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The Legacy of Gypsy Studies in Modern Romani Scholarship



By Margareta Matache

This is the second of a three-part blog series, “The White Norm in Gypsy and Romani Studies,” about the racialization and othering of Romani people against a white norm in standard Gypsy and Romani studies. The first segment explored the [contribution of Gypsy studies to the perception of the Roma as inferior to their white European counterparts](#). This second segment shows how the legacy of such thinking manifests itself in modern Romani scholarship. Finally, the third

segment will suggest more participatory and self-reflective ways forward in the field of Romani studies.

Oksana Marafioti reading an excerpt from her book, [American Gypsy](#)

In contemporary academic literature, Romani people have become the subject of more rigorous research. Yet, to a large extent, *gadjo*-ness[1] persists as the standard, and modern social science has not started to employ scholarly reflexivity in Romani studies.

To distance themselves from racialized modes of thoughts, scholars should start to explore the nexus between academic biases, scholars’ position in the social hierarchies, and approaches on Roma.

In this blog, I discuss several primary scholarly trends in Romani studies that reinforce the hierarchical relationship between white Europeans and Roma. I use a typological model on racial reflexivity that explores: a) scholars' position in social hierarchies and the assumptions that shape scholars' own perceptions; and b) the ways in which limitations in disciplinary fields manipulate the subject of inquiry.[2]

Scholars within Social Hierarchies and the Shaping of Scholars' Scientific Perceptions

Current academic writings regarding Roma continue to reproduce whiteness through a sustained emphasis on Roma marginality. The legacy of Gypsy studies[3] has made it challenging for present-day scholarship to shift from problematizing and other-ing Roma to exploring Roma as "a free subject of thought or action." [4]

White normativity is deeply fixed in social science approaches to the Roma and recent scholarship has not made substantial effort to challenge the presumptions and biases that informed past and current ideas. Marushiakova and Popov argue that in the past few decades scholars have imposed two paradigms on Roma: marginalization and exoticization.[5] Marsh has also pointed out that research has continued to reproduce the imaginary of Roma as "...ignorant and under-educated, disenfranchised politically and marginalized economically, socially excluded and culturally appreciated in a very narrow context." [6]

These images have been framed by elite white scholars and organizations and also confirmed by parts of the Romani movement and some Romani scholars. Even typically "well-intended" researchers (Marsh's language) have remained trapped in the complex "machinery of hegemony," [7] especially if they have taken for granted, uncritically and mechanically, *gadjo*-ness/whiteness as the standard against which they have explored Romani realities. Scholars advancing such ideas have made no serious effort to employ critical and self-reflexive analysis of their position in the social hierarchy. Academics have neglected to pay attention to the historic and present-day dynamics of power between Roma and non-Roma, including academia, leading to reaffirming and constructing unequal power dynamics.

Romani scholars could potentially shift this approach with increase audience and strength in their voice. Yet, to a large extent, the privileged positions of non-Romani scholarship, media and institutions in social hierarchies have invested them with power to validate or reject Romani scholarship as a legitimate form of knowledge production.

To date, the ethnic identity of Romani scholars involved in Romani studies has impacted negatively on their academic identity in the field.[8] Some well-established non-Romani intellectuals have tended to view the Romani origins of a scholar as a weakness rather than as an added value. A case in point is Marushiakova and Popov's criticism of "NGO science" which they say is written by researchers who often have no academic background and, more importantly for the purpose of this paper, "cases where the only qualification of the authors of this direction is their Roma origin." [9] It's problematic that Marushiakova and Popov fail to back up their claim with data regarding the educational level of those conducting NGO-related research.

It's also thought-provoking to understand all the nuances of the rationale for which the scholarship brings the issue of scientific quality into discussion precisely when addressing diversity in academia.[10] In the case of Romani academics, their "subaltern" position in the social hierarchy arguably contributes to the question marks put on quality of research as the debates tends to attach the questions on quality primarily to Roma scholarship. By linking lack of quality of some scientific work and questions about the academic background of Roma, scholars themselves contribute to reproducing the power dynamics in academia.

Marushiakova and Popov question the relevance of "indigenous knowledge"[11] in research and find it striking that there is a demand particularly in Romani studies to involve people from the researched community in conducting research. Yet marginality and exoticization of the Roma are concepts created and nurtured by white scholarship, as the academia has traditionally explored Roma against the white standard. Thus, their observation neglects that the demand of Romani knowledge production is made precisely in the context of a long history of cultural domination of white Europeans and subalternization of Roma in Europe.[12]

Furthermore, while criticizing those few Roma involved in Roma knowledge production, Marushiakova and Popov are uncritical toward the blunt racism[13] and poor quality in broader Roma-related research. For instance, a 2008 article by Cretan and Turnock concludes that “[t]he stereotyped perception of the Roma as a disruptive minority responsible for disproportionate levels of criminality may not be wholly unjustified—given the high crimes figures for example—and forms part of the wider problem of self-exclusion.”[14] Yet, the authors do not include in the article data on “the high levels of criminality.” Moreover, the law forbids the institutions to collect data on criminality based on ethnicity in Romania. What else than biases and common knowledge informs this conclusion?

And thus, in academia, if we look beyond the Roma “vulnerabilities,” the shift of the actual paradigms is primarily blocked by problematic ethics and biases as well as lack of reflexivity in Roma related research.

Limitations of Disciplinary Fields

The “Gypsy” prototype suggested by previous scholars, in addition to methodological limitations, have narrowed or manipulated the inquiries on Roma in some disciplinary fields. Sociology and anthropology in particular—have perpetuated miss-representation of Romani people and strengthened white normativity.

Some scholars still mechanically reproduce the very simplistic idea of white superiority. In a 2015 study, Djuve et al. state that “in a sense, the perceived identity as being Roma, and cultural practices embedded within Roma communities, can in some cases provide a form of protection against the sense of shame and humiliation that is commonly associated with begging in mainstream society.”[15] In other words, since Roma have been seen for centuries as inferior, and Romani culture has been long associated with begging, it is less humiliating for Roma to beg than it is for non-Roma. While seeking pathways for Roma social inclusion, some modern scholars have taken for granted concepts and knowledge echoing earlier bodies of work or common beliefs.

The seeds of the Western anthropology imperialistic tendencies [16] led to the conflation of Romani identities into one identity— an imagined uniform, global “Gypsy lifestyle.”

A common denominator of some of the most well-known ethnographies on Roma is the constant search for the authentic Roma, which is based on archaic imagery and biases fully-fledged by academia or common beliefs. Thus, scholars have been inclined to explore the “traditional”—or what the authors think of as the most genuine Romani communities—but these views are largely based on “Gypsy” prototypes created by previous academic work.[17]

In *Bury Me Standing*, one of the most acclaimed studies on the Roma, Isabel Fonseca writes: “Gypsies lie. They lie a lot—more often and more inventively than other people. Not to each other, but to *gadje*.... lying is a cheerful affair.”[18] Similarly, in *Gypsies, The Hidden Americans*, based on fieldwork in a community in California, Anne Sutherland describes that Roma have other “imaginative schemes than stealing.”[19] Although she also states that “these schemes are not necessary practices by all Rom,” she still manages to reproduce the idea of Romani thieves and cheats. For example, *The New York Times* noted in a review: “[s]he draws a good picture of the inbred alienation of gypsies. But she is obviously beguiled by her subject and her treatise eventually boils down to an extended apologia for why gypsies steal a lot.”[20]

As Matras rightfully notes, Romani customs and habits are dispersed across groups, and “if we are not careful, we end up in stereotypes.” Yet, in his effort to highlight similarities among the multiplicity of Romani groups, Matras remarks that “in most Romani communities, families acknowledge that “school cannot be avoided at younger age,” implying that the Roma do not value education.[21] These views contradict the voices of Romani people from 11 countries across Europe who, interviewed in a sociological study, listed lack of access, geographical mobility, poverty and discrimination among the factors pushing Roma out from school.[22]

A knock-on effect of such narrow studies is that they feed the frameworks of thought on whiteness versus Roma otherness, thievery, and Roma intentions to deceive the *gadje* and their institutions. It also distances the reader from the multiplicity of Romani identities, their self-transformation and hybridity.

Sociology was also “formed within the culture of imperialism.”[23] Roma participation in education has consistently been a central subject in sociological studies.

Recent Romani studies have succeeded in changing some of the vocabulary surrounding Roma education. Education with regard to Roma has undergone a reframing—from a tool to “extirpate Gypsy habits”[24] to a tool to deliver “integration.” But the imperialistic thought on this topic – “to educate the primitive”[25] has yet to change.

Many sociologists continue to view obstacles to Roma educational advancement through the lens of cultural barriers, low motivation and vulnerability and victimhood[26] and to neglect or poorly address key obstacles in Roma access to education, particularly anti-Roma racism and whiteness.

Other authors show resistance to changing their ethnically based presuppositions when their data showed different patterns. For example, Djuve et al. state: “[w]e can obviously not disregard the possibility that parents conceal their true opinions about their children’s education.”[27] Yet, rejection of education as a feature of Romani culture has long been dismantled in research. Multiple studies have confirmed that Romani parents have aspirations and hopes for their children’s education.

Romani scholars and activists, including myself, exposed to non-Romani educational and cultural production systems, have also been invested and engaged in research and policy work seeking for “integration.”

Shifting the Emphasis from the Oppressed to the Oppressor

There has been no shift in focus from Roma marginality to the systematic malfunctionings and *gadjo*-ness/whiteness in law, policy, and practice.

We should be able to start exploring critically the social power and privilege of dominant majority populations and their impact on the education and other social and economic rights of Romani people. We need to start exploring the language and the mechanisms of racism and whiteness in law, policy and practice.

We are, I would say, facing a stringent need to shift the frameworks of thought and Romani scholarly production from Roma vulnerability to white privileges, from participation and achievement gaps to opportunity gaps, from poverty to perpetual institutionalized racism, and finally from integration of the Roma to the means of liberating non-Roma from long-held racist *doxa* or commonly held beliefs.

We might lack the means to dismantle the control of economic power and cultural production, but we do have a modest scholarly apparatus to set up different frameworks of thought on Roma.

Margareta Matache is an instructor, Harvard University, FXB Center for Health and Human Rights and a Roma activist.

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Notes

[1] *Gadje* is the generic term used by Romani people to refer to non-Roma; in the text, I use *gadjo/gadje* interchangeably with non-Roma. *Gadjo*-ness is used here to underline a Euro-specific form of whiteness that grants social, economic, cultural, and institutional privileges and entitlements to non-Roma, or more precisely, to dominant majority groups.

[2] Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond, “Race and Reflexivity,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 35, no.4, (2012).

[3] Gypsy studies or Gypsyology refers here to the formal, early academic study of Romani people by *gadjo* scholars. I also use these concepts when referring to more recent literature using Gypsy terminology and biased modes of thought about Roma.

[4] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, reprint (1978; repr., London: Penguin Group, 2003) p.3.

[5] Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, “Between Exoticization and Marginalization. Current Problems of Gypsy Studies,” *BEHEMOTH A Journal on Civilisation*, vol. 4, no.. 1, (2011).

[6] Adrian Marsh, “Research and the Many Representations of Romani Identity,” European Roma Rights Centre website, November 20, 2007, <http://www.errc.org/article/research-and-the-many-representations-of-romani-identity/2900>

[7] Stephen Steinberg, "Two cheers for race and reflexivity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 35, no.4, (2012).

[8] Anna Mirga, "Romani studies and emerging Romani scholarship," in *Nothing about us without us? Roma participation in policy making and knowledge production*, Andrew Ryder et al., eds., *Roma rights*, *Journal of the European Roma Rights Center*, 2, (2015).

[9] Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, "Between Exoticization and Marginalization. Current Problems of Gypsy Studies," *BEHEMOTH A Journal on Civilisation*, Volume 4, Issue Nr. 1, (2011).

[10] Yaron Matras also brings up the issue of quality while addressing the question of "who speaks for the Roma?" in Yaron Matras, *I met lucky people. The story of the Romani Gypsies*, Penguin Books, 2015.

[11] Matthew Clair, "Black intellectuals and white audiences," May 1, 2016, <http://www.publicbooks.org/nonfiction/black-intellectuals-and-white-audiences>

[12] See more on the importance of Roma knowledge production in Anna Mirga, "Romani studies and emerging Romani scholarship," in *Nothing about us without us? Roma participation in policy making and knowledge production*, Andrew Ryder et al., eds., Roma Rights Issue, *Journal of the European Roma Rights Center*, 2, (2015).

[13] See Marius Taba's comment on racism in universities in *Nothing about us without us? Roma participation in policy making and knowledge production*, Andrew Ryder et al., eds., Roma Rights Issue, *Journal of the European Roma Rights Center*, 2, (2015).

[14] Remus Cretan and David Turnock, "Romania's Roma population: from marginality to social integration," *Scottish Geographical Journal*, (2008), 124:4, 274-299, p. 296.

[15] A.B. Djuve, J.H. Friberg, G.Tyldum, and H. Zhang,"When poverty meets affluence. Migrants from Romania on the streets of the Scandinavian capitals," *The Rockwool Foundation*,(2015).

[16] Stephen Steinberg, "Two cheers for race and reflexivity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 35, no.4,(2012).

[17] Margareta Matache, "Word, image and thought: creating the Romani other," *The Huffington Post* blog, October 3, 2016, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/57f29d40e4b095bd896a156a?timestamp=1475519595732>

[18] Isabel Fonseca, *Bury me standing*, Vintage Departures, 1996.

[19] Anne Sutherland , *Gypsies, The Hidden Americans*,Waveland Press P.95, 1975, reprinted in 1986.

[20] Peter Andrews, "King of the Gypsies," *New York Times*, November 9, 1975, http://www.nytimes.com/1975/11/09/archives/king-of-the-gypsies.html?_r=2

[21] Yaron Matras, *I met lucky people. The story of the Romani Gypsies*, Penguin Books, 2015.

[23] Fundamental Rights Agency, "Roma survey-Data in focus. Education: the situation of Roma in 11 EU member states," *Publications Office of the European Union*, (2014), http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014_roma-survey_education_tk0113748enc.pdf

[24] Connel, 1997, cited in Stephen Steinberg, "Two cheers for race and reflexivity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 35, no.4, (2012).

[25] John Hoyland, *A Historical Survey of the Customs, Habits, and Present State of the Gypsies*, 1816.

[26] Stephen Steinberg, "Two cheers for race and reflexivity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 35, no.4, (2012).

[27] This is central to the argument put forth in a forthcoming *Harvard Educational Review* article, which I co-wrote with colleagues from Harvard FXB Center and the Center for Interactive Pedagogy in Serbia.

[28] .B. Djuve, J.H. Friberg, G.Tyldum, and H. Zhang, "When poverty meets affluence. Migrants from Romania on the streets of the Scandinavian capitals," *The Rockwool Foundation*, (2015).

This blog was originally published in a slightly different form at [The Huffington Post](#).

Revised June 13, 2017 to use the term gadjo-ness, rather than gadje-ness to reflect Romani language more accurately.

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