiller et al. 2011: 401), a view which gained renewed salience with the advance of globalisation and cross-border mobility, seen to foster post-national identities (Erkmen 2015). The notion of 'rooted' cosmopolitanism challenges this understanding, depicting cosmopolitans, in Appiah's widely-cited words, as 'attached to a home of one's own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the

presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people' (1997: 618). This potential compatibility between openness to difference and 'more particular communal attachments and loyalties' encapsulated by rooted cosmopolitanism has become, as Amit observes (2015: 551), a recurrent theme in the diverse cosmopolitanism literature. Whilst highlighting broader forms of openness, Glick Schiller et al. (2011) too caution that cosmopolitan openness should not be seen in opposition with rootedness, understood as ethnic/national, religious or related ties or identities (see also Mee 2015). This, however, leaves unattended alternative ways in which ethnicity may inform everyday cosmopolitanism, narrowing its meaning to a separate form of identity that may coexist unproblematically with cosmopolitan projects and identities (Moroşanu 2013).

Extending a previous argument (Moroşanu 2013), this paper contributes to the literature on migrants' everyday cosmopolitanism in two significant ways. First, it seeks to overcome the unfruitful divide between studies that prioritise ethnicity and those that do not, calling for a more nuanced and systematic exploration of migrants' everyday cosmopolitanism and the ways in which ethnicity might inform it. I thus propose a start from migrants' perspectives and develop a framework to examine (rather than assume) how ethnicity matters (or not) (see Wimmer 2013) in specific cosmopolitan initiatives and relationships. Ethnicity may be invested with very different meanings by different participants in or aspirants to cosmopolitan encounters, shaping their lives and life-worlds in ways that are not captured by the celebration of ethnic difference, nor the rhetoric of enduring ethnic identities and solidarity, which predominate in current approaches to migrants' everyday cosmopolitanism. Second, by expanding the register of ways in which ethnicity might shape cosmopolitan ventures, I expose some limitations of the widespread view of rooted cosmopolitanism, which may not be as easily accomplished in practice as often assumed.



It needs noting that social encounters across ethnic or racial boundaries has been a long-standing concern in a separate but related body of research, centred on multicultural urban areas, from studies of inter-ethnic friendships, neighbourhood relations and identities to more recent ‘living multicultural’ and conviviality perspectives (e.g. Hewitt 1986; Back 1996; Neal et al. 2013; Wise and Velayutham 2014). The starting point of these studies is usually not migrants *per se* but the negotiation of cultural diversity and ‘mixing’ in urban environments and peer groups. Speaking against political and policy versions of multiculturalism and the associated ‘anxiety-crisis discourse’ around urban segregation or tension (Neal et al. 2013), ‘everyday’, ‘living’ multicultural or ‘conviviality’ approaches refocus attention on quotidian encounters, and how diverse populations ‘live together’ in shared spaces. Whilst sometimes invoking cosmopolitanism (e.g. Jones and Jackson 2014), these approaches are more broadly concerned with ‘unpanicked’ modes of coexistence, amicable (even if transitory) exchanges in mixed settings (Neal et al. 2013), and trans-local connections, than the conscious openness to and engagement with difference that cosmopolitanism often entails. Although different in aims, this literature offers valuable insight into how cross-ethnic sociability works and reconfigures residents’ identities (migrants or non-migrants), which may be centred in locality and combine multiple cultural elements and styles (e.g. Back 1996; Wise and Velayutham 2009). Another merit of these studies is that they account for a variety of behaviours, attitudes, and emotions emerging from the lived experience of diversity, acknowledging the coexistence of inclusion with racism, which Back (1996) has aptly termed the ‘metropolitan paradox’ (see also Hewitt 1986; Jones and Jackson 2014). Whilst sharing similarities with these studies, I focus specifically on migrants, and propose a framework that allows a more nuanced and systematic examination of the manifold ways in which ethnicity may inform (or not) migrants’ perceptions or experiences of cosmopolitanism.

### **Migrants' ethnic and non-ethnic lenses to cosmopolitan relationships**

In examining migrants' everyday cosmopolitanism, I draw on critical approaches to ethnicity that shift attention away from ethnic groups as 'given building blocks of society' (Wimmer 2013: 32) towards ethnicised discourses, practices, and boundaries. Instead of something that individuals or groups possess, ethnicity is understood here as a 'way of seeing, a way of talking, a way of acting' (Brubaker et al. 2006: 207), which contributes to the making or unmaking of ethnic boundaries (Wimmer 2013). Without taking its meaning and importance for granted, this approach focuses on how ethnicity 'works' in everyday experience, including how it is invoked, performed or obscured in daily interactions, how it informs individuals' narratives, decisions or preferences (Brubaker et al. 2006). It does not reduce ethnicity to a form of identity or a 'self-subsistent domain' that coexists with the cosmopolitan (Brubaker et al. 2006: 15; Moroşanu 2013; see also Skey 2013, for a similar approach to ethnicity in studying 'ethnic majority's engagements with 'Others') but helps capture a much wider range of ways in which ethnicity informs everyday cosmopolitanism, often missed in current research on migrants. Instead of simply celebrating or downplaying ethnicity, this approach helps uncover *how* ethnicity may aid but also fragment cosmopolitan openness, from different actors' perspective. This enables a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of everyday cosmopolitanism, which may reinforce or blur ethnic categories and boundaries (Lamont and Aksartova 2002; Wimmer 2013).

In his article 'Ethnicity without groups', Brubaker (2002) uses the language of ethnicity to frame the discussion of ethnic, racial, and national categories or phenomena, and develops a similar approach to them. Furthermore, Wimmer treats ethnicity as encompassing the subtypes of 'race' or nationhood, depending on the specific similarities perceived to define a collective (e.g. phenotypical) or the presence of state-related aspirations therein (for

a detailed discussion, see 2013: 7-10). Ethnicity is used here in a similarly ‘broad’ sense, and alternated with its cognates, where relevant, as also common in migration research.

Instead of abandoning the ‘ethnic lens’ (Glick Schiller et al. 2006) in researching migrants, I thus contend that we are better off focusing on how migrants themselves use ethnic or non-ethnic lenses in their cosmopolitan endeavours, and the outcomes of their interpretations and experiences. This involves paying attention to when and how different participants see cosmopolitan relations in ethnic terms, how they invoke ethnic categories or symbols, claim or assign ethnic identities but also how these are challenged in favour of alternative (non-ethnic) forms of social organisation or categorisation (Brubaker 2002: 175, 183; Wimmer 2013).

To avoid privileging either ethnic or non-ethnic aspects of cosmopolitan encounters, and capture ethnicity’s ‘empirical variation’ (Wimmer 2013) therein, I thus propose a more systematic examination of how ethnicity informs everyday cosmopolitanism<sup>1</sup>, along three broad types of relationship: (1) mutual reinforcement, whereby ethnicity works to facilitate and enrich cosmopolitan encounters; (2) tension, whereby ethnicity figures as a practical or imagined constraint to cosmopolitan ties; and (3) indifference, where ethnicity and ethnic difference are made irrelevant in accounts of cosmopolitan ties. Whilst certainly not exhaustive, this framework enables a more nuanced and balanced assessment of ethnicity’s multiple roles and manifestations in narratives of cosmopolitan socialisation, including those perceived to undermine cosmopolitanism, which have received less critical attention in migration research.

In the following sections, I illustrate these three types of relationship with examples from empirical studies on migrants’ everyday cosmopolitanism, including my research on Romanians in London. This was based on in-depth interviews with 40 migrants in high- and lower-skilled occupations conducted during 2008-2010. Romania’s 2007 accession to the

European Union made it possible for many of these mostly young, urban, and educated migrants to pursue work, study, and lifestyle opportunities in Britain, despite ongoing work restrictions (lifted in 2014) and an increasingly negative rhetoric about Romanian (and other East European) migrants in the UK (Moroşanu and Fox 2013: 441-442). My research examined the different social relations developed or maintained by migrants and how ethnicity informed them, providing valuable insight into how cross-ethnic affiliations are imagined or experienced, in relation to other types of ties (for further information on the study, see Moroşanu 2013). Alongside my participants' narratives, I draw on various studies of everyday cosmopolitanism to develop more general tools for examining the multiple ways in which cosmopolitan aims and practices may become ethnicised or not.

The analysis presented here, drawing mostly on interview data, focuses on how ethnicity matters in migrants' own experience or perception of cosmopolitan encounters. Whilst such accounts of cosmopolitan socialisation or aspirations offer insight into the manifold ways in which participants become 'active producers' (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008) of ethnicised or non-ethnicised versions of cosmopolitanism, they may not necessarily tell us about the 'reality' of cultural forms emerging from mixed interactions, which can combine influences from the many places and people encountered, and challenge ideas of bounded, homogenous ethnic groups and practices (cf. Back 1996). Alternative methodological tools, such as longitudinal and observational, attentive to the nuances and rhythms of everyday life and interactions, may paint a different picture of how various ethnic elements combine to constitute cosmopolitan practices. Nevertheless, participants' discourses and interpretations remain a pertinent site for examining the role of ethnicity in cosmopolitan encounters in their own right, with tangible consequences, for example, in terms of reproducing particular views of the social world, guiding individuals' choices or behaviour towards others.

### *Celebrating ethnic difference*

In exploring the presence or absence of ethnicity in everyday cosmopolitanism, I focus on migrants' more sustained social relationships, ranging from working relations to more intimate family and friendship bonds. Casual encounters in public spaces may offer important snapshots of cosmopolitan sociability but do not necessarily allow an appreciation of the nature and dynamics of cosmopolitanism within participants' wider network and interactions, including close relations.

Traditional migration research has trained us to expect manifestations of ethnicity in contexts such as rituals and ceremonies linked to key life-course events, migrants' visits to the home-country or mundane activities ranging from preparing food and socialising to recreating a familiar and supportive environment abroad. Yet the growing literature documenting migrants' mixed interactions provides solid evidence that ethnic difference is also integral to cosmopolitan sociability. Although cosmopolitanist perspectives in one sense challenge the analytical prioritisation of ethnicity by focusing on migrants' diverse networks and interactions, empirical studies suggest that ethnicity may nonetheless crucially shape how people manage and interpret these cosmopolitan encounters. In what follows, I discuss four key contexts where ethnicity facilitates and enriches cosmopolitan ties, although not without tension or in isolation from non-ethnic factors.

First, living or working in multi-ethnic environments creates important opportunities to develop cosmopolitan skills and knowledge, which may range from language and communication skills to professional and country-specific knowledge. For example, Kothari (2008) notes how street traders from different countries in Barcelona develop forms of 'camaraderie on the street', learning from each other about coping with insecurity and conducting their precarious business. Although shared migration circumstances are crucial in uniting these migrants, ethnicity often becomes prominent in their everyday interactions and

trading strategies, adapted to their clients' origin ('Spanish' or 'English') or learned from particular 'groups', such as the 'Senegalese experts [who] really know how to sell' (Kothari 2008: 508). This echoes accounts of business transactions conducted in 'super-diverse' urban areas highlighting how language skills, ethnic materials or national symbols may be used to establish good relationships across ethnic boundaries. For example, in Wessendorf's (2014) study of Hackney, a South Asian butcher, who had lived in Ghana, addressed his Ghanaian customers in their native language and displayed a Ghanaian flag next to his stall, whilst a Turkish shop owner learned various Polish words and stocked Polish products, in his efforts to adapt to his new clientele.

Such ethnicised competences or exchanges are not limited to precarious work environments (Kothari 2008; Werbner 1999; Datta 2009). Professional migrants' narratives also offer ample evidence of the highly ethnicised (or nationalised) way in which workplace interactions are perceived. Research on French professionals in London highlights frequent comparisons between the 'French' and 'English' (or 'Anglo-Saxon') way of conduct and doing business, and how these otherwise versed cosmopolitans managed the challenges of working in London, combining 'French' traits perceived as advantageous with adaptations to the 'local' culture (Mulholland and Ryan 2014; see also Favell 2008). Interactions in multi-ethnic work environments are thus often seen through an ethnic lens by migrants themselves, who offer ethnicised interpretations of difference, and the competences they develop and employ in navigating it.

Second, alongside work interactions, cultural events, such as ethnic festivals and celebrations organised by local authorities, schools or other institutions, create important opportunities for 'mixing' through the explicit celebration of ethnic difference. Studying middle-class families in Silicon Valley, Horst (2015) analyses a festival organised by a multi-ethnic school, which emphasised its diversity by displaying elements that reflected students'

different backgrounds, including traditional food, flags or clothing. Whilst the attendees discussed a variety of topics, from school- and work-related matters to hobbies, visits to one's home-country or other places abroad, they specifically praised the school's diversity and cosmopolitan character. Ethnic or national difference was by no means omnipresent but its importance in organising and negotiating cosmopolitan encounters was undisputable.

Similar events define the experience of international students, whose socialisation is often facilitated via ethnically-themed parties organised by institutional representatives or at their own initiative (Moroşanu 2013; Jones 2013). For example, the Romanian students I interviewed in London often recalled contributing to events for international students, by showcasing elements of Romanian culture, from traditional food and clothing to architectural or landscape highlights. Whilst these events are not only narrated through an ethnic lens, ethnicity figured as an important pretext and ingredient of socialisation (Moroşanu 2013).

Such events provide opportunities for migrants to perform as well as consume ethnicity (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). If the accumulation of ethnic symbols and ethnicised performance may engender moments of ethnic solidarity in intra-ethnic settings (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008: 545-546), in inter-ethnic interactions they serve to facilitate cosmopolitan learning and sociability. As I argued elsewhere (Moroşanu 2013), although such ethnically-marked events do not necessarily signal persisting ethnic identities, they do refocus attention on ethnic difference, often stereotypically presented, and thus reinforce, instead of dismantle, the logic of distinct 'ethnic groups' and boundaries.

Third, whilst ethnicity serves as a principle of organisation in the events described above, everyday socialisation in informal settings may provide additional occasions for invoking ethnicity in ways that illustrate openness to engaging with the 'Other' (Hannerz 1990). Răzvan, a 33-year-old Romanian construction worker I interviewed in London, often invited over English and New Zealander work colleagues, and took pride in serving them

Romanian specialties of which they ‘couldn’t get enough’ (Moroşanu 2011). Similar ‘cultural exchanges’ emerged in many participants’ accounts of socialising with friends from different countries, who relished opportunities to share information about one’s place of origin, language, music, cuisine, and other markers of ‘difference’ (Moroşanu 2013; Jones 2013). Some expressed enthusiasm about the effervescent ‘nature’ of Latin Americans they befriended or preferred the ‘French’ or ‘Italian’ culture of dining out.

Close relationships constitute a fourth key site for routine exchanges of and learning about ethnic difference. An eloquent example is provided by Nicoleta, a Romanian lawyer in London, who had initially migrated to Canada, and valued living abroad as a way of ‘gaining, seeing much more, having a different kind of exposure and... multicultural experience’. Although Nicoleta did not feel ‘culturally tied’ to Romania, express a Romanian identity or have the ‘reflex of... searching for [Romanians]’ (Moroşanu 2011), her ‘cultural heritage’ occupied an important place in her ‘very personal relationships’, for example, with her non-Romanian partner, who often became her ethnic ‘confidant’: ‘I will always tell him how we say this in Romanian and I’ll try to translate or explain, or this saying... my references will still be to this’. These were, for Nicoleta, ‘things you have because you learned them and were born with them’, and importantly, if not permanently, shaped her close relationships.

Such examples illustrate the multiple ways in which ethnicity may facilitate cosmopolitan sociability, from the strategic deployment of language skills and cultural knowledge to get by and conduct business transactions in multi-diverse workplaces to the performance, consumption or sharing of ethnic or national elements at themed events or in more informal interactions involving international friendship networks and partnerships. As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008: 552) argue, what in some contexts counts as evidence of ethnic identity may be invoked or consumed in others in ways that signal cosmopolitanism. Whilst such ‘cultural exchanges’, as one of my interviewees called them, are positively perceived by



participants, reflecting openness towards diversity, we need to remain alert to the widespread reliance on stereotypical representations, which inadvertently project a view of the world ‘partition[ed]... into discrete ethnocultural units’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008: 540), possibly at odds with ordinary people’s mixed cultural practices. Furthermore, as I show next, celebratory accounts of difference may alternate with more critical assessments.

### *Ethnicity as a barrier to cosmopolitan sociability*

In an effort to acknowledge the continued relevance of ethnic and related divisions, scholars of everyday cosmopolitanism often emphasise its ‘rootedness’, and the potential coexistence of ethnic and cosmopolitan sensibilities (Glick Schiller et al. 2011; Amit 2015). Nevertheless, for some migrants, becoming cosmopolitan may appear incompatible with maintaining ethnic ties and identities. The same contexts and events that enable ethnic exchanges and celebration for some may be differently perceived by others, challenging the treatment of ethnicity as a distinct form of identity and solidarity that can be easily combined with its cosmopolitan counterparts.

This is vividly illustrated by various migrants’ aspirations for cosmopolitan sociability, which prompt avoidance of coethnics, following ethnic traditions or claiming ethnic belonging, and deriding those who take that route (Moroşanu 2013; Jones 2013; see also Gruner-Domic 2011). A telling example is that of Ioana, a Romanian consultant I interviewed in London, who displayed ‘cosmopolitan’ curiosity and enthusiasm about London’s ‘diverse, international environment, [...] where even after almost ten years [you] discovered new things, new customs, new places, new events, interesting people’. Yet, for Ioana, becoming part of London’s cosmopolitan world did not easily go hand in hand with maintaining Romanian connections and a Romanian identity. Conversely, she was quite adamant that she was ‘simply not interested in knowing Romanians’ abroad, and sought to

‘get rid of Romania, all things Romanian, and avoid continuing the same traditions and cultural bullshit [she] was running away from’ (Moroşanu 2011).

Ioana’s case is perhaps extreme but not unique. Various other Romanians in London claimed they avoided fellow Romanians, looking instead for new experiences and relationships, which partly stimulated their migration decision (Moroşanu 2013). This perceived incompatibility is echoed by one of Gruner-Domic’s Latin Americans working in Berlin’s arts sector, who thought it was ‘not sensible to stay with your ethnic community. “For that you could stay at home”’ (2011: 477). In the London context, Polish migrants expressed similar criticism towards those who ‘stay in a ghetto’ and ‘don’t have any contacts with non-Poles’ (Ryan 2011: 714). Some of the Tamil students in the UK interviewed by Jones (2013: 424-425) aspiring to become cosmopolitan deliberately sought non-coethnic friends and spoke disparagingly about those who socialised in mono-ethnic circles. For many other migrants, living abroad was a ‘liberating’ experience, allowing them to ‘break off’ from the norms of home societies and develop openness towards other cultures, instead of retreating amongst their ‘own’ (Favell 2008; Kennedy 2010). These examples reinforce the salience of ethnicity (or nationhood), yet as a perceived impediment to cosmopolitan sociability.

Furthermore, ethnic ties may be not just an imagined but also practical constraint in cross-ethnic interactions. Răzvan, the Romanian construction worker introduced earlier, provides a powerful illustration of how ethnic difference may suddenly fragment cosmopolitan sociability in particular social configurations, informing decisions about organising future events. Răzvan generally took pride in his good working relations with colleagues from different countries, and did not hesitate to invite them to his home, along with Romanian friends and acquaintances. His initial openness, however, turned into more careful considerations about ‘mixing’, following his daughter’s birthday party, where the

majority of invitees were Romanian, and Romanian became the dominant language of conversation, implicitly marginalising non-Romanian speakers such as their landlady, who decided to leave:

‘Because most of us were Romanian and speak Romanian... of course, you do speak English too, out of respect but you can’t cope. I was busy with the barbecue, [my wife] with preparing other things, so we couldn’t translate [the conversation] and she felt uncomfortable and eventually decided to leave, asking to take her food to go’.

This example shows how ethnic boundaries may be spontaneously redrawn in mixed interaction. Whilst the hosts displayed cosmopolitan openness, language skills and the ethnic composition of the event worked to fragment it, echoing Amit and Barber’s point that one’s cosmopolitan aspirations depend on ‘*other* willing partners to join [...] in working out a set of measures for enacting that engagement’ (2015: 546). Răzvan’s initial openness subsequently turned into ethnicised choices about whom could be ‘mixed’ or not when organising a social event. Cross-ethnic interactions worked well when the invitees were non-Romanian. At Romanian-dominated reunions, however, Răzvan later avoided inviting non-Romanians, to prevent experiences of marginalisation. Unsuccessful experiences of mixing thus had wider implications, showing how occasions for cosmopolitan sociability may revive perceptions of bounded ethnic groups and incompatibility between intra- and inter-ethnic ties.

Apart from ethnic ties and language, which can become a practical or imagined constraint to cosmopolitan sociability, enthusiasm and curiosity about (others’) ethnic difference themselves may ironically cause negative feelings amongst those at the receiving end. Whilst some migrants enjoy performing ethnicity and sharing ethnic or national materials in mixed interactions, as seen in Răzvan’s or Nicoleta’s case, others respond to such cosmopolitan curiosity directed towards themselves with bewilderment or fatigue. Some migrants I interviewed struggled to recommend ‘Romanian’ food or music when prompted by

their international friends, whereas Ioana, the consultant introduced earlier, expressed fatigue at her Portuguese partner's insistence to visit traditional Romanian restaurants and sample Romanian food when they travelled to Romania. Ioana's own cosmopolitan aspirations and eagerness to experiment with different cultures did not necessarily mean she was prepared to reciprocate, and facilitate others' cosmopolitan pursuits oriented towards her own heritage. Becoming cosmopolitan meant for her pursuing new experiences and relationships, rather than doing things 'Romanian'. Others' curiosity about Romania inadvertently imposed on her a Romanian identity, which conflicted with her 'cosmopolitan self-fashioning' project (Plage et al. 2016: 15). If cosmopolitanism is sometimes understood not simply in terms of 'openness to new experiences' but also the transformation emerging thereof (Plage et al. 2016: 12), Ioana's case ironically shows how some's openness towards difference and aspirations for self-transformation may unintentionally preclude similar cosmopolitan projects amongst those at the receiving end of cross-ethnic encounters.

Exploring how cosmopolitanism works in practice in more sustained social relationships can thus highlight ethnicity in less celebratory yet still powerful ways. Cosmopolitan aspirations and encounters may lead to avoidance of ethnic ties and identities, redraw ethnic divisions, or ethnicise identities in unforeseen and sometimes frustrating ways for those at the receiving end. Ethnic difference is thus not only an important facilitator of cosmopolitan sociability but also a perceived source of tension, fragmenting mixed interactions and revealing the potentially conflictive nature of 'rooted' cosmopolitanism in practice. A nuanced view of everyday cosmopolitanism needs to remain sensitive to the struggles some face in negotiating diverse affiliations, and the importance of ethnicity therein, which may or may not be recognised as such by participants themselves.

### *The indifference to difference*

The previous sections exemplified the varied roles ethnicity may play in cosmopolitan encounters, being invoked, consumed, performed or imposed on others in positively or negatively-perceived ways. Yet paying exclusive attention to moments of ethnicised celebration or tension assumes that ethnic difference is always central in migrants' diverse interactions (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016: 18), ignoring instances when migrants exhibit indifference to ethnic and related divisions. Whereas 'forgetting' ethnicity may pave the way to cosmopolitan sociability around non-ethnic commonalities, it is the *critical* indifference to ethnic difference that reveals a new face of cosmopolitan openness, which questions its 'rootedness', yet from a different perspective than discussed in the previous section.

Research conducted in multi-ethnic urban settings cautions against taking the importance of ethnicity for granted in everyday life. As Brubaker and his colleagues (2006) found in their study of 'everyday ethnicity' in a Hungarian-Romanian Transylvanian town, people's concerns about getting by or getting ahead are commonly framed in economic, educational or generational terms. Residents' perceptions of their local area may similarly be non-ethnically-marked. Focusing on Swiss immigrant neighbourhoods, Wimmer (2013) observed that a preoccupation with maintaining 'order' informed distinctions between new and established residents, overriding ethnic boundaries and categorisation. More generally, although ethnicity may be a conspicuous feature of life, inhabitants of places where 'everyone comes from elsewhere' may be so accustomed to diversity that they rarely pay attention to it, as Wessendorf (2014) found in Hackney, where socio-economic difference proved more important.

Wessendorf's study is part of the growing research on urban 'super-diversity', which seeks to capture the multitude of 'variables surrounding migration patterns, and – significantly – their interlinkages' (Meissner and Vertovec 2015: 542). Instead of prioritising

ethnic difference, this concept introduced by Vertovec (2007) underscores the complexity of diversity produced by migration, and the varied non-ethnic factors (e.g. legal status, education) that simultaneously shape migrants' social interactions. Alongside the previous examples, super-diversity studies remind us that ethnicity may 'disappear' in inter-ethnic encounters. However, this potential indifference to ethnic difference in 'super-diverse' contexts does not necessarily mean they are devoid of tension or thriving sites of cosmopolitanism (Wessendorf 2014: 73; Jones and Jackson 2014). Finding common ground across ethnic boundaries and/or critical reflection on ethnic identities and divisions more aptly reflect cosmopolitan sociability.

Contrary to the literature that celebrates ethnic difference and the development of inter-cultural competences, an alternative approach to everyday cosmopolitanism thus focuses on 'domains of commonality' (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016: 18) that unite individuals beyond ethnic and related divides (see Glick Schiller et al. 2011). Various studies document forms of solidarity emerging from shared socio-economic status, occupation, lifestyle or interests, which override ethnic or national differences. Shifting attention away from the 'primacy of difference' in the analysis of mixed spaces and relationships, Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2016) illustrate how shared precariousness in the workplace brings together people of different backgrounds. Various Romanians I interviewed similarly noted how economic hardship or vulnerability made them empathise with similarly-placed migrants (Moroşanu 2013). Whilst their white Europeanness enabled many to rhetorically deny discrimination and claim a privileged racial status in Britain (Fox et al. 2015), it did not necessarily bring them socially close to the British. Alongside the negative public discourse about Romanians (and other East Europeans), work restrictions and low-paid employment well below migrants' qualifications contributed to a more ambiguous position, and the development of affective relationships of mutual understanding with other migrants, rather

than natives, particularly in the context of perceived class-based similarities (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2016: 25).

Furthermore, cross-ethnic friendships could be founded around similar interests, lifestyles or life experiences (on Tamil students in the UK, see Jones 2013: 425). For example, Ada, an undergraduate I interviewed in London, did not befriend her work colleagues, who were older and had family commitments, but connected with other international students, based on their shared interests and experience of living in London. Commenting on adapting to a new country, Lucian, a postgraduate with considerable migration experience, described himself as a ‘veteran’ in such things, eagerly supporting other international students he encountered in the residence halls (Moroşanu 2011). Being a non-native or migrant more generally played a key role in uniting young migrants from different countries in London and other cities (Ryan 2011; Moroşanu 2013; Favell 2008), often against the backdrop of shared educational or professional background.

Whilst ethnicity silently loses relevance in such examples of cosmopolitan sociability amongst those who share similar experiences or concerns, another form of indifference to ethnic difference emerges in the *overt* contestation of its meaningfulness, which constitutes, for some, a fundamental aspect of cosmopolitanism (see Radice 2015: 596). Engagement with different ‘Others’ may lead some to problematise ascribed forms of identity and ensuing social divisions. Various Romanians I interviewed in London emphasised how living in a cosmopolitan city enabled greater openness and curiosity towards others, as well as critical reflection on one’s taken-for-granted beliefs. For one student, meeting people from parts of the world little-known to her produced embarrassment but also curiosity to learn more, and awareness that her ‘own perceptions were not always the most appropriate ones’. Similarly, the mobile Europeans in Manchester studied by Kennedy (2010: 477-479) saw living abroad as a transformative experience, facilitating not only the development of identities detached

from ‘any single national/ethnic frame’ but also critical reflection on different cultures and lifestyles, including their own (see also Delanty 2012b). Exposure to different people and cultures made them aware that ‘everything is very relative’, critical towards the ‘parochialism at home’ and prejudiced attitudes, and appreciative of alternative yet ‘equally valid’ lifestyles (Kennedy 2010: 479). In a neighbourhood in Malmö, Povrzanović Frykman (2016) further documents occasions when residents bond around shared values and concerns, openly countering the emphasis on ethnic background and diversity prevailing in the media and local authority discourses. Their cosmopolitan initiatives invoked human rights, environmental and social justice concerns and ‘solidarities beyond national borders’, explicitly declaring one’s place of birth irrelevant (Povrzanović Frykman 2016: 45).

Such moments of critical reflection may be fleeting, bound to specific circumstances and ‘Others’, and do not negate the salience of ethnic identities in other contexts (Skey 2013). As various scholars warn, one ought to carefully examine the depth and scope of cosmopolitan inclusiveness, which may coexist with prejudice and racism. Back (1996) provides ample evidence of the fragility of cross-ethnic friendships, and the more or less subtle ways in which they are tinged by racism. Individuals may combine enthusiasm towards some forms of difference with negative feelings towards others, illustrating the ambivalence of cosmopolitanism (Skrbiš and Woodward 2007; Moroşanu and Fox 2013). Furthermore, what is warmly embraced by some can generate expressions of discomfort and profoundly negative feelings in others (Jones and Jackson 2014), showing additional limits of (unreciprocated) cosmopolitanism.

This, however, should not detract from noting that the examples above importantly illustrate a different face of cosmopolitan openness, which (momentarily) challenges rather than celebrates ethnic differences. The indifference to difference articulated in explicit, critical ways in such moments does not signal a class of cosmopolitan relationships distinct



from those discussed earlier. Cosmopolitan sociability may involve multiple ethnic and non-ethnic layers, and a fuller understanding of it requires attention to how different actors and situations make them salient. Whether turning ethnicity up or down, some mixed encounters reveal the difficulties of achieving ‘rooted’ cosmopolitanism in practice.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has critically examined studies of migrants’ ‘everyday’ cosmopolitanism to call for a more nuanced and systematic exploration of the varied presence (or absence) of ethnicity therein. Everyday cosmopolitanism perspectives offer a promising alternative to approaches to migration that view migrants’ social lives through an ‘ethnic lens’. Whilst they usefully bring into focus the often-downplayed cross-ethnic ties or interactions migrants enter, these studies nonetheless fall short of providing a nuanced picture of how ethnicity may occasionally shape them. Extant research in this field tends to either emphasise engagement with ethnic difference, thus continuing to prioritise ethnicity, or highlight common interests, values, and experiences uniting individuals across ethnic or national boundaries, downplaying ethnicity in turn. The latter approach does not deny the relevance of ethnicity but tends to treat it as a distinct form of identity and solidarity that does not impede cosmopolitan aims (Moroşanu 2013).

This paper has sought to overcome this divide, and enrich our understanding of cosmopolitan sociability by starting from migrants’ perspective, and proposing a more systematic approach to the varied ways in which ethnicity may facilitate, fragment but also fade in actual or imagined cosmopolitan relationships, without assuming its permanent relevance. Second, the paper problematises the notion of ‘rooted’ cosmopolitanism, often supported by scholars of everyday cosmopolitanism, who, despite their variable attention to

ethnicity, view ethnic rootedness as potentially compatible with cosmopolitan openness (Hannerz 2004; Glick Schiller et al. 2011; Mee 2015; Amit 2015). The examples discussed here showed that, whilst this may be an apt characterisation of some forms of cosmopolitan sociability, it leaves little room for exploring alternative ways in which ethnicity may inform migrants' cosmopolitan ties and aspirations, as well as the struggles involved in developing and negotiating them. For some migrants, 'rooted' cosmopolitanism may not be as easily accomplished in practice as commonly assumed.

By examining how ethnicity shapes migrants' everyday cosmopolitan relationships, the paper did not seek to prioritise ethnicity but to reveal its 'empirical variation' (Wimmer 2013), and how participants themselves invoke or contest its salience in their cosmopolitan pursuits. Despite growing criticism against the 'ethnic bias' in migration research, 'the world which we study very often [...] has an ethnicity bias' (Fox and Jones 2013: 391). Ethnicity remains a widely-used category in media and political discourses (Fox and Jones 2013), which likely impacts migrants' view of the world. Migrants' narratives are often replete with ethnicised or nationalised comparisons between their residence place and the home society or others they visited, as they try to make sense of their experiences abroad. Ethnic (or national) categories will inevitably surface in mixed interactions, particularly when more long-lasting. For one of my participants, the question 'where are you from?' had become the 'refrain of [her] life', and surely, of many others', making ethnicity relevant to them in ways often unknown pre-migration. It is thus reasonable to expect that the regular, sustained cross-ethnic relationships migrants develop, which were the focus of this paper, will occasionally foreground ethnicity, just as much as they might lead to questioning and downplaying its relevance.

Instead of privileging ethnic or non-ethnic dimensions of cosmopolitan encounters, I have thus suggested that we are better off starting from migrants' ethnic or non-ethnic lenses

to examine more systematically the specific, positive or negative, ways in which ethnicity informs cosmopolitan ties or aspirations (Moroşanu 2011). Cross-ethnic interactions in work or non-work settings, be they the marketplace, ethnic festivals, friendship ties or mixed partnerships, often provide the context for positively-connoted manifestations of ethnicity. Inter-cultural skills and learning, performing and sharing things ‘ethnic’ thus become key markers of mixed interactions, as many cosmopolitanism studies demonstrate.

Nevertheless, ethnicity may also fragment cosmopolitan socialisation in both concrete and imagined ways, an aspect which has received insufficient critical attention in current research, particularly if we consider the prominence of rooted cosmopolitanism in contemporary debates, which assumes a harmonious coexistence between ethnic roots and cosmopolitan orientations. This tension is illustrated by some migrants’ reluctance to befriend coethnics or continue ethnic traditions, perceived to conflict with their cosmopolitan aspirations. Or it emerges when one’s curiosity towards other cultures may inadvertently preclude the cosmopolitan projects of those at the receiving end, forcing them back into the ethnically-bounded collectives they may seek to escape. Furthermore, efforts to foster cosmopolitan sociability may dissolve following mixed interactions which redraw ethnic boundaries and confer renewed salience to ethnic difference, echoing Amit and Barber’s (2015) point that cosmopolitanism relies on mutual engagement, rather than being a one-sided pursuit. These examples prompt us to expand our register of ways in which ethnicity might matter in everyday cosmopolitanism, beyond a narrow, and usually positive, understanding as a persisting form of identity and solidarity (Moroşanu 2013). Whilst they reaffirm the salience of ethnic difference in cosmopolitan encounters, they do so in a way that signals tension, which may or may not be acknowledged as such by participants themselves.

Yet research on everyday cosmopolitanism also offers evidence of indifference to ethnic divisions, showing that migrants may use non-ethnic lenses to their cosmopolitan

encounters. Cosmopolitan openness is not only manifest in engagement with ethnic difference but also in discovering common ground and challenging ethnic (or national or racial) divisions. Like cultural exchanges, such commonalities are increasingly documented amongst lower-skilled workers, students, and other ‘middling’ migrants. Whilst such cosmopolitan sociability may be ‘circumscribed’ (Amit 2015) to those with similar class, professional status or lifestyle, and interrupted by racism or prejudice, it counters previous associations of cosmopolitanism with mobile elites, showing that critical stances towards ethnic difference and boundaries are shared by many other migrants. Although in very different ways, critical discourses about coethnics and those that question the relevance of ethnic difference both problematise the ease with which rooted cosmopolitanism can materialise in practice. Whilst opening up our understanding of ethnicity within cosmopolitan sociability, the paper thus also called for a more nuanced account of how different participants imagine and negotiate cosmopolitan ventures, ethnic difference and boundaries, instead of assuming that they can simply reconcile them.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>I draw inspiration from Erdal and Oeppen’s (2013) call for specifying how two different migration-related processes (integration and transnationalism) interact, and the three types of interaction between them they propose (additive, synergistic, and antagonistic).

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