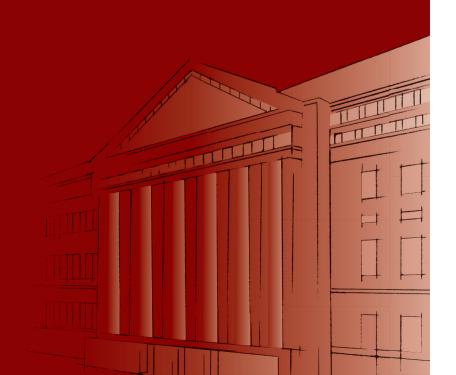CHRISTIANA HOLSAPPLE

Narratives of Positionality
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Complexity and National
Normativity

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During these four years of PhD studies, I have had the resources and support to drastically complexify my way of considering and relating to the world, to learn to question critically, and generally to transform into a more nuanced, curious, and reflective individual. Critiquing competitive, business-like orientations of modern academic institutions, Jan Blommaert opines that the biggest failing of a university is if students leave their studies unchanged, simply as recipients of a standardized product (Blommaert 2020; DocWerkers 2021). I am gratified to assert that my educational experiences have defied this trend, as I am emerging from doctoral studies substantially altered, not merely as a researcher, but also more broadly as a human being. bell hooks (1994b) asserts that education should mean the practice of freedom, for through ideas, we reinvent ourselves. PhD studies have unquestionably given me the freedom to transgress many of the previous boundaries of my own mind and imagination. Above all, carrying out this project has been empowering, as it has allowed me to engage in dealing with many of the aspects of our world and social realities that have always troubled me. My sincere hope is that I have been able to do justice to my task of opening discussions with which others can dialogue and that this dissertation can be used as a springboard for future meaningful work. I consider myself extremely fortunate and appreciate immensely this opportunity provided through the University of Tartu, the DoRa Plus Program, and the Estonian Research Council (PSG48).

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION

I use the Library of Congress system in transliterating Russian from the Cyrillic. Original names and spellings are retained, except when there is a commonly used English version (e.g., Gagauzia, not Gagauziia or Maria, not Mariia). All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine. All names are pseudonyms.

MAPS[1]

Red area is the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia.

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[1] Generated in Google Maps by myself.

1. INTRODUCTION: RATIONALE AND CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCH TASKS

This dissertation draws on ethnographic data to explore negotiations and articulations of self and collective in the context of Gagauzia, an autonomous configuration in Moldova. To outline the project's emergence, my initial research questions sprang from interest in overlapping, flexible, seemingly conflicting repertoires of self-applied ethnic/national categories that I observed among locals during a stay of nine months in Gagauzia, in 2015–2016, which I later built upon with another stay of three months in 2018. During both, I was intrigued by locals' patterns of claiming various positionalities and labels differently, depending upon the framework, goals, and expectations in operation in a given context. I was often entirely unsure as to whom locals' "we" or "us" referred to in a particular situation. Within one given conversation, "we" and "our" might be a way of voicing Gagauzian, Moldovan, Russian, Bulgarian, Turkic, or Soviet affiliations, perhaps encompassing elements from various or all of these named groups. Alternatively, sometimes a "we" could refer loosely to the community, without need for articulating connection to any named group. I found this fluidity, ambiguity, and inclusivity engaging, refreshing, and striking. These observations contrasted decidedly with my previous experiences in European nation-states that normatively present narratives of cohesive populations with matching linguistic, ethnic, and citizenship labels. While modern European nation-states have "sorted" their populations (Brown 2004) – or made efforts to construct the narrative of having done so – in Gagauzia I encountered an ambiguous conglomeration of overlying, shifting narratives and affiliations. This dissertation emerged, then, as an effort to explore these positionalities, and it has progressed as an endeavor to understand "how things can be different while also being the same across diverse technologies of representation and experience" (Green 2005: 22). In probing this ambiguity, it quickly became evident that such patterns are intertwined with Gagauzia's economic poverty (IFAD 2021; IOM 2022) and accompanying heavy dependence upon remittances, necessitating transnational lifestyles (Bloch 2014, 2017; Guboglo 2006; Keough 2006, 2016). This dependency results in highly asymmetrical circumstances, in which locals often claim positionalities vis-à-vis powerful nation-states – salient among them Russia, Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania – in order to access citizenship or other privilege that make migrant work conditions more secure.

The negotiations that I address are often discussed in terms of identity and/or belonging in both scholarly and popular contexts; however, I unpack them as narratives of positionality (Anthias 2002, 2020), in an effort to shed essentialist baggage and highlight the salience of context and practice. By "essentialist baggage" I refer to the innateness and possessiveness that concepts of identity or belonging often suggest, even if said concepts are qualified as ambiguous, situational, simultaneous, etc. identity or belonging. In contrast, "narratives of

positionality" highlights that any articulation of self or collective is just that – a *narrative*, produced in interplay with specific circumstances. "Positionality," then, appeals to ideas of locating oneself – and also being located by multiple others and structures – within (or without) certain frameworks, diverging from essentialist visions of "having" or "being" an identity. While the three articles that make up this dissertation's body tackle a plethora of interconnected issues within the case study of contemporary Gagauzia, their key foci are, respectively: bordering and citizenship practices, linguistic use and attitudes, and heritagization and authenticity discourses. This umbrella chapter, then, draws out the common denominators from these specific topics to show how modernity's colonial project of nation-state, involving asymmetrical access to wealth and resources, has shaped positionality narratives – of both locals, as well as at the governmental level – in what-is-today-Gagauzia. In referring to the modern/colonial project of nation-state, I allude to the language-culture-territory ideological nexus (Heller & Duchêne 2008; Laine & Casaglia 2017) that drives social organization – better, division – demanding maintenance of said elements in determining right to privilege. The above phrasing, "what-is-today-Gagauzia," draws attention to the contingent and constructed nature of any geopolitical configuration, as well as other hegemonic concepts such as ethnicity or language, which I interrogate throughout this work. The methodology is very much both ethnographic and autoethnographic, in that I also problematize my own narratives of self, navigations of national normativity, and embeddedness in asymmetrical access to opportunity and privilege.

This dissertation addresses a gap in the growing body of research on Gagauzia, as what I perceived to be vibrant and dynamic everyday patterns of identifying are scarcely represented in scholarly works. Existing research on Gagauzia, both external and internal, in large part appeals to ethnic/national taxonomy in portraying "the" Gagauzians as a supposedly-cohesive Turkic-speaking, Orthodox Christian minority group. Although certainly there are people who fit this standard representation of "Gagauzian," based on my observations, it is difficult to claim that this is the majority. It seems majorly reductionist to ignore intersectional (Yuval-Davis 2006; 2011), meaning numerous, cross-cutting, and dynamic social locations, and lump the plethora of diverse, dynamic individuals with whom I lived and interacted into this single categorization. There exists a fair amount of outside political-science scholarship on Gagauzia's geopolitical positioning (Katchanovski 2005, 2020; Cantir 2015; Tudoroiu 2016; Kosienkowski 2017a, 2017b, 2021) or bases for ethnic claims (Grigoriades & Shahin 2020). Most of these works unproblematically categorize Gagauzia as "pro-Russian," appealing to notions of a zero-sum geopolitical powerplay between Russia and the West. This approach troubles me, as during fieldwork I observed orientations and expressions of affinity – both on the level of individuals and political leaders – to be much more open-ended, ambiguous, and, above all, plural. Other powerful states, along with Russia, exert "kinship" discourse and policy in Gagauzia. Turkey, for instance, openly advances Turkic-world ideology with its Gagauz-Türk Dünnäsi Center,

lyceums, library, special diplomatic visits, and even a bust of Ataturk (Hols-apple 2020). However, I have not seen any scholarly work labeling and problematizing Gagauzia as "pro-Turkish." This speaks to the very specific political imaginaries within which Western – and otherwise – research often operates and works to reproduce, contrasting with my goal of exploring complexity informed by on-the-ground lived interactions and observations. By "Western," here, I allude to those universities and institutions that are on the higher end of asymmetrical power dynamics within contemporary knowledge production, legitimization, and dissemination processes (Canagarajah 2002). There is little research on Gagauzia drawing on ethnographic data, with the few exceptions, for instance, focusing specifically on a supposed ethnicity-language nexus (Demirdirek 2008) or migration (Bloch 2014, 2017 – dealing with Gagauzia only partially; Keough 2006, 2016). As one of the few ethnographies focusing on Gagauzia, James Kapaló's *Text, Context and Performance: Gagauz Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice* (2011) warrants mention. He explores folk religion in contemporary Gagauzia, scrutinizing in this context how "religious language and practice have been instrumentalized by the competing national, political and 'official' religious entities in the region in pursuit of their territorial, political and economic interests" (3). In part because his work investigates extensively local religious practices, I have not given this topic particular attention in my study. If compared to the general body of research on Gagauzia, ethnographic research specifically has not grown to such an extent in recent years, and, as such, this dissertation contributes underrepresented methodological and disciplinary perspectives to Gagauzian studies scholarship.

Similar critiques to those above regarding reliance on ethnic/national taxonomy to portray "the" Gagauzians apply to scholarship produced by Gagauzian locals. This includes publications through the Marunevich Scientific-Research Center (*Nauchno-issledovatel'skiy tsentr im. M.V. Marunevich*) based in the capital, Comrat, that serve to reinforce template national mythology of existence as a cohesive, homogeneous ethnic group with traits. The center, opened in 2001, was founded by its namesake Maria Marunevich (1937–2004), the "brains" of successful autonomy claims in the 1990s (*immeno ona iavlialas' mozgovym tsentrom sozdaniia Avtonomii* (Romanova 2021)). Its activity, including organization of conferences, historical and ethnological publications, and creation of Gagauzian-language-learning materials and dictionaries of Gagauzian terminology gives legitimacy to political claims by creating a body of scientific knowledge backing the narrative of a rooted, clearly-defined Gagauzian people. One of their projects, "Historic Forms of Gagauzian Identity," that attempts to connect medieval traditions with contemporary ethnic/national articulations of Gagauzian-ness (Bulgar & Konstantinova 2021), spells out:

> In the modern stages of history, a hybridization of national cultures is occurring, and in these conditions of civilizational and cultural crisis, in many countries of the world, issues of national and cultural identity are important. [...] In these conditions, the Gagauzian community must establish an integral system of the

culture of the people in order to restore the historical forms of the Gagauzian identity.

The project's aims, along with highlighting the power of heritage claims related to having an ancient, traceable history (Holsapple 2022b), are clear in describing cultural mixing or ambiguity in negative terms, evidencing Gagauzian-local research as having a very specific agenda of ethnic/national particularism.

Further, locally-written works tend to present their arguments as general statements of fact, without citing sources of data or dialoguing with broader research. Historian and politician Fiodor Angeli's (2006) *Gagauzskaia avtonomiia. Liudi i fakty (1989–2005)* (Gagauzian Autonomy. People and Facts (1989–2005)), for instance, contains many arguments along the lines of "Even many Western researchers believe..." (6), "Moldovan politicians believe..." (231), or "as is known" (*kak izvestno* (e.g., 30, 40, 70)), but without indicating references. This is the case, as well, particularly in conference *sborniki* (compilations of papers). As an assistant in Comrat State University for two semesters 2015–2016, I remember many instructors commenting on their difficulty and dissatisfaction with being obligated to contribute, often at the last minute, to these publications, regardless of whether they were carrying out any sort of research or not. Many of these contributions have obvious nation-building goals, advanced through generalizing, ascriptive commentary on Gagauzianness. Gagauzian ethnologist-folklorist Elizaveta Kvilinkova's (2015) paper justifying usage of the wolf as national symbol, for example, asserts that the traits of the Gagauzian people include "bravery, the ability to hold their own, and the capacity to survive in any situation" (176–177), alleging that this means Gagauzians experience identification with the wolf. While these publications – both outside, as discussed above, and local – can draw attention to relevant topics, their approaches have significant limitations from the point of view of representing diversity and complexity.

As such, my goal in embarking on this PhD project has been to develop and advocate alternate, more complex ways of thinking about marginal places like Gagauzia: that is, about the area that now bears this name, but that historically went unnamed or was encompassed into other regional names like Budjak or Bessarabia. "Marginal" here indicates that Gagauzia has never been a center of power, and I interrogate this positionality in section 3.4. The issues I unpack are particularly pronounced in Gagauzia due in large part to its borderlands positioning historically and currently in between various empires and nation-states. However, issues related to diversity and inequality characterize all modern societies. Consequently, this dissertation is not only about Gagauzia, but it uses the Gagauzian example to discuss contemporary conditions in a broader sense. I endeavor to attend to local narratives on positionality and belonging, probing how and why they are claimed, in dialogue with which circumstances. As researchers – I would argue, also, generally as individuals – we need to move beyond simplified, template categorizations such as "minority group" and, instead, critically trace local history and also question contemporary represen-

tations of this history, listen to local narratives, and engage in local practices. By "local" I allude to non-elite, mundane, quotidian, and also broad-spectrum in terms of engagement with diversity within the same community. Indeed, a salient aspect of my fieldwork trajectory involved gradual disengagement from any idea of some coherent, consistent, definable Gagauzian-ness. For this reason, this dissertation also necessarily adopts an autoethnographic approach in addressing my own shifting ways of perceiving and experiencing social realities. My aim has been to bring to the forefront the multifacetedness of lived experience, rather than trying to categorize, generalize, and add to the myth of groupness (Brubaker 2004; Handler 1994). This research, then, addresses a lack of insight into experiences and narratives of belonging in contemporary Gagauzia, while also contributing to critiques of group-ist analysis and methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) by way of engaging with intersectional (Anthias 2020; Freire 1970(2018); Yuval-Davis 2011; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019), decolonial (hooks 1994a; Mignolo 2007; Mignolo & Escobar 2009; Mignolo & Walsh 2018; Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012), and pluriversal (Escobar 2018; Reiter 2018) perspectives in advocating more equitable global imaginaries and structures (Fry & Tlostanova 2021). The arguments of this dissertation tie together to bring to light different angles of negotiations of positionality – both of field partners in Gagauzia and my own – in an effort to critically rethink the categories through which we view the world and our fellow world inhabitants, and through which we perform and narrate our own articulations of self as well.

Why does this endeavor matter, particularly potentially for people in Gagauzia? The asymmetric frameworks which manifest through the interface of positionality and access to entitlement that I problematize in this dissertation have very real implications for individuals' lives, experiences of selfhood, and ability to achieve their goals in the world. One interviewee, Misha, who self-described as having darker features, said that because of this, he cannot consider himself Russian. However, he is a Russian-speaker, and cannot claim a Gagauzian identity because he does not speak Gagauzian. Such dilemmas in the post-Soviet space are problematized by, among others, Madina Tlostanova (2012: 137–38), who elucidates exclusionary, othering frameworks that situate individuals with mismatching ethnic-language combinations outside the right to position themselves unambivalently to any collectivity. Misha expressed frustration with being unable to self-apply any one category. He did not choose his racial features or native language, yet he is seemingly locked in frameworks and discourses that say this combination is problematic. I discuss more such data throughout this dissertation, but my key argument is that the logic of coloniality/modernity according to which our contemporary world is divided, most evident through the institution of citizenship, will always end up creating outsiders, those left out of exclusionary narratives of identity/belonging, which in turn largely determine access to opportunity. Human positionality is inevitably more complex than any singular model of cultural identity. Any nationally/ethnically-framed rhetoric on identity/belonging will be inherently

exclusionary, setting up unequal frameworks regarding who does and does not belong based on aspects over which we have no control. These frameworks keep our world locked into asymmetric cycles, in abyssal thinking, according to which affluent parts of the world increasingly depend on cheap migrant labor, as problematized through this case study. This dissertation, then, endeavors to stimulate critical thinking and examine potential for transcending these structures by constructing alternative visions of self and community without relying on coloniality/modernity's templates. The key word of this dissertation is complexity. When we – as researchers and generally as individuals – begin to complexify our understandings, which primarily involves asking how and why, we can begin to generate more nuanced and critical imaginings of social phenomena. This is not and should not be easy or straightforward because social life is not straightforward.

2. CONTEXT ON GAGAUZIA

In this context section, I give attention to various periods of what-is-today Gagauzia and how in each, patterns of national/ethnic categorization have been shaped in interplay with larger, outside powerplays and the project of modernity. As addressed in depth in section 3, modernity is mutually-constitutive of coloniality, for essentially all aspects of modern existence are marked by colonial logic and uneven power dynamics (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012). The point here is not to argue that Gagauzian locals' – or anyone's – lives and identities are simply *determined* by these larger processes, but rather to emphasize individuals' negotiations and agency as embedded within broader contexts of historical and contemporary asymmetry. Any negotiation of identity or belonging is, though not a straightforward response to, nonetheless, unavoidably in dialogue with larger, hegemonic frameworks. The opening phrasing of "what-is-today-Gagauzia" not only indicates that prior to the Soviet Union's dissolution there never existed a territorial configuration with this name, but it also is telling in regards to my reticence to articulate constructs discussed in this dissertation – above all, ethnicities/nationalities and geopolitical configurations – in definitive, unproblematic terms. These are things that must be constructed purposefully, always in interplay with multifarious, dynamic, power-laden circumstances, and a key overarching theme of this dissertation is to problematize their normative representations as organically-existing, self-evident realities. This section deals with these issues in the region that is today Gagauzia, which was part of the Russian Empire 1812–1918, then Romania 1918–1944, and incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1944 (ATU Gagauzia 2022, GBM 2022). I have presented these periods using neutral language, but it is important to note that in contemporary local accounts, both official and the quotidian ones I encountered, the Romanian period is referred to as occupation, from which the Soviet Union liberated the population (e.g. Angeli 2006; Bulgar 2006; ATU Gagauzia 2022; GBM 2022).

2.1. Early-Twentieth-Century Efforts in Constructing Gagauzian: Chakir and Moshkov

I began this project with the aim of exploring locals' articulations and practices of belonging, particularly to how ethnic/national categories are drawn upon in narrating one's place in the world. I soon realized a major part of this requires exploration of taxonomic history, naming pathways, historic use of categories, and the contexts in which certain names acquire particular meanings, associations, and privileges. In the Gagauzian case, the usage and promotion of "Gagauzian" as an ethnonym and glotonym has been entangled with and evidences wider processes of the construction of modernity. Modernity, as a part of the colonial matrix of power, has historically involved efforts to civilize and

Christianize, accompanied by evocation of the trope of salvation (Boatcă 2021; Dussel, Krauel & Tuma 2000; Mignolo 2007; Santos 2007). Salient to understanding these patterns is the role of ethnography therein, as "discovery" – or construction – and categorization of non-modern peoples was key to creating the project of modernity, which relied on taxonomy of primitive others against which modern civilization could be juxtaposed (Anttonen 2005).

2.1.1. Mikhail Chakir (1861–1938)

Modernizing ways of being in the early twentieth century in what-is-today Gagauzia (then Bessarabia of the Russian Empire until Romanian incorporation/ occupation in 1918) involved efforts of Bessarabia-native priest and ethnographer Mikhail Chakir (1861–1938) to advance Orthodoxy among locals and to chronicle history and traditions. While arguably well-intentioned and certainly extremely positively represented locally in contemporary Gagauzia as a giver of literacy and religion (Moshin & Kopuschu 2013; Tsvirkun, Duminika & Syrf 2018), Chakir's proselytization efforts through his creation of a written language inevitably served to overwrite local, traditional practices and ways of being. His privileging of written, standardized language over orality were efforts to enlighten and produce knowledge according to notions of Western civilization. Further, his views of who and "what" Gagauzians were did not necessarily represent non-elite locals' views. Telling is the striking difference in representation in Chakir's two versions of his "History of Bessarabian Gagauzians" – in Gagauzian *Besarabiealâ Gagauzlarân istorieasâ* (1934), and in Romanian *Istoria şi cultura găgăuzilor din Basarabia* (published as articles 1933–1936 in the journal *Viaţa Basarabiei* (2018)). While the Gagauzian version "preaches" normative commentary on how Gagauzians should behave and be, particularly expounding how they how they are ethnically distinct from Bulgarians and the importance of being devout Orthodox Christians; in contrast, the Romanian version features expanded descriptive accounts of traditional practices, as a more straightforward ethnographic taxonomy intended to create imaginings for outsiders (Grigoriadis & Shahin 2020). This evidences that Chakir was quite aware of the power of different narratives, which he shaped and deployed for his own political objectives (Kapaló 2011: 65–72). Chakir's strategic constructions of Gagauzian-ness – articulated differently depending on the audience – show the salience of the power of national/ethnic claims in the early twentieth century. Formulation as a mixed, jumbled, multiethnic, multilingual population of Bessarabia is not very convincing, but when put in the straightforward framework of a nation, of a people, then claims and narratives are seen as legitimate. As a politically-active elite, Chakir was adept at navigating the powerplay between the Russian and Romanian empires, as well as pan-Turkic ideology (Kapaló 2007, 2010), and his calculated political relations facilitated his religious objective of advancing Orthodoxy among locals. Chakir's religious literature included many Arabic and Persian terms that he had encountered in his religious education, as well as neologisms of his own

invention (Kapaló 2010: 12). This evidences that Chakir was not merely recording local speech patterns, but was very much constructing anew and molding according to his own ambitions. I am not arguing that he was intrinsically erroneous in carrying out this engineering. However, what I wish to highlight is that the Gagauzian "language" that Chakir brought into existence did not necessarily represent actual local patterns of communication. He took centers of religious power as his reference points for standardization, and his efforts – as with any language codification process (Makoni & Pennycook 2007) – inevitably valorized certain ways of communicating as "right" language, while stigmatizing those that did not line up with his new standard.

Differences between Mikhail's and his father Dmitrii's accounts evidence how the formula of the national worked to overwrite cultural complexity and ambiguous, localized ways of identifying in the early twentieth century. Dmitrii Chakir (1839–1916), a sexton (*d'iachiok*) and grandson of the founder of their settlement in Bessarabia, identified himself and his family definitively as Bulgarian (*bulgarskaia natsiia, slavianskii plemen'* (Chakir 1899 (2005): 25)) in his genealogical and autobiographical account, which he wrote in Russian. Gagauzian scholar Elizaveta Kvilinkova purports that the particularities of his identification (*osobennosti identifikatsii*) is a reality that bothers all modern Gagauzian studies researchers (*muchaet vsekh sovremennykh issledovatelei-gagauzovedov* (2019: 80)). Her commentary underscores a key argument of this dissertation: identity narratives and practices that do not fit the mold of matching ethnicity-language are often viewed as problematic in academic and popular contexts both. Why should Dmitrii's combination of affiliations with different cultures/groups/languages *bother* us? It is only bothersome if viewed through the prism of primordially-framed (Gil-White 1999) national mythology that upholds the language-culture-nation ideological nexus (Heller & Duchêne 2008; Laine & Casaglia 2017), for it shows that ethnicity/nationality is very much something that must be constructed and that individuals can choose to articulate differently depending on circumstances. That the father of one of contemporary Gagauzian national mythology's most celebrated figures did not consider himself or his family Gagauzian is certainly problematic for the tidy narrative of generations of self-identifying Gagauzians having historically resided as a cohesive, distinct group on their "ethnic territory" (Marunevich 1993), as articulated as justification for autonomy claims in the late twentieth century. Mikhail Chakir's initiatives and descriptions increasingly came into line with emerging imposition of national taxonomies with container visions of national/ethnic groups, the "right" way to organize society within modernity's fixation on controlling diversity (Bauman 1989). In describing the composition of Bessarabian villages, he asserts: "...Bulgarians live in the Bulgarian quarter, Gagauzians – in the Gagauzian quarter, and each people lives by their own traditions, customs, and no Gagauzian would say that he's Bulgarian" ((...*bolgary zhivut v bolgarskom kvartale, gagauzy – v gaguzskom kvartale, i kazhdyi narod zhiviot po svoim obychaiam, privychkam, i ni odin gagauz ne govorit, chto on bolgarin*) (Chakir 1933 (2005): 92)). Chakir maintains unequivocally

that Bulgarians and Gagauzians are distinct groups, negating the possibility of any mixing of cultures, customs, or ways of life. This contrasts sharply with his own father's accounts. It also contrasts with official categorization of the Russian Empire in the early twentieth century, when Bessarabian priests' national labels, originally "Bulgarian," gradually began to be re-recorded as the hyphenated "Bulgarian-Gagauzian" (Kvilinkova 2019: 81), in the context of Chakir's discourse on difference.

2.1.2. Valentin Moskov (1852–1922)

Another early ethnographer, Valentin Moshkov (1852–1922), similarly was determined to represent local populations with an ethnonym and matching glotonym. While a general-lieutenant of the Russian Empire, Moshkov recounts: "[...] I met by chance soldiers, who their comrades called Turkish-speaking Bulgarians, or Gagauzians" (1900–1902 (2004): 5). Fascinated by this combination of characteristics – which he discusses in terms of ascriptive naming, rather than how the individuals themselves identified – Moshkov proceeded with ethnographic expeditions to Bessarabia as a member of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society during the final years of the nineteenth century. He succeeded in naming and categorizing the local population according to national frameworks, with his findings legitimized as knowledge in publications of the Saint Petersburg Imperial Academy of Science's Eastern Languages Division (ibid). His study was published as *Gagauzy Benderskogo uezda (Etnograficheskie ocherki i materialy)* ("Gagauzians of Bender District (Ethnographic Essays and Materials)") in 1900–1902 as a series of articles in *Ethnograficheskoe obozrenie* (Ethnographic Review) and reprinted as a book in 2004 on the initiative of Gagauzian scholars Stepan Bulgar and Stepan Kuroglu and financed by Gagauzia's *ispolkom* (executive committee).

Moshkov's writings make it clear that locals themselves did not readily categorize themselves as "Gagauzian" or share Moshkov's ethnically/nationally-framed classification norms. He writes that Gagauzians are "dimly aware that Turk is their own folk name" (*smutno [soznaiut], chto tiurk – eto ikh sobstvennoe narodnoe imia*), and he comments on their own use of glotonyms: "If two Gagauzians are conversing, and one, for whatever reason, does not understand the other, then the other may reproach him 'Don't you understand Turkish?' [*po-turetski-to ty, ponimaesh' li?*]. But he would *never* say: 'Don't you understand Gagauzian?'" (Moshkov 1900–1902 (2004): 19 – emphasis mine). Further, in discussing people he calls "Gagauzians" outside the Russian Empire, he asserts that it is impossible to reach a population count, as some of them call themselves Bulgarians, some Greeks (*chast' iz nikh vydaet cebia za bolgar, a drugaia – za grekov*) (Moshkov 1900–1902 (2004): 6). Despite the evident ambiguity of self-identification patterns, Moshkov persisted in taxonifying populations in line with modernity's hegemonic notions of ethnicity/nation. Essentially, his work swept aside localized identities – largely regional, familial, occupational, and/or confessional, rather than ethnic or national prior to

colonial/modern projects (Brown 2004; Kappeler 2001) – with the colonial mindset that the population *was* an ethnicity, but that they were too backwards to be aware of it. His failure to grant legitimacy to local patterns of self-definition contributes to classic discussions of whether the subaltern can speak (Spivak 1992) or "who is worthy to speak and be heard" (hooks 1992: 176), as an example of the power differentials of namer/named and observer/observed dichotomies.

Many of Moshkov's descriptions of "the" Gagauzians were clearly shaped by his intent to prove his theory of their origins. For instance, he singles out usage of *sofra* – low, round tables for meals – as proof of their descendancy from Turkic nomads (*priderzhivaetsia svoikh drevnikh privychek kochevnika* (373)). However, such tables were prevalent generally in the region among different communities (Nikoglo 2014), and it is not possible to assume the specific origins of this tradition, nor make assumptions about a population's ancestry on this basis, as Moshkov does. Further, he is selective in drawing such conclusions: while he notes that Gagauzians also use "our" Russian benches (374), he does not use this as evidence of Russian ancestry. Essentially, his ethnography attempts to create the "content" for national culture (Handler 1988) or the "cultural grammar of nationhood" (Löfgren 1989), established sets of components legitimizing existence as an ethnic/national group, and he uses this content to advance his theory on supposedly cohesive, traceable origins. His efforts clearly reflect early folklore scholarship's intertwining with the project of modernity:

> In the historically specific process of making modern Europe and its others, the culture of selected marginal groups, for example the material objects, ritual practices and 'lore' of those that are called the 'folk,' has received much of its meaning as an object of discovery. The objectified cultural practices and products have not only provided representation of difference and otherness but they have also functioned as prerequisites for constructing the category of the modern from which they are separated (Anttonen 2005: 32).

Indeed, by "discovering" the Gagauzians, Moshkov was working to construct primitive others to juxtapose with modern Russia, within his position in the Imperial Russian Geographical Society. As discussed below, the "European patent on modernity" (Quijano 2000) means that while there were contextual specificities, the Russian and Soviet empires drew on Western modernity's constructs and categories in their own projects of reengineering reality, of which a salient building block was ethnographic knowledge (Hirsch 2005).

What's more, Moshkov draws borders inconsistently, in contradictory ways, and very much in line with his own objectives, which often involves glorification of "authentic" folk practices. Generally, Moshkov asserts that Gagauzians are doubtless distinct from Bulgarians (*vsiakiy prekrasno znaet gagauzov i ni za chto ne smeshaet ikh s bolgarami* (10)), with no apparent doubt as to being able to differentiate them. Yet, in particular contexts, he readily questions the

"real" identity of "Bulgarians." For example, in praising lavishly the weaving skills of Gagauzian women, he conjectures that the fine "Bulgarian" fabrics popular in urban centers were perhaps in actuality produced by Gagauzians, asserting that Gagauzians – both in Russia and Bessarabia – are often generally considered Bulgarians (*prichisliaiutsia k bolgaram*: 408). Moshkov often describes "like our Russian peasants" (e.g., 41, 194, 387) in regards to many aspects of life in Bessarabia, from childhood development (41) to bread baking (387–394)), and he compiles extensive lists of similarities between Gagauzians and other widely-dispersed catalogued folk groups (Hutsuls, Yakuts, Turkic Serbs, Belorussians, Little Russians, etc.) on the receiving end of scientific study. In his introduction, he highlights Gagauzians' "amazing" commonalities with Russians, "down to the smallest details" (*dokhodiashcee do mel'chaishikh detalei*), while also stating that they share commonalities with Bulgarians, Moldovans, Tatars, and Votyaks (Udmurts), "not to mention those elements that can be considered international" (21). That is, he clearly highlights the bricolage (Malkki 1994: 37) that any "culture" is. He also qualifies that among different "Gagauzians," there are different traditions, customs, and language particularities (194). Indeed, he himself emphasizes that cultural practices are variable and diverse, which should underscore the futility of attempting to definitively link any practice with a single named group, represent populations as unanimous, or give special "traits" to cultures. But the lens of modernity's project of nation/ethnicity guiding his efforts to construct a coherent "folk" does not allow him to represent Bessarabia's population as sundry and heterogeneous; instead, he persists in constructing "the" Gagauzians as a definable, bounded group. His efforts demonstrate the need to define and *know* – to assert within the legitimacy of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society, that he has "theorized" and "proven" the origins of his object of study. He is clear that his positionality as an educated Russian scientist is superior, describing Gagauzians as being of "low culture and in enormous part illiterate" (199), thereby articulating a decided hierarchy of high culture vs. folk culture, as well as written knowledge vs. oral knowledge. He describes them paternalistically as a small people" (*malen'kiy narodets*" (7)), in conspicuous contrast with his own great titular people of the Russian Empire. Further, he decries their lacking religious knowledge, bemoaning that Gagauzians are more naive even than Russian peasants (201–202) and that he had to hear (*mne prikhodilos' slyshat'*) their corrupted versions of scripture (202).

Moshkov's imaginings of Gagauzians as a named, cohesive people, with a "culture," legitimized as published, scientific knowledge of the Russian Empire, has been instrumental in contemporary ability to see and represent them(selves) this way. The 2004 reprint of Moshkov's work was compiled by Gagauzian-local scholars and includes their commentaries praising Moshkov's work as the source of Gagauzian scientific studies (*istoki gagauzovedcheskoi nauki* (Kuroglo 2004a: 469)) and unproblematically declaring its content to be reliable fact (*vse zafiksirovannye v nikh fakty dostoverny* (Bulgar 2004: 485) – although they do correct an error in Moshkov's narrative, for instance, on page 11,

refuting his claim that Gagauzians historically lived in the village Valea-Perjei). Importantly, they link Moshkov's work with Gagauzians' ability to "begin speaking in the language of politics" (*zagovoril na iazyke politike* (Kuroglo 2004a: 469)) in the 1990s in order to claim territorial autonomy. As noted already in regards to Chakir's efforts, voicing the right to political self-determination is not especially convincing if articulated merely as a heterogeneous population entangled in uncertain definitions; however, articulation as a nation, a named ethnic group with scientific categorization to prove its existence, has resonance in our world organized – or, I would say, divided – according to national logic, as I unpack in section 3.3. Contemporary Gagauzian-local academics laud Moshkov as a "Russian Nostradamus," claiming that he *predicted* Gagauzians' future emergence into the civilized, modern world as priests, teachers, and soldiers (Kuroglo 2004b: 481).This primordially-framed (Gil-White 1999) presentation implies that there was some objective destiny of evolution of the Gagauzian people, completely neglecting to critically contemplate Moshkov's very active role in constructing modern reality, in transforming lives and communities with his categorizations, imaginings, and production of ethnographic knowledge.

The above formulation of being able to "begin speaking in the language of politics" (Kuroglo 2004a: 469) resonates with ideas of "strategic essentialism" (Spivak 1985(1996)). It suggests that leaders at the forefront of activity during the Soviet Union's collapse were aware that some kind of essentialism – self-articulation as an ethnic/national group – was needed in order to achieve their aims (a widespread tendency problematized by Handler (1994: 38)). That is, it was necessary to oppose Moldovan/Romanian dominion – arguably, a colonizing force – by formulating resistance in the colonizer's own ethnically/nationally-framed terms. Many aspects of Gagauzia's organization – its legal status framed in terms of "multinational" population (Halk Topluşu 1994), its pluralist language policy, for example – and also my own observations of lived realities betwixt and in-between various cultural forces and affiliations evidence diverse, non-exclusionary local realities. However, leaders in the early 1990's were able to "essentialize" themselves with a sort of fight-fire-with-fire-logic by rejecting Romanianization vis-à-vis their own mirror construct of ethnic particularism. I return to this in sub-section 2.3 with a brief comparison of the trajectories of Gagauzia and Transnistria, a disputed region in contemporary Moldova.

The above affirmation also evidences dynamics of the mutual-constitutive "being seen and seeing oneself" (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009), as often it is through articulation or performance for outsiders that internal attitudes congeal and gain traction, with these two processes then working to mutually (re)affirm one another. The Comaroffs discuss this interplay in relation to commodification of ethnicity: "marketing what is 'authentically Tswana' is also a mode of reflection, of self-construction, of *producing* and *feeling* Tswana-ness" (2009: 9). The reciprocity they describe appears to be present in ethnopolitical claims made in Gagauzia as well. Claiming Gagauzian-ness – for outsiders – in the context of gaining autonomy within Moldova in the early 1990s has surely

worked to stimulate internal claims of Gagauzian-ness, as evidenced through contemporary ethnopolitical entrepreneurship addressed in the third publication (Holsapple 2022b).

To what extent I engage in similar activity to Chakir and Moshkov I discuss in the methodology section, acknowledging that while I endeavor to decreate and dislink from national categories, any effort to represent experience and analyze will inevitably involve reduction of complexity (Bagga-Gupta 2017; Balibar 2002: 75–86;) and will always create knowledge anew in line with my own positionality and objectives. To be clear, my intent is not to vilify these actors, but instead, to draw attention to the larger frameworks of modernity/coloniality in which they were embedded and that they, even if arguably with benign intentions, worked to promote and transform into reality. So, Chakir and Moshkov themselves are not the target of my critique, but rather the imperial knowledge systems and practices that they advanced and the lack of complexity with which their legacies are today evoked. Indeed, Chakir's and Moshkov's activities are usually represented unproblematically, both in Western scholarship (e.g., Grigoriadis & Shahin 2020) and within Gagauzia, where there are statues and educational institutions bearing their names (e.g., Chakir Pedagogical College in Comrat, Moshkov Lyceum in Chadyr-Lunga). However, any process of "giving" religion or "enlightening" can never be neutral, as the underlying logic implies superiority to vernacular lifeways. Through their production of written knowledge in the forms of religious materials and folkloristic/ethnological descriptions, both men attached the category of Gagauzian to their works, thereby working to (re)construct and invest with meaning the label.

Tracing the trajectory of naming pathways sheds light on how ethnic/national identity claims are embedded in the workings of larger patterns of modernity and coloniality. This dismantling of the label "Gagauzian" shows how naming practices, the basis of any identity claim (Balibar 2004), are intertwined with cycles of power asymmetry. How a "backwards" population in a borderlands region between the Russian and Romanian empires at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries became the object of religious and scientific inquiry – of which a preliminary aspect is naming – is a starting point for understanding contemporary narratives of positionality in Gagauzia. These early taxonomic efforts contributed to reordering a population by partitioning and defining individuals' existence according to ethnic/national labels. Further, they are reminiscent of contemporary Western (cf. section 3.2) notions of diversity. While diversity is discursively supported and celebrated in Western rhetoric, in reality the only space for diversity is the kind that is definable in line with named groups and categories. Transcultural and in-between ways of being are made invisible and/or problematic, which I attend to in section 3.4 discussing marginality.

2.2. Romanian and Soviet Bessarabia

With the category of Gagauzian having been constructed and solidified by Chakir and Moshkov in the early twentieth century, it was made use of in Romania's ethnic cleansing policy seeking to transform Bessarabia into a "model province," or pure Romanian space, during World War II. After mass murder of Jews in Bessarabia in 1941 (Solonari 2002, 2006, 2007; Geissbühler 2014), Gagauzians were named specifically (along with Ukrainians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Roma, and others) in ongoing policy as a target of deportation and/or extermination ("purification" is the euphemism used (Solonari 2002, 2006, 2007)). These circumstances live on in historic memory, with a contemporary Gagauzian politician recently referring to Romanian rule as "ethnocide" (e.g., Gagauzinfo 2016b). Zygmunt Bauman (1989) argues that the Holocaust was very much rooted in the general logic of modernity and cannot be understood outside the context of the boundary-drawing tendencies and civilizing "achievements" of modern rational thought and bureaucracy, with the engineering of nation-space being salient among them. Ethnic/national categorizing does not merely reorder lives, but it can become criterion for exclusion or annihilation, evidence of the project of modernity's historical and current intertwining with violence (Dussel, Krauel & Tuma 2000; Mignolo 2007). It intrinsically involves claims of superiority, of the "right" lifeways and has demanded the erasure and/or management of difference in pursuit of specific imaginings of organized – often homogenous – society.

Bessarabia came under Soviet rule in 1944, and in the following decades was on the receiving end of top-down *korenizatsiia*-like activity (Hirsch 2005: 146; Martin 2001), such as Gagauzian alphabet creation in 1957 by linguists in Moscow (Pokrovskaia 1964: 8). This worked to solidify the category of Gagauzian, as local populations learned to use the "language of nationality" (Hirsch 2005) to gain access to institutional entitlement and navigate the Soviet system's bureaucracy (Hirsch 1997, 2005; Slezkine 1994). A small group of Bessarabian-local academics dedicated to Gagauzian research (*gagauzovedenie*) developed within the Soviet educational system, and key among them was Maria Marunevich, who, from its inception in 1986 until 1990, headed the Department of Gagauzian Studies within the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic's Academy of Sciences (Romanova 2021). Her publications (e.g., 1980, 1983, 1988) during the Soviet era worked to (re)construct and legitimize the existence of the Gagauzian *narod*, in line with Soviet ideology and discourse. One notable publication that she co-authored, *Sotsialisticheskie preobrazovaniia v bytu i kul'ture gagauzskogo naseleniia MSSR* ("Socialist Transformations in the Life and Culture of the Gagauzian Population of the MSSR"), draws on "archival, statistical, and ethnographic data" to explain how a people lacking a written language "overcame centuries of backwardness and actively joined in the building of socialism" (*preodelel vekovuiu otstalost' i aktivno vkliuchilsia v stroitel'stvo sotsializma*) (Kuroglo & Marunevich 1983: 2). As in the previous section, orality is constructed as ignorance, and folk lifeways are *objects* of

study, but certainly not considered knowledge systems in and of themselves. Another such book by Bessarabian-local academics, *Proshloe i nastoiaschee gagauzskoi zhenschiny* ("The Past and Present of the Gagauzian Woman") (Kuroglo & Filimonova 1976), for example, is dedicated to outlining the oppression and suffering of Gagauzian women in pre-Soviet times, as contrasted with their current societal equality thanks to communist ideology and Soviet leadership. Not only does this work make clear the specific roles and responsibilities in Soviet society of women generally, but it further deals with the situation of *Gagauzian* women specifically, simultaneously situating them as a sub-group within the larger umbrella category of Soviet people and also differentiating them as a describable, named ethnic/national group. These Bessarabian-local academics developed successful careers by dialoguing with dominant modern concepts of "correct" social organization. Again, as with Moshkov and Chakir, my aim is not to critique these people's intentions, but rather to highlight the hegemonic frameworks within which they worked, drawing attention to their key role in shifting lived realities based upon the unit of ethnicity/nationality.

As mentioned, present-day Gagauzia officially refers to Bessarabia's period under Romanian rule as "occupation," and Soviet appropriation of rule as "liberation" (ATO 2022; GBM 2022). While extremely different in their activity and legacies, both ruling configurations worked within the same modern frameworks of ethnic categorization, of seeing human beings as specimens of imagined-as-cohesive "breeds" of peoples. They engaged in the same modern re-construction of reality in line with imaginings of "civilized" societal organization and composition, based on the unit of marked categories of peoples.

> Modernity [...] is an age of artificial order and of grand societal designs, the era of planners, visionaries, and – more generally – 'gardeners' who treat society as a virgin plot of land to be expertly designed and then cultivated and doctored to keep to the designed form (Bauman 1989, 113).

In the Bessarabian case, Romanian policy involved elimination of people labeled as Gagauzians, while policy of the Soviet Union – an empire of nations (Hirsch 2005) – involved active encouragement of the existence of a Gagauzian *narod*. Both, though, had the same unit of analysis and the same approach, reminiscent of horticulture or animal husbandry, aimed at re-engineering populations drawing on ethnological knowledge.

The key question that I want to confront in this section through the example of Bessarabia/Gagauzia generally, and this zooming-in on Romanian and Soviet eras specifically, revolves around why and how this dividing and essentialist categorizing of people happens. And, by extension, what good can it ever bring about? Can it ever *not* come into conflict with visions of equality, pluralism, and the opportunity for individual self-determination, not based on a blood/genetic lottery? "What does it mean to try to affirm someone, without excluding somebody else?" (hooks 1994a: 254). As I have touched upon already and

explore more in the next sub-section, locals' success in claiming political and territorial self-determination as autonomous Gagauzia was achieved through articulation in terms of ethnicity/nationality. Smaller self-determination movements, due to asymmetric standing, necessarily imitate the presented-as-universalist format of civilization – the national, that is (Balibar 2002: 60–61). It is uncertain whether such claims would have had resonance or been seen as legitimate without this framework, without "learning to speak the language of politics" (Kuroglo 2004a: 469) – meaning gaining access to rights based on ethnic/national arguments – as cited previously. This necessity to reduce diverse lived experience to fit into boxes of mutually-exclusive categories, in order to function in a modern world that "[abhors] the non-national void" (Bauman 1989: 53), is an overarching issue I problematize.

2.3. Post-Soviet Claims

Amidst the collapse of the Soviet Union, the central government of Moldova in Chișinău adopted Romanian-language policies, the Romanian anthem, and the Romanian flag in 1989–1990 (Angeli 2006; Guboglo 2006; OSCE 1994). Political talks in favor of unification with Romania became common, with the first president of Moldova, Mircea Snegur, declaring in 1991 "independence is, of course, a temporary condition," alluding to Moldova's rightful place as part of greater Romania (Angeli 2006: 48–9). Due in large part to negative historic memory of Romanian rule in Bessarabia, which I often encountered in contemporary outlooks during fieldwork as well, locals in southern Moldova opposed potential union with Romania and Romanianization policies, foremost those related to language. Mikhail Guboglo (2006: 478) asserts: "Ethnic mobilization of Gagauzians occurred under the flags of Russian language and in the name of its preservation as national patrimony of the people" (*Etnicheskaiia mobilizatsiia gagauzov protekala pod flagami russkogo iazyka i vo imia ego sokhraneniia v kachestve natsional'nogo dostoianiia naroda*). At the forefront of efforts for territorial autonomy was Marunevich, who in 1993 published a booklet *Pravda o gagauzskom narode, kak o samobytnom etnose i ego etnicheskoi territorii* ("The Truth about the Gagauzian People, as a Distinct Ethnic Group and Their Ethnic Territory"), asserting that Gagauzians were a separate people (*narod/etnos*), and, therefore, had the right to govern the territory of southern Moldova. Her insistent use of the concept of ethnicity is striking: southern Moldova was not merely Gagauzians' territory, but rather, specifically, Gagauzians' *ethnic* territory. This repeated use of "ethnic" in framing self-determination arguments would imply that populations discursively constructed as ethnicities self-evidently have the right to land and autonomy, whereas heterogeneous communities' such rights would likely not be so unequivocal. There never existed a toponym of "Gagauzia" prior to the Soviet Union's dissolution, and its creation was a direct response to Romanian-framed nationalist policies of the new Republic of Moldova. As discussed, the category "Gagauzian" was

constructed in large part by ethnographers Moshkov and Chakir, and it was first included as a people – *narodnost'* – for the All-Union Soviet Census in 1926 (Hirsch 2005: 329). In the Soviet era, some *korenizatsiia* activity, such as Gagauzian language alphabet creation by Turkologists in Moscow (Pokrovskaia 1964: 8), took place, but with limited reach and resonance. For example, a 1958 Soviet decree that thirty-eight schools in the southern Moldova Soviet Socialist Republic change their language of instruction to Gagauzian was protested by locals for reasons of lack of teacher training, deficient terminology, and as an impediment to access to educational and career opportunity in the greater Russian-speaking Soviet Union; consequently, the decree was reversed in 1961 (Bulgar 2006: 369–375). So, while its implementation and impact were limited, the category of "Gagauzian" had been created, so that in the context of the Soviet Union's collapse, local leaders in Bessarabia were able to draw upon this label. They did so to discursively activate an ethnic/national identity in order to articulate the right to oppose Romanianization policies. Important to note is that the majority of the population of southern Moldova voted to remain in the Soviet Union in the 1991 referendum, coordinated within the larger all-Soviet referendum on the question of preserving the USSR (Angeli 2006: 111–112). In this context, the territorial configuration was originally proclaimed as the Autonomous Gagauzian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1989, then was the Gagauzian Republic 1990–1994, with transition to autonomy within Moldova in December 1994 (Angeli 2006; ATU Gagauzia 2022; GBM 2022; Guboglo 2006).

I discuss this in my first (2020) and third (2022b) publications, but here I highlight more in-depth the power of the currency of "ethnicity" in our modern world. Within the Republic of Moldova, looking at the disparity between the trajectories of Gagauzia and Transnistria can be insightful in thinking about the resonance of ethnically/nationally-framed reasoning. Transnistria, officially (self-called) the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic (*Pridnestrovskaia Moldavskaia Respublika*), is a geopolitical configuration between the borders of Moldova and Ukraine. Like Gagauzia, it has some national-political "content" (Handler 1988) in line with the "cultural grammar of nationhood" (Löfgren 1989), including a flag and anthem, in three official languages (Russian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian). Unlike Gagauzia, it has its own currency, passports, and armed forces. In the midst of the Soviet Union's collapse, Transnistria declared itself an independent state in 1990 and in 1991 created a constitution, Supreme Council (*Verkhovnyi sovet*), and elected a president (Babilunga 2015; MID PMR 2022). Their Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID PMR 2022) describes Transnistria's trajectory as such:

> The formation of the Transnistrian Moldavian Republic was a natural consequence of the processes that began as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union. This was an important decision that reflected the will of the people of Transnistria, as expressed in an all people's (*vsenarodnyi*) referendum and allowing protection of the legitimate interests of Transnistrians, preservation of centuries-old historical and cultural traditions, and ensuring the right of people to

live on the land of their ancestors, providing an opportunity for equal development of all nations (*natsii*) living here.

This articulation is similar to Gagauzia's of the same era, involving claims to a historic homeland, culture, traditions, and the right to self-governance. However, the key difference is that Transnistria makes no claim to being a specific ethnic/national group. While, considering the multifarious factors, it is, of course, impossible to draw any sweeping conclusion on direct correlation, it is nonetheless worth pointing out that Gagauzia achieved territorial autonomy on the basis of rigorously-argued ethnic/national justification, backed up by ethnographic knowledge, whereas Transnistria, lacking any sort of ethnic/national claim, remains a grey zone. Leaders in both regions engaged in similar reactionary activities in the wake of Romanianization policies; however, in Western characterizations, Transnistria is typically described as an "unrecognized state," "de facto," "breakaway," or "separatist" (e.g., O'Loughlin, Kolossov & Toal 2014; Voronovici 2020), while Gagauzia's claims are recognized as legitimate rights of a "minority group" to self-determination. It is possible that this also played a role in the difference in the nature of their trajectories of advancing their claims: Transnistria's conflict elevated to violent conflict throughout 1991–1992 (OSCE 1994), whereas Gagauzia's occurred without violence. The involvement of Turkish president, Süleyman Demirel, played a decisive role in negotiating peace talks in Gagauzia in 1993–1994 (Guboglo 2006, 477; Halk Topluşu 2015), with Gagauzian leaders able to elicit his support, again, by articulating an ethnic/national identity and commonalities with Turkey based on said identity.

An Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) report (1994: 5–6) describes observation of a "Transnistrian identity going beyond ethnic lines," pointing to trans-ethnic ways of experiencing belonging, like values or attachment to space/place. Transnistrian historian Nikolai Babilunga (2015) also makes it clear that Transnistria has always been a multi-national (*mnogonatsional'nyi*) space. Further, it is worth noting that Transnistria, like Gagauzia, has pluralistic language policy, with three official languages – Moldovan, Russian, and Ukrainian – in striking contrast with Moldova, where uncertain policy and disputes regarding the naming of the sole official language – Moldovan or Romanian – lead many locals to simply say "the state language." Indeed, Mikhail Guboglo (2006: 479) suggests that Moldova's failure to embrace pluralistic language policy is a – if not the – key obstacle to dealing with the "Transnistrian problem." Contemplating these differences within one nation-state can help us ponder the hegemonic resonance of the articulation of the ethnic/national and its exclusionary implications, as well as the contingent nature of the existence of territorial configurations: nation-states, autonomous regions, and "unrecognized" republics alike.

Another aspect that bears underscoring in terms of post-Soviet configuration is Gagauzia's embeddedness as an autonomy within the nation-state of Moldova. This means that ultimately the processes that unfold in Gagauzia do so in

the larger context of Moldova. The 1994 *Zakon ob osobom pravovom statuse Gagauzii (Gagauz Eri)* (Law on the Special Legal Status of Gagauzia (Gagauz Eri)) (Halk Toplușu 1994) outlines general conditions of autonomy, stating that Gagauzia has the right to "independently decide questions of political, economic, and cultural development." That being said, Gagauzia's budget is 59% dependent on revenues from the Moldovan state budget (IDIS Viitorul 2016: 10), and any large-scale economic changes impacting Moldova will impact Gagauzia as well, at least to some extent. A key example is the wine and agricultural embargo imposed by Russia on Moldova in 2013, but that through diplomatic talks, bașkan Irina Vlakh succeeded in getting lifted for Gagauzia (Deutsche Welle 2015). Incidentally, in this context, leaders in Gagauzia's neighboring region Taraclia, which has been engaged in stalled initiatives to achieve special status as a Bulgarian community within Moldova since 2015 (Taraclia City Administration 2015), reanimated these efforts, with the intent to approach Russia specifically as *Bulgarians* – and therefore legitimately separate from larger Moldova – in an appeal for lifting the embargo (Gagauzinfo 2016a). This evidences how identity claims, the power of being a named group, are intertwined with economic concerns. Although many farmers and businesses throughout Moldova suffered economically from Russian sanctions (Deutsche Welle 2014), it was through articulation as a named ethno-territorial configuration, not entirely part of the Republic of Moldova, that Gagauzia was able to reverse sanctions. In this context, Gagauzia also held a 2014 referendum on the future of the region's foreign relations, in which 98.4% voted for strengthened ties with Russia/CIS, and 97.2% voted against closer EU integration (RFE/RL 2014). Along with the obvious economic factors involved, the referendum was considered locally as a "vaccine against possible Romanian unification" (Gagauzinfo 2017b), discussed further in the next paragraph. The referendum day is now a public holiday in Gagauzia, People's Unity Day (*Den' narodnogo edinstva*), celebrations of which I observed during fieldwork in 2018.

Another example of Gagauzia's autonomy in decision-making centered around the Moldovan Parliament's 2017 ban on Russian news and informational-analytical channels, which bașkan Vlakh and other Gagauzian political leaders vehemently rejected, asserting that Gagauzia's constitutional right as an autonomy allowed them to control their own access to information and media (Gagauzinfo 2017a). Gagauzian news portal Gagauzinfo (2017a) wrote, "Going against the decision of the Gagauzians will mean that Chișinău gets another Transnistria." Stated in legal codex, and something that I heard evoked a great deal during fieldwork, is that "in the case of a change of the status of the Republic of Moldova as an independent state, the people of Gagauzia have the right to external self-determination" (Halk Toplușu 1994). Although Romanian unification is not named specifically, as mentioned at the start of this section, it was the new Republic of Moldova's adoption of Romanian – not Moldovan – language and symbols in the midst of the Soviet Union's collapse that caused Bessarabian leaders to formulate self-determination plans (Guboglo 2006). Contemporary support for Moldova's unification with Romania certainly exists

in the country, particularly actively and openly advanced by Moldova's Partidului Național Liberal (National Liberal Party (2022)), whose leaders receive attention in Gagauzian news coverage for referring to Gagauzia as "separatist" and drawing parallels with Donbass and Crimea (e.g., Gagauzinfo 2021). In 2016, Romanian political scientist and former governmental advisor, Petrisor Peiu (2016), published a roadmap of reunification of Romania and the Republic of Moldova ("Foaia de parcurs a Reunificarii Romaniei cu R.Moldova") that was followed by waves of pro-unionist marches and discussion in Moldova.

Gagauzia has been able to activate its autonomy in many contexts of disagreement with Chisinau's decisions. However, it is still very much dependent upon Moldova economically and structurally. One example is the issue of education. On one hand, Gagauzia has the right to organize some matters, such as the teaching of two classes that other Moldovan schools do not offer: "Gagauzian language and literature" and "History, traditions, and culture of the Gagauzian people" (cf. Gagauzinfo 2020 for recent debates about combining these into one class). That being said, schools in Gagauzia are still reliant upon the larger national educational structures of Moldova, meaning, for example, that they primarily use Moldovan (Russian-language) schoolbooks, as they lack the resources to create their own. Roma, a history teacher in Comrat, discusses his views on these materials:

> I don't like how ideology itself is taught. How in modern history that's taught to children, the role of Russia, the role of the Soviet Union is taught. There's this extreme excessiveness in modern Moldovan historiography, it has erased everything good that was in our Russian and Soviet past. After all, this region, during the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, it developed so prosperously, so intensively. Moldova would have never been so developed, there would have never been such a high standard of life. But all of this is erased. There's nothing about this, and they left only the repressions of the Soviet times, the famine. And they push this into kids' heads, and the overall picture is that everything was dark, there was nothing good. I don't like this at all. I think that, if being objective, that in Moldavia, where there's not one place to extract metals, not one drop of oil, that at one time it had industry. Here there were factories. They gave education, medicine, the academy of sciences. There was huge agricultural success. The list goes on forever. There's none of that, you understand. There's only the scary Soviet past, angry Stalin. This I regard negatively. Everything needs to be talked about. The bad and the good (Interview April 11, 2018).

To sum up, Gagauzia's positioning involves autonomy in voicing orientation and rights, but it is restricted by economic and structural dependence. Very clear is Gagauzia's stance in that autonomy within Moldova is acceptable only if Moldova remains an independent state. However, as Roma further opined, when discussing the possibility of unification:

> Yes, it's possible. The people won't even be asked about this, by the way. When people start debating with me and saying that, oh, the people don't want this, we

won't go along, I give this example. In 1812 the Russian Empire defeated the Ottoman Empire, and a part of Moldova, Bessarabia, was immediately taken from the Turks. And the other part of Moldova went to Romania. Were the people asked about this? No. In 1918 Romania took this territory back, from the Russian Empire. And my grandfather and grandmother lived under Romanian rule. Were the people asked? No. In 1940 comrade Stalin pounded his fist on the table. He told Romania to return [Bessarabia]. They returned Moldova to the Soviet Union. Were the people asked? No. In 1991 when the Union was collapsing, the people were asked, do you want independence, or do you want to stay in the Soviet Union? 87% of people voted to stay in the Soviet Union. But the opposite was done. The question of Moldova's independence or its unification with Romania will not be decided here, not in Moldova. It will be decided in Bucharest, Washington, Moscow, but not here (Interview April 11, 2018).

Roma's views highlight the asymmetry of the world's power relations. While Gagauzia is often able to successfully negotiate its own rights and interests within Moldova, its economy and legitimacy are very much reliant on maintaining positive diplomatic relations with powerful states such as Russia and Turkey, a salient part of which is dialoguing with their kinship or "big brother" narratives (Holsapple 2020).

3. RESISTING REPRESENTATIONS: COMPLEXITY, PLURALITY, AND DYNAMISM

> The human being is something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable. In overlooking, denying, evading our complexity, we are diminished and we perish; only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves.
> - *Notes of a Native Son* (Baldwin 1955)

> Anyway, let's hope the next century is another kind altogether, one without labels.
> - *When I Lived in Modern Times* (Grant 2000)

In this section, I present the dissertation's theoretical scaffolding in five conceptual clusters, which tie together to contemplate narratives of positionality and navigations of national normativity in contemporary Gagauzia. Readers will find that while I have endeavored to organize the sections cohesively, there is indeed overlap among them, as the discussed concepts and their implications are very much interconnected, in many cases mutually-constitutive. Most generally, the discussion deals with representing – or, more aptly, resisting representing (hooks 1994a) – pluralism, dynamism, and heterogeneity. Taking as starting point that social reality is "too complex, too multisemiotic, too heterogeneous, and cannot be comprehended in terms of the single isolable text, object, or homogenous small group" (Bauman 1983: 156), I endeavor to engage in *desprendimiento* or delinking (Mignolo 2007) from dominant categorizing and generalizing logics of modernity/coloniality. Postabyssal (Santos 2007; Santos & Mendes 2020), decolonial (hooks 1994a; Mignolo & Escobar 2009; Mignolo & Walsh 2018), and pluriversal (Escobar 2018; Reiter 2018) thinking stems from the perspective that the world's inexhaustible diversity cannot be boxed into one epistemology, problematizing hegemony of modern/colonial knowledge that totalizes, simplifies, and erases ways of knowing and being otherwise (Escobar 2007; Fry & Tlostanova 2021; Shotwell 2011).

3.1. Narratives of (Transnational) Positionality: Unpacking (Non)Identity and (Non)Belonging

I always find it challenging, both in academic and personal contexts, to discuss topics of identity and belonging, as the words are used in a wide variety of situations, often in imprecise, unclear, interchangeable ways. As both refer, most broadly, to some sort of negotiation and/or expression of selfhood, which always occurs in dialogue with a wide interplay of ever-changing factors, any attempt to articulate such processes in definitive terms is unproductive. Many consider "identity" to lack analytic power, in large part due to both scholarly and popular undifferentiated overuse (Brubaker & Cooper 2000; Lähdesmäki et

al. 2016). Indeed, with its categorical and absolutist logic of difference, "identity has become a set of implacable statements that suppress, at times, questions about what identity really is for" (Probyn 1996: 9). It can also be argued that there is no "identity" in any capturable, able-to-pin-down sense; rather, there is only "identification," uneven and precarious processes of distinguishing and naming (Balibar 2002: 67–68). "Belonging," then, strives to represent a more complex nexus of factors impacting one's sense of self and place in the world. Individuals can experience belonging in infinitely diverse ways, but belonging is "always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity, which is only a naturalized construction of a particular hegemonic form of power relations" (Yuval-Davis 2006: 199). Belonging, a concept that emerged out of queer and feminist theorizing critical of hegemonic ways of thinking, "captures more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fueled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state" (Probyn 1996: 19). On the other hand, much discourse on group "identity" revolves around such essentialized, static representations (Handler 1994). So, a salient difference between the concepts' usages seems to be that "identity" is a key term in the vernacular idiom of contemporary politics (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 2; Anthias 2002: 496), often articulated at the forefront of national institutions' struggles to manage difference (Bagga-Gupta, Lyngvær Hansen & Feilberg 2017). On the other hand, "belonging" is limited more to scholarly contexts attempting to "emphasize the fluid, unfixed, and processual nature of diverse social and spatial attachments" (Lähdesmäki et al. 2016: 234). At the same time, both are also emic concepts used by people to make sense of their realities.

As an important note, I acknowledge that this focus itself on questions related to being as an individual is not a universal, but rather reflective of modern Western ways of social organization, thinking, and scholarship. Further, it is reflective of my own dilemmas, as I myself have been the data generation tool in this study, which I problematize in-depth in the methodology section. In highlighting the fallacy of treating Western individualistic assumptions as universals, Richard Handler (1994) discusses myriad examples of alternative human orientations, which may not include fundamental aspects of Western models, for instance: physical boundedness of personhood, mind and body dualisms, or usage of personal names. The chosen focus is appropriate for this case study, as my data showed that articulations of identity/identification/ belonging – positionality is the term I opt for below – vis-à-vis national labels is very much at the forefront of access to opportunity, wealth, and mobility in contemporary Gagauzia. This dissertation deals with issues of how self is reflexively constructed and narrated, in dialogue with which frameworks, while recognizing that such processes are characteristic of the post-traditional order of Western modernity (Bauman & Vecchi 2004; Giddens 1991) and that there are plethora ways of being elsewhere that do not reflect the same preoccupation with negotiations and accounts of selfhood.

Fundamental in informing this dissertation has been Nina Yuval-Davis's "politics of belonging" (2006; 2011) that involves:

> struggles around the determination of what is involved in belonging, in being a member of a community, and of what roles specific social locations and specific narratives of identity play in this. As such, it encompasses contestations both in relation to the participatory dimension of citizenship as well as in relation to issues of the status and entitlements such membership entails (Yuval-Davis 2006: 205).

According to these conceptualizations, experiences of belonging are always intersectional, in that an individual cannot be reduced to a single positionality, nor to simply a sum of said positionalities. Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw within critical race theory in 1989 (Crenshaw 2017), addresses the numerous, cross-cutting social positionalities and ideological forces through which inequality is created, maintained, and experienced. Although originally imagined as a "crossroads" of intersecting axes of positionality and oppression, this conceptualization can be critiqued for its additive approach, with Yuval-Davis (2011), for example, arguing that we should in fact see these vectors of positionality and oppression not as differentiated, but as mutually constituting one another.

Belonging is always situated, in that it is experienced and articulated in relation to specific circumstances. In navigating the politics of belonging, individuals exercise agency, but that agency can be limited due to embeddedness in specific frameworks of criteria to belong. As such, discussions of ambivalence (Meloni 2019) and ambiguity (Balibar 2002; Balibar & Wallerstein 1991) are relevant. While Gagauzian locals can often tap into various overlapping narratives on national membership, obtaining corresponding citizenship and/or privileges, they can be in the ambivalent or ambiguous position of not belonging fully to any one by claiming them simultaneously. Further, other factors – for instance, language practices or physical appearance – may serve as obstacles to claiming belonging fully. Like with marginality (discussed in section 3.4), ambivalence and ambiguity can be both constriction and resource.

This dissertation is informed by much literature dealing with identity and belonging. However, I follow Floya Anthias (2002, 2020) in opting to focus on "narratives of location and positionality" in recognition that any discussion of identity and belonging, even if qualified as multivalent, situational, ambivalent, etc. still carries essentialist baggage in that it implies possession, often working to draw our attention away from context and practice.

> There are race claims, but this does not require us to argue that it is race itself that accounts for the claims. For social analysis, there must be an interrogation of the conditions that relate to the modes of production, reproduction and transformation of the social ontologies we use (such as those of identity, particularly in the sense of collective identity). If we start with assumptions of the generic importance of identities of particular kinds, this disables the analysis of parti-

cular practices and performances in relational and processual terms (Anthias 2002: 494).

This has parallels in Brubaker's (2004) critique of the assumed existence of, and therefore analytical starting point, of groups: instead of assuming collectivities as self-evident, we should pay attention to how group labels are drawn upon (or not) in specific contexts. Such a lens allows us to look beyond the "rhetoric of sameness" (Antonsich 2010: 650) to give attention to attachments, or "year-nings" (hooks 1994a; Probyn 1996) for attachments, that do not necessarily imply uniformity, likeness, or consistency.

What's more, very applicable to the overlapping positionality narratives I encountered in Gagauzia is the concept of the "translocational," which re-cognizes that "issues of exclusion, political mobilization on the basis of collective identity and narrations of belonging and otherness cannot be addressed adequately unless they are located within other constructions of difference and identity" (Anthias 2002: 502). Central to this dissertation is looking at how positionalities are entangled within bordering practices and inequalities (Anthias 2020; Yuval-Davis 2006; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019). In the Gagauzian case, these topics are especially acute due to the region's historic and present-day borderlands positionality on the fringes of various empires' and nation-states' belonging-related rhetoric and policy (Holsapple 2020), as well as its contemporary poverty and dependence upon remittances.

3.2. Modernity/Coloniality and Abyssal Thinking

This dissertation deals with the hegemony of Western/European modernity that denies the existence of other modernities (however they might be envisioned or defined). Modernity, both a temporal and spatial construct, is a "Western export product," for "non-Western cultures or civilization are not modern unless they *become* modern by adopting features of Western modernity" (Anttonen 2005: 30). This "European patent on modernity" (Quijano 2000: 543) involves an evolutionary framework of humanity with dichotomies of traditional, primitive vs. advanced, civilized. This dissertation takes as an underlying position the duality of Western modernity and coloniality, as inseparable, mutually-cons-tituted logics and power matrices (Borsani & Quintero 2014; Galeano 1971; Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2001, 2003a, 2007, 2011; Mignolo & Escobar 2009; Mignolo & Walsh 2018; Reiter 2018; Palmer 2018; Shilliam 2011; Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012). While Eurocentric imaginings characterize modernity in terms of notions of emancipation, rationality, development, and progress, viewpoints from peripheral loci of enunciation (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012) lay bare the massacre, enslavement, and oppression of those constructed as obstacles to modernity's advance, "all of them victims of an irrational act that contradicts modernity's ideal of rationality" (Dussel, Krauel & Tuma 2000: 473). Such a starting point problematizes how totalizing, exclusionary modern

frameworks of thought and practice work to make certain histories and realities invisible, that is, render them as "no place" (Brown 2004) or "no language" (Holsapple 2022a). Kate Brown describes this process in the *kresy* – "no place" – a peripheral borderland between historic Poland and Russia, maintaining:

> The fact that the former borderlands are now part of a decisively Ukrainian nation-space offers a poignant illustration of how the process of nation-building can exile difference to the margins of social consciousness and public memory. The generalizing, standardizing efforts of modern governance have engendered an impatience for the kind of social complexity, local nuance, and hybrid cultures that made the *kresy* at the beginning of the century a puzzling and engaging place (2004:14).

As discussed in the previous section, the project of modernity has involved historically, and continues to involve, efforts to taxonify and generally control within specific boundaries (Wallerstein 2000: 170–184), rendering other forms of knowledge or perspectives of reality non-existent or inferior. Eurasian borderlands like what-is-today Gagauzia were colonized by "Janus-faced" (Tlostanova 2003) "secondary empires of modernity" or "subaltern empires" (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012). That is, they were:

> ...colonized not directly by the Western capitalist empires but by the second-class empire, which was itself epistemically and culturally colonized by the West and, thus, acted as a mediator of Western modernity, albeit in distorted forms. As a result, [...] colonies of a second-class empire took a specific doubly subaltern space in the complex global power structure (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012: 92).

This was the case for those that ruled what-is-today Gagauzia – Imperial Russia (Hoffmann & Kotsonis 2000; Tlostanova 2003), Romania (Bucur 2002; Solonari 2002, 2006, 2007), and the Soviet Union (Hirsch 2005; Hoffmann & Kotsonis 2000; Tlostanova 2015), as, though distinctive in their specific manifestations, all made "second-hand" use of Western models of cultural, ideological, and epistemic categories and practices – in great part reliant on legitimizing dichotomies of civilized/backwards – in reordering society. The Soviet Union's structuring along the lines of constructed nations (Martin 2001), for example, was based largely on generation of ethnographic knowledge, begun in Imperial Russia, modeled after Western European colonial contexts (Hirsch 2005). That being said, while recognizing this entanglement within Western modernity, the adopted categories and practices were transformed into their own specific versions when made use of in particular, situated contexts:

> The Soviet Union took shape through a process of selective borrowing, [...] the transmission of ideas and practices from the West into the Soviet Union; the efforts of Soviet leaders, experts, and local elites to redefine those ideas and practices to pursue specific, and sometimes competing, agendas; and the

> "activation" of those ideas and practices "on the ground" among different
> population groups (Hirsch 2005: 5).

Further, interwar Romania's focus on social engineering and population policy,
with its "eugenic solution" (Bucur 2002), involving ethnic cleansing atrocities
in the context of Bessarabia (Solonari 2002, 2006, 2007), and, indeed, the larger
Holocaust itself (Bauman 1989), were very much rooted in Western moder-
nity's imaginings of homogeneous nation-spaces and fixation on reordering
social reality.

Potent for thinking about the modernity/coloniality duality is the metaphor
of the abyss, as a divider that separates legitimate, recognized realities from
their rendered-invisible counterparts: all practices and forms of existence that
both hold up the other side of the abyss, while also made irrelevant/invisible
through its universalizing logic. "Modern Western thinking is an abyssal
thinking" (Santos 2007 45), in that it engages in justifying and/or making
irrelevant patterns of inequality, asymmetry, and exploitation (Dussel, Krauel &
Tuma 2000). The abyss is a powerful imaginary for thinking about the nor-
malized inequality that characterizes our modern world, as it evokes notions of
an absolute void of human connectedness. It carries associations of damnation,
with parallels in Frantz Fanon's (1961) articulation of *Les Damnés de la Terre*
(The Wretched of the Earth). As a metaphor, "the abyss" is drawn upon in
literature often to convey parallel, interdependent yet polar-opposite realities.
Pilar Quintana's (2021) novel *Los abismos* (The Abysses), for instance, deals
with the interface of realities divided by abyssal thinking that manifests in the
mutual constituency of, on one hand, public presentation of a functional family
and, on the other, the hidden normalization of domestic misery and violence.
Our contemporary world is organized according to this dualism, which means
that legal principles, ethical considerations, and self-congratulatory professions
of supposedly-universal democracy, equality, human rights etc. do not apply for
an enormous portion of the world's population – on the other side of the abyss.
Historically, this has been the case largely for colonized regions. Eduardo
Galeano's definitive *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (The Open Veins of
Latin America) addresses colonial exploitation creating the abyss between the
wellbeing of few and the misery of many in Latin America ("*el abismo que en
América Latina se abre entre el bienestar de pocos y la desgracia de muchos*"
(1971: 156)). However, the same frameworks are in place today, with "globali-
zation as continuing colonialism" (Mikander 2016), evidenced by modernity's
production of "human waste" (Bauman 2004) or the "dispensable" (Mignolo
2012) populations radically excluded from modernity's definition of humanity.
"Modern humanity is not conceivable without modern subhumanity. The
negation of one part of humanity is sacrificial, in that it is the condition of the
affirmation of that other part of humanity which considers itself universal"
(Santos 2007: 52), and it is this dividing logic that means "human principles do
not become compromised by inhuman practices" (53). Zygmunt Bauman con-

ceptualizes contemporary social inequality, marginalization, and human suffering in terms of "collateral damage":

> Thinking in terms of collateral damage tacitly assumes an *already existing inequality* of rights and chances, while accepting a priori the unequal distribution of the costs of undertaking (or for that matter desisting from) action (2011: 5 – emphasis original).

This taken-for-granted aspect underpins modern systems of and attitudes towards inequality, as an enormous segment of the world's population is simply made invisible or irrelevant through discourses of difference and unworthiness. Contemporary abyssal thinking is most obvious in well-known heinous manifestations such as Guantánamo, a clear example of a legal and ethical non-zone (Santos 2007: 53), but also in the structures that facilitate contemporary slavery, often manifesting in tandem with statelessness and other citizenship-related circumstances (Bloom & Kingston 2021; Gordon 2020). Abyssal thinking is inherent to modern consumerist production and outsourcing of migrant labor, as I will address in the Gagauzian case in section 3.5. Asking how, by whom, and in what conditions the cotton that comes into contact with our bodies constantly throughout our lives is produced (Kunelius 2021) is a simple way to begin thinking about the abyssal thinking that characterizes our modern world. This relates directly to the Gagauzian case, as an enormous part of the population is constantly engaged as migrant workforce in similar patterns of receiving abominably disparate wages to facilitate the consumption and retention of wealth of those in circumstances of privilege.

The immoral behavior or conditions – especially when not immediate/visible – that characterize abyssal frameworks are easily rationalized or ignored, in large part thanks to modernity's categorizing, as application of labels often works to render others as different and therefore outside the "universe of obligation" (Fein 1979). National categorizing would have us deny our complex interconnectedness (Tsing 2004) and positionalities as individuals in a global community, instead fostering thinking in terms of borders (Balibar 2002: 75–86). Modernity's nation-state formations accord more or less worth to certain lives depending on their national affiliation, which I address in the coming subsections. The legacies of subaltern positionality (doubly subaltern, Tlostanova (2015) might argue, viewing the Russian, Romanian, and Soviet powers as themselves subaltern in relation to other empires) throughout the past century are evident in contemporary Gagauzia, where locals navigate abyssal cartography within massive outsourcing of labor through *gasterbaiterstvo,* low-work migrant work patterns, referred to as such in Gagauzia and beyond (e.g., Dubova 2006).

Perhaps the idea of an abyss seems too abstract, so I will provide assorted concrete examples. A film I saw in last year's PÖFF annual cinematic festival in Tartu, *When Pomegranates Howl* (Granaz Moussavi, 2021), based on events of 2013, narrates the "collateral damage" (Bauman 2011) of young boys in Afghanistan killed by NATO helicopters. The film closes with footage of Australian

Defense Minister Stephen Smith explaining that the boys' families will be compensated, but in hundreds of dollars, certainly not thousands, considering the region's economic poverty. This is abyssal thinking. Human beings with the misfortune of being born in impoverished, often war-torn parts of the world do not have the same worth as human beings born in developed, affluent nation-states. Lionel Shriver's *So Much for That* (2010) deals with the same issue of the worth of a human life, but from the point of view of privileged individuals in the United States paying exorbitant sums – amounts that exceed the GDP of many impoverished countries, they point out – on trial treatments in vain hopes of prolonging the life of one American with terminal cancer. Increasingly, abyssal thinking is at the forefront of much contemporary governmental policy and mediatic commentary reflecting disparity in treatment of different refugees, grossly skin-deep, in which certain humans fleeing abominable circumstances are subject to suspicion, xenophobia, detention centers, and threatened repatriation, while others – imagined and discoursed as being "like us" – are exempted from the entire asylum system itself and welcomed with solidarity and privilege (John 2022; Saifi 2022). Journalist Arwa Damon (2022) poignantly comments:

> How do you tell someone their life is not part of a geopolitical calculus, that in the grand scheme of the puppet masters their life is not worth all that much? We are painfully seeing that refugees are selectively welcomed, and war criminals are selectively punished. It's not just the western media that is biased; it's the western world. I hear it in the rhetoric coming out of from politicians, journalists and global leaders. Rhetoric about how Ukrainians are a "prosperous middle-class people," "the family next door," "civilized." As if what is defined as a human worth saving is identified by the color of their skin, the language they speak, the religion they practice or where they were born.

3.3. The Formula of the Nation-State

In endeavoring to explore positionalities and colonial/modern frameworks of inequality in contemporary Gagauzia, this dissertation takes as one of its most basic points of departure problematization of the nation-state. The manifold issues scrutinized in the framework of this project, both in terms of lived experience, as well as methodological research concerns, all thread back to the Gordian knot of the nation-state and consequent patterns of abyssal asymmetry and bordering – in the broad sense of the term, meaning not only control of movement but other cultural, economic, political, and social activities, aimed at determining who belongs and who does not (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019) – carried out within nation-state frameworks. The categorizing and homogenizing effects of nation-state ideology (Anttonen 2005: 81–94) mean that diversity is normatively viewed as anomalous, often problematic, and deserving of scholarly attention (Brown 2004; Heller 2011), with the management of diversity a key preoccupation of nation-state organization. Any attempt to attend to "diversity" can never be unlinked from dimensions of inequality

(DocWerkers 2021), as "diversity" implies practices or traits ill-fitting within normative imaginings of nation-states as cohesive. Modern social organization largely relies on a language-culture-nation ideological nexus (Heller & Duchêne 2008; Laine & Casaglia 2017), involving maintenance of these corresponding units, characterized by persistent patterns of oppression (Bauman & Briggs 2003). Language is a particularly powerful fulcrum for maintaining frameworks of asymmetry, and, indeed, diversity in the form of "multilingualism" evokes immense interest research- and policy-wise, while monolingualism is exceedingly rarely problematized (Gramling 2016).

This dissertation critiques the coloniality of the formula of nation by drawing attention to how the concept and lens of national (re)arrange individuals' lives and patterns of experiencing and articulating belonging, in some cases working to displace local, ambiguous identities. Structures of modernity work to make the world demographically simpler and demarcate clear-cut identities by obligating individuals to identify in relation to nation-spaces. This is the case in terms of my observations in Gagauzia and in my own life too, for how often am I allowed to simply identify freely, without being obligated to list a national affiliation? I go into this in detail in the autoethnographic section, but in short, in my experience, nation-state ideology does continue to dominate normative articulations of identity. This is inherently problematic, as it locks individuals into arborescent (Malkki 1992; Bonfiglio 2010) frameworks of positionality. It means that individuals in most situations are not free to choose to frame their identities in relation to other facets of self, but rather a nation-state attachment – an aleatory status assigned either by birth or blood, rather than by choice or consent – is normatively framed as the most important and immediate aspect categorizing who you are. The view from the margins that I began to grasp in Gagauzia, which made apparent the asymmetrical aspects of national identifications, challenged me to view individuals without a national lens, or at least not foremost through a national lens. A key argument of this dissertation is that we need to disinvent, denaturalize, and delink (Mignolo 2007) from the lens of nation, a conceptual prism that works to essentialize and totalize positionalities.

In delinking, we can problematize how development of national (and, by extension, typically linguistic and territorial) categories can be circumstantial, with the Gagauzian case showing that often the name precludes the existence of that which it describes. Due to a conglomeration of specific circumstances, foremost related to the power of the formula of national/ethnic, Gagauzian "groupness" crystallized (Brubaker 2004) in the midst of the Soviet Union's collapse, but it could have easily failed to do so. For five days in 1906, a result of a peasant uprising in the context of the First Russian Revolution, there existed a self-proclaimed Republic of Comrat (Bulgar 2008: 83–102). In this context, before Chakir's and Moshkov's initiatives to solidify the concept and boundaries of Gagauzian, local leaders articulated groupness in relation to the name of the city, rather than in exclusionary ethnic/national terms. Groupness as "Comrat" was evoked in this specific context, and if history had played out differently, perhaps today "Comratian" would be a category that people use to

describe an ethnicity, language, or political entity, as well as their feelings of identity or belonging. This draws attention to the contingent trajectory of naming pathways and (discursive) manifestation of collectivities, for there are many possible ways to name things and create realities accordingly. As discussed in the first section, success in achieving autonomy specifically as an ethnic group draws attention to the "right" way of naming things (Spotti 2018) in order for claims to have weight in particular ideological matrices, in this case that of nation.

3.4. Marginality, In-between-ness, and Border-thinking

In the most basic terms, marginal refers to not being the center. And as, by definition, the center defines the margins (Bagga-Gupta 2017), notions of marginality typically deal with patterns of exclusion and unequal access to resources. An aspect of marginality often has to do with being (un)able to articulate location within binary imaginaries, for – as I have tried to demonstrate in previous sections – such articulations are often necessary for achieving recognition, rights, or privilege (Green 2005). As I described in the chapter's opening, I frequently observed this ambiguity in Gagauzia as manifesting in shifting or overlapping articulations of affiliation and/or sameness vs. difference. In some cases, "Gagauzian" was the same as "Bulgarian." "Us" could make reference to various centers: Gagauzian, Moldovan, Russian, Soviet, but it could also be a general reference to the local community, without a specific name. In the first publication of this dissertation (Holsapple 2020), I argue that narratives of belonging in Gagauzia are in-between the normative, dominant categories of nation, culture, and language, in large part due to geopolitical positioning. The region that today is Gagauzia has never been a seat of power, but rather a periphery, on the receiving end of various hegemonic entities' endeavors to proselytize, rule, taxonify, and generally make comprehensible in line with Western modernity's notions of demographic and geographic organization. Gagauzian locals today are included in various political entities' rhetoric and policies on belonging, yet ambiguously, as a sort of grey zone. Jurisdiction over them is claimed as a mode of legitimizing imperialistic legacies and/or pursuits, yet in a way that does not grant titular-identity status of the given polities. That is, they are claimed on the fringes, rather than relative to the center of power, thereby at once included and excluded in discourses on belonging to these nation-states. "Can one be simultaneously inside and outside the state? This is the dilemma of marginality," (1993: 26) professes Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, who uses the term to discuss "distinctive and unequal subject positions within common fields of power and knowledge" (1993: xi). Notions of marginality are relevant to the concentric patterns of power of this case study. Gagauzia is not a center of power within Moldova, and Moldova itself is also very much on the margins of various hegemonic world systems and agendas.

This dissertation takes a twofold approach in contributing to studies of marginality. It shows how marginality has been and continues to be produced in present-day Gagauzia as a result of its doubly subaltern positionality, both within Moldova and considering Moldova itself in the global order. But it also highlights how locals engage with, renegotiate, and contest marginality, to some extent destabilizing the asymmetry of the modern world's abyssal lines. It shows how marginality can be experienced as both constriction and resource. Naming pathways and outside rhetoric on belonging do not have unquestioned hegemony, as they are manipulated and reinterpreted by locals and other actors. However, the circumstances of negotiation are asymmetrical, as Gagauzian locals are frequently dependent upon given discourses to access opportunity. While hegemonic structures urge us to "see like a state," this dissertation finds resonance with efforts to "see like a border" (Laine & Casaglia 2017; Rumford 2011), in privileging marginal loci of enunciation that both challenge the assumed linkage of state, territory, citizenship, language, and notions of identity/culture and also make particularly visible patterns of inequality. These realities often go unrecognized due to the asymmetry of modern knowledge production and dissemination, in which centers (whether conceptualized as the Global North, the West, or otherwise) typically remain ignorant of happenings in the margins, but the opposite is never allowed (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, & Koobak 2016). Marginal loci of enunciation, therefore, are insightful, for:

> A view from the border highlights the contradictions and imperfections in the grand narratives of nations and states. It shows that the rhetoric of the state becomes problematic at its edges and that along borders nationalizing policies are regularly defeated, ignored, or redirected (Pelkmans 2006: 215).

This kind of border thinking (Mignolo 1999; Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, & Koobak 2016) is vital to decolonial (research and beyond) practice, as a way of dealing with patterns of marginalization and asymmetrical power structures.

3.4.1. Marginality through the Prism of Language Practices

> Perhaps it is so that all languages are finally, foreign languages, alien to our animal being. But in a way that is, precisely, inarticulate, inarticulable, English does not feel to me like a resting place, a home. It just happens to be a language over whose resources I have some mastery. My case can certainly not be unique. There must be many who command other languages only imperfectly, yet who, as they listen to themselves speak or as they read what they have written, have the uneasy feeling that there is something false going on.
> - *Diary of a Bad Year* (Coetzee 2007)

> Was it possible to live outside language? Naturally, this question did not address itself to her in words, or as a single lucid sentence. It addressed itself to her as a soundless, embryonic howl.
> - *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (Roy 2017)

Marginal positionality is especially evident when considered through the prism of speech practices, as an interviewee, twenty-year-old Nelia from the village Copceac, shares:

> So it works out that I know Gagauzian, but not fluently! Russian, also not fluently! Russian, I understand everything perfectly! And I speak… not perfectly! It works out for me… I'm thinking in Gagauzian, then I switch to Russian… everything is mixed up for me! And it works out that I can't think or speak purely in Gagauzian. It's interspersed with Russian (Interview March 27, 2018).

So how does this individual fit into modernity's clear-cut categories and bounded identity boxes, in this case of "native language?" In discussing her complexes when speaking both Gagauzian and Russian, Nelia explains that she is viewed and positioned – and, as a result, often views and positions herself (intertwined being seen and seeing of self (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009) or internalizing representations (hooks 1994a)) – as an incompetent speaker, regardless of lifelong engagement in complex, multilingual and translingual communication strategies. Her ways of communicating do not fulfill normative imaginings of "native language" that fetishize supposedly homogenous, uniform speech practices that adhere to norms legitimized by a center of power as "standard" (Bonfiglio 2010; Gramling 2016; García et al. 2021; Hymes 1992). This process of marginalization – of having one's "natural" (Anzaldúa 1987) languaging – referring to dynamic activity, in contrast with notions of fixed, definable "language" (Becker 1991) – constructed as "wrong" – is a clear example of the project of modernity's preoccupation with control of diversity, of "weeding out" (Bauman 1989) those ways of being that do not fit artificially-constructed monolithic categories. Local practices in Gagauzia, in this case communicative patterns, when held up to the benchmark of modernity's universalizing units of existence like standard language, can fall short. That is, they are perceived – both internally and externally – as lagging or non-modern. Precisely for this reason, peripheral regions like Gagauzia should be loci of enunciation (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012) for confronting the coloniality/ modernity nexus.

One interviewee, Valentin, a cameraman for a local news agency, explained that when autonomy claims were first made in the 1990s, he remembers people in Comrat showing enthusiasm for speaking Gagauzian. He even co-authored and acted in plays for a short-lived Gagauzian theater initiative. However, as he tells it, soon reality set in: people realized that there was no potential for Gagauzian, that it lacked terminology for use in non-domestic settings, that it had no use beyond southern Moldova.

> So people understood that there was no need to study this language. And it all went the other way. Now we've become more Russian-speaking. I'll even tell you this, in those villages, where people used to know Gagauzian, today they don't. They've forgotten names and meanings of some words. It's being lost

even there. And I'll tell you again, the outward migration has impacted our people. They themselves switched to speaking Turkish. [...] Today, in general, with the opportunities there are in Gagauzia, it's not possible to use our native language. So we replace it. Add to this that many have forgotten it. The connection is lost. Many people left for Russian. They return, converse in Russian because they already don't know Gagauzian, and it's uncomfortable to communicate that way, with much forgotten (Interview April 17, 2018).

Valentin highlights massive out-migration as a salient factor impacting local language practices, a phenomenon which Gagauzian ethnologist Mikhail Guboglo also discusses in terms of "ethnocultural degradation," loss of identity, and destruction of traditional values (2006: 381). Valentin goes on to discuss his doubt about the possibility of revitalization of Gagauzian:

But unfortunately, there is no interest at all among young people. It's all very tragic! Maybe a [educational] system is needed. But again, in my opinion, this can all end in chaos. Each teacher can interpret some words, expressions, and terminology within their subject in their own way. It will be chaos. That's why scientists, academics, writers here should develop a standard format. These days there's a lot of singers performing songs in Gagauzian. And you listen to them, and you feel that something in the pronunciation is wrong. But nobody corrects them. And this song stays in people's consciousness. The word now sounds this way and that's it. We ourselves don't know the difference (Interview April 17, 2018).

Valentin expresses that he does not see how the varying, non-uniform speech practices now grouped together as Gagauzian "language" could be used in contexts of standard education. Like with Nelia's narratives above, here complexity and non-homogeneity of local communication patterns are constructed as problematic, falling short of the monolithic construct of "language." Further, Valentin draws attention to the bricolage of any linguistic practices, constantly changing in interplay with a wide variety of factors, particularly in a globalized world with transnational populations. However, he presents "borrowing" words or pronunciation from Turkish negatively, voicing his concerns that, without a codified standard, people are unsure how to speak "correctly." Through such commentary surrounding language comes to light center vs. margins dynamics. Turkish and Russian, as codified languages corresponding to powerful nation-states, are centers that contribute to processes of defining – and marginalizing – communicative practices in Gagauzia.

3.5. The Coloniality of Citizenship

As explored in-depth in the first publication of this dissertation, during my fieldwork citizenship emerged as a salient facet of issues of positionality and belonging in Gagauzia. Almost everyone I encountered had at least a second passport, with citizenship applications – primarily for Russia, Bulgaria, and less

frequently Romania – recurring topics of conversation in quotidian life. My first publication (Holsapple 2020) deals with the contemporary politics of belonging connected to navigation of these citizenship regimes, and here I delve more deeply into their entanglement with larger frameworks of global inequality and legacies of coloniality, showing how contemporary evocation of ethnic/national categories are tied up in navigating the capitalist, market-economy, neoliberal (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019) system and its accompanying abyssal lines.

As discussed, the ethnic/national lens is a form of imperialism that delegitimatizes other ways of conceiving of human beings and identities. Further, it is closely interconnected with the world's distribution of labor and wealth. As is pointed out particularly in regards to the North/South dynamic (Boatcă 2021), asymmetry becomes especially evident when we turn attention to issues of citizenship, a form of classification among the factors that most decisively determine an individual's access to wealth and privilege (Carens 1987; Shachar 2003, 2009; Korzeniewicz & Moran 2009; Korzeniewicz 2011; Yuval-Davis 2011). Borders are polysemic (Balibar 2002: 79), in that they exist differently depending on an individual's national affiliation. The Gagauzian case puts into sharp relief the world's asymmetrical conditions of (im)mobility (Bloom & Kingston 2021; De Fina & Mazzaferro 2021), namely how the right to cross political borders – and by extension, to opportunity and entitlement – is overwhelmingly determined by citizenship, which, in turn, is interlinked with discourses on identity/belonging. Discussing the massive phenomenon of *gasterbaiterstvo* (Dubova 2006), export of the workforce from Moldova generally, and specifically Gagauzia, ethnologist Mikhail Guboglo (2006) describes endless lines for biometric passports to go abroad, empty homes, children growing up without parents, elderly left without care. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (2021) states that almost a quarter of Moldova's population works abroad, with labor outflow primarily from rural areas. The International Organization for Migration (2022) highlights widespread poverty, extreme reliance upon remittances (earning of which has been negatively impacted by the recent pandemic), and human trafficking as severe migration-related issues impacting the country. Indeed, my many field partners who exerted the agency to navigate the time-consuming, invasive, expensive bureaucratic ordeals of obtaining additional passports did not do so out of some desire to prove their national/ethnic identities. They did so in order to considerably better their prospects for obtaining work and/or other opportunities abroad. In discussing the contrast between Turkey's showy humanitarian and ideological projects implemented in Gagauzia vs. the lack of social protection faced by migrant workers from Gagauzia in Turkey, Alexia Bloch points out that "the poorly paid, largely female post-Soviet labor force in Turkey is a key part of the story of Turkey becoming a global force, capable of flexing its 'soft' power, but also relying on newly mobile, flexible labor" (2017: 50).

Data mapping changes in global occupational stratification (Korzeniewicz & Moran 2009) show that for populations in most countries of the world, migra-

tion is the most effective strategy for material and social mobility, with the discrepancy in compensation between countries often sufficiently considerable for individuals to leave behind professional status in their countries of origin for unskilled work abroad. Certainly, I observed this tendency in Gagauzia, where, for instance, school teachers might go abroad to work in construction, or accountants might work outside Moldova as cleaners. Along with this acceptance of new occupational identities, these individuals frequently discursively activated specific narratives on new/additional ethnic/national positionality as well. In order to less riskily pursue work opportunities in the European Union, it is immensely beneficial to cross borders with a European Union passport. To obtain a European Union passport, many, for example, comply with Bulgaria's official policy claiming Gagauzians to be of Bulgarian origin and thereby granting them citizenship. That is, they accept and/or activate – at least discursively – identification as Bulgarians for the purposes of improving their life circumstances. The topic of access to European citizenship is often brought up in discussions on Romanian unification as well, with pro-Romanian sentiment seen as a "pragmatic" orientation (Gagauzinfo 2011) in relation to Moldova's economic poverty. The pro-unionist Moldovan National Liberal Party's (2022) campaign efforts in Gagauzia reported locating many allegedly eager to receive Romanian passports, and the aforementioned Petrisor Peiu (2016) asserts that while he recognizes not all in Moldova support unification, it is allegedly their only hope to access the European Union and the accompanying improved life circumstances. So, here comes to light how modern, global frameworks of distribution of wealth and privilege are closely intertwined with and can shape individual experiences of translocational positionality. In this section, I have tried to highlight that individuals "discursively accept or activate" certain identifications, but this does not necessarily imply – and nor does it negate – a correlation to identity/belonging-related affect or experiences. It is more appropriate to see narratives as a type of social action, instead of some unambiguous representation of reality:

> ...narratives are produced in relation to socially available and hegemonic discourses and practices. These operate within the social context that the narrator finds themselves and cannot be depicted as representing the articulation of 'meaning'. Such narrations fulfil a range of social and personal goals and have to be seen in their intersubjective context – who they are narrated to and what the narration is seen to be about" (Anthias 2002: 511).

That being said, Alexia Bloch's ethnographies (2014, 2017) show how Moldovan, among them Gagauzian, migrants often voice feelings of being "mobile non-citizens," despite perhaps having assorted passports. My observations and interview data show that for many in Gagauzia, ethnicity/nationality, as claimed in order to access citizenship, rather than being seen as simple fact or unchangeable reality, is viewed and employed as a strategic resource for

navigating access to opportunity within the world's abyssal frameworks. This is a reality throughout many other parts of the world, in which:

> [...]former colonial citizenships have partly been turned into bargaining currency in an unequal worldwide distribution of goods and rights, among which mobility rights necessary for migrating to better economic prospects rank very high (Boatcă 2021: 14).

4. METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CONCERNS

As described in each publication, this dissertation engages with ethnographic data generated during two stays in Gagauzia: nine months in 2015–16 and a return visit of three months in 2018. During both, I lived with a multigenerational family and took active part in quotidian life, striving to privilege the mundane. Throughout the two semesters of my first visit, I worked as an assistant within the Foreign Languages department of Comrat State University, and during my second stay, I carried out fifteen semi-structured interviews with locals on topics related to the politics of belonging, particularly ethnic/national labels, language use and ideologies, and citizenship practices. My 2015–16 stay was not for specific researcher purposes, and I address this "accidental ethnography" in section 4.2. Although I originally had planned return visits, they were hampered by the pandemic. Nonetheless, I have stayed in touch with my field partners virtually, generating data despite not being able to travel.

4.1. Autoethnography as Decolonial Research Practice

> Por supuesto, yo podía estar malinterpretando toda la situación. Tampoco sería raro o inusual, claro, pues en ésas nos pasamos todo el tiempo: malinterpretando a los otros, leyéndolos en clave equivocada, intentando dar el salto hacia ellos y luego cayendo al vacío. No hay manera de saber realmente lo que les pasa por dentro, aunque la ilusión sea tan atractiva: todo el tiempo se abren entre nosotros y los demás vacíos inabarcables, y el espejismo de la comprensión o la empatía es sólo eso, un espejismo. Estamos todos encerrados en nuestra propia experiencia incomunicable.
> - *La forma de las ruinas* (Vásquez 2015)[2]

I include this quote to problematize that I myself, as researcher, have been the data generation tool of this dissertation. I have had hegemony on what has been made salient, given attention, and constructed as knowledge according to my own, ever-changing ways of viewing and experiencing the world, interacting with others, and interpreting those interactions. Therefore, examination of my own positionality and practices is essential to provide context for the data and arguments of this dissertation. I am upfront that, not uncoincidentally, there is much overlap between my ethnographic and *auto*ethnographic findings, and I am apt to agree with Edmund Leach's (1984: 22) characterization of fieldwork data as "a kind of harmonic projection of the observer's own personality."

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[2] Of course, I could be misinterpreting the situation. We spend most of our time doing that: misinterpreting others, reading them in the wrong key, trying to take a leap towards them and then falling into the abyss. There is no real way to know what goes on inside, no matter how attractive the illusion may be: all the time vast spaces open between us and others, and the mirage of comprehension or empathy is just that, a mirage. We are all enclosed in our own incommunicable experience (The Shape of the Ruins (Vásquez 2015)).

Identity, belonging, national labeling, and languaging are topics that preoccupy me a great deal in my own negotiations of lived experience, and it is unsurprising that these were also the facets of life that stood out as most relevant to me during my field experiences. This dissertation focuses on in-between-ness, both that of Gagauzian locals' positionalities and identities, and, inevitably, of my own as well.

The ideas set out in the prior theory section are not merely abstract, but are related directly to me, as researcher and as individual. Engagement in the decolonial project, construction of the pluriverse, inhabiting the in-between – cannot just be theoretical. They must be conscious decisions and purposeful endeavors that guide research methodology. Critical self-scrutiny of one's own positionality and practices is imperative: researchers have to start with ourselves and how our gazes are constituted. What is my worldview as researcher? How have I been informed and shaped by theoretical traditions and conceptualizations? Whose voices are heard in my study? I view autoethnography as decolonial methodological practice (Holmes, Reynolds & Ganassin 2022; Phipps 2019), in that by laying bare myself to critical scrutiny, I attempt to question and decenter my own power. When we obligate ourselves to scrutinize our own ways of being, perceiving, and experiencing, we can begin to question how our positionalities are intertwined with asymmetrical human conditions.

A salient aspect of decolonial practice is asking "Why?" In the context of research endeavors, how and why does one become an agent of academic knowledge production? Why did I pursue a research project in Gagauzia in the first place? The most sincere and straightforward answer is simply that I enjoyed living in Gagauzia and feeling myself to be a part of the community there. It seemed an obvious choice to capitalize on the many scholarships, grants, and research initiatives offered through European Union institutions and available to those able to navigate their demanding, specific application processes in order to continue living in Gagauzia and do something stimulating. I felt that I belonged, not in terms of relating to or claiming any named identity category – ethnicity, origin, religion, etc. – or some feeling of being "the same as" others, but belonging in the sense that I felt fulfilled and engaged with my life. I loved my daily routines, interactions, and relationships, and I soaked in my friends' categorizations of me as "*nash chelovek*" and "*svoia*." On one hand, much of my everyday life involved a giving up of power (Phipps 2019), or a conscious lived practice of interaction (hooks 1994a: 287), that should be part of decolonial research practice, with an eye to disrupting observer/observed binaries. I often found myself navigating "uncomfortable" situations – ranging from close contact with bodily functions, afflictions, and death, to lack of creature comforts, to familial conflicts – because I was not in charge. Rather, my local family and friends' routines, responsibilities, and circumstances determined my own activities. I do feel that, in this regard, my experiences went beyond scratching the surface in terms of participating in local realities. To a fair extent, I believe I engaged in folkloristic "humble theory" of "being near the ground" (Noyes 2016) in my practice, in that far from seeing or positioning myself fore-

most as an academic or researcher, I was eager to immerse myself in local realities. On the other hand, though, I am cognizant that any claim to some sort of giving up of power was partial, situational, and temporary. I have to be upfront that, as an outsider connected with and supported financially by a university in the European Union, maybe to some extent I could be "*svoia*" in terms of outlook or behavior, but I was in an extremely different position from most of the people I interacted with in terms of access to wealth, opportunity, mobility, and privilege. This asymmetry cannot be ignored, and it goes towards supporting the arguments of this dissertation in regards to the matrices of power within which we all live and negotiate issues of identity and belonging and also within which knowledge production processes, like my PhD studies, are carried out.

4.1.1. Self-Questioning and Navigating National Normativity

I realized that no one could save me but myself. That is why I started to write. To save myself. I had to seek out the truth and unravel the snarled web of my motivations. I had to find out who I am and what I want to be, and what I could do to become the best of which I was capable.
- *Soul on Ice* (Cleaver 1968)

While he was waiting, he began thinking of the persona he would adopt. He conceived of life as a game in which one gets to play many roles and have many personas. He thought it best not to be too hung up on consistency.
- *The Age of Magic* (Okri 2014)

Una es más auténtica cuanto más se parece a lo que ha soñado de sí misma.[3]
- *Todo sobre mi madre* (Almodóvar 1999)

I echo Zsuzsa Millei's position of being "simply unable and also unwilling to answer the question where I am from. I am from where my home and multi-national family is, always at the border, not here but not there either" (Silova, Millei & Piattoeva 2017: 6). While I feel fortunate to have in my life other individuals with "mixed-up" identities with whom I experience solidarity, in the majority of normative interactions – from classrooms and conferences to bars and book clubs – I feel supremely ill at ease having to respond to the inevitable prompting to identify in relation to a national category. The most basic reason is that I do not feel that any national label in any relevant way describes who I am. This can be a common sentiment among people with transcultural and trans-national lives (Vertovec 2009), but I also see this constantly among people of more "stable" origins, but who do not fit normative imaginings of their country of origin or who simply do not wish to dialogue with stereotypes. Examples are endless: a friend from Russia with Asian features exhausted by having to explain why she looks like she does; friends from Colombia saying they are

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[3]   You are more authentic the more you resemble what you have dreamed of yourself ("All About My Mother" (Almodóvar 1999)).

from Spain to avoid cocaine-related jokes; classmates in my Estonian-language courses mortified when forced to justify how they can be *from* Estonia, but not speak Estonian. One interviewee in Comrat, similarly, explained:

> The thing is that I don't speak Gagauzian. And very often there are questions: how do you live in Gagauzia, you're Gagauzian, and you don't know Gagauzian language? I say that I'm Russian! And this helps to avoid questions (Interview April 11, 2018).

Further, many people do their best to actively forget "where they are from," as, bluntly, we are not all from pleasant places and circumstances. And this identification norm is, indeed, ubiquitous. I recall a doctoral course in which the instructor – assumedly in an attempt to celebrate diversity – called out country names, asking students to stand up when their listed country of origin was named. Individuals were positioned as specimens of nation-states, with inevitable stereotypes being mentioned in relation to each nationality. It is rare that I find myself in a position in which I can voice who I am freely, without having to justify a lack of affinity for any nation-state. No matter which geopolitical space I might name, I feel queasy linking myself nationally as such, and there is always some ill-fitting characteristic that can prompt questions or comments about why I do not meet stereotypical imaginings. Zygmunt Bauman, in conversation with Benedetto Vecchi, describes this constant obligation to self-define and justify being outside wherever could pass for his "natural habitat" as "upsetting, sometimes annoying":

> There is always something to explain, to apologize for, to hide or on the contrary to boldly display, to negotiate, to bid for and to bargain for; there are differences to be smoothed or glossed over, or to be on the contrary made more salient and legible. 'Identities' float in the air, some of one's own choice but others inflated and launched by those around, and one needs to be constantly on the alert to defend the first against the second (Bauman & Vecchi 2004: 13).

What's more, as with gender identifications (Bornstein 1994), people generally do not easily accept ambiguous articulations like "transnational" or "I don't identify that way." If I were obliged to voice any sort of self-descriptive category, I suppose it would be Anzaldúa's (2015) nepantlera, a conscious in-between positionality, but a key aspect of this framework is that I *choose* this positionality, that it was not decided for me. As AnaLouise Keating sums up in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro*, an edited compilation of Anzaldúa's un-published writing:

> Never entirely inside, always somewhat outside every group or belief system, nepantleras do not fully belong to any single location. Yet this willingness to remain with/in the thresholds enables nepantleras to break partially away from the cultural trance and binary thinking that locks us into the status quo. Living within and among multiple worlds, nepantleras use these liminal perspectives

(perspectives from the cracks) to question 'consensual reality' (our status quo stories) and develop alternative perspectives – ideas, theories, actions, and beliefs that partially reflect but partially exceed existing worldviews. They invent relational theories and tactics with which they can reconceive and in other ways transform the various worlds in which we exist (Keating 2015: xxxv–xxxvi).

My contestation of the normative usage of ethnic/national identity labels stems from the issue that they do not actually indicate anything about who you are as an individual. They do not express your choices, preferences, aspirations, visions, or ideas, nor your specific intersectional experiences, circumstances, and perspectives. They merely tie you to dominant imaginaries and stereotypes of a nation-state or other discursive group, based on an aleatory connection that you did not choose. This identification – and, by internalizing extension, often, identity – norm hinders freedom, creativity, and subjective plurality, as living within fixed boundaries, assigned to you without your consent, inhibits personal growth. Essentially, what I am trying to problematize is lack of recognition of the "plurality in each of us and among us" (Lugones 2003: 71) and how modern patterns of categorization, of distaste for ambiguity and lack of patience for in-between-ness curtail the freedom to simply be an individual. Within this dominant model, we normally do not have the freedom to choose which aspects of identity have salience or relevance for us personally and which do not. In critiquing endangered language rhetoric and its essentializing assumption that people labeled as belonging to minority groups *should* want to speak the "language" (constructed as such according to modern frameworks: cf. Makoni & Pennycook 2007) of their ancestors, Deborah Cameron (2008: 280) asks what about "a right *not* to be defined linguistically and culturally in terms of the ethnic, racial or religious affiliation somebody else considers the most important thing about them?" The notion of self-determination and being *free* is also central to transculturalism, for modern identity frameworks "leave no freedom of choice for the individual who is destined to be globalized and homogenized or serve as a specimen of some ethnic or gender identity" (Epstein 2009: 329). Returning to Comaroff & Comaroff's (2009) arguments regarding the interplay between being seen and seeing oneself, the identity label(s) within which we are typically locked by birth have implications for our own negotiations of self, as we often internalize representations (hooks 1994a). Problematizing this inter-play, notions of *interculturalidad* (Mignolo & Walsh 2018) call for learning to be oneself, rather than learning to be dominant imaginings of one's ethnic/national label. In the context of alternative educational initiatives in Ecuador, attaching descriptors like "indigenous" or "Indian" would mean "learning 'how to be according to national expectations regarding the indigenous population' but not learning to 'be themselves'" (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012: 13).

This is not to argue that who we are is of our doing alone, for we are shaped by a myriad of factors and circumstances not of our making. As this dissertation has endeavored to show, people's strategic choices as related to citizenship and intertwined identity/belonging claims evidence the larger frameworks within we

negotiate our articulations and visions of self and collective. I borrow Deborah Cameron's (2008: 282) paraphrasing of Karl Marx ((1852) 1948: 16): "[humans] make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing." My approach in this section might be critiqued as very much centered on the individual. It is, indeed, individual-centered in that I believe that decolonizing one's own mind – of which a salient aspect is challenging the essentialist frameworks within which we are placed – is crucial. Only then can we meaningfully engage in coalition-building (Anzaldúa 2015; Borsani & Quintero 2014; Lugones 2003; Tlostanova 2020) that could impact change in relation to the myriad issues related to inequality and marginality produced within the colonial/modern nexus discussed in this dissertation. bell hooks's (1994a) now almost-thirty-year-old reflections on Western society's unhealthy desperation to avoid face-to-face interactions, with modern-day privacy often a "euphemism for extreme loneliness, alienation, and fragmentation" (265), has only too much resonance in today's human conditions increasingly marked by unsettlement (Tlostanova 2020). I emphasize the importance of interconnection and collective networks, but I hold that we should have the freedom to decide which they are, rather than being locked into certain ones primordially. Further, they must be coalitions not based on exclusionary notions of sameness, but rather oriented "towards a shared struggle of interrelated others" (Lugones 2003: 98).

In discussing national normativity, it is useful to draw parallels with male/female dichotomies and the fallacy of expecting them to in any way be capable of representing common experiences or concerns (see Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011 on delinking from Western perspectives in queer studies), as individuals are normatively expected to articulate who they are in relation to a clear-cut gender category (Cameron & Kulick 2003). In highlighting the impossibility of "being" a gender, Judith Butler (1990) advocates problematizing gender categories through performance, drawing attention to drag as way of – often playfully – destabilizing gender binaries. bell hooks, similarly argues for such "shaking up the idea that any of us are inherently anything" (1994a: 247), pointing out that performance can be a useful tool for allowing the self to grow and calling for the need to construct community and solidarity around alternative bases. Indeed, focusing on common goals, on what we want to achieve collectively, is a much more just and appropriate basis for formulating groupness, in contrast with monolithic, universalizing identity labels. Bringing in here literature typically categorized as being from feminism or gender studies (Butler 1990; hooks 1994a) makes clear the importance of interdisciplinary (or transdisciplinary) discussions, as these identity-related normative categories – whether in terms of nation or gender – are all part of the same matrix/logic. A part of decolonial practice is challenging disciplinary boundaries, recognizing that ideas have resonance and applicability outside the disciplines within which they are normatively associated, sometimes entrapped.

"One of the things that happens when you decolonize your mind is that it becomes hard to function in the society, because you're no longer behaving in ways people feel comfortable with" (hooks 1994a: 262). This has certainly been

true in my case. I observe constantly that most people are not comfortable if I resist representing myself unambiguously vis-à-vis the normal categories of nationality, ethnicity, native language, sexuality, etc. A relevant course of action – in everyday negotiations and beyond – is trickster positioning (Tlostanova 2012b; Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert & Koobak 2016), engaging in "disobedient" navigation and metamorphosis to destabilize assumptions and predictable pathways of identifying, thereby complexifying interactions. Often drawn upon in diverse folklore and literary narratives as a symbol of agency, trickster personas in contemporary society challenge normative order, homogeneity, and act as agents of change with their "determination to break out of the narrow frame into which [they were] placed by the system [...] linked to the desire to become oneself – a psychological and intellectual entity that is independent from the social structure" (Bassil-Morozow 2015). Creative ways of confounding monolithic labels and expected, naturalized identification pathways is a strategy to deal with the "very real nexus of the essentialized positions we are interpellated into (all of us) by dint of our skin, origins, experiences, language, class, journeys, positions" (Phipps 2019: 90). Intentionally blurring or leaving ambiguous our positionalities compels others to remain uncertain on where we fit in relation to essentialized categories and can work to "delink, pluralize, or make opaque singular imagination" (Silova, Millei & Piattoeva 2017: 18) by rejecting the normativity of being obligated to position vis-à-vis a label. Although "trickster," for some, might evoke negative associations, its usage here is not meant to imply dishonesty, but rather creative, sometimes playful performative approaches – like those of Butler (1990) and hooks (1994a) above – to negotiate circumstances usually thought of as rigid or inescapable. Tricksters dwell in the in-between as "boundary-crossers" (Hyde 1998: 7), open to multiplicity, contradiction, and ambiguity. In many ways, this framework has parallels with my field partners' practices and narratives, as they were able to shift among various identity labels to meet the needs of a given situation, making it unclear where they fit in relation to essentialized categories. This navigation can be thought of as "disobedient," in that it does not obey the rules of mutually-exclusive matching labels that guide the modern formula of nation.

By drawing attention to uneasy aspects of my own positionality, I point out that we are all embedded in webs of essentializing categorizations, foremost related to nation-state ideology as problematized in the previous sections. As mentioned in the introduction, I critique existing scholarly and otherwise representations of Gagauzia as simply a "Russified post-Soviet region" (e.g., Cantir 2015; Tudoroiu 2016; Katchanovski 2020) or of its supposedly-cohesive population as "Turkic-speaking Orthodox Christians" (e.g., Katchanovski 2005; Kosienkowski 2017). These representations not only make complexity invisible, but they also clearly relegate an "object" of study. Trying to disrupt the observer/observed dichotomy, I emphasize that I am intertwined with the study, as my own lived experience was the foundation of the research. I attempt to draw attention to how these normative ways of thinking can blind us, both as researchers specifically, but as human beings, in general. "Because our minds

process information almost solely through analogy and categorization, we are often defeated when presented with something that fits no category and lies outside of the realm of our analogies [...] 'A circle looks at a square and sees a badly made circle'" (VanderMeer 2014). Modernity's taxonified imaginary has no space for transcultural (Epstein 2009) realities and ways of being, for practices and experiences that go unnamed as they do not fit a pre-conceived conceptual box.

Gagauzians are normatively represented in relation to supposed groups that already exist in Western imaginary, for instance as "either Christianized and Bulgarianized Turks or linguistically Turkicized Christian Bulgarians" (MRGI 2018). Noteworthy is the focus on Christianity in these descriptions as a defining feature of "the" Gagauzians. To comment on religion during my own fieldwork, I took part in a wide variety of local Orthodox practices (Holsapple 2020: 12–13), as well as Baptist services and traditions, both in the capital and in various villages. Further, I followed Babushka Pasha's irritated spiritual debates with missionaries who rang our doorbell from time to time, as well as her dismissal of her daughter's "modern" following of Orthodoxy. She always said, "*Bog est' vnutri*" (God is inside), arguing that we should listen to our conscience, instead of the priests with expensive cars and watches. I had many religious friends and acquaintances, but I had just as many, both of Soviet and younger generations, who held decidedly agnostic or atheist worldviews. Indeed, my assortment of diverse interactions makes it impossible for me to sweepingly and unproblematically refer to "the" Gagauzians as Orthodox Christians. Orthodoxy certainly holds a showy predominant place in public life, particularly considering Russia's patronage, but it is far from being the only belief system, and I cannot say that it was a defining characteristic of the majority of the people with whom I interacted. Ubiquitous labeling of "the" Gagauzians as Orthodox Christians is a standard example of the fallacy of according traits to groups, representing populations as cohesive and homogenous, and erasing diversity and complexity in both scholarly and popular classification.

4.2. Accidental Ethnography

Õigem oli vist jätta tunded omapääd, lasta omapääd voolata ning areneda, sundimata neid mingisse mõistelisse raami. Mida ta tunneks siis, kui ei oleks olemas sõna "armastus", kui tunnetel poleks niisuguseid nimesid, nagu oli, kui tunne oleks olemas nimetuna, lihtsalt iseendana ja seda nime ei peakski otsima?
- *Seesama jõgi* (Kaplinski 2007)[4]

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[4]   It was fairer probably to leave his feelings to themselves, allow them to flow unchecked and blossom without forcing them into any kind of conceptual framework. What would he feel if the word 'love' did not exist, if there were no names for feelings, which would be the case if a feeling existed without a name, was just itself and no name had to be chosen for it? ("The Same River" (Kaplinski 2007)).

In the same vein as Kaplinski's protagonist, I question how our data would be different if we embarked on fieldwork with no theoretical frameworks and concepts, ethnic and linguistic categories, or planned outcomes? I consider myself very much an accidental ethnographer (Castillo & Puri 2016; Martínez 2021), in that with my initial engagement with Gagauzia, I never set out to pursue a career in academia or went into the field armed with research queries, as such. I suppose I could position myself as having engaged in so-called "para-ethnographic practice," in that while I had never received specific education or training in ethnographic methods, I did possess a great deal of curiosity and generally was apt to engage in "experimenting with various narratives of [my] personal circumstances and the ambiguous conditions framing [my] expecta-tions and sentiments" (Holmes & Marcus 2008: 83) in efforts to reflect on my lived experiences. This project found me and not the other way around. I argue that this has been a methodological advantage to some extent, as I was able to allow what I was learning and observing to create the study, instead of having some pre-conceived research concerns and concepts shape the project's direction. In some ways, this aligns with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (2003) ideas of "open-plan fieldwork," involving lack of binding to methodologies and institutional frameworks. After all, when we look for something, we see it. If we set out with the goal of explaining phenomena through the lens of ethnic/national groups, then we will certainly generate data to confirm that very hypo-thesis. If we are interested in gender, we will undoubtedly see gender every-where and bring it to the forefront of our representations. This is not to say that these aspects or foci are invalid, simply that any data generation and represen-tation process inevitably silences and amplifies (Seljamaa 2016) according to what the researcher finds relevant. The gaze of the researcher decides what be-comes visible, and we must be upfront regarding this limitation and question our own seeing. What complexity might we miss because we come to the field already with specific vocabularies and conceptual frameworks that mold the ways we see it? In contrast, privileging the mundane, which might involve mindful and conscious development of "the art of paying attention" can enable "a break of consciousness, suspends politics of relevance, and leaves space for serendipity and embodied imagination" (Martínez 2019: 541). All this being said, I also recognize possible disadvantages of having generated data before receiving specific ethnography-related education. My coursework in anthro-pology, ethnology, and folkloristics theories in 2017 equipped me with basic understanding of key concepts – ethnicity, belonging, heritage, etc. – which informed my fieldwork in 2018.

Readers might rightfully question – as we all should when contemplating any research results – whether my fieldwork findings reflected a pre-conceived notion or agenda. To elaborate on my data generation beginnings, I can criti-cally evaluate my interview questions used during 2018 fieldwork as very much reproducing methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2003). While I had basic exposure to key concepts of ethnicity/nationality, my imaginings were decidedly lacking in complexity. Many of the questions ask

about interviewees' opinions regarding differences between named groups (Gagauzians, Moldovans, Russians, etc.), a phrasing that implies the taken-for-granted existence of said groups, contrasting drastically with the arguments of this dissertation. As I point out in my first article (Holsapple 2020: 4), such formulation can certainly be critiqued for having been framed through the lens of nationalism. However, asking about ethnicity (*natsional'nost'*) in such a direct way elicited responses from locals that showed me blatantly how ethnic/national labels in Gagauzia are not used unequivocally or in a mutually-exclusive way. These responses, combined with observational and experiential data, gradually taught me to dislink from thinking in terms of groups and from seeing individuals as specimens of national labels. This dislinking took place more fully, then, when analyzing my data in dialogue with intensive reading of critical scholarship cited throughout this dissertation. In turn, these processes of inquiry and contemplation have been mutually-constitutive of my own personality and individual life trajectory. My notions of belonging, nationality/ethnicity, language, and selfhood as I write this in 2022 bear little resemblance to those I held when carrying out fieldwork in 2018. This dissertation's arguments may read as embodying a deep-set antipathy towards taxonomies and constructs that simplify reality. However, this is not reflective of a pre-conceived ideological project, but rather speaks to the transformative process in which I have engaged during PhD studies. I am now attuned to myriad problematic aspects of human positionality that five years ago I would have taken for granted. I articulate this on the individual level here, but a goal of this dissertation is to stimulate such transformation on a larger scale. Indeed, the approach of this dissertation, a project that sprang out of "accidental" ethnography and reflects both its advantages and disadvantages, evidences an aspiration to entirely transcend my previous worldview, and also to open dialogues that could stimulate similar meaningful transformation more broadly.

Ethnography can be thought of as a way of seeing (Wolcott 1999), not rules for doing. I have endeavored to approach ethnographic "re-search" (Blommaert 2020) as an activity bent on re-viewing and re-envisaging, keeping in mind that research is never about objectivity; it is about reflexivity. I have done my best to "unthink" and "learn to unlearn" (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012) throughout. Foremost, I approach fieldwork as social practice. My methodology has not involved attempts to create some definition of others, but has been, rather, an educational, explorative, collaborative experience that has allowed me to "realize new potentialities and possibilities for the living of life" (Wagner 1975: 4). It has been an effort

> to show how knowledge grows from the crucible of lives lived with others, in the in-between. This knowledge consists not in propositions about the world but in the skills of perception and capacities of judgement that develop in the course of direct, practical and sensuous engagements with the beings and things with whom, and with which, we share our lives (Ingold 2015: 157).

I strove to triangulate by generating different types of data in order to create situated understandings of phenomena: I drew on my extensive participant observation in a wide array of local contexts to corroborate informed interpretations of interview data. As discussed in the next autoethnography section, I also aspired to constantly scrutinize my own ideas about, for instance, culture and language, questioning whether and how I worked to perpetuate and/or challenge normativeness in my representations. My methodological aim – though utopian – was to shift my thinking away from essentialized groups (Brubaker 2004) and instead pay attention to how, when, and why such group labels are used – or not used – in a given context. I say that this is utopian, for it is an ingrained rubric. Though one can claim a non-group-ist lens, especially when engaged in detached theoretical thought, its actual application calls for a considerable overhaul of fundamental world-view assumptions.

4.3. Interdisciplinary Approaches

The idea of multidisciplinary – like multicultural – by definition implies separate, distinct bodies, ignoring the bricolage-like negotiation and fluidity that actually occurs as a part of any knowledge generation – or cultural – activity. As such, my general approach in analyzing data and composing this dissertation has involved endeavors to synthesize theoretical and practical writings with an interdisciplinary – or, utopically, transdisciplinary – eye. I follow folklorists Diane E. Goldstein and Amy Schuman (2012: 122–123) in "opening a conversation broader than the discipline" and rejecting any claim that "this conversation belongs only to us." This can align with Dorothy Noyes's (2008; 2016) notion of folkloristic "humble theory," embracing ethnography and practice, rather than seeking ownership of grand theory. Noyes asserts that the discipline of folkloristics is "attuned to contingencies, softer voices, and the constraints of language and history" (Noyes 2008: 38). This is certainly an approach that I strive to embody and an environment from which I have benefited immensely in my experiences within in a Folkloristics department. However, I do not experience "theory envy" (Noyes 2008: 38) in relation to master narratives of disciplinary high theory, as I have always comfortably seen my research and myself as inherently interdisciplinary, ever-wary of engaging in "atomistic reading practices that are bounded by epistemologies and disciplines" (Bauman & Briggs 2003: xiii). Spivak's "death of a discipline" (2003), "undisciplined research" (Castillo, Puri & Shalini 2016), and notions of being "outside" (Probyn 1996; Spivak 1993) have much more resonance with me. Just as locking myself into any identity label causes me unease, defining myself according to a singular disciplinary linkage likewise seems artificial and restrictive. I am contented being identity-label-less. The current line of methodological reflection echoes this dissertation's arguments connected to modernity's insistence on usage of categorizing labels. It seems that the "inferiority complex" or "theory anxieties" problematized by Noyes (2008, 2016) are

caused by expectation to identify with a single label, which, again, evidences modernity's impatience for ambiguity and in-between-ness. In outlining how disciplines were carved out of holistic knowledge systems between 1850–1945, Immanuel Wallerstein (2000) advocates a "complete overhaul of the boundaries" (182) and a rethinking of academic divisionary organization:

> 'Creating boundaries' around 'sectors' is a social decision, fraught with both short-run and long-run consequences for the allocation of power and resources and the maintenance of the legitimacy of social institutions. The boundaries that have been erected are far from self-evident. They have been enduring to be sure, but they have also been plastic and impermanent. And what has been socially created can be socially uncreated (170).

What might be gained by disengaging from monolithic identity – in this case disciplinary – tags, by adopting more un-self-conscious articulations of being in-between, of not having to measure up to invented standards of elitist academic institutions? I believe that Noyes expresses sentiments in the same vein, with her call to folklorists to cultivate "shamelessness" (2008: 37) and to "learn to live with the ambivalence of the middle position" (2008: 39). Having myself benefited from an extremely eclectic disciplinary/educational background that was very much determined by chance access to opportunity, it is challenging for me to dialogue with notions of a single discipline, just as it is difficult for me to view the world through the lens of clearly-divided containers of ethnicities and cultures. "Torn between ways, we seek to find some sort of harmony amid the *remolinos* of multiple and conflictive worldviews; we must learn to integrate all these perspectives" (Anzaldúa 2015: 17).

I have found that while different texts may be tagged with distinct disciplinary labels, there can be much overlap in their underlying arguments and approaches. For example, literature dealing critically with topics related to gender/sexuality (Butler 1990; Cameron & Kulick 2003; hooks 1994a; Kulpa & Mizielinska 2011) has informed my thinking a great deal, as I have been able to draw parallels in problematizing ethnicity/nationality. This has allowed me to begin seeing structures of exclusion and inequality, though varying in their manifestations, as all stemming from the same logic of coloniality/modernity. I have also come across parallels in artistic and autobiographical literature (Baldwin 1955; Coetzee 2007; Kaplinski 2007; Okri 2014; Quintana 2021; Roy 2017; VanderMeer 2014), included mainly as section starters. Looking to artistic literature as a way of supplementing and enhancing my understanding of the issues I problematize in this dissertation helps deconstruct academic/non-academic segregation. It recognizes the potency of artistic representations and performances to mediate human conditions (Tlostanova 2017, 2018; Martínez 2019), holding that artistic methods and insights should not be seen as contra-positional to academic activity. With these methodological tactics, I have attempted to think rhizomatically and not permit myself to be entrapped within any container of tradition. The limitations of "atomistic" (Bauman & Briggs

2003) approaches or "bounding" (Wallerstein 2000: 170–184) research is problematized by many thinkers, also intertwined with the inequality inherent to Western academic frameworks (Canagarajah 2002; Handler 2000; Spivak 2003; Silova, Millei, & Piattoeva 2017). hooks (1994a, 1994b), for instance, critiques certain critical literature being confined to "Black studies," and Zygmunt Bauman (1989) argues that the separate relegating of the Holocaust as a special phenomenon of "Jewish studies" prevents us from recognizing its more fundamental interconnectedness with rational modernity. Similarly, during a transformative short course on intersectionality that I attended at Jönköping University in 2019, Sangeeta Bagga-Gupta (2017; Bagga-Gupta, Lyngvær Hansen & Feilberg 2017) troubled the issue of intersectionality as a theoretical lens in many cases being held captive within Women's studies.

4.4. Dialoguing and Drafting

I am often asked to explain my election to write an article-based dissertation, rather than a monograph, a decision that has had a great deal of significance for how my work has ultimately turned out. Engaging in manuscript drafting processes with three quite distinct entities – two journals *Journal of Borderlands Studies* and *Nationalities Papers* and the edited volume *The Politics of Researching Multilingually* – has obligated me to enter into dialogue with an array of editors and reviewers, diverse in terms of disciplinary backgrounds and aims. I see this as having undoubtedly made my work stronger and more multifaceted, as I was challenged to engage with a wide variety of viewpoints and contextualize my research through different lenses in order to successfully navigate norms of these venues. Indeed, it is appropriate to think about each publication as a "complex assemblage of spatial repertoires," indicating that "a range of participants, multimodal resources, and artifacts from different networks and spatial ecologies went into the construction of the text" (Canagarajah 2018: 43). This has implications for both content as well as form, as it is also worth pointing out that my publications were edited extensively stylistically to bring them into line with the imaginings of each editor of what "standard, academic English" should entail. This means that idiolectic "creative" articulation strategies were cut from the published versions, and interestingly, I discovered also that my usage of verb tenses (e.g., were waiting vs. waited) was often problematic for editors. At times when reading over manuscript proofs, I was struck by how much my own style and voice – a voice that fails to adhere to standard English – was eliminated during editing. This speaks, once more, to my key arguments about modernity's fixation on homogeneity and uniformity, and it also highlights the realities of any research communication process.

The notion of this dissertation as a "complex assemblage of spatial repertoires" (Canagarajah 2018) is also relevant for reflecting on my trajectory in engagement with certain concepts and with developing original concepts, which occurred in cross-cutting dialogue with other authors' ideas. Throughout my

four years of PhD life, I have read and pondered a vast amount of literature. Some ideas I have encountered have had passing resonance. For example, the "subcultures" (Fellerer, Pyrah & Turda 2020) concept used in my first publication to draw attention to lifeways in-between dominant categories of ethnicity, nation, etc., ultimately does not seem entirely fitting for final discussions in this umbrella chapter. I tackle this in the coming paragraph in relation to stigmatization of the vernacular (Goldstein & Schuman 2012), and as I point out in the article itself (Holsapple 2020), the "subcultural" conceptualization is based on the analytical unit of groups. Since MA studies, the idea of challenging the taken-for-granted analytical starting point of the group (Brubaker 2004) and essentialist positionalities through intersectional lens (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011) has significantly guided my work. Publishing my first article in the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* afforded me deep engagement with borderlands literature, most notably Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 2015) and Kate Brown (2004), as well as literature dealing with bordering (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019) and border thinking (Mignolo 1999). Indeed, if I had to single out the most impactful work with which I have dialogued throughout my development as a PhD candidate, it would be Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera*. This is because of her complete lack of interest in adhering to disciplinary, genre, and language boundaries, which facilitates her "uprooting of dualistic thinking" (80). Her work allowed me to begin thinking more rhizomatically, encouraging me to critically reflect on my own experiences in a more upfront way. In large part, this also occurred in dialogue with Walter D. Mignolo's (1999) call for "border thinking," efforts to theorize *from* the border, rather than *about* the border.

Moving to writing for a volume dedicated specifically to multilingualism with my second publication (Holsapple 2022a), through which I engaged extensively with critical literature problematizing what is and is not constructed as language (e.g., Becker 1991; Bonfiglio 2010; Heller & Duchêne 2008; Phipps 2019) allowed me to draw connections among studies and phenomena from the first publication. Jan Blommaert and his teams' (e.g., Blommaert 2013; Blommaert & Backus 2012) conceptualization of linguistic repertoires, pointing to the disparity between actual competencies vs. how we are normatively positioned as speakers was especially instrumental. I was able to apply Brown's conceptualization of "no place" (2004) to problematize linguistic practices made invisible and/or irrelevant and conceptualize them as "no language." The notion of "no language" has relevance beyond this case study of Gagauzia. For instance, in my current life in Estonia, within the frameworks of governmental integration initiatives, I study and interact with many people whose language practices do not fit the box of any one standard language and who are obligated to navigate hegemonic discourse of "native speaker." I believe that these issues will continue to increase in acuteness. How will nation-states like Estonia, with its visions of named, separate languages and matching language-ethnicity/nationality ideology accommodate the realities of incoming refugees with diverse linguistic repertoires and attitudes? As in many parts of the world (Makoni &

Pennycook 2007), in Ukrainian contexts language is often used as a fulcrum for articulating dynamic social, cultural, and political contestations (Bilaniuk, Grant & Ries 2005), with issues related to stigmatized languaging like Surzhyk (Bernsand 2006) evidencing tension between prescriptive standard-language ideologies and actual communicative practices. To engage effectively with these issues, we – researchers, particularly, but generally as individuals living in an era of unsettlement (Fry & Tlostanova 2021; Tlostanova 2020) – need to challenge binary lens in developing more complex ways of relating to superdiverse (Vertovec 2007) lived realities.

To return to this dissertation's trajectory, critically contemplating issues of authenticity (Bendix 1997) and heritage (Bendix 2009; Hafstein 2012; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995) for my third publication (Holsapple 2022b), I began to ponder more specifically how and why efforts to homogenize diverse lived experience occur. Ultimately, this has culminated in the arguments of this umbrella chapter, in which I situate the publications' topic matter within the larger whole of the modernity/coloniality nexus, highlighting more concretely their intertwinement with asymmetrical human conditions. The moving around among disciplines, foci, and topic matter that took place through engagement with three diverse publishing venues allowed me to see patterns among seemingly different issues. Then, during this final drafting process, bell hooks's (1992, 1994a, 1994b) intersectional, decolonial ideas have informed my thinking tremendously. Although her writing deals primarily with race and gender/sexuality in the United States, her challenging of normative representations, questioning of essentialist positionalities, and, generally, approach in writing from the viewpoint of her own lived experiences have all been methods I have attempted to learn from and apply to my own study.

Another salient issue that emerged during article drafting involved concerns related to stigmatization of the vernacular (Goldstein & Schuman 2012). During a review of my second publication (2022), in which I conceptualize stigmatized communication patterns that do not adhere to notions of standard language – both my own and my field partners' – as "no language," I received questions about whether this phrasing comes across as entirely emic. I was a bit startled, as far from intending to discount or discredit the discussed ways of communicating, my goal had been, rather, to critique the monolithic concept of language and fetishized notions of "native speaker" (Bonfiglio 2010; Gramling 2016; Hymes 1992), problematizing how such hegemonic units of analysis both fail to reflect the complexity of actual diverse communicative repertoires (Blommaert & Backus 2012) and also reproduce cycles of inequality and abyssal thinking (García et al. 2021). The received feedback, though, was insightful, in that it highlighted issues of "the stigmatized vernacular," which refers to "not only the emic experience of stigmatization, but also the contagion of stigma – the way it spills over beyond the topic into the means of articulation" (Goldstein & Schuman 2012: 116). In drawing attention to the complexity of practices that overflow categories, I have attempted to engage with questions of *why* and *how* they can be marked and stigmatized and also

advocated alternative, more multifaceted and equitable ways of engaging with diversity. However, any discussion involving stigma carries methodological concerns related to the very sensitive enunciation itself and how to avoid (oversimplified) cycles of representation through its lens.

Another instance when stigmatization of the vernacular came into play occurred when drafting my first publication, looking at borderlands positionality of and in Gagauzia. A volume (Fellerer, Pyrah & Turda 2020) problematizing the limitations of labels like "ethnic group" or "minority" often attached to communities – like Gagauzia – that are "situated in-between the monolithic categories that have dominated the [East-Central European] region and beyond since the nineteenth century, such as nation, culture and language" (1) draws on a specific conceptualization of the term "sub-culture" to refer to "in-between-ness" or of "belonging fully to [no one] category" (6). While the authors make convincing arguments with clear parallels to my own research, my own personal, interiorized stigma of the word "subculture" initially impacted how I perceived the conceptualization. When I think "sub-culture," the first associations that come to mind are negative, related to deviance. Indeed, the very preposition "sub" alludes to being below, lower, and this initially caused me to balk at the conceptualization. Upon reflecting further, I realized that the wording could be fitting, as lifeways that do not neatly adhere to the mold of a single, standardized notion of "ethnicity," for instance, perhaps can be stigmatized in similar ways that many subcultural ways of being are. I ultimately opted to draw on the conceptualization, in part because journal reviewers suggested that I dialogue with different theoretical works. Reflecting on the issue is telling in regards to the politics of representation and the words that we choose. Representing using a word that may have negative connotations – "sub-culture" or "no language" – can unintentionally work to reproduce secondhand stigmatization or to cause negative associations. Even if the representation is based on firsthand commentary and extended ethnographic observation, they still are *our* representations and terminology, which brings in matters of scholarly responsibility (Holmes, Reynolds & Ganassin 2022). While we cannot entirely control how others interpret our work, we still must problematize usage of stigmatized terms to describe our observations, reflecting critically on the impact of our choices in representation. Critical contemplation is also crucial more generally in regards to the consequences of engaging in deconstruction of dominant representation norms:

> On the one hand, to deconstruct notions of cultural identity at precisely the moment when the disempowered turn to them may aid the reactionary social forces who seek to reassert the validity of homogeneous "mainstream" collective identities against proponents of "multicultural" diversity. On the other hand, to support without criticism identity claims is to aid in the reproduction of an ideology that is both hegemonic and, I believe, oppressive (Handler 1994: 38).

5. PUBLICATIONS IN BRIEF

5.1. Publication I. Bordering and Strategic Belonging in Gagauzia

This article focuses on the interplay between bordering and belonging practices in Gagauzia, drawing attention to the region's historic and current borderlands positioning "in-between" monolithic, exclusionary categories such as "nation," "ethnicity," and "culture." Russia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Romania, and Moldova all construct commonalities with Gagauzia in terms of territorial dominion, ethnicity, and/or language practices. Many of these narratives overlap and/or seemingly contradict one another. For instance, both Turkey and Bulgaria claim ethnic connections, with Gagauzians named in official discourse as simultaneously a Turkic group and also a Bulgarian historic community. Similarly, both present-day Russia and Romania claim sway over the territory where Gagauzia currently resides, asserting historic authority as the nation-state "descendants" of the Soviet Union and the Kingdom of Romania, respectively. Fractured Moldova, as the nation-state within which Gagauzia holds autonomy, also issues discourse narrating Gagauzian belonging and overseeing policy on how the region is governed and structured. Gagauzia is a poor region reliant on remittances, and many locals draw on the policies offered and/or imposed by these five nation-states in order to access entitlements and opportunity. This often involves going along with narratives of identity in order to secure citizenship(s), as well as aid funding. Bringing to light data on lived experience of open and ambiguous ways of being, articulating identity, and voicing affiliation shows how locals experience and practice belonging strategically. The mentioned polities' bordering policies endeavor to narrate Gagauzians into a larger story of ethnic/national jurisdiction. However, by drawing on the various policies concurrently and strategically, locals, to some extent, defy their hegemonic implications.

Indeed, zooming in on Gagauzia, a periphery region "in the margins" of various national polities' policies and discourses, draws attention to the inconsistencies of nation-state ideology. Gagauzia juxtaposes sharply with the nationalistic, homogenizing polices of many other areas of the post-Soviet sphere and beyond, where endeavors to narrate and construct a comprehensible nation space, in which populations normatively (should) have matching ethnic, linguistic, and territorial belongings leaves little or no room for in-between-ness. In this sense, this article argues that Gagauzia can be thought of as a "success story" of sorts for ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and national inclusiveness and ambiguity, contradicting the standardizing, categorizing trends of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Avoidance of nationalistic, exclusionary policy and rhetoric creates an ambiguous, in-between space where conflicting, overlapping

categories can be claimed and practiced to make sense of diverse lived experience. However, less sanguinely, it is, in large part, economic dependence and poverty that create the circumstances making this pluralism possible. This puts in relief the normativeness of nation-state configurations and categorizable identities: diversity manifests as an anomalous accident connected to lack of (economic and political) development, whereas mature nations normatively present the narrative of having their populations sorted and classified with mutually-exclusive labels.

5.2. Publication II. Speaking 'No Language?': Reflections on (Il)Legitimate Multilingualism from Fieldwork in Gagauzia

Prue Holmes, Judith Reynolds and Sara Ganassin (eds.). *The Politics of Researching Multilingually*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2022, 327–344.

In the context of a volume dealing with hegemonic structures, power relations, and decolonial methodologies in multilingual research settings, this chapter is very much autoethnographic. It scrutinizes my own languaging and that of my field partners, drawing attention to what is – and what is not – normatively constructed and represented as multilingualism. It juxtaposes multilingualism with a conceptualization of non-standard languaging as speaking "no language," problematizing how often only codified, named languages are made visible in research practice (and beyond). Contemplating critically how and why certain ways of languaging are stigmatized, rendered illegitimate, or made invisible can help complexify research practice. It argues that self-scrutiny is vital, as we ourselves are the research tools, and our own positionality determines what we find relevant and ultimately transform into scholarly knowledge. The chapter is structured into reflections on various language-related challenges I faced during four stages of my research: pre-fieldwork, arrival to the field, data generation, and data translation.

The pre-fieldwork positionality and planning section discusses navigation of asymmetry and naming when starting a research project. We should give thought to how our own linguistic (in)competencies and attitudes mold the data we create during fieldwork, recognizing that linguistic choice is never a neutral circumstance, as it is inevitably embedded in larger configurations of power and affective associations. By interrogating the historic trajectories of the "languages" in/through which we work, we can be more cognizant of the frameworks of power in which we operate and give thought to what structures we may reify as a result of our own linguistic choices. The next section focuses on arrival to the field and discusses the various language registers, varieties, and translingual practices that I encountered in Gagauzia. I reflect on how I was challenged to navigate ways of communicating beyond the simple label of

"Russian-speaking," and thereby, augment my own communicative repertoire. I point out that because "multilingual" typically only refers to standardized, codified communicative practices, the vibrant and engaging kind of languaging I encountered is usually made invisible – both by speakers themselves and by outside researchers – by being glossed over as simply "incorrect" speech. This point is explored further in the third section dealing with the data generation phase, problematizing how language is performed and adjusted in research settings, particularly recorded interviews. Recording and transcribing interviews is a fundamentally reductionist activity, and we have to question to what extent such data reflects what we are actually trying to represent, as well as how participant observation can be helpful in complementing interviews. The final section tackles the challenges of translating data, discussing my own translingual process before reaching a final standard-English product for academia. It problematizes the glossing over of complex linguistic negotiation with standard-language labels and also draws attention to controversial aspects of the general feasibility of accurately representing meaning given such textualization and translation processes.

The chapter's conclusions argue that a shift away from confining our work to standard, bounded languages can allow for more nuanced conveyance of findings, transcending the hegemonic implications of adjusting ways of languaging – our own and our interlocutors' – to fit the boundaries of territorialized, labeled languages. It presents an overview of the growing body of literature on translingual practice and theory, efforts to challenge monolingual linguistic ideologies' exclusionary logic, highlighting how change towards broader understandings of multilingualism and legitimization of diverse languaging practices has implications for researcher – and individual – empowerment. I explore how, ultimately, I position myself as a "non-knower" or speaker of "no language" in acknowledgement of the nationalistic frameworks that drive standard languages and what implications these hegemonic configurations have for how we carry out multilingual research.

5.3. Publication III. Ethnopolitical Entrepreneurs as Nation-Builders? Heritage and Innovation in Gagauzia

Nationalities Papers, 2022.

This article focuses on the tension between, as well as the mutual-constituency of heritagization – cultural production involving transvaluing aspects of the past – and innovation in constructions and articulations of nation in Gagauzia. It zooms in on the role of a specific segment of society, neither fully top-down, nor bottom-up actors – ethnopolitical entrepreneurs – who engineer initiatives that claim to be the "first" projects representing the "last" of some cultural prac-

tices or ethnic/national identities. Examining their projects evidences the overlap between heritagization, on one hand, and ethnic incorporation by means of homogenization and abstraction of notions of *narod* or "the people" on the other. By bringing to light the interplay of the construction of exclusionary national narratives and economic (inter)dependence, this article shows that the institutionalization of nation-building in Gagauzia, to a great extent, is ultimately restrained by economic realities. It thereby contributes to existing scholarship on contemporary nation-building in post-socialist regions, while also adding to Gagauzian studies literature. In contributing to these bodies of literature, this article also aims to critique methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) by highlighting intersectional and local experiences of belonging.

The three cases of ethnopolitical entrepreneurship examined are: the first Gagauzian rapper (active from the early 2000s to the present day), the first Gagauzian film (released in 2017), and the first ethno-tourism complex (opened in 2016). I draw attention to how they all invoke discourses of authenticity and heritage in attempts to create exclusionary, nationalistic representations of Gagauzian-ness. To begin, I look at the case of Vitalii Manjul, "the first Gagauzian rapper," who compiles modern music drawing on folk songs, with the purported goal of encouraging new generations to connect with and take pride in their (ethnic) heritage. Next, I look at the "first Gagauzian film," *Dünürcülük* (loosely translatable as "Matchmaking"), exploring how its presentation of romanticized images of pre-industrial agronomic life serve to advance the notion of a Gagauzian people with a coherent history and unified origins. Finally, I scrutinize the case of Gagauzia's first ethno-tourism complex, Gagauz Sofrasi, a business that profits economically by creating an attraction for touristic consumption centered around imaginings of pre-modern village life.

To conclude, these three cases are contrasted with alternate articulations of Gagauzian-ness, both non-entrepreneurial everyday narratives, as well as policy at the governmental level, drawing attention to the array of social actors involved in any nation-building activity. It highlights the limitations of nationalistic narratives taking root without governmental policy to institutionalize them, and it draws attention to the agency of individuals, of the oft-evoked *narod*, in interpreting elites' national imaginings. Actual lifeways in what-is-today Gagauzia's diverse population have been and are heterogeneous, complex, and nuanced, yet, such varied, difficult-to-categorize lived practice is erased with template imaginings of cultural "authenticity" as consistent, uniform traditions proving the folkloric, mythologized origins of a named ethnic/national group. They are made irrelevant, overwritten with the dominant, standardized concept of nation and its complementary imaginings of ethnicity and codified language.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS
FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This dissertation has endeavored to look at asymmetrical power frameworks, on one hand, and lived experience and agency on the other. By drawing attention to the epistemic and experiential hegemony of modernity, of which a salient component is the formula of nation, I have aimed to show how ambiguous, in-between ways of being and experiencing the world are often made invisible, irrelevant, or problematic. I have explored these topics both in connection to a case study of Gagauzia, based largely on my particular situated observations there, and autoethnographically, engaging in broader scrutiny of my own positionality-related concerns.

A key underlying message is that any discussion on positionality, belonging, identity, or culture must be in dialogue with lived experience. Based on both fieldwork observations and my own negotiations, lived experience is so multilayered, multifaceted, dynamic, and unpredictable that it inevitably defies attempts at categorization or containment within any singular representation. As such, an aim of this work has been to advance tolerance for ambiguity, to embrace "not knowing" and refuse to reduce lived experience to some one-dimensional analytical unit. A salient aspect of this involves challenging modernity's aversion towards being nameless, of having ways of experiencing self and one's place in the world (or, better, worlds, in pluriversal understandings) be ambiguous. I have come to see ambiguity and complexity as two faces of the same coin. Any attempt to classify or generalize involute, ever-changing dimensions of lived experience will lead to an inevitable reduction in complexity, a simplified, sanitized version, easily-digestible for the world of academia – and for normative interactions, in which self-description vis-à-vis hegemonic (national/ethnic) identity categories is the status quo. Being reflexive and critical about our roles in reducing complexity – both in academic knowledge production and in mundane interactions – is necessary to decolonize our ways of being. This might include pushing traditional genre boundaries and questioning what "academic" writing is, can, and should be. This questioning of *why?* we, as researchers, are doing what we do (Lander 2000) can lead to alternative modes of ethnographic representation (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1993; Blackledge & Creese 2019), as often such (autoethnographic) interrogation renders traditional approaches inadequate. Foremost, it calls for "complicating things" (Balibar 2002: 75), for:

> ...if we are to contribute to changing this world in its unacceptable, intolerable aspects – or (and this perhaps comes down to the same thing) to resist the changes occurring in that world, which are presented to us as inevitable – we need to overturn the false simplicity of some obvious notions (75–76).

This dissertation has dealt with ways in which modernity's conceptual frameworks have shaped – and/or distorted – our lived realities. I hope to have demonstrated this on the example of narratives of positionality in Gagauzia, but the argument is relevant also to my academic endeavors themselves. I can preface ideas for future research with reflection on what it should *not* entail. In this I am taking the example from Jan Blommaert (2020), who, shortly prior to his passing, in contemplating what had been important in his life, wrote:

> Academic publishing, as an industry, has become a disgrace and is an obstacle to science, not a facilitator (let alone an indispensable actor). Publishing has become a form of terror for young scholars, while it should be an instrument for liberation, for finding their voice and feet in the business. Burnout has now become an endemic professional hazard in academia, much like depression, unhappy human relationships and unhealthy lifestyles. It's become a highly unattractive environment for human creativity, while it should be an environment, a *specialized* one, ideally tailored to precisely that.

Much in the same way that Mario Vargas Llosa (2012) argues that in our contemporary world, the word "culture" has been re-semanticized (entered into decadence, he puts it (13–14)) to refer to spectacle-like mass entertainment dictated by the market and elite interests, the concept of "education" has likewise morphed into a customer-oriented, marketable product, obsessed with politically-determined template performance measures of rankings and metrics (Mignolo 2003b). Modern manifestations of "culture" and "education" bear little resemblance to the activities that these words once described.

Foremost, in terms of future potential, I – and we, all researchers – should challenge these trends. Research and studying should only be steps in larger processes of impacting social change (Tlostanova & Mignolo 2012), rather than self-serving ends in themselves restricted to elitist academia. These activities must have an aim to change society, to transform our current lacking system, even if at the most local or individual scale. This means challenging the divide between the exclusionary "academic" (Canagarajah 2002) and mundane "non-academic" worlds. It means making resources, in the form of ideas and insights, available to educators, social workers, community leaders – the people actually involved in molding society. Blommaert (2020) selects four keywords in summing up an academic's role in society: to *give*, to *educate*, to *inspire*, and to *be democratic*, with the latter referring to inclusive visions and policies of society, entailing education and production of science as a resource for everyone (Freire 1970 (2018); hooks 1994b), in contrast with the exclusive, commodification-oriented tendencies of modern academic institutions.

So, from an autoethnographic stance, this is the stage at which I find myself currently when considering future directions, and I argue that troubling these issues is relevant for all researchers. With my engagement in creation of knowledge, what am I accomplishing? Which frameworks am I working to uphold and whose visions of the world am I working to legitimize? This dissertation

has been a starting point for confronting modernity's implications and thinking critically about what I can do – as a researcher and an individual – to impact social reality. My experiences in Gagauzia, along with education and opportunity for critical reflection afforded through PhD studies, allowed me to learn to pay attention to ambiguity, complexity, and plurality of lived realities and interrogate critically global frameworks of inequality, in large part structured through asymmetrical citizenship regimes. I am increasingly astonished by how the question of citizenship impacts access to opportunity in our world divided by national logic. During final drafting of this dissertation in March 2022, I received an email from the University of Tartu justifying their exclusion of students with certain citizenship from matriculation into the university. Aspiring students with the poor luck to possess the wrong documents can also be seen as "collateral damage" (Bauman 2011) of political powerplay and alleged security concerns, underscoring once more that opportunities in this globalized world are ultimately largely determined by the piece of paper assigned predominantly by birth.

Transcending the global frameworks that create the circumstances for the poverty and massive out-migration that characterize contemporary Gagauzia would call for coalitions (Anzaldua 2015; Borsani & Quintero 2014; Lugones 2003; Tlostanova 2020) challenging the current interface of positionality and access to entitlement. Our world needs a shift from viewing individuals as problematic, to viewing as problematic the hegemonic structures and discourses that position them as such. If for you, reader, these things read as utopian and impossible, I agree. Often I feel that I am *soñando con los ojos abiertos* (dreaming with my eyes open). Changing the world's deplorably asymmetrical conditions, that I have tried to explore through this case study of Gagauzia, would call for a major restructuring of reality, as proposed by pluriversal and decolonial thinkers. As long as our world continues be divided by nation-state logic, characterized by increasing bordering and production of human waste, I do not see hope of change for those on the losing end of the birthright lottery. With this dissertation, I hope to stimulate awareness of such realities and encourage transformative agency, among researchers and more broadly. Optimistically, its findings related to the interface of positionality and systematic asymmetry could animate future research – and, imperatively, beyond – initiatives targeted at confronting ingrained patterns of inequality, an endeavor of ever-increasing urgency in the contemporary context of defuturing conditions.

SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Positsionaalsuse narratiivid tänapäeva Gagauusias: komplekssus ja rahvuslik normatiivsus

Doktoritöö analüüsib Moldovas Gagauusia autonoomses territoriaalüksuses loodud etnograafilise ainese põhjal üksikisikute ja riikide positsionaalsuse narratiivide lõikepunkte globaalse ebavõrdsuse taustal. Tavapäraselt lähtutakse sedalaadi käsitlustes nii akadeemilises kui tavakeeles 'identiteedi' mõistest. Väitekirjas eelistatakse rääkida 'positsionaalsuse narratiividest', vältimaks 'identiteediga' kaasas käivat essentsialismi taaka ning tõstmaks esiplaanile konteksti ja praktika. Analüüsin ajalooliselt, keeleliselt, kultuuriliselt ja geograafiliselt Bulgaaria, Moldova, Türgi, Rumeenia ja Venemaaga seotud Gagauusiat ümbritsevate rahvusriikide osalt kattuvate identiteedipoliitikate ja -diskursuste sihtmärgina, näidates, kuidas Gagauusia ja selle elanikud navigeerivad nende vahel strateegiliselt, kasutamaks pakutud materiaalset tuge ja muid võimalusi.

Kolme teadusartiklit seob hulk omavahel läbi põimunud teemasid, millest olulisemad on piiritlemise ja kodakondsusega seotud praktikad, keelekasutus ja -hoiakud ning pärandiloome ja autentsuse diskursused. Kokkuvõttev ülevaatepeatükk pürib välja tooma teemade ühisosa, näitamaks, kuidas modernismi koloniaalne rahvuse projekt, millesse on sisse kirjutatud ebavõrdne ligipääs jõukusele ja võimalustele, on mõjutanud positsionaalsuse narratiive Gagauusias ja seda nii kohalikul üksikisikute kui valitsuse tasandil. Kasutan Gagauusiale viidates sageli väljendit „mis-on-täna-Gagauusia", toomaks välja igasuguste geopoliitiliste moodustiste, aga ka 'keele' ja 'identiteedi' mõistete tingliku ja konstrueeritud olemuse. Uurimuse aluseks on Gagauusia autonoomsese territooriaalüksuses aastatel 2015–2016 ja 2018 kaheteistkümne kuu jooksul kogutud materjalid, eelkõige intervjuud ja välitööpäevikud. Lähenemisviis on ka autoetnograafiline, kuivõrd ma problematiseerin oma positsiooni, navigeerimist rahvusliku normatiivsuse väljal ning osalemist ebavõrdsusele rajatud suhetes.

Esimene artikkel käsitleb peamiselt intervjuuainese toel Gagauusia ja selle elanike positsionaalsust erinevate riigikordade poliitikate ja diskursuste äärealana, juhtides tähelepanu rahvusriigi ideoloogia ebakõladele. Gagauusias toimuv eristub teravalt mitmetest teistest kohtadest nõukogudejärgses sfääris ja mujalgi, mida iseloomustavad rahvuslikud ja homogeniseerivad poliitikad ning kus püüdlused jutustada ja luua selgelt rahvuslikku ruumi, kus elanikkonna etniline, keeleline ja territoriaalne kuuluvus ühtiksid, tõrjuvad kõrvale vahepealsuse võimalused ja võimalikkuse. Artiklis leitakse, et käesoleva ja möödunud sajandi standardiseerimise ja kategoriseerimise trendidele vastuvoolu ujuvat Gagauusiat võib pidada etnilise, kultuurilise, keelelise ja rahvusliku inklusiivsuse ja mitmesuse omamoodi edulooks. Rahvuslikul pinnal välistava poliitika ja retoorika vältimine loob mitmetähendusliku vahepealse ruumi, kus võidakse argielu keerukusega hakkama saamiseks nõuelda ja praktiseerida vastuolulisi, kattuvaid kategooriaid. Samas tuleb vähem optimistlikult tõdeda, et Gagauusiale omane pluralism on paljuski tingitud majanduslikust sõltuvusest ja

vaesusest. Siit omakorda joonistub teravalt välja rahvusriiklike moodustiste ja kategoriseerivate identiteetide normatiivsus: mitmekesisus on (majandusliku ja poliitilise) arengu puudusest tulenev anomaalia, samas kui küpsed rahvusriigid esinevad lugudega sorditud ja üksteist välistavate siltide alla liigitatud rahvastikust.

Teine teaduspublikatsioon problematiseerib marginaalsusega seotud teemasid keele vaatepunktist, küsides mida peetakse – ja mida ei peeta – mitmekeelsuseks. Käsitlus tugineb Gagauusias loodud välitööandmetele ja autoetnograafilisele refleksioonile. Kõrvutan mitmekeelsust ja „mitte-keele" (ingl. „no language") rääkimist, pidades viimase all silmas mittestandardset keelekasutust ja keelelist suhtlust (ingl. languaging). Näitan, kuidas sageli muudetakse uurimistöös ja laiemaltki nähtavaks ainult kodifitseeritud ja nimetatud keeled. Kutsun ka uurijaid üles märkama ja arutlema, kuidas meie oma keelelised (eba)pädevused ja hoiakud kujundavad välitöödel loodavat ainest ning kuidas keelega seotud valikud ei ole kunagi neutraalsed. Oma töökeelte ajalooliste trajektooride uurimine tõstab teadlikkust võimusuhetest, mille tingimustes me toimime, ning struktuuridest, mida me oma keeleliste valikute kaudu reifitseerime.

Kolmas väitekirja koondatud artikkel analüüsib pärandistamise ja uuenduste vahelisi pingeid ning vastastikust mõju rahvuse konstrueerimisel ja väljendamisel tänases Gagauusias. Pärandistamise all mõeldakse siin kultuuriloomet, mille käigus valitud kilde minevikust ümber mõtestatakse ja uuesti väärtustatakse. Käsitlus keskendub kohaliku rohujuuretasandi ja eliidi vahele paigutuvatele „etnopoliitilistele ettevõtjatele", kelle algatused esindavad väidetavalt „viimaste" veel säilinud kultuuripraktikate „esimesi" representatsioone ja töötlusi. Artiklis vaadeldakse lähemalt Gagauusia esimese räppari loomingut, esimest gagauusia filmi ning gagauusi rahvakultuuri esitlevat turismikompleksi. Projektides kattuvad pärandistamine ning rahva (vene narod) mõiste homogeniseerimise ja abstraheerimise kaudu toimuv etniline kaasamine. Käsitlusest ilmneb välistavate rahvuslike narratiivide ja majandusliku sõltuvuse vastastikkus, mis omakorda annab tunnistust majanduslike olude piiravast mõjust rahvusliku ülesehitustöö institsionaliseerimisele Gagauusias. „Mis-on-täna-Gagauusia" mitmese elanikkonna tegelikud eluviisid on varem olnud ja on tänagi mitmekesised, keerukad ja nüansirikkad. Šabloonsed kujutelmad kultuurilisest „autentsusest" kui püsivaist, ühtseist traditsioonidest, mis annavad kinnitust etnilise või rahvusrühma folkloorsetest, mütologiseeritud juurtest, kustutavad varieeruva, raskesti kategoriseeritava elatud elu. Asetatuna kõrvuti domineeriva, standardiseeritud käsitusega rahvast ja seda täiendavate kujutelmadega etnilisusest ja kodifitseeritud keelest, muutub argielu vähetähtsaks.

Doktoritöös käsitletud komplekssusel, rahvuslikul normatiivsusel ja ebavõrdsusel ning nende seostel on konkreetsed tagajärjed üksikisikuile, nende kogemustele subjektsusest ja võimalustele oma eesmärke saavutada. Uurimuse peamisi argumente on, et koloniaalsuse/ modernsuse loogika järgi jagatud tänapäeva maailm jääb alati välistama ning välistamisele rajatud identiteedi narratiividest välja jääjate võimalusi piirama. Inimeste positsionaalsus on vältimatult keerukam kui mistahes ühene kultuurilise identiteedi mudel. Igasugune rahvu-

sele või etnilisusele apelleeriv identiteedi retoorika on loomuldasa välistav, seades tingimusi sellele, kes kuulub ja kes ei kuulu ning millistel alustel, ning hoiab maailma ebavõrdsuse kütkeis. Maailma jõukamad osad sõltuvad järjest enam migrantide odavast tööjõust, nagu näitab ka Gagauusia juhtum. Väitekiri kutsub üles neil teemadel kriitiliselt mõtisklema ning otsima võimalusi olemasolevate struktuuride hülgamiseks üksikisiku ja kogukonna kujutelmade kasuks, mis ei lähtu koloniaalsuse/modernsuse mallidest. Oluliseks märksõnaks on siin komplekssus. Nüansirikkusele avatud ja kriitiliselt meelestatud kujutlused ühiskondlikest nähtustest saavad alguse ja võimaluse, kui asume teadlaste ja inimestena esitama „kuidas" ja „miks" küsimusi ning seeläbi olemasolevaid arusaamu keerulisemaks muutma.

Võibki öelda, et doktoritöö juhib tähelepanu modernsuse epistemoloogilisele ja kogemuslikule hegemooniale, käsitledes rahvuse valemit modernsuse ühe olulise osisena. Uurimus näitab, kuidas mitmetähenduslikud, vahepealsed maailmas olemise ja maailma kogemise viisid muudetakse sageli nähtamatuks, ebaoluliseks või probleemseks. Väitekirja koondatud teaduspublikatsioonid rõhutavad, et igasugune arutelu positsionaalsuse, kuulumise, identiteedi või kultuuri üle peab toimuma dialoogis argielu kogemustega. Välitööainese analüüs ja autoetnograafilised refleksioonid osutavad elatud elu mitmekihilisusele, mitmetahulisusele, dünaamilisusele ja ette ennustamatusele, mis trotsib katseid seda kategoriseerida või ühese representatsiooni vormi sulgeda. Kui modernism taunib nimetamatuks jäämist, siis omal moel kõneleb doktoritöö mitmetähenduslikkuse ja -mõttelisuse sallimise poolt ning valmisoleku eest minna kaasa mitteteadmisega ja loobuda elatud elu taandamisest ühemõõtmeliseks analüüsiühikuks. Mitmetähenduslikkus ja komplekssus on sama mündi kaks külge. Igasugune katse klassifitseerida või üldistada elatud elu keerukaid, alati muutuvaid dimensioone viib paratamatult komplekssuse kahandamiseni, lihtsustatud ja desinfitseeritud versioonini, mis on nii akadeemilises maailmas kui ka ametlikus suhtluses kergem seedida ning mis eeldab enese positsioneerimist hegemoonsete rahvuslike/etniliste identiteedikategooriate suhtes. Olemise viiside dekoloniseerimine seevastu eeldab kriitilist meelt ja reflekteerimist selle üle, kuidas me nii uurimistöös kui argises suhtluses osaleme komplekssuse kahandamises ja miks me seda teeme.

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