

# ROMA RIGHTS

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## NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US? ROMA PARTICIPATION IN POLICY MAKING AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

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CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY

# The Importance of Feminists and ‘Halfies’ in Romani Studies: New Epistemological Possibilities

ETHEL BROOKS

Some of the most radical criticism coming out of the West today is the result of an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject. ...Although the history of Europe as Subject is narrativized by the law, political economy, and ideology of the West, this concealed Subject pretends it has ‘no geo-political determinations.’ The much-publicized critique of the sovereign subject thus actually inaugurates a Subject. —*Gayatri Spivak*<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gayatri Spivak points to the “interested desire to conserve the subject of the West, or the West as Subject” as the impetus for much of the radical critique coming out of the West in the 1980s. What we understand as the field of Romani Studies in its current formation continues to conserve the West as Subject through its reliance on the “expertise” of its most prominent scholars, which is often juxtaposed against the silence of, or inexpert status of the subjects of that expertise — Romani subjects, Romani communities, Romani knowledge and its production. What happens when we reconsider Romani Studies by taking seriously Romani expertise and Romani knowledge production? I want us to consider the troubling of the insider/outsider split that is presented to us in the form of Romani knowledge producers, on the one hand, and a careful attention to power, on the other. Epistemologically, what does the practice of “nothing about us without us” with regard to Romani Studies mean for the “subject of the West, or the West as Subject”?

## Against Culture

In *Writing Against Culture*, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod argues for the importance of two critical groups “whose situations neatly expose and challenge the most basic of [anthropological] premises: feminists and ‘halfies’ — people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage.” Abu-Lughod goes on to say, “The importance of these groups lies not in any superior moral claim or advantage they may have in doing anthropology, but in the special dilemmas they face,

dilemmas that reveal starkly the problems with cultural anthropology’s assumption of a fundamental distinction between self and other.”<sup>2</sup> Romani scholars — scholars who come from Romani backgrounds, families, and communities — are quintessential ‘halfies,’ moving between Romani and *gadje* worlds through processes of migration, education and parentage. The dilemmas faced by Romani academic, artists and cultural producers call into question notions of authenticity, on the one hand, and a pure space of culture, on the other. Romani communities stretch across Europe, into the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia and have been marked by migration, deportation and slavery, as well as by mixing and intermarriage, cultural shifts and adaptation, along with preservation of language, cultural practices and identity formations across centuries of migration and settlement. The richness and diversity of Romani cultural practice and knowledge production opens up new epistemological possibilities and new ways of understanding not only with regard to Romani histories and experiences, but also on the enduring narratives of “law, political economy and ideology” cited by Spivak.

Whether operating in the fields of history, sociology, linguistics, or, indeed, anthropology, the field of Romani Studies often echoes anthropology’s focus on “culture” as the starting premise of its analysis. As Abu-Lughod suggests, this focus on culture — on difference as the basis of analysis — implicitly assumes a hierarchy. While Max Weber argued that the avoidance of value judgments in social scientific inquiry is fundamentally untenable, he pushed for a kind of scientific objectivity where, once the research questions have been delineated, the researcher must put aside her/his value

1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 271-272.

2 Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture,” in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1991), 137.

judgments in pursuit of “scientific truth.” Weber argues: “For scientific truth is precisely what is valid for all who seek the truth.”<sup>3</sup> What, however, do feminists and ‘halfies’ do for the principle of scientific truth? In short, precisely because of “the dilemmas [we face] that reveal starkly the problems with...[the] assumption of a fundamental distinction between self and other,” we expose the workings of power that produce the very concept of objectivity; in the case of Romani Studies, the bounding of the field by culture produces hierarchies that are called into question once power is brought into the field of analysis.

As we know, Romani Studies owes much - if not all - of its existence to Gypsylorism: Romani Studies is both the inheritor and the legacy of the Gypsy Lore Society. In fact, the relation of the re-named *Romani Studies* journal to the present-day Gypsy Lore Society calls into question any temporal shifts or sea changes in Romani Studies as a field of inquiry. Perhaps it is more precise to say that, despite any changes in name, Romani Studies as we know it is not just the inheritor and legacy of Gypsylorism, but, rather, continues to be indistinguishable from it in much of its practice, its assumptions and its starting points. It is precisely these assumptions and starting points that need to be central to the kind of scientific inquiry that we should pursue, grounded both in a sense of ethical commitment but also in a commitment to analysing the workings of power in the production of a post-Gypsylorist Romani Studies. This involves a commitment to reflexivity, to understanding our own investments in truth production and in scholarly output, and in a deep critique of our own positionality *vis-à-vis* the subject(s) of our research.

What would a ‘feminist’ or ‘halfie’ Romani Studies look like? Perhaps it is one that not only writes “against culture,” as Abu-Lughod suggests, but one that also contains within it an analysis of its own production and a critique of its own grounds for expertise.<sup>4</sup> If we are to salvage Romani

Studies from its Gypsylorist origins, it is crucial that we take on the hierarchies that are implicit when Romani “culture” is seen as bounded, and outside of, the subject of the West, and when Romani subjects are only seen as objects and subjects of analysis, rather than as producers of knowledge – about Roma and about non-Roma alike. As feminists, as ‘halfies,’ as engaged scholars, we can produce a Romani Studies that is at once critical of its own production and that works toward dismantling the “West as Subject,” thus opening a more radical critique of the workings of “law, political economy and ideology” that place Roma at the bottom of epistemological and material hierarchies both within and outside of Europe.

## The Grains of the Archive

Thomas Acton has argued that the designation of a song, poem, story, painting or other literary, musical or artistic piece as folklore renders these products of (someone’s) intellectual and artistic labour “authorless *objets trouvés*.”<sup>5</sup> Acton maintained that this is especially true when a piece is designated as (*trad.*), or traditional, rather than as the product of a specific author. British Romani artist Daniel Baker argues that “folk art” is defined by its history and context, rather than the meaning of the object itself or the intent of its producer: “A preoccupation with contextual clarification belies the art museum’s possible mistrust of the folk art object and its own ability to engage and generate meaning.”<sup>6</sup> The “folk art,” or “primitive,” piece displayed in a museum is another way of denying its authorship – its context takes precedence over everything else. The rendering of an intellectual product, be it a song, a piece of theatre, a painting, story or decorated object, as *authorless* at once inaugurates and continually reinscribes a Subject: the (non-Romani) expert, whose knowledge production and authorship rest upon the appellation “*trad.*” or the rendering of Romani intellectual work, products and labour as folklore.

3 Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1949), 84.

4 For a critique of expertise and the production of the expert-working-on-nature divide, see Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Technopolitics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

5 Thomas Acton, “Romani Films and Visual Cultures,” (lecture at the CEU Summer School in Romani Studies, *Performing Romani Identities*, 9 July 2015). See also Thomas Acton, “Modernity, Culture and ‘Gypsies’: Is there a Meta-Scientific Method for Understanding the Representation of ‘Gypsies’? And do the Dutch really Exist” in *The Role of the Romanies: Images and Counter-Images of ‘Gypsies’/Romanies in European Cultures*, ed., Nicholas Saul and Susan Tebbutt (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 98-116.

6 Daniel Baker, “Gypsy Visuality: Gell’s Art Nexus and its potential for artists,” PhD Thesis, (Royal College of Art, 2011). Available at: <http://danielbaker2.webspace.virginmedia.com/Gypsy%20Visuality%20by%20Daniel%20Baker%20RCA%202011%20double%20sided%20web%20version%20june%209%202011.pdf>.



The rendering of Romani knowledge production as folklore, and of Romani cultural production as folk art, opens up the question of the Romani *objet trouvé* and its relation to (subaltern, impossible) bodies of knowledge, artistic and intellectual production, and material cultures. The heterogeneous, disorderly archive of Romani knowledge production – written as *trad.*, rendered authorless – has served (and not only for Gypsylorists and their successors) as the constitutive outside of knowledge production, of art and of “the subject of the West, or the West as Subject.” Romani intellectual production is at once a blind spot and an object of fascination for Western academic and popular culture alike. There has been an obstinate insistence on the impossibility of Romani knowledge production as something that may exist in conversation with, in contestation to, or even perhaps outside of non-Romani knowledge production about Romani people, culture, language and history. The treatment of the Romani subject and the subject of Roma in Western scholarship parallels that of the colonial subject in remarkable ways.

Subaltern Studies Collective founder Ranajit Guha points to the absence of notions of consciousness or reason in the colonial and post-colonial literature on peasant rebellion – where, he argues, “...insurgency is regarded as *external* to the peasant’s consciousness and Cause is made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of that consciousness.”<sup>7</sup> I would argue that, in the case of Romani Studies, folklore or tradition – culture – stands in as the phantom surrogate for knowledge production and its logics. Ranajit Guha asked in his seminal piece, *The Prose of Counter-Insurgency*, “How did historiography come to acquire this particular blind spot and never find a cure?” This question is one that resonates with Romani Studies: the Romani archive is continually rendered absent, invisible or impossible, effaced in the name of folklore and *trad.*, or tradition, while at the same time hyper-visible in popular culture, fashion, music and dance in ways that become easily appropriable and exploitable.

## Constituting Elements

Guha’s answer to his question regarding blind spots points us to a methodology for reading the archive through a careful attention to the way it is constituted, shaped and stitched together, on the one hand, and the material it is made of, on the other:

For an answer one could start by having a close look at its constituting elements and examine those cuts, seams and stitches – those cobbling marks – which tell us about the material it is made of and the manner of its absorption into the fabric of writing.<sup>8</sup>

For one, Romani Studies assumes an archive that is without individual authors; tradition, folklore or the primitive stand in for the author, the knowledge producer or the cultural agent. Daniel Baker, not only in his writing, but also in his curatorial and artistic practice, reads the archive of Romani artistic practice, like Spivak “[f]rom within and against the grain” and works to bring to light the multiple forms of practice, collaboration and authorship that would otherwise fall under the category of ‘Folk Art.’ This practice was clear in the catalogue cover of the 2007 London exhibition co-curated by Baker and Paul Ryan, *No Gorgios*, where the artistic practice, authorship and intellectual production of the artists in the exhibition was made visible through a number of strategies: the title was a pencil drawing by Jim Hayward that was designed as a preliminary sketch or blueprint for a wooden sign, with the marks and plans of the artist clearly delineated, along with the signature and date of the artist. The image below the title, of two catapults made by Simon Lee, in mixed media, at once grant authorship and acknowledged artistry in work that has often been both unattributed and relegated to the realm of primitivism or folk art. The *No Gorgios* exhibition, and Baker’s larger body of artistic and scholarly work, point to the artistry, aesthetic claims and authorship in Romani artistic practice that is left out of the dominant Romani Studies archive.

This larger body of artistic, aesthetic and critical work is often marked by methods of knowledge production and practice that call into question recognised (non-Romani/*gadjekane*/Western) modes of expertise. A prime example is the idea of family practice: that members of an extended family or community pass down knowledge through kin networks, and that knowledge production and artistic practice can be carried out by and through kin groups, or by and through the larger community. Such community - or family-based cultural and knowledge production is visible across the Romani Diaspora, in multiple artistic and narrative genres. In contemporary art, we see it in the family practice of Romani artists Delaine Le Bas, Damian Le Bas and Damian

7 Ranajit Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed., Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 47.

8 *Ibid.*, 47.

James Le Bas. Delaine and Damian, who met in art school and married, are professional artists trained in the finest art schools in the UK; their son Damian James holds a BA from Oxford University – and Damian James is married to Romani actress Candice Nergaard, with whom he has performed and worked in radio and theatre. All members of the Le Bas family have individual artistic practices, and are recognised across the UK and internationally for their work in multiple genres, while at the same time they work together, either as a group, in pairs or in threes, on projects ranging from performance to visual arts installations to film, including *Safe European Home* (2013) and *Grace in Thy Sight* (2014), as well as collaborating on *Witch Hunt* (2011) and *To Gypsyland* (2014) – bringing together images, texts and translation, film and performance through their collective practice.

Such community-based and family-based knowledge production belies the idea of the ‘token’ or the anomaly – the community member who ‘escapes’ or succeeds despite the community, or against the community. In fact, ‘success stories’ almost never happen without family or community – and the narrative of the (deracinated) exception as heroic individual struggling against community is, at the core, an impossibility that simply serves to reinforce liberal, capitalist, and fundamentally classist and racist, conceptions of expertise, knowledge production and class mobility. It is also sexist and patriarchal, allowing the myth of the (male, individual, liberal) hero/expert to be pitted against community, family and that which is learned from our mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters.<sup>9</sup> Over and over again, the myth of the individual – as expert, as hero, as anomaly, as token – is one that serves to deny community support, engagement and interest in knowledge production, and in the Romani artistic and cultural archive. As we can see from the work of the Le Bas family, once we focus on the ongoing collective practice, family practice, and show the relation of such practice to individual success, we can open up new forms of understanding and new forms of knowledge production. In short, we

can provide an archival reading that is at once within and against the grain – but also, as Ann Stoler maintains,<sup>10</sup> *along its grain* to better understand the way it is built, constituted and its authority, thus providing a new understanding of its constitution, possibilities and absolute limits.

## Re-inscription as Strategy

Such new forms of understanding and new forms of knowledge production involve processes of reinscription – of authorship, of cultural production and epistemology, of expertise, of the archive. Here, I return to Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of the Subaltern Studies project, where she provides both a critique and a possible opening for its work:

... I read *Subaltern Studies* against the grain and suggest that its own subalternity in claiming a *positive* subject-position for the subaltern might be reinscribed as a strategy for our times.

What good does such a re-inscription do? It acknowledges that the arena of the subaltern’s persistent emergence into hegemony must always and by definition remain heterogeneous to the efforts of the disciplinary historian. The historian must persist in *his* efforts in this awareness, that the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic.<sup>11</sup>

What might this “strategy for our times” mean for Romani knowledge production, on the one hand, and a larger critique of the narratives of Western authorship, on the other? Spivak goes on to argue, “Theoretical descriptions cannot produce universals. They can only ever produce provisional generalizations, even as the theorist realizes the crucial importance of their persistent production.”<sup>12</sup>

Collective practice – and the very idea, perhaps, of epistemology as collective practice – is one way to honour the

9 Elsewhere, I have written about the accusation I received from a white feminist, saying that one can’t be feminist and Romani at the same time – that the patriarchy of the (Romani) community goes against the claims of feminism, and therefore we must renounce one or the other (See Ethel Brooks, “The Possibilities of Romani Feminism,” *Signs* 38:1, Autumn 2012). This denies all that I learned about how to be a feminist from my mother, my aunts, my grandmother, my father and uncles, from my cousins and sisters. The myth of the individual against community – and of the possibility of individual success against community – reinforces capitalist, racist and liberal myths that serve power. Our job is to dismantle it.

10 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

11 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed., Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 16.

12 *Ibid.*, 17.

provisionality and persistent production of knowledge, of the archive, and of narrative. We see this in the acknowledgement of collective practice in the work of the Le Bas family and in that of Daniel Baker, who works to “honour her [his mother’s] practice”<sup>13</sup> in contemporary art form. Celia Baker, Daniel’s mother, took up her knitting practice therapeutically and has produced oversized scarf-like blankets featuring multi-coloured squares and stripes. Daniel, in turn, has created the Blanket Series – *Surveillance Blanket* (2008), *Security Curtain* (2013), *Survival Blanket* (2013) and *Canopy* (2015) – that draws from the notions of protection, care and safety that can be seen as a reflection of his mother’s artistic and maternal presence. The ties of love, family, community and productivity are clear in the collective practice – and they work not only to shed light on the “persistent production” of the theoretical, but also the limits of that production – the disruption of liberal notions of authorship, ownership and individuality through collective practice, collective epistemologies – that shift, whose genealogies are often unarchivable and are grounded in everyday life, labour and love. Taking collective, community, familial groundings seriously as producers of subjectivity and of knowledge, rather than simply as context, history, or impediments to knowledge production, opens up the subjective heterogeneity that is “the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic.”

## Epistemological Reconfigurations: Feminists and ‘Halfies’

“Feminists and halfies” at once disrupt the subject of the West and call into question the West as Subject. They help us to read the archive both “with and against the grain,” and “along the grain” and to open up new modes of knowledge production. By reclaiming authorship in its diversity and opening up space for multiple forms of productivity, authorship and epistemology, “feminists and halfies” also trouble dominant liberal notions of authorship, culture and the hierarchy embedded in the archive – thus opening up space for the contingency, creativity and knowledge production of everyday life. I want to argue that this is the strategic reinscription that is necessary in the current moment; for, even as there is a growing movement calling for a halt to knowledge production about Roma without Roma – “Nothing About Us Without Us” – Romani people across Europe and beyond are continually subject to

denial of subjectivity and epistemological erasure, along with forced evictions, state-sponsored violence and racist attacks by their erstwhile neighbours.

The current moment, marked as it is by epistemological invisibility and embodied violence, already shows the limits of the Cartesian mind-body split. Through a reconfiguration of authorship and the acknowledgement that knowledge production is a collective project, we open up a new engagement with scholarly practice, one that takes seriously Romani knowledge, productivity and the possibility of decolonisation. For me, this is where encampment becomes the archive – in fact, the anti-*archive* – of possibility.<sup>14</sup>

Here I have drawn upon postcolonial feminist scholarship to present new possibilities in knowledge production by, for and about Roma. However, I want to make an epistemological intervention that would go beyond placing Romani Studies – Romani knowledge production – within the arena of postcolonial studies. Instead, I wish to take up Spivak’s critique of Foucault to provide a critique of my own. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak argues, “The clinic, the asylum, the prison, the university, seem screen-allegories that foreclose a reading of the broader narratives of imperialism.” Perhaps it is the role of the feminist and the ‘halfie’ to point out the limitations of Spivak’s own argument; even as the West was being continually produced by its imperial reach and by what Spivak calls “the topographic reinscription of imperialism,” Romani people across Europe, who, through slavery, migration, deportation and attempted genocide, have a Diaspora that reaches into the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia, have been produced as outside of history, without an archive, and subject to a crisis of representation that points to the limits of the topographic and geographic boundedness of Europe. Roma in this way have been the constitutive outside of not just Europe and Empire, but also of “law, political economy and ideology” and the logic of the nation-state. What would it mean for us to take up the disruptions and heterogeneity of the constitutive outside? The impossibility of subject position and archive alike? Just as postcolonial critique has allowed for a reconfiguration of the archive of Europe, Romani critique – the work of ‘feminists and halfies’ in Romani Studies – can allow for a reconfiguration of postcolonial epistemology that goes beyond the nation-state and the empire and takes seriously the limits of the archive.

13 Daniel Baker, telephone conversation with Ethel Brooks, 20 July 2015.

14 For my preliminary theorisation of encampment as archive, see Ethel Brooks, “Reclaiming: The Camp and the Avant-Garde,” in *We Roma: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, ed., Daniel Baker and Maria Hlavajova (Utrecht: BAK/basis voor actuele kunst, 2013).