

# 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

## Speaking from the Margins

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The development of the women's movement in the 1960s and 70s fundamentally challenged the traditional epistemology and methods of social science. One of the main questions raised by feminist scholars has been the dominant understanding of the genealogy of knowledge and knowledge production. The work of the French postmodern critical theorist Michel Foucault on power and knowledge provided a solid foundation for feminist theorists to develop further their theoretical and empirical understanding of social science. Foucault uses the term "power/knowledge" in his work to articulate the view that power is created and recreated through accepted forms of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> In his work he refers to "*scientific truth*" as a knowledge which is produced based on consensus by multiple forms of constraint. This short article will be published in the Roma Right Journal, which is more of an applied Human Rights Journal than a scientific one. However it is still considered as a source of knowledge-making on Roma from a human rights point of view. Also, human rights as an applied field of knowledge has been shaped greatly by various 'truth regimes' or theoretical perspectives such as the 'rights-based approach' which has been evident in the last two decades in various Roma-related policies.

So, one of the main claims by critical feminists is that "truth" can be explained and defined from various positions and eventually that specific knowledge is thus political.<sup>2</sup> Feminist theorists claim that knowledge is never detached, but is rather embedded in a specific social, political and historical context. Black feminist and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins succinctly explains: "what to believe and why something is true are not benign academic issues. Instead, these concerns tap the fundamental question of which versions of truth will prevail and shape thought and action."<sup>3</sup> So, regarding Roma-related academic discourses, one of the main questions was which version is the most dominant in social and political discourses? I argue, in accordance with feminist theorists, that it always depends on the prevailing power

and the validation of the academic community. Who has greater credentials in the academic community? Who has the power to delegitimise knowledge experiences or views that produce from a different position and epistemological perspective? These are the concerns that need to be problematised in connection with power and knowledge, and they might ultimately reveal some invisible privilege that profoundly shapes the legitimacy of knowledge.

Romani Studies is a developing interdisciplinary academic field that has been created mainly by non-Roma scholars. I argue that discourses on Roma, as with other socially constructed knowledge, are not separated from the influence of racial epistemologies. Drawing on the literature of feminist methodology and epistemology, I will expose how the infusion of hidden racism and power relations in Romani Studies and discourses on Roma can urge us to practice the act of critical reflexivity that creates a new, inclusive and critical perspective.

Despite feminist and critical theorists' extensive work on the dynamic of knowledge and power, Roma-related studies still have not reflected on and do not problematise the unambiguous positions and powers which shape the very nature of Roma-related knowledge. At this time, as we witness the emergence of a thin, insecure and fragile section of Romani intellectuals, one of the contested issues raised by them is the theme of Roma in knowledge production. If we take this to the next step then the following question can be posed: what does the significance of that issue reveal about this contentious field?

In the last couple of years there have been a variety of questions that have emerged from Roma scholars' discussions and debates with other members of the academy and beyond. For instance questions such as the following: Who benefits from the knowledge which has been produced on Roma? Whose knowledge is recognised and validated? In other words, who has the epistemic authority and privilege

1 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

2 Linda Martín Alcoff, *Real Knowing: New Versions of Coherence Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

3 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

in Roma-related knowledge production? These are major issues that need to be discussed in a sincere way. The denial and banality of these questions in academia leads to disguising the fact that the system is structurally unfair and maintains a systemic disadvantage for the Roma.

However, it is important to differentiate between epistemic authority and epistemic privilege, which are connected but are not the same. Maria Janack noted “epistemic authority is conferred ... as a result of other people’s judgment of our sincerity, reliability, trustworthiness, and ‘objectivity’; certain people are in a better position to ‘see’ the world than are other people.”<sup>4</sup> Contrary to this, epistemic privilege is socially more complex and tied to opportunities which are structured by gender, race, class, sexuality, citizenship, social network, even institutional belonging, and so on. Eventually, for those who have opportunities to speak to the centre, they can do that either from their own subject position, or they were promoted by others who have power and created an opportunity for those whose voices are silenced in a mainstream academic context. Epistemic privilege is rather a flexible, temporal and spatial position. Regarding knowledge-making on Roma, the epistemic authority is usually by default controlled by non-Roma scholars and policy makers. However, currently there are some Roma who are involved in knowledge-making processes, and while they have a certain configuration or specific space for some epistemic privilege, they still lack epistemic authority.

Concerning the validation of Roma-related studies, there is a tacit consensus that non-Roma are in a better position to provide a more reliable and objective account of the situation of Roma. This assumption is based on the premise of ‘objectivity’ which has been challenged by feminist theorists. However, as I mentioned above, the epistemic privilege in a certain position can also be possessed by Roma, depending on their gender, class and even their geopolitical position. For example, a Romani person educated and placed in a ‘western’

academic setting may be considered to be in a higher position than someone else who is coming from so-called ‘eastern’ academia. Furthermore, a Romani person working in a powerful institution may carry more institutional weight and credentials than anyone else who is working in a less powerful institution, regardless of their personal academic achievement.

Many postcolonial and feminist theorists also refer to the geopolitical structures of dominance and control which provide more epistemic privilege for those who are located in a dominant geography.<sup>5</sup> In Roma-related knowledge-making process, Roma and non-Roma experts and scholars who are from a ‘western’ geopolitical location, particularly from an English-speaking country, still usually maintain language and knowledge hierarchies and asymmetrical power relations. A significant number of Roma intellectuals from Central and South-Eastern Europe thus have limited access to English resources and their work and efforts remain invisible.

The various privileges will become clearer when we apply them to a particular example and context. For instance, the current discussion about the forthcoming European Roma Institute (ERI) illustrates how Roma presence and voice in an academic context is still not validated. In fact, it can be disqualified, questioned and violently contested by non-Roma/white scholars.<sup>6</sup> It is somewhat uncomfortable even to react to such critiques of the ERI as were raised publicly by the European Academic Network on Romani Studies (EANRS) and Yaron Matras, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Manchester and also a member of the Scientific Committee of EANRS.<sup>7</sup> His critique was driven by the joint statement of Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe and George Soros, founder and chairman of Open Society Foundations, announcing the creation of a European Roma Institute. Matras’ main concern was that the ERI was initiated by Soros and the Council of Europe rather than Roma themselves.<sup>8</sup>

4 Marianne Janack, “Standpoint Epistemology Without the ‘Standpoint’? An Examination of Epistemic Privilege and Epistemic Authority”, *Hypatia* Number 12 (1997): 125-139.

5 See Ramón Grosfoguel, “Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality”, 4 July 2008, available at: [http://www.humandee.org/spip.php?page=imprimer&id\\_article=111](http://www.humandee.org/spip.php?page=imprimer&id_article=111).

6 The European Academic Network on Romani Studies issued a highly critical statement of the European Roma Institute. They argue that knowledge production on the Roma should be located in universities and steered by academic principles and scholars of repute. The statement is available at: [http://romanistudies.eu/.../RAN\\_paper\\_on\\_ERI\\_30April2014/](http://romanistudies.eu/.../RAN_paper_on_ERI_30April2014/).

7 Yaron Matras, “Why plans for a European Roma Institute might be a setback for Europe’s Roma”, London School of Economics, EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2015/04/16/why-plans-for-a-european-roma-institute-might-be-a-setback-for-europes-roma/>.

8 George Soros & Thorbjørn Jagland, “Why We Are Setting Up a European Roma Institute”, Open Society Foundations Voices Blog, (an article which originally appeared in *European Voice* on March 26, 2015), available at: <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/why-we-are-setting-european-roma-institute>.



There were some direct and indirect public reactions to the critique of the ERI from the EANRS and Yaron Matras. For instance, Andrew Ryder facilitated a public discussion on critical knowledge-making with his working paper, as an indirect reaction to the statement by the EANRS.<sup>9</sup> In 2012, Thomas Acton's resignation from the Scientific Committee<sup>10</sup> was a protest against the approach of the EANRS towards Roma in knowledge-making, an approach which was uncovered in their statement against the ERI. Acton started his resignation letter with the following statement:

"[...] I feel compelled to offer my resignation to the Scientific Committee of the European Academic Network on Romani Studies. At a recent meeting of the Brentwood Gypsy Support Group, of which I am secretary, our Chair, Bernadette Reilly articulated the policy to which everyone assented, "Nothing about us, without us". I cannot honourably remain secretary of the Brentwood Gypsy Support Group and at the same time be part of an all-gajo/buffer committee which purports to represent adequately scholarship in Romani Studies without any participation of Roma/Gypsies/Travellers."<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, in response to the EANRS statement on the ERI there was substantial argument and criticism articulated by a number of critical scholars, coordinated by Anna Mirga who called for the resignation of the Committee and the holding of a new election. However, at the 7th Meeting of the Scientific Committee of the EANRS in Paris on 7 November 2014, the Committee decided to vote down the request to organise a new election.

Matras' critical statement (in his personal capacity) on the ERI reinvigorated the official statement of the EANRS.<sup>12</sup> I use this statement as an example of how epistemic authority has been claimed and manifested as an exclusive power of non-Roma scholars, to maintain

hegemony over Roma-related knowledge production. Furthermore, I would like to discuss how Roma intellectuals who have epistemic privilege in the development of the ERI are positioned by Matras as controllers and dominant figures in Romani Studies, and identity 'traders' who are marketing their identities to gain recognition based clearly on their ethnic identity. Matras' remarks illustrate the colonial hierarchy in which Romani scholars are located either at the very bottom of academia or are not accepted at all as scholars. He described the group of Romani intellectuals as follows: "The group seemed to come from nowhere: They had no track record of local leadership, no experience in cultural management, and no academic publications to their names. But they claimed a connection to Romani ancestry and appeared to have powerful friends."<sup>13</sup> Later in the text he refers again to these Romani intellectuals as a group of Roma who are "guided by the philosophy that self-ascribed ancestry should override formal qualification".

Without going into the academic and professional backgrounds of the Roma proponents of the ERI initiative, a group which does in fact include PhD holders and established researchers with extensive track records of publication, this kind of language is not just aggressive but also very intimidating for many Roma who want to work in any academic context. It is similar in fact to the larger phenomenon described as silencing black scholars in a white academic space by postcolonial theorist Grada Kilomba.<sup>14</sup> I am not surprised that such a position of marginality also evokes pain and stigmatises Romani scholars, in an academic context which is predominantly white. Grada Kilomba theorises the academic space as an oppressive institution with regard to the representation of Black people:

"This is a white space where Black people have been denied the privilege to speak. Historically, this is a space

9 See Andrew Ryder, *Co-producing Knowledge with below the radar communities: Factionalism, Commodification or Partnership? A Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Case Study* (University of Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre Working Paper, 2015). Available at: <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/tsrc/documents/tsrc/discussion-papers/2015/gtr-discussion-paper-g-ryder-28janfinal.pdf>.

10 European Academic Network on Romani Studies, "The Election for the Scientific Committee (February-March 2012)", available at: <http://romanistudies.eu/news/the-election-for-the-scientific-committee/>.

11 Thomas Acton. Resignation from the Scientific Committee of the EANRS, 10 July 2012, available at: [https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/roma\\_files/HZhYbPRRuOY](https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/roma_files/HZhYbPRRuOY).

12 Matras, "Why plans for a European Roma Institute might be a setback for Europe's Roma" (LSE blog, 16 April 2015) available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/04/16/why-plans-for-a-european-roma-institute-might-be-a-setback-for-europes-roma/>.

13 *Ibid.*

14 Grada Kilomba, *Africans in Academia – Diversity in Adversity*, available at: <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/miscellanies/netzwerk-mira-38541/299/PDF/299.pdf>. This essay is part of the author's book: see Grada Kilomba, *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*, (Münster: Unrast, 2008).

where we have been voiceless and where white scholars have developed theoretical discourses which officially constructed us as the inferior ‘Other’ – placing Africans in complete subordination to the white subject. Here, we were made inferior, our bodies described, classified, dehumanized, primitivized, brutalized and even killed. We are therefore, in a space which has a very problematic relationship to Blackness. Here, we were made the objects, but we have rarely been the subjects.”<sup>15</sup>

Romani scholars, in contrast to Black intellectuals, have only recently arrived to the stage when they have to confront and challenge the academic establishment. Right now Romani intellectuals are in a historical moment when they use their epistemic privilege to ‘speak back’ to the dominant cluster of scholars who created discourses and knowledge systems about Roma that objectify them. This ‘position of objecthood’ is inevitably challenged by Romani scholars with the proposition to create a Romani-led institution such as the ERI that will ultimately claim some space and authority in academia. The arrogant reaction of Matras to describe Romani scholars, as noted above, as a group of ‘self-ascribed’ Roma who in his words had no

track record of local leadership, no experience in cultural management, and no academic publications to their names is part of the larger institutional racism and hegemonic masculinity that systematically disqualifies and invalidates the knowledge of black/coloured/feminist scholars. Even though some of his points are relevant and would merit some discussion, these have been diminished by the violent, tone of the statement.

One of the possible strategies could be to ignore these kinds of flawed arguments and keep the pain as a private matter. However, this strategy would keep Romani scholars silenced and we would never start to deconstruct the knowledge production at the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality (just to mention a few sensitive categories). Now it is time for Romani intellectuals to use their epistemic privilege, what has been created by the process of institutional change, such as the establishment of the ERI, not to mirror and reproduce dominant masculine power games and hegemony but rather to create and foster reflection, dialogue and cooperation between Roma and non-Roma in order to emancipate the subjugated knowledge.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*