

Towards 'Critical Whiteness' in Romani Studies

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Introduction

Recently there has been a call emerging from Romani activists and academics for knowledge production related to Romani people to increasingly take into account the views of those that are the subject of research and policy development. Romani activists are asking for a shift away from outsiders speaking about matters relating to Roma as if they were a 'target group' and towards an approach of greater integrity and usefulness that would allow Romani Studies to move forward.¹ This reflects the frustration felt by many with the fact that the level of racism endemic in European society is not acknowledged by the majority population and is explained away through considerations of economics and social welfare.

There is a perception that Romani Studies has been disproportionately focused on Roma as the object of study, with countless anthropological and ethnographic studies, surveys, policies, recommendations and strategies written about them. While very valuable, these² do not engage with analyses or ways of working with the majority, non-Romani population. In this context, the Council of Europe's youth strategies and manuals for anti-racist education³ are the exception that proves the rule.

Yet, while there is growing concern internationally with the rise of anti-Gypsyism, seen as the "root cause of Roma marginalisation",⁴ there is as yet little theoretical

and practical understanding of how to address the prejudice. This kind of insight seems even more precious and urgent in a context where some non-Roma are lurching towards more extremist views. While this pressure seems to require immediate action of the kind that stops racism from happening, I would like to argue that "coming to understanding and resolving exploitation are linked"⁵ and even that deeper understanding of the root causes of anti-Gypsyism should be prioritised over problem solving.

One possible avenue to achieve a deeper comprehension of the everyday lives and aspirations of Roma and by extension perhaps also of how they are affected by anti-Gypsyism is to give "greater emphasis [...] to research 'for' and 'with' Roma communities through community-based and participatory research".⁶ Participatory research – meaning research with and in the best of circumstances, by the people who are its focus – is held up as a way of allowing marginal communities to become more central in development projects, in political processes, or even in academia, in the hope that this would allow them to set the agenda. However, people don't operate in an ideal world but one where power struggles have resulted in unequal relationships of oppression based on people's identities.⁷ It is difficult to create a situation in which participation as defined above gives real influence to excluded communities such as the Roma, without engaging with wider philosophical and political issues of identity and power.

1 Roma Research and Empowerment Network collective, *Workshop Reflections: 'Nothing about us without us?'*, European Roma Rights Centre Blog, 16 December 2014, available at: <http://www.errc.org/blog/workshop-reflections-nothing-about-us-without-us/45>.

2 Michael Stewart and Márton Rövid, eds, *Multi-disciplinary Approaches to Romani Studies* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011).

3 Ellie Keen et al., *Mirrors – Manual on Combating Antigypsyism through Human Rights Education* (Council of Europe Roma Youth Action Plan, 2015), available at: https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Source/Resources/Publications/2015_MIRRORS_combat_antigypsyism_thru_HRE.pdf.

4 UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UN Expert urges Political Action to fight 'Anti-Gypsyism' as a root cause of Roma Marginalisation", 8 April 2015, available at: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15807&LangID=E>.

5 Patta Scott-Villiers, "A Question of Understanding: Hermeneutics and the play of history, distance and dialogue in development practice in East Africa", *Doctoral dissertation*, (Bath: University of Bath, 2009).

6 Roma Research and Empowerment Network, "Roma participation in policy-making and knowledge production", *Roma Empowerment Blog* 2014, available at: <http://romaempowerment.wordpress.com/>.

7 Yvonna S Lincoln, Susan A Lynham and Egon G Guba, "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences, Revisited" in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2011), 97-102.

Thus it is important when setting into motion participatory processes that the assumptions and beliefs of those who hold the power in any given relationship are challenged and examined, alongside or even before embarking on research or development projects involving those who hold less power. From this perspective, I explore how and why the little understood role played by non-Roma in promoting or holding back research, activism, community development and politics focused on Roma is key to successful Romani involvement in all these areas.

On a wider political and theoretical level, this paper seeks to show that the project of Romani emancipation will have difficulty moving forward until the concept of critical whiteness is incorporated into it, both theoretically and practically. I contend that until such time that non-Romani people are willing and able to examine their own racialised identity, even those non-Roma who are committed to dismantling the discrimination experienced by Romani communities will be unable to play a powerful role in this process; whereas those non-Roma who are indifferent, resentful of or actively hostile to Roma could be persuaded to budge from their positions through a deeper understanding of the history of their own identities and how these are formed and performed in the present.

The task I propose therefore, is to reach for an understanding of what non-Romani identities mean, how they have emerged in Eastern Europe but also more widely, and how they could move from an ossified and unwitting set of assumptions towards a live, progressive and positive driver that can ultimately underpin the emancipatory efforts of the Romani movement. To do this, I use a theoretical model based on participatory approaches to research and development, philosophical hermeneutics, critical race theory and critical whiteness pedagogy. I take each of these in turn to explain their potential for Romani Studies. I also

point to a possible model of processing the historical legacy and contemporary experience of non-Romani identity that may be able to move forward towards a better understanding of that identity.

In doing so, I acknowledge that Romani people all over the world have been engaged in a process of re-claiming their Romani identity and that, while they may find the insights in this paper useful, it is not the place of a non-Romani researcher such as myself to seek to guide that parallel movement.

Who participates? The meaning and practice of participation

Participatory action research has deep and wide roots⁸ in the field of liberation pedagogy and has in fact underpinned movements against oppression especially but not exclusively in Latin America. The meaning of participation itself has changed over the years in response to top-down approaches to development,⁹ from the involvement of local people in projects and programmes designed for them, mainly in rural contexts; through participation explicitly linked to cycles of learning and action not only for those who are disempowered, but also for those who are in control;¹⁰ to a more recent focus on how participatory approaches can support active citizenship and structural change.¹¹

In the context of Romani Studies, participatory research is particularly pertinent, given the centuries during which outsiders have spoken for and represented Romani people. In the UK, there has been work using participatory approaches with Gypsy, Romani and Traveller communities,¹² but in general, most of the research 'on' Romani people has not included them.¹³ Meanwhile, there is a stated intention to arrive at national and EU development strategies that are more appropriate for and respectful of

8 Mary Brydon-Miller et al., "Jazz and the Banyan Tree: Roots and riffs on Participatory Action Research" in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2011), 387-400.

9 Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the last first* (London: Longman, 1983).

10 Robert Chambers, *Whose Reality Counts?: Putting the first last* (London: Intermediate Technology, 1997).

11 John Gaventa and Gregory Barrett, *So what difference does it make? Mapping the outcomes of citizen engagement*, IDS Working Paper 347 (University of Sussex: Institute of Development Studies, 2010)

12 Margaret Greenfields and Andrew R. Ryder, "Research with and for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers: combining policy, practice and community in action research" in *Gypsies and Travellers: Empowerment and Inclusion in British Society*, ed. Joanna Richardson and Andrew R. Ryder (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2012).

13 Annabel Tremlett and Aidan McGarry, "Challenges facing Researchers on Roma Minorities in Contemporary Europe: Notes towards a research program", *European Centre for Minority Issues, Working Paper Number 62*, (January 2013), available at: http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx_lfpubdb/Working_Paper_62_Final.pdf.

the choices of Romani people and civil society,¹⁴ so clearly more work is needed in this respect.

However, as is often the case when working with hitherto excluded communities, the devil is in the detail, and there are many possible pitfalls as to who participates, how they participate and for what purpose. It is clearly difficult to create a situation in which participation actually gives real power to a community; big questions arise over who sets the agenda and whether research is truly inclusive of everyone or just tokenistic. The critics of participation go as far as to say that the approach has been hijacked by an instrumentalist ethos that at best “hides and at the same time perpetuates certain sets of power relations”¹⁵ while at worst participation can be downright destructive and have negative consequences.

However, even its critics recognise that participation is a valid concept when it is applied to political activism and challenges oppression. To achieve its broader and some would say, primary potential, participation needs to overtly challenge power relationships and also needs a solid philosophical basis, lest it ends up favouring form over substance.¹⁶

All this brings forth the question of whether those of us who hold the power *vis-à-vis* Romani people are willing and able to undergo a double process of applying participatory inquiry to our practices and examining the deeply held beliefs or even prejudices that we bring to our work practices or academic writing. In other words, do non-Roma have the tools and knowledge that would allow them to question their own identities and how they have come to be ‘the majority’ that contributes to ‘Roma exclusion’ – terms that suggest non-Roma are in the societal driving seat and have more influence than Roma do over their own affairs.

Here, more fundamental approaches to human understanding such as hermeneutics and a deeper critique of

power relations such as critical race theory can be helpful. To these I now turn to explore what they can bring to Romani Studies.

What can we learn from the Other? Hermeneutics, identities and Romani Studies

Philosophical hermeneutics as an ontological discipline was developed by Hans Georg Gadamer.¹⁷ Through Gadamer’s work, hermeneutics transcended its early roots to engage with the nature of human understanding. Hermeneutics is thus understood as a challenge to the “self-certainty and decidedness”¹⁸ that (because of the profound influence of modern science) we bring to knowledge and to our ways of knowing. It opens the door to another way of seeing the world, one that seeks truth in an approach that is less predefined and more to do with a state of mind than with a particular method. It also leaves that door wide open to points of view that jar with one’s worldview and even overturn it.

Gadamer argues that we all have deeply but often not wittingly held beliefs determined by our “hermeneutic situation – i.e. the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition we are trying to understand”¹⁹ In this context, situation means both context and historical horizon or placement, and is created by not only our individual personal history, but the history that has brought each of us to where we are now, e.g. our family history, the history of our people, our class or ethnic group or our nation. As such our understanding of everything that surrounds us is inflected by this tradition, or *effective history*. We each have our effective history – the starting point for our future understanding of the world. Whenever we attempt to grasp anything, we come up against that starting point. Thus, when we come into contact with another person, culture or identity different from our own, Gadamer suggests that, even if we are not aware of it,

14 European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “National Roma Integration Strategies: a first step in the implementation of the EU Framework”, Brussels, 21 June 2012, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/com2012_226_en.pdf.

15 Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, *Participation: The new tyranny?* (London: Zed Books, 2001), 11.

16 Orlando Fals Borda, “Participatory (action) research in social theory: Origins and challenges” in *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice*, 1st ed., ed. Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, (London: SAGE, 2001), 33–34.

17 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), xxiv.

18 Scott-Villiers, *A Question of Understanding*, 106.

19 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301.

that contact is limited and circumscribed by our respective effective histories, creating a horizon of understanding or “range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point”.²⁰

For Gadamer, the way to live consciously and correctly in the world is to expand our vision by engaging in an intentional “circular movement of understanding” that allows us to integrate more and more fresh elements into the picture of reality that we have constructed about a given phenomenon,²¹ while at the same time acting upon that phenomenon to change it.

To do this, it helps to engage with awareness of what has been called the hermeneutic dialogue whenever we encounter the Other – that thing which is different, or that person who is different from us and with whom we seek understanding but with whom we often experience misunderstanding. What’s more, “the basic posture of anyone in the hermeneutical situation has profound implications for ethics and politics, inasmuch as this posture requires that one always be prepared that the other may be right.”²²

To prepare us for the other being right, hermeneutics rescues the notion of *prejudice* from its “current pejorative connotation [acquired] with the ideas of the Enlightenment, when European scientists, philosophers and historians sought freedom from any prejudgment through the application of precise methods.”²³ Thus prejudice in the social sciences is no longer considered an obstacle - instead it becomes simply the starting point of any dialogue, something freely acknowledged and eagerly challenged through the art of questioning and remaining open to new insights.

To do this well, we need what Gadamer has called *Bildung*.²⁴ The concept has sometimes been translated from the original German as ‘culture’ or ‘cultivation’ but encompasses a much wider notion. *Bildung* has been described by Davey²⁵

as including a “process of self-formation”. According to Davey, *Bildung* is also a practical “capacity to act” but without a definite end-goal (“it has no goal outside of itself”) and is concerned with the process of acquiring a certain maturity that allows one to question and remain open to new experiences, while at the same time grounding these in a thorough understanding of the past. Thus, the preconditions to useful dialogue become: acknowledging one’s historically constructed prejudices and engaging in a lifelong and continuous process of *Bildung* related to the topic that one seeks to understand.

Thus equipped with the capacity to see our own prejudices and a profound attitude of openness, we become ready to accept the *provocation of the Other*²⁶ – a situation or experience that we cannot make sense of within our own reality, but that is understood quite differently if seen from the point of view of our interlocutor.

Working through the provocation (which may require additional learning, a great deal of dialogue and relationship building) can eventually bring people to a *fusion of horizons*, which admittedly is always partial but brings with it a new level of understanding from which we can move forward in new and almost certainly unexpected ways. This fusion is not necessarily as harmonious as the word may suggest. It can give rise to either understanding or misunderstanding, to friction or strife, as well as creativity or constructive debate. Of course, the new understanding gained in this zone of ‘fusion’ is different for each party and, while it can be shared, it is also possible that it leads to completely separate world views.

Academics such as Georgia Warnke have used the concept of the *hermeneutic circle* to explore how our identities too, are historically constructed and bound by tradition,²⁷ and how we need to bring rigour and insight to the question of identities, without becoming slaves to a particular method.

20 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 301.

21 *Ibid.*, 292.

22 Robert J. Dostal, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32.

23 Scott-Villiers, *A Question of Understanding*, 33.

24 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 8-16.

25 Nicholas Davey, “Philosophical Hermeneutics: An Education for all seasons?” in *Education, Dialogue and Hermeneutics*, ed. Paul Fairfield (London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 46.

26 Scott-Villiers, *A Question of Understanding*, 65.

27 Georgia Warnke, *After Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Warnke links hermeneutics to racial identity, exploring the contexts under which racial identity is meaningful. Although she believes that racial identities may in the future lose their significance, she explains that at this historical moment in time a racial understanding of identity is historically necessary precisely because humanity has not processed the history that resulted in racial discourses and there is still a need to correct mistakes of the past that have led to centuries of racial oppression.²⁸

She uses an example from the writing of W.E.B. Du Bois²⁹ to explain how people who have historically been seen in racial terms, and have been the targets of scientific racism, are forced to take on a racial identity even if they are reluctant to. Importantly, Warnke concludes that even those of us who were not forced to take on a racial identity because of being racially oppressed are nevertheless called upon to reconfigure our understanding of ourselves when confronted with the ‘effective history’ of how racial identities were created. In other words, she invites everyone to acknowledge the prejudice embedded in our own racial identities and to accept the provocations that this brings into our lives.

In this sense, Paul Gilroy’s thinking is particularly apt to show the way towards a complex understanding of the historical processes involved in the development of a racial identity. Gilroy is particularly insistent that we need to “re-construct the history of ‘race’ in modernity.”³⁰

History, Gilroy says, can teach us not only to understand where racism comes from but also how different concepts of race coexist and interact with each other in the present, and how it is possible that attitudes that were thought to have died in the “bloody penumbra of the Third Reich”

are layered below and among “the culturalist, anthropologically-minded race-thinking of the 1950s”.³¹

However, history in itself does not automatically teach anything. It is in the encounter with the position of another who may have a different view of history that we are provoked to wonder whether there is a reason why what we have always thought to be true is not so in someone else’s view “so that when we find contradictions we question them and make adjustments to our understanding”.³² In this case it is helpful, when encountering someone who has been seen as racially different to ourselves, to question where that difference originated, how it developed and where it has left each of us.

It is helpful to turn also to Homi Bhabha whose argument is that racism is not an anomaly, but “part of the historical traditions of civic and liberal humanism”.³³ In this sense, we can say that there is a generalised effective history of racism in society, but this is in addition to each party in the encounter having their own effective history.

Focus on ‘black’ and ‘white’ – lessons from critical race thinking

Commentators on the work of W.E.B. Du Bois have come to a similar conclusion, namely that all the “various peoples... exist within the veil of blackness”³⁴ – and in Du Bois’ interpretation this definitely includes white people who are “tethered by a fable of the past”, meaning their own white, unprocessed identity.³⁵ It’s important to note that neither black nor white are immovable constructs – blacks can be both oppressors and victims, while whites can transcend their prejudices.³⁶ However, they all operate within the structures of a racialised reality.

28 *Ibid.*, 119.

29 *Ibid.*, 170.

30 Paul Gilroy, “After the great white error... the great black mirage”, *Transformation* Number 47 (2001), available at: <http://transformation.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/transformation/article/viewFile/840/655>.

31 *Ibid.*, 31.

32 Scott-Villiers, *A Question of Understanding*.

33 Homi K. Bhabha, “Race, time and the revision of modernity” in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, ed. Les Back and John Solomos (London: Routledge, 2000), 366.

34 Anne Marie Hancock, “Du Bois, Race and Diversity” in *The Cambridge Companion to W.E.B. Du Bois*, ed. Shamoan Zamir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 93.

35 William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk”, in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1920), 29.

36 Hancock, *Du Bois, Race and Diversity*, 97.

Hancock also reminds us that we owe to Du Bois' internationalism the insight that the veil of blackness extends to other peoples and races,³⁷ not just Black Africans who were the focus of his scholarship. This paves the way for the application of the concept to Romani Studies. For although the thinkers above talk about racism in general, or perhaps in particular about the experience of being black in the USA or the UK, their observations are just as pertinent to the racialised realities surrounding Roma and non-Roma identities.

For a sense of the 'multiple genealogies' of the racialised understanding of Romani people, it is useful to think back to how medieval notions and realities of oppression and slavery aimed at Roma played out in Eastern Europe. According to Ian Hancock³⁸ "*institutionalised antigypsyism in Europe [that] began in the fourteenth century with slavery and continues to this day*", with the sources of this virulent prejudice starting with religious intolerance and the mistaken association of Gypsies with Islam in the times of the Crusades, and continuing with the general equation of Romani people's skin colour with blackness and evil in the European mind. However, Hancock also points to a more recent "parallel, created 'gypsy' image"³⁹ and to the phenomenon of scapegoating that feeds on earlier prejudices and continues to fan the flames of anti-Gypsyism.

This account of the development of anti-Roma racism is backed up by extensive historical research using data from contemporary records, for example those originating in the Romanian Principalities (currently roughly the territory covered by Southern and Eastern Romania) at the time of the abolition of Gypsy slavery (the term is used in its historical context).⁴⁰ They show that not only

did the enslavement of Gypsies in the Romanian Principalities last for centuries, but also that it developed into an institution with long-lasting effects.⁴¹

Other scholars have traced the way in which these early instances of oppression have laid the groundwork for the virulent forms of prejudice that resulted in the Romani Holocaust during the Nazi era.^{42, 43} The same racial discourses continue to underpin seemingly more liberal yet profoundly oppressive attitudes that still survive in the modern era of European integration. One example is viciously racist jokes on social media that, even when publicly challenged by prominent Romani activists, are met with a backlash rather than understanding or apologies from the perpetrators.⁴⁴

Returning to hermeneutics, a history that includes centuries of racialised views of Romani people means that not only they but also non-Romani people are equally bound to 'read' their identities through the lens of race and racism.⁴⁵ In other words, not only Roma but also non-Roma are 'racialised', or have developed a racial identity. Non-Romani people are equally born into and develop a set of identities that can no more avoid being perceived in a racial context than can look away or escape from the role of racial oppressor that has been played by the ancestors of those non-Roma since the early Middle Ages. Of course, neither Romani nor non-Romani are immovable constructs and there are many possible permutations of those identities. However, all operate within the structures of a racialised reality extending beyond the confines of individual countries or cultures. Thus it is just as helpful for the project of understanding anti-Gypsyism to see Romani people as politically affiliated to a 'black' identity, as it is to see non-Romani people as 'white'.

37 Hancock, *Du Bois, Race and Diversity*, 98.

38 Ian Hancock, *We Are the Romani People (Ame Sam E Rromane Džene)*, (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002), 54.

39 *Ibid.*, 61.

40 Viorel Achim, *The Gypsies in the Romanian Principalities: The Emancipation Laws, 1831-1856* (Bucharest: Grupul de Cercetare pentru Istoria Minoritatilor, Institutul de Istorie "Nicolae Iorga", 2004), available at: http://www.iini-minorities.ro/resurse/Achim-Viorel_The-Gypsies-in-the-Romanian-Principalities_2004.pdf.

41 *Ibid.*, 109.

42 Gerhard Baumgartner, *A History of the Roma Genocide* (London: Centre for Holocaust Education, UCL), available at: <http://www.holocausteducation.org.uk/teacher-resources/subject-knowledge/history-roma-genocide/>.

43 Michael Stewart, "Remembering without Commemoration: the mnemonics and politics of Holocaust memories among European Roma", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 10 (3) (2004), 569.

44 Michael Bird and Stefan Candea, "Anti-Roma views rampant across all Romanian political parties", *EU Observer*, 29 April 2014, available at: <http://euobserver.com/euelections/123907>.

45 Warnke, *After Identity*, 105.

Taking a radical feminist approach,⁴⁶ Angela Kóczé applies just such a lens of critical race theory to understand how the experiences of Romani women are different from those of both white males and white females in Hungary, and encourages a dialogue between Romani women and the “sisterhood of women of colour” who have challenged the “totalizing norms of the broader feminist movement”.⁴⁷ Thus, Kóczé articulates a basis from which Romani women can fight their own specific battles against oppression, even going as far as suggesting that “critical studies of whiteness” could be a useful next step for the Romani movement.⁴⁸ In the next section I will unpack the theoretical and emancipatory reasoning for this attention to whiteness.

The challenge of critical whiteness

In the contemporary world, “whiteness, as a global formation, is alienating to its subjects and objects”⁴⁹ and has a lot to answer for when it comes to the exclusion of non-white subjects such as Romani people. Leonardo shows how “global studies in whiteness” when added to the insights of critical race theory can lead to a new model of knowledge production, one that acknowledges the distinct white racial identities of the majority of those currently producing that knowledge. Critical whiteness seeks to go beyond denial to embrace that identity and work with it, noticing in particular its content of white supremacy and white privilege.

The message from critical white theorists is that to dismantle the ways in which some people are kept in a subordinate position because of racism, it is imperative that those affected by whiteness – that is all of us whose identity is non-black – learn to engage with the concept in theory and praxis, and apply it to our individual circumstances. Extrapolating to the

situation of Roma, I argue that for those of us whose identity is non-Romani and who have not been directly targeted by racism, there is no way to understand or affect race oppression unless we process our own (for want of a better word) ‘white non-Romani’ identity.⁵⁰ Going back to the theory and practice of participation (in politics, development projects or knowledge production), not only do we all have to acknowledge our respective positions in the constellation of power created by anti-Gypsyism, but for participation to be real and effective, we all need to participate. At present, non-Roma (as well as many Roma) fail to participate in dismantling the construct of anti-Gypsyism, by allowing a racialised reality to claim their minds and dictate their actions.

As for the methods to approach the project of exploring non-Romani white identities, embracing critical whiteness pedagogy⁵¹ is one way in which those of us who were raised with that identity can make sense of our racial experience and move forward to form a new vantage point, one that more fully engages with our own history by seeing it through the eyes of Romani people and communities. Critical whiteness pedagogy has the potential to lift people whose identity has been constructed as ‘white’ out of a defensive position, or one that remains stuck on grievances around political correctness. It offers another way of understanding white (or non-Romani) identity, one that can fill a previous ‘identity vacuum’ with a positive, empowering anti-racist energy.⁵² Such a transformation has been very aptly called “one of the ultimate acts of humanity: race treason”,⁵³ designed to dismantle white supremacy while at the same time enriching the lives of those of us who are engaged in it.

Feminist scholars such as Ruth Frankenberg⁵⁴ have done considerable work examining the effect of whiteness on individual women’s lives, starting from the premise that a

46 Angela Kóczé, *Gender, Ethnicity and Class: Romani women’s political activism and social struggles* (Budapest: Central European University, 2011), 64.

47 *Ibid.*, 65.

48 *Ibid.*, 70.

49 Zeus Leonardo, “The Souls of White folk: Critical pedagogy, whiteness studies, and globalization discourse”, *Race, ethnicity and education* number 5 (1) (2002), 45.

50 There is of course a question of how people who are not Roma but have been targeted by racism relate to this (by necessity) incomplete binary model, but that is not a discussion to be addressed in the current paper.

51 Dana Nichols, “Teaching Critical Whiteness Theory: What college and university teachers need to know”, *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege*, Volume 1 Number 1 (2010).

52 *Ibid.*, 6.

53 Leonardo, *The Souls of White Folk*, 46.

54 Ruth Frankenberg, “White Women, Race Matters”, in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, ed. Les Back and John Solomos (London: Routledge, 2000), 447–461.

profound and personal understanding of how ‘whiteness’ operates for each of us is necessary to move forward and away from racism. Indeed, feminist perspectives have been at the forefront of engaging with critical white pedagogy, inspired by theorists and activists such as bell hooks⁵⁵ who insist on the need to embody and practically apply an understanding of racism in everyday relationships and particularly when it comes to political activism. hooks demands that feminism as a theory takes on the concept of race and points out that for a period feminist activism failed to thrive precisely because it lacked an analysis of racism.⁵⁶

The project of critical white pedagogy has moved forward and has been enriched by many scholars writing in particular about racism in the USA (such as Barbara Love or Dana Nichols) and some of them propose detailed blueprints for processing white identities, based on their practical experience as anti-racism educators. All these may be useful to study for those of us who seek to process our non-Romani white identities.

Moving forward in our understanding – a possible approach informed by hermeneutics

However, I want to return to the practical lessons that hermeneutics can teach us in this respect. For beyond its theory of understanding, hermeneutic philosophy proposes ways in which anyone can acquire what has been called “hermeneutic consciousness”.⁵⁷ As indicated above, hermeneutics uses that consciousness to reach a deeper understanding of the world, including people and their identities.

Hermeneutic understanding is a three-fold process: in order to understand a thing (*Sache*), including people and their identity, one must be able to intellectually ‘grasp’ that thing;⁵⁸ one must be able to operate with it, in the same way as an artisan operates with or wields the tools

of her trade; and one must find a way to articulate it so that the thing becomes illuminated by language, a fundamental dimension of hermeneutics.⁵⁹

Importantly, hermeneutic dialogue is an iterative process and does not stop once a new understanding is reached – rather, it creates new prejudices, new starting points from which we can move forward towards the other, always knowing that there is no such thing as a perfect fusion of horizons.

I have tried to argue that non-Romani people and communities might want to reach back into history to gain an understanding of their own *prejudices*, engage in a process of *Bildung* designed to open them up to the possibility of new insights into their own and Romani identity and be ready to seek out and genuinely accept the *provocation* (or learning experience) held up by Romani people and communities that they encounter. The possibility thus opens up *a fusion of horizons* that can bring new insights into the lives of both parties. This may seem a simplistic process but is nothing of the sort. It requires a long-term commitment to reinventing our own racialised understandings of ourselves and may happen suddenly (as in those intuitive Eureka moments that people sometimes have) but only as a result of long years of learning and focus. Furthermore, hermeneutic dialogue is a continuous process that keeps unfolding and bringing us to new insights. It owes a lot to attention, listening and the building of clarity between people and does not have an ultimate agenda.⁶⁰ At the same time, hermeneutics is not method, but a state of mind, an openness and continuous questioning, “a posture [requiring] that one always be prepared that the other may be right.”⁶¹ In this sense, hermeneutic understanding seeks to inform and guide method, such as inter-cultural dialogue, aiming to rescue it from being blithe, superficial, over-eager to reach agreement and ignoring the gulf between the self and the Other. Indeed, Derrida, one of hermeneutics’ critics, has argued that there is always that which cannot be understood, and

55 bell hooks, “Racism and Feminism, the issue of accountability” in *Theories of race and racism: A Reader*, ed. Les Back and John Solomos (London: Routledge, 2000), 373-388.

56 *Ibid.*, 388.

57 Scott-Villiers, *A Question of Understanding*.

58 Jean Grondin, “Gadamer’s basic understanding of understanding” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 36-51.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Scott-Villiers, *A Question of Understanding*, 179.

61 Dostal, *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, 32.

that the hermeneutic fusion of horizons glosses over many of the “heterogeneities and abysses that confront us”.⁶²

Hermeneutics, then, is one philosophy that can contribute to the effort required to undo a history of discrimination, “a way of being and behaving, which changes with experience and attention”.⁶³ This effort that has much more to do with confrontation than a comfortable fusion of “lifeworlds”,⁶⁴ goes beyond superficial engagement or political correctness to personal engagement with the deeper meanings and truths of people separated by the “gulfs of effective history”.⁶⁵ Hermeneutics can lead to a deep, politically engaged and long-term process where identities of participants are examined, deconstructed and perhaps reconstructed in a way that expands the understanding of those involved.

It can be a process fraught with many pitfalls and potential conflicts, since even the words ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’ or ‘identity’ immediately conjure up deeply held emotional beliefs and any group of people engaged in examining their Romani or non-Romani identity would have to be skilfully led towards greater openness rather than greater entrenchment or resentment.⁶⁶ Examples abound of people setting out on a journey to emancipation only to end up in blind alleys and accused of “erasing the identities of those who cannot choose”, as recently happened in the much-publicised case of Rachel Dolezal.⁶⁷

One way of mitigating the dangers is to make an agreement with others on the same journey as oneself to look out for each other, discuss, make manifest and challenge each other’s prejudices in an atmosphere of safety and respect, where all those present agree that their field of vision is limited by societal prejudices and where the inevitable conflicts are seen as so many opportunities for learning rather than immutable differences of opinion. Such a group would have to engage with and debate boundaries

of identity, different conceptions of how it is constructed and if not necessarily reaching a consensus on all matters, agree to disagree enough so that dialogue remains possible and can move forward. Beyond such a group of fellow learners, for such an endeavour to succeed, it would be useful for the wider Romani Studies community to work towards achieving an environment where debate and disagreement are valued – but that is a much wider discussion.

Conclusion

As already noted, I acknowledge that individuals, groups and communities who see themselves as part of the Romani movement (including many contributors to this journal) are already engaged in a highly productive process of re-claiming, processing and re-inventing their racial identities. The challenge is to extend this work to a group of people who can equally productively understand, operate with and articulate their non-Romani identity. Thus, while this paper sets out to articulate the theoretical basis of such an endeavour, it is at the same time an invitation to non-Roma to join in a journey of discovery of our own identities, as well as an invitation to Roma to guide and/or engage critically with such an undertaking.

The vision held out by this paper is to seek to transform non-Romani identity from one that is ‘preserved in aspic’, unaware and ultimately detrimental to both Romani and non-Romani people, into one that is engaged with and questioning its own historical roots and prejudices and seeks to actively overcome these through thoughtful and deliberate action. As mentioned at the very beginning of this article, Romani activists and academics have indicated repeatedly that they would welcome a dialogue with non-Roma who are willing to move beyond the exclusions that have been foisted upon them by a history of oppression.⁶⁸

62 Richard J. Bernstein, “The Constellation of Hermeneutics, Critical Theory and Deconstruction”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

63 Scott-Villiers, *A Question of Understanding*, 25.

64 *Ibid.*, 118.

65 Patta Scott-Villiers, “This Research does not Influence Policy”, *IDS Bulletin* 43.5 (Institute of Development Studies, 2012): 25-30.

66 Charmaine L. Wijeyesinghe, Pat Griffin and Barbara Love, “Racism Curriculum Design” in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook*, ed. Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 1-3.

67 Syreeta McFadden, “Rachel Dolezal’s definition of ‘transracial’ isn’t just wrong, it’s destructive”, *The Guardian*, 16 June 2015, available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/16/transracial-definition-destructive-rachel-dolezal-spokane-naacp>.

68 Kóczé, *Gender, ethnicity and class*, 70.

Beyond academic and activist circles, the practical implications of developing the theory and practice of critical whiteness as it relates to non-Romani people and communities could help solve a lot of the intractable issues connected to Roma exclusion. One such obstacle is that white culture has been more and more monopolised by the New Right and has come to be equated with conservative notions of ethnicity which lead to more insular and hierarchical ways of seeing and operating in the world, rather than striving towards more openness. It's useful to remember that most of us are not determined to discriminate against Roma, but often fall prey to divisive discourses when we don't have the choice of a better alternative.

For example, encouraging a critically white attitude and a mindset of alliance⁶⁹ in non-Romani parents could begin to disentangle the difficulties with parental attitudes “which push segregation in classes and white flight.”⁷⁰

Or it could serve as an inspiration for training aimed at non-Romani staff working for human rights and other NGOs working for Romani communities, thus ensuring that they

avoid contributing to experiences of subalternity and exploitation for Romani activists involved in the field.⁷¹

A critical whiteness approach could also encourage student of white non-Romani privilege to gain an “understanding [of] the connection between all forms of injustice”⁷² and therefore educate or involve themselves in movements that challenge injustice more widely. This would back up and strengthen similar efforts by Romani activists who are seeking out and building solid alliances with feminist and LGBT groups, and perhaps lead to a more intersectional approach to Romani Studies, where researchers and activists alike weigh up and acknowledge not only the influence of their race, but also that of their class, gender, disability or sexuality upon their work.

However, while the practical applications of the theoretical approach described above are multiple and may have a demonstrable effect on policy, “once a consciousness is in operation it seems [that] it begins to have an active effect on understanding”⁷³ that transcends its original goals. That is perhaps its most precious gift - that a journey of understanding once embarked on, can have a transformative effect beyond the immediate and time-bound.

69 Wijeyesinghe, Griffin and Love, *Racism Curriculum Design*.

70 Francois-Havier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University, *Strategies to Combat Segregation of Romani Children in schools: Case studies in Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, and Romania*, Research Report Digest, (Francois-Havier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights, 2015), available at: <http://fxb.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2015/02/Romani-Segregation-2015-brief-version-final.pdf>.

71 Angela Kóczé and Nidhi Trehan, “Postcolonial Racism and Social Justice: The Struggle for the Soul of the Romani Civil Rights Movement in the ‘New Europe’” in *Racism, Postcolonialism, Europe*, ed. Graham Huggan and Ian Law (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 50-77.

72 Wijeyesinghe, Griffin and Love, *Racism Curriculum Design*, 5-6.

73 Scott-Villiers, *A Question of Understanding*, 40.