ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS IN GYPSY, ROMA AND TRAVELLER RESEARCH

LESSONS FROM A TIME OF CRISIS

**EDITED BY
MARTIN FOTTA AND
PALOMA GAY Y BLASCO**

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Notes on Contributors

Tamsin Cavaliero is a lecturer in the Department of Social Sciences at the Atlantic Technological University Sligo. Her research interests include creative methodologies, educational inclusion, group work, cultural contexts of childhood and youth, sustainability and Traveller and Roma communities. Prior to taking up her lecturing post she worked in practice in a variety of posts with Traveller youth in formal and informal educational settings and was involved in a number of arts-based projects with Travellers. Tamsin is a trained graphic facilitator regularly involved in graphic facilitation work which focuses on family support, youth participation, inclusive research practices and counselling.

Ana Chirițoiu is a social anthropologist working at the intersection of legal, moral and political anthropology. She has worked with Roma communities across Romania for over a decade now, both as an academic and as an engaged researcher. She has written about Romani activism, Romani jurisprudence and vernacular Roma politics. Her doctoral work analysed the relation between the social exclusion of Roma and the inner social order of a Roma group living on the margins of a southern Romanian town, along with the practices and ideologies that maintain this order. Her current research examines the challenges that long-term migration poses for the reproduction of Roma groups' moral community – and whether social media mitigates or compounds these challenges.

Martin Fotta is a researcher at the Institute of Ethnology at the Czech Academy of Sciences. His primary research interests are informal economic strategies, mobilities and welfare state transformations. He is a co-author, with Mariya Ivancheva and Raluca Pernes, of a report on precarity and labour conditions within academic anthropology entitled *The Anthropological Career in Europe: A complete report on the EASA membership survey* (EASA, 2020) and a co-editor, with Paloma Gay y Blasco, of *Romani Chronicles of COVID-19: Testimonies of Harm and Resilience* (Berghahn, 2023).

David Friel is a researcher and PhD candidate at the Atlantic Technological University Sligo (ATU Sligo). He holds a Master of Arts in Social Care and

Social Justice and a Bachelor of Science in Health and Social Care. He is also an academic tutor at ATU Sligo and a training officer with Think Equality Donegal. Most recently, he has taken up the position of adjunct lecturer at University College Dublin, teaching the Traveller Culture, History and Ethnicity course. Additionally, he has a wealth of experience as a social care practitioner. His research interests include Irish Travellers, human rights, social justice, and participatory action research.

Paloma Gay y Blasco teaches social anthropology at the University of St Andrews. She has authored books and articles on ethnographic methods, collaborative anthropology and Romani issues. Recent publications include *Writing Friendship: A Reciprocal Ethnography* (co-authored with Liria Hernández, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and *Romani Chronicles of COVID-19: Testimonies of Harm and Resilience* (co-edited with Martin Fotta, Berghahn, 2023).

Demetrio Gómez Ávila has worked for over three decades advocating for social justice and Romani rights through decolonial and intersectional perspectives. A leading Rroma human rights activist, he has, among other things, served as an expert and trainer for the Council of Europe, the European Commission and other organizations and institutions connected to racial justice, antifascism and the fight against xenophobia and discrimination.

Luxa Leoco is a Romanian Roma woman who spent most of her youth living in homelessness with her husband and two children in Madrid. In recent years, she has worked as a waitress, an assistant cook and, lately, as a store manager. In 2020, for six months, she joined the Marie Skłodowska–Curie project 'Resilience and Resignation among Transnational Roma and non–Roma Youths' (RETRY) as a research assistant.

Nathalie Manrique is an independent social anthropologist. During her extended fieldwork among Andalusian Gitanos, she investigated the place of gifts in the construction of kinship. In 2016–17, thanks to a grant by the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona, she examined Gitano matrimonial practices from the early modern era to the present day. She is also interested in funeral commensality patterns. Her most recent publication is 'Gitanos en España. Un estudio exploratorio a partir de los apellidos' (in *Nombrar y circular, los gitanos entre Europa y las Américas*, edited by Neyra P. Alvarado Solís, Colegio de San Luis de Potosi, 2020).

Antonio Montañés Jiménez is a Spanish anthropologist with an interest in the study of Rroma people, Christianity and social movements. He is a Margarita Salas postdoctoral fellow affiliated with the School of

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Stefano Piemontese is a research fellow at the Institute for Research into Superdiversity of the University of Birmingham. His research interests are primarily in youth, migration and inequality. While using ethnography to explore these topics, he likewise employs audiovisual and collaborative methodologies in his research. Recently he co-edited, with Tina Magazzini, *Constructing Roma Migrants. European Narratives and Local Governance* (IMISCOE-Springer, 2019), and led the Marie Skłodowska-Curie project 'Resilience and Resignation among Transnational Roma and non-Roma Youths' (RETRY, 2019–22).

Iliana Sarafian is a researcher at the Centre for Public Authority and International Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the author of *Contesting Moralities: Roma Identities, State and Kinship* (Berghahn, 2023). Her doctoral work focused on the reproduction of social inequalities among Bulgarian Roma in gender, kinship and state relationships. She also conducted research on minority and migrant health and well-being in Italy and the United Kingdom. She is currently leading a British Academy-supported ethnographic project on deservingness and resilience among Ukrainian Roma refugees in Poland.

Marco Solimene is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics of the University of Iceland. His research activities revolve around Roma-related issues in Europe, with a specific focus on Italy and the Balkan area. His research interests and publications include themes such as governmentality and resilience, urban governance and (in)formality, memory and nostalgia, as well as methodological and epistemology issues. He is currently investigating transnational practices and imageries of home-making among Bosnian Muslim Roma families dwelling in an urban shanty in Rome (Italy).

Acknowledgements

Introduction: Emerging Trends in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Research

Martin Fotta and Paloma Gay y Blasco

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities across Europe. The global crisis fed on the fragility of GRT lives, exacerbating entrenched patterns of disenfranchisement while creating opportunities for new forms of marginalization to emerge. Throughout successive waves and lulls, as government directives and public attitudes changed, the vulnerability of GRT communities undoubtedly increased. GRT people were variously subjected to racial scapegoating, not just on social media but by the established media too. Measures designed to control the spread of the virus particularly harmed vulnerable families and communities heavily dependent on outdoor, manual and sometimes peripatetic ways of earning a living. Lockdowns and limits on movement provided the framework where discrimination in access to education, health and social support burgeoned. Especially during the early period in the spring of 2020, some governments at local, regional and national levels imposed supplementary controls and restraints on GRT people living in ghettos, informal settlements and sites. There, they became even more vulnerable to the virus due to overcrowding and lack of adequate sanitation. Isolation and economic precarity had negative impacts on mental health, while school closures in combination with the inadequate access to technology (broadband, laptops) put the education of many GRT children on hold.

Documenting, analysing and critiquing the marginalization of GRT communities, past and present, have long been central to the field of GRT-related research. This is true even for many scholars not commonly

involved in applied research. In March 2020, these tasks gained added urgency as reports appeared of the racist scapegoating of GRT communities and of the hardships facing GRT families unable to support themselves under lockdown. Restrictions on movement throughout much of 2020 and 2021 meant that researchers could not resort to the familiar, established ways of conducting ethnographic research – long-term participant observation, detailed life history work, *in situ* surveys, in-depth interviewing, first-hand investigation and documentation. Often, even archival work became impossible. With so many people across so many countries unable to leave their homes for such a long period of time, or having to avoid face-to-face interactions, even scholars living in and researching their own communities met unprecedented challenges. For researchers, whether of GRT background or not, working with groups located elsewhere, the obstacles seemed insurmountable.

Yet this also turned out to be a significant moment in the development of GRT-related scholarship – one that added impetus to a much-needed methodological overhaul, core elements of which were already in the making before the start of 2020. As researchers questioned the viability of their projects and pondered the usefulness of their work in the context of the crisis, they also retooled their methodologies, sometimes fruitfully expanding in new directions. They were not just responding to practical pressures. Rather, they were engaging wider debates relating to the ethics, politics and practicalities of knowledge production, both in connection to GRT issues and more widely. Alongside the generalized move to online work and remote social interaction there were other, sometimes contradictory, stimuli and processes at play – among others, the movement to decolonize social science research and teaching; the increasing precarization of academic labour; the growing focus on 'impact' in research evaluation; and the expansion of open-access publishing. In March 2020, all these came together in the crucible of the health crisis. Although the resulting overhaul is still in its early stages, three and half years after the start of the pandemic it is clear that GRT-related research has already undergone, and is undergoing, significant transformations. The aim of this volume is to scrutinize these and assess their relevance for the future of scholarship on GRT issues.

A companion to emerging GRT research

The aim of this volume is to unpack the changes within the field of GRT-related research that were accelerated or brought on by the pandemic through a distinctive focus on methods. We explore the concrete methodological implications of this transformative moment for the future of GRT-related scholarship, and we draw on the collective expertise of our contributors to provide guidance for researchers. The volume centres on ethnographic research so that, while most of the contributors are anthropologists, it will

be also useful to sociologists, social work practitioners and others using ethnographic methods. Of course, the breadth of scholarly work on GRT issues is vast, and it is impossible to document every significant development. For this reason, we have focused on those elements and processes that we consider particularly important and that we have found especially salient in our own work. These are:

- the critical investigation of the shifting roles, capabilities, constraints and accountabilities of researchers (whether these are of non-GRT or GRT background);
- the development of collaborative approaches to project design, implementation and dissemination that engage on-the-ground GRT interlocutors and that create synergies between local and academic aims, needs and outlooks;
- the flexible deployment of research methods alongside the willingness to experiment, adapt and innovate;
- the ongoing reconfiguring of 'the field' (and, relatedly, 'home') from a bounded site or community to a shifting set of relations and processes, and of 'fieldwork' from consisting solely of sustained periods of 'being there' to knowledge-making combining different temporalities;
- the foregrounding of traditionally downplayed dimensions of the research process, including doubt, ignorance and failure; the exploration of aspects of human life that more readily escape analysis and description; and the recognition that academic knowledge is always in the making, and therefore is always provisional, partial and unstable;
- the transformation of academic writing to incorporate the work and perspectives of non-academic GRT interlocutors, particularly those without a formal education, and to enable dialogic texts where researcher approaches and conclusions are the subject of analysis and critique by research participants;
- the determination to work with publishers, reviewers and academic employers to shift established ideas of what outputs of academic value might look like, and to experiment with multimodal ways of communicating research.

The focus on these themes gives the volume its particular ethos, both reflexive and strongly practical. It is important to emphasize that none of these transformations is unilinear or unproblematic: none solves the challenges that face either social scholarship in general or GRT-related research in particular. Indeed, each of these trends seeds its own contradictions and challenges, and these are methodological and ethical. Our aim in the chapters that follow is precisely to attempt to bring both their limits and potentialities to light. The chapters do not offer an exhaustive overview of potential research topics nor

an itemized list of research methods to be applied in one's project. Nor do we intend to dictate the direction that GRT-related research should take. Rather, inspired by Ballestero and Winthereik (2021, 7), we think of this book as something between a handbook and a guidebook – a resource to think with, and to question, and in that sense a companion. We hope that the experiences and insights of our contributors, and their recommendations for further reading, will suggest helpful avenues for reflection and action to researchers facing concrete challenges.

But we also think of the volume through the idiom of companionship because it emerged from 'a form of copresence that entails proximity during highs and lows' (Ballestero and Winthereik, 2021, 7), from a sense of camaraderie and fellowship that arose as the contributors shared with each other their difficulties and insights while navigating their research projects under the new pandemic conditions. The book is a result of a series of conversations that we held throughout 2020, 2021 and 2022 – at online workshops, while working on this and other publications and informally. The pandemic, and in particular the turn to online interaction that it has engendered, enabled a proliferation of online events, facilitated the creation and strengthening of networks and made both more accessible to scholars with fewer resources or less opportunity to travel. The series of online workshops that seeded this volume, and the volume itself, were in fact stimulated by the crisis.

Throughout the pandemic we witnessed many home-bound ethnographers 'virtually [that is, remotely] accompanying' the communities with which they work through advocacy, awareness raising, and fundraising among other initiatives (Horton, 2021). The authors gathered here reflect on their own experiences to question what it might mean to accompany their research participants as the latter face struggles brought on or exacerbated by the global crisis. Their accounts bring to the surface tensions between research relationships on the one hand, and kinship, friendship and cooperation on the other. They discuss the limits, pitfalls, drawbacks and benefits of various kinds of action and collaboration, asking what forms social scientific research for transformation might take in the wake of COVID-19.

Some contributors write about their own GRT families and communities, reflecting on the emotional and practical challenges involved in working with and for their own people in the midst of the tremendous suffering engendered by the crisis. Others write about bonds of friendship and affection established with their research participants over the years, and how these were reconfigured or formed the basis of new collaborations during the pandemic. All contributors probe the complex nature of these connections, examining the ties of mutual support and also the boundaries, power differentials, inequalities and hierarchies that separate researchers and their interlocutors. Rather than positing engaged scholarship as an

unproblematic solution to the oppression and marginalization of GRTs, the chapters confront its limits and reach. What emerge are reflections on companionship that foreground key differences and inequalities, including the uneven impact that pandemic control measures have had on the lives of authors and interlocutors. The chapters thus address, in practical rather than theoretical ways, recent debates about the ethics, politics and morals of scholarship in general and of GRT-related research in particular.

Some authors in this volume had pre-pandemic professional expertise, academic or otherwise, working alongside GRT groups, and others are experts by experience writing about their own lives and those of their GRT families and communities. Additionally, the majority of the academic contributors find themselves early in their careers and hold no tenured position. We wanted to hear from younger researchers with recent or ongoing strong engagement with their fields, who were facing methodological dilemmas brought on by the pandemic without the cushion of an established academic career. We wanted to understand better whether normative, often gendered expectations regarding fieldwork (such as the reliance on long-term participant observation) take for granted a degree of professional and economic stability. Lastly, we wanted to ensure that the skills and backgrounds of our contributors matched the needs of the different groups with a stake in the development of GRT research methods: this includes not only academics but others (such as activists or non-governmental organization workers) using social science tools in their work.

About the chapters

The chapters that follow deploy reflexivity as the vehicle through which to appraise specific methodological challenges and innovations: all chapters foreground the researchers' positionality and assess critically the nature of their research involvement. Each starts with a bullet-point list of key themes and ends with a list of recommendations that should help readers as they are designing their own research projects or working through conundrums.

Chapters are preceded by 'visual abstracts' by Tamsin Cavaliero, a social scientist working with Irish Travellers and graphic facilitator. As she explains in Chapter 2, 'Responding to Research Challenges during COVID-19 with Graphic Facilitation', graphic facilitation guides readers through complex information using a mixture of diagrams, symbols and pictures. While it is usually deployed in real time (for example, during meetings or seminars), we hope to harness its capacities to assist understanding and debate. The inclusion of these illustrations is not accidental: academic writing styles often function as barriers to understanding and dialogue, not just for academics themselves but for wider audiences, including students and those whose lives are under scrutiny. By mobilizing visual cues and notes, illustrations

should enable readers to see patterns more clearly and also encourage them to reflect on what academic knowledge is and can be, and how it is achieved and communicated (or not). We have found multimodal ways of communicating research very helpful when sharing findings with project participants during the pandemic, and when asking for their critical analysis and feedback. Illustrations by Cavaliero are offered in the same spirit, with a hope that teachers and researchers will consider using them and other multimodal tools in their classes and projects.

In order to assess the methodological transformations accelerated by the pandemic, in our own Chapter 3 on 'Innovation, Collaboration and Engagement', we place them against the context of ongoing debates about the ethics and politics of GRT-related research, asking whether they help foster reflexivity, inclusiveness and accountability as well as scholarly rigour and innovation. The growing reliance on narrative and textual data, the increased tendency to do research through and about social media and the rising dependence on the help of research assistants have the potential both to challenge and reinforce the inequalities on which GRT research is built. The pandemic has made more salient the multifaceted roles that researchers play in relation to the communities they study, and the ethical complexities of these roles have also become more clearly visible. Here collaborative methodologies, where researchers work together with local non-academic interlocutors, emerge as one potential avenue for a more egalitarian, accessible and open way of doing research with GRT communities. Yet their usefulness and appropriateness in any particular context must be assessed rather than taken for granted: we argue that a strongly reflexive and critical approach to methodological choice, and the productive recognition of doubt, failure and dead ends, must be central to responsible ethnographic research.

The pandemic fuelled the intensification and diversification of modes of cooperation between researchers and non-academic interlocutors, yet these are rarely unproblematic. Understanding the contrasting motivations for cooperation of the various parties, and confronting their distinct histories, expectations and goals, is essential for such collaborations to succeed. In Chapter 4, 'Bridging Academia and Romani Activism in the Age of COVID-19', Demetrio Gómez Ávila, a Romani activist, and Antonio Montañés Jiménez, a non-Romani anthropologist, discuss how they joined forces in 2020 to document the growth of online hate speech against Gitanos in Spain. Their conversational approach keeps their two voices distinct and so makes clear to the reader the distances between their outlooks while demonstrating the fruitfulness of dialogue. Discussing openly the perils of academic misrepresentation and conflicts over control of knowledge production, they demonstrate one way in which advocacy and scholarship can come together to facilitate the 'renewal' of Romani studies (Beck and Ivasiuc, 2018, 12).

Yet what advocacy and action might accomplish, or by whom, is far from predictable or straightforward. The question of why, when and how scholars should engage in advocacy is central to debates around the place of academia in struggles over social justice (Scheper-Hughes, 1995; Harrison, 1997). Marco Solimene, who has carried out research among Bosnian Xomá in Rome for over two decades, discusses the possibility that the silence of the non-GRT researcher might constitute a form of deferral to Xomá knowledge. In Chapter 5, 'The Anthropologist's Engagement', he questions taken-for-granted, hegemonic understandings of politics of voice and visibility. His 'refusal' (for example, Simpson, 2007; Shange, 2019) to speak up on behalf of his Xomá interlocutors honours Xomá control over their representation and its terms and builds outward from their politics, experiences and understandings of their social position.

Solimene's chapter reflects on the methodological affordances and limits of social media and digital technologies as research tools. While online and offline worlds are interconnected, and even in pre-pandemic times social media played an increasingly important role in Xomá sociability, during the pandemic Solimene could make sense of the online lives of his Xomá friends only because of his previous knowledge of Xomá social relations and cultural cues, gained through decades of first-hand participant observation. From piecemeal information, Solimene attempted to reconstruct a picture of a Xomá social life in the so-called 'nomads camp' during the lockdown which turned out, despite the material strife, in many respects more socially satisfying than that of most other inhabitants of Rome who were isolated within their apartments.

Like Solimene's, Iliana Sarafian's contribution examines the practical difficulties involved in making sense of research participants' lives remotely, but she also emphasizes the difficulties that arise when we try to account for those aspects of human experience that most easily escape analysis – in her case, grief and love. Her Chapter 6, 'Roma Ethnographies of Grief in the COVID-19 Pandemic', is driven by a humanistic reflexivity that uses the researcher's self and her emotions as vehicles for inquiry. The chapter takes as its departure point two coronavirus-related deaths, one in Iliana's own Bulgarian Roma family, and another in that of Maria (a pseudonym), one of her Roma research participants. These events bring Iliana and Maria together despite the geographical distance that separates them and the time that has passed since Sarafian's doctoral research in Maria's neighbourhood. The 'field' irrupts into 'home' thanks to communication technologies, sparking a series of reflections about the structures that connect and disconnect Roma lives, and the lives of participants and anthropologists. Sarafian focuses on the centrality of the emotional and the affective in research: building on established traditions in the anthropology of emotions, she argues that her own experience with death and mourning gave her a better insight into

what her interlocutor was going through. She is careful, however, not to homogenize and claim identity with Maria. Rather, drawing on the best tradition of autoethnography, she troubles the dichotomies of insider and outsider, proximity or distance, nuancing relationships and experiences across various levels. The stringing of adjectives, qualifications and hesitations that characterizes Sarafian's writing thus becomes not merely an evocative authorial strategy but a means of describing and displaying the particularities of their relationship and positionalities.

Social science aesthetics and assessment processes are biased towards certainty, assertiveness and success. Even in ethnography we seldom read about failures or dead ends, although these moments also bring forth the contours of the social and the nature of ethnographic knowledge, as we suggest in Chapter 3. This is the subject of Nathalie Manrique's Chapter 7, 'Beyond the Screen', a testament to Manrique's commitment to her Gitano interlocutors and to slow learning. Manrique describes her attempt to find out what was happening in the community where she had done intermittent fieldwork since 1996 and to carry out remote research on perceptions of the pandemic during the lockdown of 2020. Manrique realizes that not all issues can be studied remotely and, while she learns some facts, their meaning or emotional valence keep escaping her. This is not least because her closest contacts, on whom she depended for many insights when doing research *in situ*, are deaf and illiterate, and other informants are hard to mobilize informally as co-researchers in a remote project. As she cannot learn in real time and what little she learns is mediated by others (informants, media, archives), the chapter becomes a meditation on ethnographic serendipity, on immersion and its limits and on how anthropology constructs its knowledge.

By making it impossible (or at least much more difficult) to carry out face-to-face research, the pandemic made patently clear something that all ethnographers know, but that is still most often downplayed: non-academic interlocutors (participants, collaborators, field assistants) play key roles in the creation of ethnographic knowledge. In Chapter 8, 'Luxa's Prism', Stefano Piemontese, a non-Roma professional ethnographer, and Luxa Leoco, a Roma research assistant, review their collaborative relationship and the methodological choices they made when researching together the lives of disadvantaged youths in Madrid during 2020. For experimental collaborations like theirs to effectively challenge the inequalities that shape scholarly knowledge production, it is essential to foreground the analytical power and limits of experiential, oral and memory-based forms of inquiry and representation. Practical adjustments have to be made to working practices so as to enable the analytical contributions of GRT interlocutors who are neither activists nor formally educated. Piemontese and Leoco's chapter sensitively and earnestly foregrounds how becoming vulnerable to each other, sharing of feelings of uncertainty and failure became central to

building a relationship of trust between the two and helped ease at least some power differentials. Moreover, written collaboratively (with the two authors alternating in providing their reflections), the chapter is also a contribution to an emergent genre of GRT ethnographic writing in which an academic and a non-academic interlocutor write ethnography together while analysing the drawbacks and advantages of the collaborative process itself (for example, Gay y Blasco and Hernandéz, 2020; also Montañés Jiménez and Gómez Ávila, Chapter 4 in this volume).

By emphasizing positionality, failure and uncertainty, and by scrutinizing the relationships and hierarchies that underpin the production of ethnographic knowledge, all chapters in this volume address questions that are central to current debates around the politics of GRT-related research: what claims to knowledge can and should different actors in the research process make? How do the particular histories and positions of researchers and interlocutors open or close to them specific avenues for inquiry and representation? In Chapter 9, 'Over and Back Again', David Friel tackles these issues by reviewing his attempts to shift the focus of his Master's research to document the impact of the pandemic on his own Irish Traveller community. He presents his chapter as a contribution to the larger effort by Irish Travellers to reclaim the narrative from the margins and grassroots. Drawing on Indigenous methodologies and participatory research methods, he argues that it is essential to challenge traditional, non-Traveller scholarly representations of Travellers, and to acknowledge that non-Traveller academic concerns dominate research agendas. The chapter pivots around the place of emotions in so-called 'insider research' within one's own vulnerabilized community and tackles questions of power, positionality and accountability. Friel convincingly demonstrates that, since the researcher's emotional involvement is essential to qualitative research, self-care and care for others must centre research practice.

Ana Chiriţoiu's 'Analysing Contradictions' (Chapter 10) closes the volume. This is appropriate, as the chapter heeds the call to reflect on analysis as 'constituent of ethnographic praxis' through which novel insights are generated from ethnographic material and that arises from immersion in specific societal positions, relationships and contexts (Ballestero and Winthereik, 2021, 1). The lockdown in spring 2020 brought about a distance between Chiriţoiu and research participants in a way that was not felt before. They were separated physically as they were contained to their respective homes in different countries. But Roma also faced racist backlash and socioeconomic disenfranchisement that highlighted structural inequalities and antigypsy racism permeating Romanian society and which separated the realities of the ethnographer and her interlocutors. These distances made apparent to Chiriţoiu the contradictions that characterize Roma lives. While she had noted them in her previous research, the pandemic context

forces her to reflect on their place in Roma lives and on Roma notions of 'trouble' and 'capability'. Following what Gregory Bateson called a 'wild "hunch"' that required Chirițoiu to work by means of 'a combination of lose and strict thinking' (Bateson, 1972, 75), she gained a novel insight into the mechanism through which societal contradictions that get imposed on Romanies become transposed onto familial and intimate levels where they get resolved along gendered lines, and often at high personal costs.

<div align="center">★★★</div>

The arrival of the pandemic instigated urgent discussions on how social scientists should respond to the crisis. As well as having to decide how best to adapt research methods and projects to the novel context, there was a felt need to investigate the social impact of the pandemic, particularly on vulnerabilized populations. Bristol University Press made a key contribution to this scholarly endeavour through the Rapid Response series and, later, the COVID-19 Collection (for example, Kara and Khoo, 2020a, 2020b, 2022; Garthwaite et al, 2022). Our volume belongs to this wider debate: it attempts to move beyond the pandemic event and learn from it, as well as to use it as an opportunity to take stock of GRT-related scholarship.

When the pandemic started, we wished we had a book to recommend to our students and others working alongside and for GRT communities who were rethinking their own roles as researchers at a time of crisis. We realized that, despite the existence of many monographs based on research in or with GRT communities, there was no generalist, critical introduction to social science research methodology on GRT-related issues or with GRT communities. While filling this gap completely would be an overambitious aim for this little book, its purpose is to help to kickstart a much-needed conversation. We hope that *Ethnographic Methods in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Research* will become a useful companion for both seasoned and junior social science practitioners when thinking through their research engagements.

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Responding to Research Challenges during COVID–19 with Graphic Facilitation

Tamsin Cavaliero
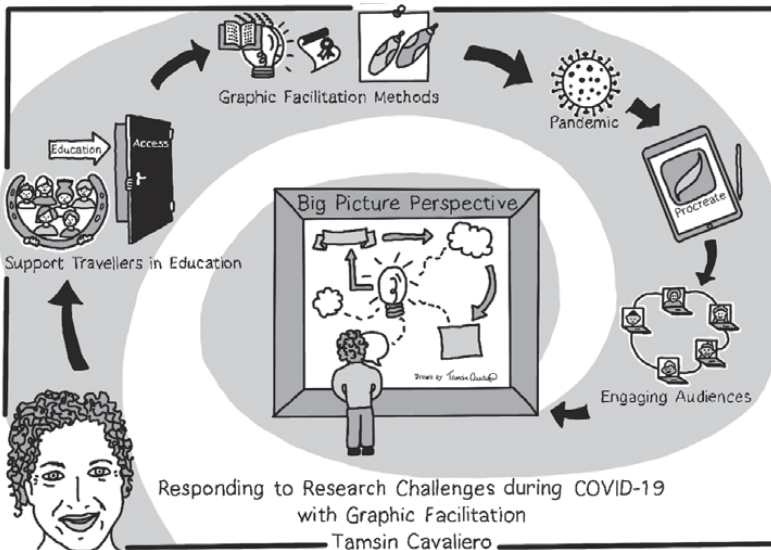
Graphic Facilitation uses a variety of visual approaches and creative media to capture big ideas, map processes, engage participants and present information clearly. The methods are used by community organizations, healthcare planners, researchers and software engineers, enabling participants to process information, visualize problems and come up with solutions. A combination of words and pictures presented in a 'big picture

perspective' (often on a large chart or screen, mural or picture gallery) allows participants to see the(ir) work in its entirety. Approaches vary depending on the audience and output required. Different learning styles and ways of processing information (Armstrong, 1987) require flexible and accessible delivery methods (Rose and Meyer, 2002). The use of images can stimulate new meaning and insight (Horan, 2000), promote reflection and deep learning (Espiner and Hartnett, 2016) speaking to heart and soul (Bell and Morse, 2012), engaging audiences, facilitating creative thinking and problem solving (Hausmann, 2017). Visual language supports our increasing use of technology by providing information in an accessible format (Sibbett, 2002). Graphic facilitation methods can support oral traditions as an additional option for communicating with and engaging wider audiences.

My interest in graphic facilitation developed out of practitioner-based experiences as a Home Youth Liaison Officer with the Travelling Community (HYLOTC) in the North West region of the Republic of Ireland, where I used visuals to support and enhance dialogue across, between and within groups using film, photography and oral traditions (Cavaliero, May and Dolan, 2010). In 2017 I began a course with the inspirational graphic facilitator Cara Holland at Graphic Change Academy.[1] I incorporated the approaches into my research and teaching at Atlantic Technological University Sligo, initially with pen and paper, later using an iPad and the Procreate application. As the pandemic hit and educators adjusted to remote teaching, I used my newly acquired skills to engage students by creating visually appealing content. I realized this approach could be adapted to online research (mapping out ideas, creating timelines, developing action research cycles; supporting dissemination of research findings for Donegal Travellers Project Mens' Health research; creating participant information sheets and consent forms for participants who may struggle with literacy; research passports for Traveller and Roma children with Kids' Own Publishing Company Our Voices Our Lives project[2] and including live visual mapping alongside online focus groups).

<center>★★★</center>

The images that you see in this volume offer graphic overviews of each chapter. Icons serve as visual cues and words provide further clarification ensuring that information is communicated in a clear, concise and visually appealing way. I began by reading each chapter and highlighting key phrases or words that seemed important. Usually, a strong visual idea forms in my mind as I read a phrase and this serves as a jumping-off point to begin the process.

Notes

1   https://graphicchangeacademy.com/
2   https://kidsown.ie/projects/our-lives-our-voices/

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Innovation, Collaboration and Engagement: Proposals for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller-related Research

Martin Fotta and Paloma Gay y Blasco

Themes discussed in this chapter

- the transformation of research methods that has been generated or accelerated by the pandemic, and its likely ongoing effects on GRT-related research;
- the ways researcher roles are changing, and the ethical and political implications of these changes;
- the ways emerging research methodologies may both challenge and reinforce existing power differentials, hierarchies and inequalities;
- the advantages of collaborating with local interlocutors (such as research participants, assistants or activists) when planning, implementing and disseminating projects. The problems that may arise from conflicting goals and expectations.
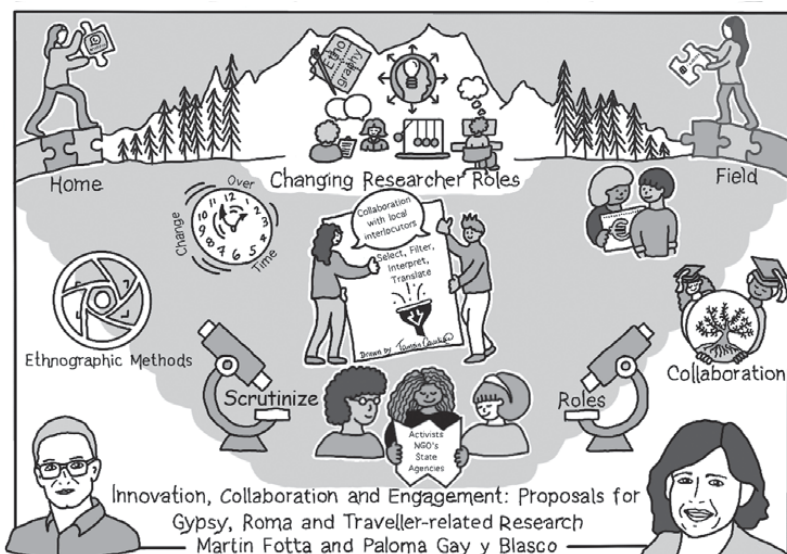
Introduction

Throughout March and April 2020, as one country after another passed emergency laws and entered into severe lockdown, researchers who had been working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) groups began to collect media reports such as this one, on 7 March, from the Spanish right-wing broadsheet *ABC*:

> **The coronavirus outbreak in Haro (La Rioja) compels the deployment of police to enforce isolation**
>
> People of Gitano ethnicity attend a non-religious funeral in a fish market in Vitoria and do not comply with the quarantine.
>
> The unprecedented spread of coronavirus in La Rioja … has forced the deployment of State security forces and bodies to force compliance with isolation … (F)ines of between 3,000 and 600,000 euros are foreseen for those who do not comply with the established measures. … Fear of further spread of the virus is what has forced the authorities to act. (Lastra, 2020)

It soon became clear to researchers that GRT groups[1] in many locales were being targeted for additional controls, and that they were being portrayed and treated as irresponsible anti-citizens, potential super-spreaders of the new virus. Tracking the depiction of GRT groups by the media was one of the few ways in which, confined to their homes under lockdown and unable to pursue face-to-face research, ethnographers attempted to document the impact of the pandemic and of pandemic control measures upon GRT

communities (for example, Berta, 2020; Gay y Blasco and Rodriguez Camacho, 2020; Matache and Bhabha, 2020; Berescu et al, 2021).

Researchers also turned to social media platforms like Facebook or WhatsApp, which already before March 2020 were being used by social scientists and research participants to keep in touch and sustain ties of friendship and affection. These platforms became key tools for understanding the new challenges that GRT communities were confronting. Like millions of others, GRT individuals and families transferred online much of their everyday sociability and interaction with the state, and it was online that researchers began documenting the transformation of social life brought on by the pandemic. Some attempted to continue in this way their work on issues that were not directly linked to the crisis, even if unavoidably affected by it – topics as diverse as oral history, gendered violence or Roma Pentecostal missionizing (for example, Doležalová, 2021).

So, whereas up until March 2020 many social scientists working on GRT issues had used online research tools as, at most, supplementary aids to face-to-face approaches, overnight they became essential: they were not just our only way of accessing information but also, as the very arena where so much of social life was developing, our field-site. This was much more than a practical adaptation: forced to consider what demanded attention, what could and could not be investigated at a distance and how, as researchers, we had to rethink our aims, roles and outputs.

Already before the pandemic ethnographers had been analysing and critiquing the multiple forms of marginalization suffered by GRT communities, and writing about topics as varied as racialized state policies, forced segregation in housing and schooling, or violence against GRT persons within health settings (for example, Sigona, 2005; Grill, 2012; Stewart, 2012; Gay y Blasco, 2016; Picker, 2017; Ivasiuc, 2021; Spreizer, 2022). We now found ourselves witnessing the rapid intensification of neglect, racism and oppression, and the deployment of necropolicies in new ways or across new arenas (Gay y Blasco and Fotta 2023a). Given the sense of urgency and danger, and the extent to which anti-pandemic measures were transforming people's lives, researchers confronted new questions about the purposes of their work. At the same time, the spread of online conferencing made collaboration with GRT activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to document and denounce these processes possible, and in some cases easier than in the past, even at a distance (for example, Gonçalves et al, 2023).

Within GRT-related scholarship these dynamics were taking place against the background of other transformations – in particular the growing awareness of the need to reflect on the politics of research and of researcher positionality. Insights, theoretical tools and methodologies developed since at

least the 1970s in connection with the ethics of research with other subaltern groups – especially by feminist ethnographers (for example, Carby, 1982; Spivak, 1988; hooks 1989; Abu-Lughod, 1996) – and with the movement to decolonize the social sciences and to critically engage with race and racialization (for example, Harrison, 1991; Rodríguez et al, 2010) began to be discussed in earnest by GRT and non-GRT scholars working on GRT issues in the years leading up to the pandemic (for example, Tidrick, 2010; Brooks, 2012; Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz, 2012; Brooks; 2015; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2015; Stewart, 2017; Fremlova 2022). Key strands of debate coalesced around the so-called 'critical Romani studies' (Bogdan et al, 2018) and around the growing call for and acceptance of collaborative and participatory research (Kazubowki-Houston, 2015; Silverman, 2018; Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021; Piemontese, 2021; Țîștea, and Băncuță, 2023). These debates had already been reflected in our pre-pandemic work, for instance in Paloma's spearheading the development of collaborative ethnography in social anthropology through her reciprocal body of work with Liria Hernández from 2009 onwards (Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz, 2012; Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020).

Our discussion here is therefore framed not just by the pandemic but by debates about the ethics, morals and politics of social science research with racialized vulnerable groups in general, and with GRT groups in particular. We have chosen to engage with these debates through a specific focus on ethnographic methods: we believe that it is through concrete changes in the ways we work as scholars that pressing concerns around voice, inclusiveness, relevance, impact and ethics must be addressed. These are not just theoretical issues but must be approached as urgent methodological problems that demand careful attending to when planning, implementing and disseminating projects. Calling for changes in the way GRT-related scholarship is carried out is a first step. The next one must be to develop ways of answering these calls through practice – a process which generates additional questions, challenges and dilemmas.

In this chapter, we critically evaluate the ways in which ethnographic research has developed during the pandemic against this specific political-epistemic landscape. We focus on three arenas or topics that we believe provide particularly fruitful ground for reflecting on the future of GRT-related research. We begin by examining changing possibilities for and practices of data collection, go on to discuss how the roles of ethnographers (whether of GRT background or not) and their interlocutors are shifting as a result, and finish by considering some of the key factors that shape the setting up of goals and agendas in this emerging research landscape. Throughout, we examine our own pandemic research trajectories because we hope that our problems and doubts, and the decisions we took to try to

address them, will prove helpful for others as they face their own, whether or not they work with GRT communities.

Innovations in research methods

The arrival of the pandemic and of anti-pandemic measures demanded methodological innovation, as social science researchers found it harder or impossible to gather data through their usual methods, particularly through face-to-face interactions with participants. Some ethnographers were able to keep working by turning to publicly available data repositories, while others analysed their own data sets to produce publications and other outputs. Yet, already in the spring 2020, during the 'Great Quarantine' (Boellstorff, 2020), literature appeared exploring research strategies suitable for pandemic conditions and advising on ways of turning in-person approaches into remote ones (for example, Lupton, 2021; IRISS, nd). Among the methods suggested were secondary source analysis, social media data gathering, online interviews, remotely organized focus groups, autoethnography, journaling, video and photo solicitation and the deployment of local field assistants to conduct research that one would normally have done in person. The use of online surveying platforms such as Amazon MTurk and Prolific grew, particularly in some disciplines such as social psychology and sociology.

The methods are by no means new, but the crisis and technological innovation have made them a more widespread, visible and acceptable part of the ethnographic tool set. Within anthropology, they have increasingly been deployed as complement to, or in some cases instead of, long-term fieldwork in a locale geographically or symbolically separated from 'home'. Günel, Varma and Watanabe (2020) argue that a combination of factors – in particular the neoliberal ethos shaping university employment, the precarization of academic labour and the feminization of the social sciences and humanities – have changed the character of knowledge production and have made anthropology's idealized reliance on extended participant observation 'elsewhere' less sustainable. They use the term 'patchwork ethnography' to describe the pragmatic blend of shorter visits and remote methods that was already increasingly deployed pre-COVID, and argue that it provides rich anthropological insights on a par with those achieved through lengthy immersion, although not necessarily of the same sort. In fact, shorter but frequent stints of fieldwork have been central to the methodological tool of ethnographers in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, where scholars commonly work closer to their homes and where financial support for lengthy field trips has rarely been available (see Brković and Hodges, 2015). Recognizing this diversity of ethnographic research practices is significant for us because it points to hierarchies and inequalities to do with nationality, gender, class, ethnicity, age and so on that are embedded in ethnographic

methods and expectations. These inequalities permeate GRT-related research in specific ways.

Thus, while long-term participant observation has the potential to deliver a level of familiarity and understanding that is very difficult to replicate through patchwork approaches, we are very aware of the economic and practical landscapes within which many scholars must operate and innovate. Against this context, methodological adaptations and innovations should not mean doing away with long-term commitments to participants or with the gradual building of trust. Nor should they lead to shallow analysis and quick conclusions. In fact, these new methods and context make even more visible 'the gaps, constraints, partial knowledge, and diverse commitments that characterize all knowledge production' (Günel et al, 2020), and demand that we confront and work with them.

A series of intertwined processes, then – the slower, to some extent unrecognized, longer-term growth of patchwork ethnography; the intensive, highly visible, shorter-term pressures of the pandemic; and the accompanying technological innovations – are driving a methodological shift in GRT research that is likely to extend beyond the current moment. This shift, unsurprisingly, involves a decreased reliance on direct observation, participation and the use of personal experience as learning tools alongside an increased emphasis on discourse analysis and reliance on participant depiction of experience. Here first-hand scholarly observation turns into second-hand, mediated access. While this shift is not necessarily or always negative, its implications must be addressed explicitly and reflected upon, and they must be taken into consideration by researchers when planning, implementing and assessing their projects. What are the challenges, advantages and disadvantages of attempting to grasp the complexities of GRT lives at a distance? Answers to this question are complex, and in what follows we address three salient themes.

The first of these themes is the growing emphasis on the use of textual materials produced or accessed online. So, for example, during the spring of 2020, under lockdown at home in Germany, very far from his Brazilian Calon participants, Martin turned to working on the digital archives of the Brazilian National Library. He scrolled through late 19th- and early 20th-century newspapers looking for articles about Ciganos (Romanies) which would help him to characterize their position during this period and provide leads for further archival research. This was a time-consuming process but one which was well suited for the period of home-boundedness. And, because it was easily fragmentable, it combined relatively well with the demands of home-schooling and childcare, and with work on other projects.

Alongside archival research, 'mining' online data (including text and video) publicly available on news outlets and social media platforms seems to help ethnographers bridge the distance between 'home' and 'field'. Yet for

researchers working on GRT issues – with groups whose voices have been consistently marginalized and side-lined – there are significant challenges involved here. These platforms amplify some voices, and their arguments and perspectives, while downplaying, stifling or silencing others; indeed, only face-to-face fieldwork might provide access to those who do not participate online for whatever reason. And if we regard these platforms as sources of ready-made data that just needs to be extracted, we lose the possibility for dialogue and debate with participants that so enrich ethnographic research: we quote participants rather than engage in conversation with them.

A second dimension involves the recognition of the increasing relevance of online sociability for GRT communities, and of online arenas for GRT self- and community-creation, leading to the study of online lives through online participant observation, for example through WhatsApp or Facebook groups (Hajská, 2019). A relevant example here is the work produced by a team of GRT and non-GRT Polish scholars (Fiałkowska et al, 2023) to document and analyse the ways in which Polish Roma migrants dispersed across Europe used social media to construct and sustain kinship and community. They argue that the separation caused by migration and lockdown challenged the intensive sociability that permeates Polish Roma life while also leading to the intensification of care and the renewal of waning ties. This team speak of the 'digitalization of everyday life' and characterize Polish Roma as 'pioneers in digital kinning' (Styrkacz et al, 2023; Szewczyk et al, 2023). Before the pandemic, the team already had very strong connections with their participants, and they were developing in-person and online tools to study the relationship between migration and online sociability. They have avoided one of the potential pitfalls of online-only participant observation: to treat online lives as if they were the only lives. Instead, they problematize the complex intertwining of online and face-to-face relations and research. They have done so by combining data gathered online with other sources of data, including participant observation and their previous experiences.

The third dimension that we want to emphasize relates to the increasing dependence on local GRT interlocutors (including research participants) who become informal or formal, unpaid or paid, research assistants and help with data gathering for researchers who stay 'at home' (Stevano and Deane, 2017). Ethnographers have historically often relied on the help of local researchers, although their contribution and importance have not always been adequately acknowledged. The potential advantages that research assistants bring are well known: they facilitate access, mediate between ethnographers and participants and can help much with data gathering. Sometimes, such as during the 'Great Quarantine' (when the field was physically inaccessible but the research problematique was both urgent and rapidly evolving), they might be the only medium through which a researcher can reach out to others and navigate an emergent research terrain.

The deployment of assistants, formal and informal, reshapes research projects (Middleton and Cons, 2014): assistants transform the field and the method, and do much more than collect data. They select, filter, interpret and translate, in explicit or implicit ways, and their active role in the construction of ethnographic knowledge must be examined and acknowledged within research plans and in outputs. Recognition and remuneration must be factored in, and later we discuss some of the ethical and practical challenges that may arise as a result of conflicting or unspoken understandings around roles and entitlements, for example with regards to data ownership or co-authorship of publications. While the use of assistants can be beneficial for both parties, it is important to stress that there are ongoing debates about the ways in which it can reproduce power differentials inherent in academic research (Bouka, 2018; Aijazi et al, 2021). Project leaders must be particularly alert to the fact that working arrangements between GRT and non-GRT ethnographers and their GRT assistants will in all likelihood embody and reproduce inequalities of various kinds.

It is also essential for researchers to think through the potential implications of relying on one predominant voice as the filter through which to access and interpret others – here the place of assistants within unequal local social settings must be considered. The boundary between assistance and gatekeeping needs to be examined, and researchers relying on assistants' accounts of events must be particularly careful not to conflate one person's interpretation or analysis with actual facts, or with the experiences and perspectives of others. The positionality of helpers, gatekeepers and assistants, and its impact on the research process, have to be given attention in research planning, implementation and dissemination alongside that of lead researchers or authors.

Finally, in the emerging research landscape, collaboration between researchers (both GRT and non-GRT) and other GRT actors besides research assistants is growing and will continue to grow. Among these actors are activists, NGO workers, state representatives and so on who may influence the formulation of research agendas. We examine these evolving roles and relationships in the following sections.

Changing researcher roles

The pandemic has been a moment of change and continuity with previous concerns and dynamics in the field of GRT-related research. The crisis generated a sudden and often radical worsening of the very precarious conditions that GRT communities faced. Simultaneously, the expansion of remote communication connected the living spaces of researchers and interlocutors, both stuck at home, making even more tangible the differential impacts of the pandemic on their lives and well-being. This

moment demanded from academics specific kinds of work. It asked them to document and explain this new instantiation of GRT marginalization and how it interweaved with other processes such as material dispossession under austerity or ongoing racial segregation in housing. It also required them to confront and sometimes transform their own roles vis-à-vis the GRT communities whose lives they studied, as researchers but also as acquaintances, friends and relatives of people who were suffering great hardships.

As a Latin Americanist, Martin observed these transformations taking place within contemporary Brazilian Romani studies, a very vibrant research community. Here, already before the pandemic, much debate and communication occurred via social media, in particular via WhatsApp groups. When the pandemic hit, social media became one of the key spaces where researchers engaged the moment: they shared their articles and blogposts; organized and publicized webinars about the difficulties facing specific Cigano communities; networked to pressure local authorities; and organized fundraisers for families and individuals using mobile banking tools. From their homes, Cigano and non-Cigano researchers also helped their research participants to register for emergency aid provided by the federal government, organized the delivery of relief to the communities where they worked or assisted municipal or state agencies in developing contingency plans for Cigano communities.[2]

Eliana Barbosa (2020) suggested that this flurry of activities emerged from what she calls 'academic southernness' – a grounded research outlook that prioritizes action and solidarity to minimize harm. This Brazilian urbanist argues that there was a distinct difference in ethos between how her colleagues in Latin America and the West responded to the pandemic: while the former did so through engaged action, the latter reacted to the unexpected by looking for its broader meaning through theoretical reflection. Yet in the West too (in the UK, Eastern and Southern Europe where we are based) we witnessed GRT and non-GRT academics attempting to mitigate the impact of the crisis on their GRT participants through action. They did so through very different scales, from making very small contributions such as giving English classes over Zoom or assisting individuals with social services now moved online, to taking on much larger roles such as helping to coordinate or deliver relief or contributing to the development of policies.

Although these activities were not new for all researchers, their form or intensity often changed under pandemic conditions, evidencing the fact that researcher roles are multifaceted and complex, change over time and with context and often lack clear boundaries. The sheer diversity of these roles and activities, and of the motives behind them and of their effects, defy generalization and it must be recognized that they were framed also by specific national and disciplinary histories and by varying levels of trust in

the state.[3] Overall, the pandemic has helped to erode the already-permeable frontier between so-called engaged and non-engaged research.

Researchers working on GRT issues must scrutinize their evolving roles critically and reflexively, paying attention to how different changes shape their place in the field and in the world, their specific relationships with participants, assistants and collaborators, and their outputs. This scrutiny should be incorporated into research plans and also addressed in academic texts and other products. In particular, researchers must examine the hierarchies and inequalities that their shifting roles may mask or reinforce. And here it is particularly important to underline the potential differences between the experiences of GRT academics working with their own communities and family members and those of non-GRT scholars – while not being blind to the many factors that may separate GRT researchers from others in their communities.

These transformations point also to the fact that roles and activities undertaken by researchers intertwine with contrasting understandings of the purpose and value of academic work. On the one hand, like other academics, those working on GRT issues are haunted by the spectre of the 'endlessly chattering, useless' scholar (Hage, 2020), by the potential irrelevancy of their research and other activities. On the other hand, identifying usefulness is not easy, if only because the priorities or ideas of relevance held by different stakeholders often do not align – for example, communities and funders may have opposing perspectives, and local communities are themselves highly diverse so that people within them may hold contrasting views regarding what needs attention, scholarly or otherwise. Criticisms of uselessness can also easily feed into the neoliberal ethos of academia which evaluates scholarly outputs according to their immediate impact, measured primarily in terms of economic growth. For these reasons, addressing explicitly the purposes, uses and potential benefits and harms of each research project – and particularly confronting the difficulties involved in defining these benefits and harms clearly – has become a methodological imperative in pandemic and post-pandemic work on GRT issues.

Examining our own work in this light demonstrates this imperative, as well as some of its accompanying challenges and tensions. In April 2020 we embarked on a large collaborative project that brought together 23 Romani and 14 non-Romani authors, from many walks of life, in an attempt to chronicle the impact that COVID-19 was having on Romani communities in five countries in Europe and Latin America. *Romani Chronicles of COVID-19* (Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023b) emerged in response to twin realizations. The first was that the effects of the pandemic on GRT communities were severe but were also likely to be disregarded, in particular by those in positions of authority, as unfortunate side-effects of their poverty, marginality and assumed inability to behave as proper citizens. The second was that, to

challenge these prejudices, it was necessary to make these effects visible but also to create arenas where GRT voices, non–academic as much as academic, are listened to. Aware of the need to get to work as fast as possible to document GRT experiences during lockdown, we asked colleagues, friends and acquaintances to contribute with their accounts about their life during the crisis. The result was a collection of texts originally written in different languages through a wide variety of collaborative methods by activists, street sellers, academics, community mediators, NGO workers, policy advisers and so on who described the pandemic through their own stories and those of their families and friends. Working primarily during 2020 and 2021, when travel and face-to-face communication were impossible, the group relied on Zoom and social media to collaborate.

As non-GRT academics in secure jobs, we conceived our role as that of initiators and encouragers, and acted as coordinators, transcribers, translators, editors and facilitators of the work of others: we attempted to assist the group as a whole to bear collective witness to the pandemic moment. We believed that there was value in propelling this task of documentation – a task without which analysis, critique and change are not possible.

Yet the fact remains that, without our intervention as established academics, the volume would not have been possible, and this fact makes clear the deep inequalities onto which the project was built. These inequalities had many practical ramifications: for example, many of the contributors to the volume will not be able to read the work of their co-authors, since the book as a whole is in English and we do not have the resources for translating every paper into the languages of the contributors. Published by an academic press and at academic prices, the book is unlikely to reach a very wide audience or have easily discernible effects. Finally, we, rather than any of the GRT contributors, had final editorial control over the volume and its contents.

Setting and implementing collaborative research agendas

The shifts in the roles and activities of researchers have not taken place in isolation: they are now beginning to be accompanied by parallel changes in the roles played within research projects by GRT interlocutors, including but not only research participants. Already before the pandemic, calls had been made to acknowledge the role of GRT participants – in particular those without formal education – in the production of academic knowledge (Silverman, 2018; Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020; Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021), and for them to play more prominent and visible parts in the planning, implementation and dissemination of projects. In 2018, Silverman argued that 'collaboration provides more insightful critiques that better resonate with communities', but she also observed that '[i]n Romani Studies, many

scholars have done the work of critique but have not necessarily embraced collaboration' (2018, 83).[4] Post-pandemic, the number of publications co-authored by academics and interlocutors is slowly beginning to grow (Campos and Caldas, 2023; Flores Torres et al, 2023; Montañés Jiménez and Carmona, 2023; Peter and Hrustič, 2023; Țîștea, and Băncuță, 2023; Montañés Jiménez and Gómez Ávila, Chapter 4 this volume; Piemontese and Leoco, Chapter 8 this volume). These transformations are still in their infancy and here the work of Paloma and her collaborator Liria Hernández (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020) has demonstrated potential avenues for others to consider. But of course, collaborative projects (with scholars and locals jointly designing, implementing and disseminating projects) are not always possible or desirable: not all research participants or local interlocutors can or wish to produce research, and many would instead cooperate with researchers in other ways.

The evolution of Paloma's research during the pandemic demonstrates some of the tensions and challenges involved in the setting up of collaborative agendas. The start of lockdown in March 2020 found her carrying out interviews with Gitana (Spanish Romani) women in Madrid, asking them about the diverse forms of gendered violence that shape their lives. At the core of this project were collaborations of various kinds between Paloma and Spanish Romani women from different backgrounds who played diverse roles in the research – from interviewees keen to see the topic of gendered violence receive attention, to fieldworkers and partners in project design.

To begin with, there was the long-term collaboration with Liria, first as Paloma's friend and her informant between 1992 and 2009, then as co-author between 2009 and 2020 and lastly as co-project designer and fieldworker from 2019 onwards. Together, Liria and Paloma had recently published *Writing Friendship* (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020), where they reflected on their intertwined trajectories as Gitana and non-Gitana Spanish women. Gendered forms of violence of different kinds were a central theme in *Writing Friendship* and, once the book was finished, Liria and Paloma decided to examine how violence figures in the lives of Gitana women in Spain more widely. Paloma got a small grant to carry out this work, with Liria employed as fieldworker.

Secondly, the project involved collaboration with Gitana professionals working at NGOs who were themselves already involved in intervention projects designed to tackle gendered violence, and for whom research evidence is an important resource when designing interventions and applying for funding. Paloma and Liria had presented to them their initial research plans before the pandemic, and these were then refined through joint discussion before being implemented with their help. Without this early input of the NGO professionals, the project would have been

impossible. Data gathering was paused during 2020 when mitigating the effects of the pandemic on Gitano families became an urgent priority for the NGOs and when documenting these effects became Paloma's primary task (Gay y Blasco and Rodriguez Camacho, 2020). Then, in 2021, when Liria became very unwell with long COVID and with Paloma stuck in the UK because of bans on travel, a number of interviews had to be carried out online.

Collaborations of these kinds, aimed at the joint production of knowledge rather than merely at data extraction (Rios and Sands, 2000; Lassiter, 2005; Rappaport, 2007; Field et al, 2008; Heffernan et al, 2020), are increasingly important within social science research generally. Yet, it is not always easy to reconcile academic and local agendas, expectations and working methods, and it is essential for researchers and their collaborators to be attentive to this fact (Helbig, 2007; Kazubowski-Houston, 2015; Silverman, 2018). For instance, the academic emphasis on observation and the NGO emphasis on intervention can stand in tension, particularly when research findings are presented to project participants for input and critique. Contrasting expectations around roles and uses of data also need careful attending to.

Anna Tsing (2004, 264) has spoken of 'collaboration with friction at its heart' as a complex productive process in social science research, one where parties 'may or may not be similar and may or may not have common understandings of the problem and the product', or even truly grasp each other's hopes, positions and agendas. In GRT-related research, like in any social science research, collaborations between researchers of any ethnicity and local partners are often also moments of friction which demand clarity, flexibility, determination and openness. This friction, as Tsing argues, does 'make new objects and agents possible' (Tsing, 2004, 264) but can also be difficult to manage and always risks reinforcing power differentials or, indeed, producing new ones.

A key point to remember is that competing demands and expectations, and hierarchies and inequalities of multiple kinds, will always permeate GRT research. While some of these may be clearly visible to researchers, collaborators and participants, others may be harder to discern, have different implications when looked at from different vantage points or change through time. Often, they cross-cut each other. As well as inequalities between parties of GRT and non-GRT background, there are inequalities within and across both of these categories – for example between project leaders, other researchers and research assistants; between those with and without a formal education; or between those who occupy positions of authority within GRT associations or NGOs and those who do not. By way of an example, gendered inequalities are particularly relevant for some of the Gitana women collaborating with Paloma, who have argued that GRT activism

is sometimes dominated by male agendas in ways that may obscure the subordination of women within their communities and that make certain kinds of research and advocacy more difficult.

These inequalities complicate the easily-taken-for-granted boundary between so-called 'insider' and 'outsider' researchers, and between researchers and subjects, and make it necessary to always deploy these categories with care (Narayan, 1993; Zavella, 1993; Bakalaki, 1997). Researchers and interlocutors attempting collaborative work must be prepared for problems, discrepancies and tensions to emerge or become more salient as projects develop. While it is possible to anticipate some of these, other cannot be planned away and the emotional impact on all involved can be significant. Lastly, solidarity and joint work are indeed possible and can be fruitful, even if they are shaped by the kinds of friction of which Tsing speaks.

It is important to keep in mind that interlocutors and researchers are not the only agents involved in the setting up of research agendas. Funders, universities and sometimes authorities at various levels from the local to the national and beyond have enormous power over what is considered worth investigating or not, and over the methods that can be employed, and they make particular kinds of research easier or harder to accomplish. In our experience, they do not always value the positive contributions of projects involving GRT collaborators without formal university education.

The key role of funders in shaping the direction of GRT-related research became particularly visible during the early months of the pandemic when funding bodies created new schemes funding research on the crisis and its aftermaths. The open access fees of this book are paid from one such scheme (see Acknowledgements, this volume), but we are aware of many others, and several scholars who had been working in GRT issues became involved in projects of these kinds. To mention only two with whom we have collaborated intensively, Brazilian anthropologist Edilma do Nascimento Souza worked on a fast-response project funded by Wenner Gren exploring pandemic governance in Brazil through intersectional methods, while Iliana Sarafian's work on vaccine hesitancy among Roma in Italy was funded by the British Academy COVID-19 Recovery fund (Sarafian, 2022; Souza, 2023).

It is clear to us that it is important to fund projects on urgent issues like the pandemic. However, we should be conscious of how funding priorities favour specific forms of knowledge and undermine other forms of scholarship, especially those not considered directly or visibly impactful, those based on methods that do not easily adjust to entrenched disciplinary expectations, and those that include collaborators whose qualifications are not considered standard or acceptable. Within large, funded projects, intra-project hierarchies of the kinds we have discussed can often become particularly important – in particular between Principal Investigators, who are still more likely to be non-GRT academics, and contracted researchers, some of whom might

be younger GRT scholars.[5] Finally, demands by funders for specific kinds of outputs and not others will unavoidably shape relationships between researchers and research participants, and among researchers themselves. Once again, these dynamics must be made explicit and reflected on in research outputs if we want the practice of GRT-related research itself to be an arena where positive social change can take place.

Conclusion

The pandemic has intensified trends that were already transforming ethnographic research on GRT issues before March 2020: here we have discussed the growing reliance on mediated data and on the help of research assistants, and how the primacy of extended fieldwork in anthropology is increasingly being questioned. These trends do not mean that research on GRT issues is becoming less rigorous or generative, but they do mean that ethnographers must consciously labour to sustain 'long-term commitments [to research participants and their communities], language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking' while simultaneously attending 'to how changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production' (Günel et al, 2020). In this chapter we have examined how commitment, responsibility and accountability intersect with technological changes, problems of access and power differentials. We have focused on three arenas where this nexus becomes materialized: in dilemmas about method choice; in tensions surrounding the shifting roles researchers play as academics, interlocutors or allies; and in the diversification of researcher–participant relationships and forms of collaboration.

As ethnographers increasingly combine various sources of data or shift between face-to-face and remote research, it is important to remember that if we treat methods as unproblematic or readily interchangeable tools, we risk obviating power differentials and reproducing structural and racialized inequalities (Briggs, 2021). Take the online interviews to which many ethnographers turned during the pandemic: not only do they foreground narrative knowledge at the expense of other knowledge modalities, but they presuppose research participants who have internet access and time, and who are willing and able to sit down and be interviewed in front of a screen. There are social and cultural determinants which shape who can narrate, and what, and who can answer questions in ways that correspond to an ethnographer's mode of inquiry (Briggs, 1986). Under normal circumstances, ethnographic sensibility to these issues would be gained through long-term participation in community life, or at least through face-to-face contact. How can this sensibility be developed in the current, changing research landscape that we have delineated in this chapter? This is a question which each researcher must explore in depth in connection with their specific project.

At the beginning of the pandemic many ethnographers imagined turning to remote methods as a second-best substitute for 'being there'. Yet, social scientists always enter social worlds through specific social nodes and work through particular sets of relationships (Strathern, 2005, vii). To produce ethnographic knowledge, we then make connections across various contexts, patterns and processes: our depictions are always partial and situated (Strathern, 2005, vii). Each set of relationships (whether face to face or remote, mediated through research assistants or not, and so on) scales the social world distinctly. The inability to 'be there', then, is not necessarily always a drawback but it does demand that we engage productively with the frames and boundaries that shape each ethnographic investigation, probing and testing them, and making them as visible as possible in our outputs. This means reflecting on the complexities of the social and human relations that underpin research, and on the ignorance and doubt that are produced hand in hand with knowledge and understanding.

Whatever methods we adopt, we must remain attentive to their affordances, limitations and biases, and to their effects in and out of the research itself, and in particular on our GRT participants. It is essential that researchers working on GRT issues cultivate awareness of their position and roles, and of how their research terrain is being constructed and mediated at each specific moment. And we must do this whether we conduct online, face-to-face or other forms of research. When planning and carrying out projects, we must also examine critically the kinds of claims to knowledge that different parties make – whether those be ourselves, our participants, collaborators or assistants.

Likewise, we must acknowledge the unavoidable failures and compromises that are always an integral part of the research process. During the pandemic we have witnessed how some researchers were able to make more or less successful changes to original research plans, and we have seen some of them being led where they might not have gone otherwise. Yet for others the transition was not so easy. Some were not able to work while caring for children or other dependants during lockdown, revealing how deeply the personal shapes the professional. And some lost part or all of their funding because their projects required travel and face-to-face interactions. Adapting projects was especially challenging for those at the start of their research journeys who could not rely on pre-existing contacts or data, such as doctoral students; without face-to-face interactions, trust, rapport and commitment between researchers and research participants are even more difficult to achieve. Lastly, some research could simply not be undertaken remotely.

The pandemic has demanded that researchers working on GRT issues question how we do our work, and that we consider what we can and

should do differently, while challenging entrenched expectations about social science research. By making visible in new ways the inequalities that separate researchers and participants, the pandemic has strengthened calls to acknowledge the many inequalities that shape GRT-related research (not just between GRT and non-GRT actors, but within these two categories). By making so blatant how difficult and complex it is to learn about others, the crisis has made it clear that all ethnographic understanding must always be partial, always in the making and provisional. By making failure and compromise visible and acknowledged parts of research, it has reminded us that dead ends are essential to the production of ethnographic knowledge as a material and relational praxis – even though they have been traditionally hidden and downplayed. In sum, the adaptations and innovations that we have discussed earlier should not be thought of as substandard substitutes for 'real' fieldwork, nor better or even as equally valid, but as invitations to engage more fully, rigorously and openly with the practical, ethical and moral nuances of GRT-related research.

Lessons and recommendations

- Debates around the ethics and politics of GRT-related research must be addressed through concrete methodological changes.
- As researchers, we must examine whether and how our changing roles and methods may contribute to the marginalization of our participants and collaborators. We must reflect on these issues in our outputs.
- If working collaboratively with local interlocutors (such as participants, research assistants or activists), we must realize that their aims and expectations may be very different from ours. It is important to discuss these aims and expectations early on in research projects.
- We must acknowledge failure, compromise, doubt and ignorance in our work since these are essential parts of the research process.

Notes

[1] For problems with categorizing Roma, Gypsy and Travellers as a single community see James (2022).

[2] Some of these varied activities are captured in 'Part II: Brazilian Chronicles' in *Romani Chronicles of COVID-19* (Gay y Blasco and Fotta 2023b).

[3] For instance, the development of contemporary Romani studies in Latin America has been since the beginning shaped by scholars of Romani descent who raised questions related to researchers' engagement and accountability (Fotta and Sabino Salazar, 2023). Latin American Romani studies is responsive to Latin American decolonial thought and embedded in the tradition of academic involvement in social struggles.

4   Even more exceptional are long-term collaborations over several years and even decades, such as those between Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria Hernández, or Juan Gamella and a Romanian Roma informant-co-author-co-analyst Vasile Muntean.

5   See, for example 'Collaborative research and authorship in anthropology: EASA good practice guidelines' (https://easaonline.org/newsletter/79-1021/guidelines.shtml), written explicitly in response to the increasing importance of large international and interdisciplinary projects as a consequence of EU funding schemes.

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4

Bridging Academia and Romani Activism in the Age of COVID-19

Antonio Montañés Jiménez and Demetrio Gómez Ávila

Themes discussed in this chapter

- motivations of scholars and activists to work on/with/for Romani communities and to collaborate with each other;
- impact of the COVID-19 pandemic both on Romani groups and on ethnographic research methods;
- opportunities and challenges in activist–scholar collaborations, co-authorship and other experimental practices;
- the role of academia in reinforcing or questioning (mis)representations of Romani groups.

Bridging Academia and Romani Activism in the Age of COVID-19
Antonio Montañés Jiménez and Demetrio Gómez Ávila
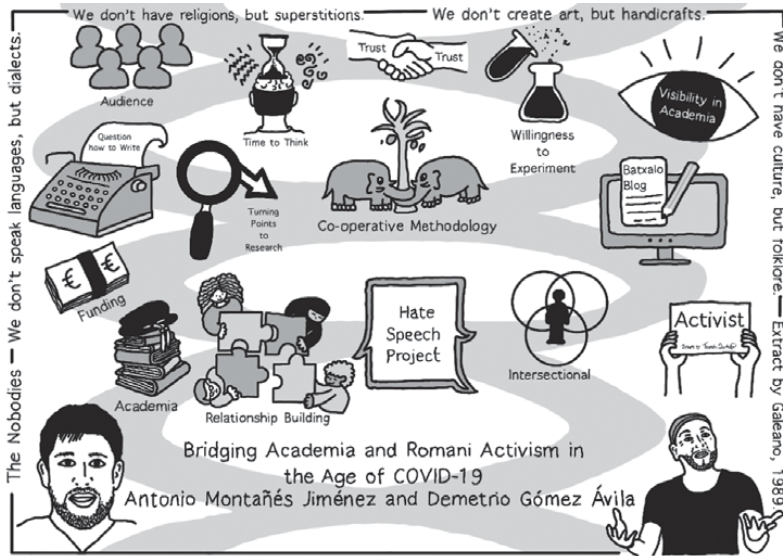
Introduction

Antonio:[1] Demetrio Gómez Ávila was born in Tijuana (Mexico) and lives in Valencia (Spain). He is a Spanish Rroma[2] human rights activist who has worked for over three decades advocating for social justice and Romani rights through decolonial and intersectional perspectives. During his activist career, he became a founding member of Forum of European Roma Young People, the first International Romani youth organization in Europe, and President of Ververipen, Rroms for Diversity, a pioneering Spanish Romani LGBT+ organization.[3]

Even though Demetrio did not attend university, the impact of his intellectual work and dedication to Romani activism is widely recognized and appreciated in the landscape of Romani politics. He has served as an expert and trainer for the Council of Europe, the European Commission and other organizations and institutions connected to racial justice, antifascism and the fight against xenophobia and discrimination. His online blog 'Baxtalo',[4] which according to its mission statement was 'created in support of intercultural understanding and the fight against antigypsyism and Romaphobia', has become a well-known resource for reflection and knowledge for Romani activists. Moreover, together with a few other prominent communitarian and political Gitano leaders, in June 2022 Demetrio was invited as a guest speaker to the Spanish Parliament to discuss the development of a much-anticipated Pacto de Estado (National Pact) against antigitanism.

Gitano political movements have long called for a more significant participation of Romani individuals and organizations in producing academic knowledge regarding Romanies. During the last decade, Demetrio has

become one of Spain's most influential Romani voices calling for further integration of academia and Romani activism. He has participated in research projects at several Spanish universities on topics related to Romanies and sexual diversity (for example, Gómez Ávila, 2018).

I met Demetrio through a Gitano friend in 2010 when I was a sociology student in Madrid. Back then, I was already interested in pursuing an academic career and learning further about Gitano political and religious mobilization, and Demetrio's activist work struck me as meriting attention. From the first time we met we got along, and our friendship grew after a trip I made to Valencia to learn more about Demetrio's ideas and political activities in favour and support of Romani communities. Demetrio has been constantly supportive of my work, for which I am deeply grateful.

Demetrio: Antonio Montañés Jiménez was born in Madrid (Spain) and lives in Oxford (UK). He is a non–Rroma Spanish anthropologist and sociologist with an interest in the study of Rroma people, Christianity and social movements. In 2021, Antonio was awarded a PhD for a thesis on Spanish Rroma Pentecostalism (Montañés Jiménez, 2021). At present, he is a postdoctoral fellow affiliated to the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford. His project seeks to create an ethnographic record of Spanish Rroma's experiences during the COVID-19 health crisis and incorporates Rroma voices, needs and demands into research design, methodology and approach (Montañés Jiménez, 2022; Montañés Jiménez and Carmona, 2023).

I met Antonio in 2010, when he was a young student interested in pursuing an academic career and studying Rroma people. I am not usually in favour of acting as a research subject, but he struck me as someone willing to learn and question his own prejudices, so I decided to discuss some of my political ideas with him during a trip he made to Valencia. As far as I am concerned, non–Rroma academics studying Spanish Rroma often hold stereotypes and rarely listen to us Rroma, so I saw in this trip an opportunity to educate Antonio and persuade him not to make the same mistake. Antonio and I hold similar political views and get along. More importantly, we share similar interests and trust in each other's abilities and professionalism.

Antonio and Demetrio: We are currently working on a project about hate speech against Spanish Rroma/Gitanos during the COVID-19 pandemic (Montañés Jiménez and Gómez Ávila, 2022). The idea of working together resulted from our shared anger and annoyance regarding how Spanish media and some social media users negatively portrayed Spanish Romanies' behaviour during the pandemic (Cortés, 2021; Muyor and Segura, 2021). Our project is concerned with including Romani voices in research and with the need for affected Roma communities to be represented in public and

scholarly debates (Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023). Importantly, the project builds upon Demetrio's expertise on the subject. For the last five years, Demetrio has tracked and monitored hate speech cases on social media platforms against Spanish Romanies for the Council of Europe and for the Spanish non-governmental organization Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG, 2021; Gómez Ávila and Saéz, 2021).

This chapter is constructed around a recorded conversation between the two of us, which took place in July 2022, about the development of our joint research. The conversation was not scripted, was conducted in Spanish and lasted one hour. Preserving its dialogical form in the text mirrors our cooperative working methodology and conveys our desire to learn from one another. We take responsibility for our own individual comments as they accurately reflect our singular opinions and views when writing this chapter. Before recording our conversation, we brainstormed some ideas and agreed to direct the conversation to discuss some relevant themes. The four themes that we settled upon became the four sections into which the dialogue that follows is divided. Antonio transcribed and translated the dialogue into English and carried out further editing, including adding references and information in footnotes. Then a draft was sent to Demetrio to review and amend. A few clarification paragraphs were added in June 2023 when we were revising the chapter as a response to the comments of the anonymous reviewer of this book, but they did not affect the structure or the selection of the topics. We also added a few references and endnotes for clarification and as a guide to further reading.

Becoming a researcher/activist on Romani issues: the power of identity

Antonio: How and why did you start working as an activist with Gitano communities?

Demetrio: I have always been involved in activism and the fight for social justice, starting from a very young age. I became interested in social movements and organizations as a high school student. I tried to make my school more sensitive to social and economic issues affecting our neighbourhood. For me, school and society belonged to the same environment; thus, my early political mobilization attempted to bring them together.

While I was starting to experiment with political mobilization, an internal search for roots and identity began. On that search, I discovered that I had Rroma heritage. Shockingly, my Rroma identity had been hidden from me by the disdain of my relatives who did not want to recognize themselves as Rroma. It is

something that has happened to many Rroma people, I am not the only one. Often, Rroma identities are denied and hidden because of fear of antigypsyism. This realization was a turning point in my life and personal identity. Something that hurt me back then and still hurts me today is that I am partially unaware of many of the traumatic events my Rroma ancestors suffered. That obliviousness was what pushed me further to keep looking for my roots. After discovering my heritage, I began working with Rroma activists and organizations. I do not consider myself just Rroma. I am an immigrant, have Rroma roots and a working-class background, and belong to the LGTB+ community.

Coming to terms with my multiple identities was a painful process. I was not accepted as an activist at first. Some Rroma questioned my right to belong and my ethnicity. My sexual identity was also perceived as a threat. Still, to this day, I find people who do not like me for those reasons. Those questioning my cultural and family credentials see me as alien to their traditions and identities.

Because of structural racism, alternative and intersectional identities are not always welcome in minority contexts. Resistance identities are common in groups that inhabit social environments with high pressure to assimilate. Rroma individuals who dare to question monolithic identities or push for changes are often categorized as *apayados* (Payo-like, non-Rroma-like), a negative term meaning you are giving up the proper way of being a Rroma and leaving your community behind. *Apayados* are frowned upon in the Rroma world.

For a long time, traditional Rroma and conservative Rroma evangelical leaders have been the most influential and authoritative voices in our community. They somehow feel they are the guardians of cultural purity against a society that marginalizes us. I do not consider myself an outsider. One of my goals as an activist is to change things from within, departing from essentialist notions of cultural identity. I want to give visibility to the most overlooked sections of my community, especially to those pushing for creating new narratives and alternative ways of being Rroma. Spanish society has changed

over the last decades; as a society, we are more open to diversity than we were before. As a group, albeit slowly, we, Rroma, follow the same path.

I must say I am self-taught with no university training. However, I believe that my search for an identity has led me to have a broad gaze on the concept of identity and to understand through my own life experiences what the idea of intersectionality means. It is true that over the years, my work as an activist has enabled me to gain deeper and even more solid theoretical understanding of my ideas about identity; however, the core of my knowledge is pretty much experiential.

Antonio: What are the dimensions that most interest you in your work?

Demetrio: My work could be defined as political if we were to understand politics broadly. For me, politics encompasses every aspect of social life. Politics affects how much our basic necessities cost, how groups are perceived, what kind of state benefits marginalized groups receive and on what basis, or how a society tries to be progressive. So, many aspects interest me politically: from economic to social politics to participation therein. Regarding politics and the Rroma population, keep in mind that when we talk about antigypsyism, we are talking about structural racism that manifests itself everywhere. So, let's say I'm a little bit interested in everything. I have done much work about Rroma sexual diversity, but lately, I have focused more on issues such as hate speech, discrimination, racism and so on.

And what about you, how and why did you start working with Rroma groups? Because the first time I met you, you were still a very young student. I remember you had contacted me because you wanted to discuss my work and ideas.

Antonio: I think it has to do with identity, as in your case, but slightly differently. I was born and raised in Villaverde, an underprivileged district in south Madrid, a home primarily to working–class people. On average, renting or buying a house in Villaverde is the cheapest in Madrid. The neighbourhood where I grew up is a segregated place within Villaverde, where a low working–class Payo[5] population live alongside numerous Gitano families and an immigrant population.

Some close relatives of mine have married into Gitano families, but I don't consider myself Gitano, nor would Gitanos view me as such. However, I grew up alongside Gitano children and neighbours. Because of my class background and the large numbers of Gitano families dwelling in the neighbourhood where I grew up, I have always felt sympathy, solidarity and somehow a connection to Gitano families living in disadvantageous settings. When I went to university, middle-class fellow students identified me with my neighbourhood and would joke endlessly about how dangerous my neighbourhood and the Gitanos living there were. I studied sociology, and what I learned at university gave me the fundamentals to understand the processes of stigmatization and how class and ethnicity shape your present life and future opportunities. Gitanos have a cultural repertoire that is relatively foreign to mine, but at the same time, they are very close to me in the Spanish social stratification system. This combination of closeness and distance sparked my curiosity and, when choosing a topic for my PhD, it was clear to me that I wanted to explore something related to the Gitano world.

Demetrio: And how do you think your sociology training and subsequent ethnographic work with Rroma communities have helped you to understand the Rroma world?

Antonio: Well, it has influenced me in many ways: for instance, I have made even more Gitano friends! Joking aside, I never experienced the rite of passage-like experience of encountering my ethnographic interlocutors for the first time because I knew some of my interlocutors from before. However, doing ethnographic fieldwork among Gitanos has enabled me to advance my knowledge on different aspects of Gitano lives. I talked to many Gitano people about their culture, opinions and ideas about what being Gitano entails, so I have been exposed to varied views on Gitano identity that have enriched my understanding of how identity is constructed. I learned that there are many ways of being a Gitano individual, as there are many ways of being Spanish, a Payo or a man. This undeniable complexity and diversity led me to demystify the illusion and the idea of 'the Other'. Furthermore, it has allowed me to understand that, although people have different cultural roots and ways

of understanding life, they may be similar in many other ways.

Beyond the idea of identity, I specialized in studying Gitano Pentecostalism in my doctoral work. I am neither a Christian nor a believer, and the experience of sharing a significant amount of time with highly devoted religious people made me appreciate and be more tolerant of religious diversity. I believe my sociology background helped me, as exploring the logic that governs social behaviours, whether cultural or religious, made it easier for me to empathize with people who think differently.

The COVID–19 pandemic and its effect on Romani communities

Antonio: How has the pandemic affected the lives of the Gitanos you know, including yourself?

Demetrio: Among Rroma people there have been diverse ways to deal with the pandemic. Undoubtedly, just as in the rest of society, the most economically unprotected groups have suffered the most. Sadly, a significant part of the Rroma population in Spain belongs to these groups. So, for example, for the Spanish Rroma who live from hand to mouth selling goods on the streets, lockdown had a devastating effect, they faced an extremely dire situation. Additionally, Europe bears witness to an increase in racism, and sadly, many fake news and hoaxes have emerged against the Rroma population. Unfortunately, in Europe, there have also been situations of institutional *apartheid* (Matache and Bhabha, 2020). We can conclude that during the pandemic, minorities in general and Rroma families in particular suffered immensely.

And what about you, what is your perception of how the pandemic has affected the Rroma population in Spain?

Antonio: My perception is similar to yours. I know at first hand the situation of the Pentecostal Gitano communities, as I work with them very closely. Not being able to get together as a community to worship God has been hard for them. Additionally, many congregations have lost their church buildings because they have had no money to pay the monthly rent. I have also found that they

have suffered from being stigmatized. For example, the right-wing Spanish media characterized Gitano believers as religious fanatics who attended their worship services and celebrations during lockdown times without regard for the collective welfare, reinforcing a widespread biased image of Gitanos as a disordered and uncivilized people (Gay y Blasco and Rodriguez Camacho, 2020; Montañés Jiménez and Carmona, 2023).

Demetrio: Exactly. We have seen this representation of Spanish Rroma as lacking '*civismo*' (civility) occurring everywhere, a little bit in all places. It is easy to see how fake news information concerning the Rroma population spreads around. Rroma communities have been vilified and accused of not following lockdown rules on social networks, in the newspapers and so on. I think this hatred is linked not only to the fact that they are Rroma but also to the fact that they are poor. I feel a critical element of aporophobia and rejection of the poor here. Regarding religion, we have seen that Spanish ultra-Catholics were complaining because they were denied the freedom to attend church services and some even celebrated masses during the lockdown period. In sum, Rroma breaking the rules were described through the usual stereotypes, whereas these stereotypes were not applied to rule breaking non-Rroma individuals (Gay y Blasco, 2023).

Reconsidering our approaches to and methodologies for the study of Romani communities in the age of COVID-19

Antonio: How did the pandemic affect the way you work?

Demetrio: It was complicated for everyone. Like many other people, I struggled with mental health issues. The COVID-19 pandemic was a painful period for most of us, one that took away our motivation to do things. I think it is a feeling that we have all been able to share in one way or another. The loss of human connection was highly detrimental to my mood. I usually deliver training and courses to educate professionals who have contact with the Spanish Rroma population, and of course, during the pandemic I had to teach these courses online.

My main work during the pandemic was reporting on the living conditions of underprivileged Spanish Rroma families. In tandem with other Rroma activists like me, we tried voicing their needs, making their situation visible and publishing materials (FSG, 2021) that help us understand how the pandemic affected them. In short, we tried to report on the dire situation experienced by some sectors in the Rroma world, since it seemed that everyone had forgotten about us.

A fascinating phenomenon during the pandemic was the unexpected proliferation of wannabe activists and social leaders. Suddenly, people had a lot of time to be on social media, so they all seemingly became activists. At first, I was excited that our complaints were echoed by some people. For a short time, I felt a momentum boosted by a rapid spread of noble concerns for others, as many people seemed to embrace ideals about humanity, the collective, solidarity, helping one other and so on. However, the momentum ended abruptly because of the pressure and the tiredness of the pandemic and people returned to their old habits and self-involvement.

How has the pandemic affected your work?

Antonio: My work is usually ethnographic, and like other scholars who use ethnography to produce knowledge, I have had to think of alternative ways of working. I encountered difficulties and tried to solve them with the support of new technologies. Instead of using participant observation, I made calls and conducted online interviews. Look at us writing this piece together, you live in Valencia, I live in Oxford, and we talk via phone and Skype; these technologies make scholars' work much more manageable.

Demetrio: Yes, that is right. I feel the pandemic changed our sense of space but also time. Critically, we all had time to reflect a little during lockdowns. As it was a general stoppage, it served some people to reflect on where we were heading. Say the two of us: I think we engaged in our project about hate speech on social media because we had the time to do so, whereas, at other times, we did not have much time.

Antonio: Something you just said seems essential to me: the pandemic has given us two time to think. We were indoors, unable to get out and time moved slower, as you

have pointed out. We had less pressure to continue what we were doing, and new opportunities arose. It was a time when we could not continue our usual day-to-day activities, so time to reflect on how we wanted to do things was available. I would say that our work together is a product of the pandemic in two ways: on the one hand, we collaborated because we were concerned about the situation for the most vulnerable sector of the Gitano population, and we were horrified as we saw how the press, social networks and Spanish society, in general, were treating Gitano people. On the other hand, it is a product of the pandemic because it gave us time to rethink our ways of working, which were previously more bound to our respective fields.

The pandemic gave me an excuse to get back in touch with you and ask to collaborate. I knew you were collecting data to report hate speech incidents, and I felt it was the right moment to do something together. I knew of colleagues who collaborated with their interlocutors and admired their work. Yet, had the pandemic not happened, I might have never considered engaging with collaborative knowledge production practices.

Challenges and opportunities of bridging activism and academia

Antonio: What has our research project brought you personally and professionally?

Demetrio: Working with an academic pushes me to learn specific ways of thinking, writing and doing things. Additionally, it provides me with theoretical references to be able to support my ideas and develop them. When you write with an academic, the activist must understand that a series of references must support the text, so the text is valid and formally written. Apart from developing their own expertise, activists need to be aware that they must substantiate their arguments, which cannot be sentimental but grounded on reason and study. Also, working with academics gives me and my ideas visibility in scholarly spaces. I feel it is crucial that critical activist perspectives and views reach or have an impact on academia. On a personal level, for someone who comes from an excluded minority like me, participating in prestigious academic

publications and being supported by an academic like you is a big step forward. The main reason I want to collaborate with you is that my name appearing as an author next to yours is incredibly important politically, as it shows that we Rroma can produce discourses about our own social and political experience that have the status of academic knowledge.

And you, what has working together with me brought to you?

Antonio: It has brought me many good things, including an encouragement to question how I write. Ultimately, it has pushed me to think much more about what is important, about who I want to write for and about the idea of accountability. In our project, when I write something, what I write must be reviewed by you, and you give me feedback. I cannot write what I want but must be subject to non–academic control and correction. I think that enriches my work. I am also very excited about exploring issues with you and learning from your vast experience and knowledge. Also, as you just mentioned, working together is a political statement that I am happy to support.

Demetrio: Working closely with an activist often involves changing your research objective and how you communicate your work. Activists must be good communicators because they want to transmit ideas and transform reality. So, we usually write for the general public and have developed some skills to reach people effectively. The academic writer is not necessarily looking at how their text is perceived by the public, but rather at how academic peers perceive it. When writing, the audience one has in mind shapes how the writer structures and organizes their work. Generally, scholars try to prove that what they write has validity in the academic world. Putting those two things together, writing in a way that is both appealing to the academic and activist world, is a rather great challenge, it's not easy at all.

Antonio: What challenges have you faced when working with me?

Demetrio: Fortunately, we have not had many disagreements. That may change, but we have yet to encounter any insurmountable obstacles. It helps that you grew up surrounded by Rroma and that we have similar political views. As with any human relationship, building a

partnership is difficult. I am going to give you an example. It was daunting for me to make you understand that you need to change the audience of your writing and write differently. Of course, learning how to do it takes time and patience. Scholars should learn to write in a way that people understand. If one uses jargon exclusive to their disciplinary language, the text becomes unintelligible gibberish to the average person. Also, I was forced to challenge your perspective when you sometimes focused too much on how society reproduces stereotypes about Rroma and forgot how we feel or are impacted by ethnic hierarchies. I want you to adopt a more humanistic and Rroma-centric perspective. You are open to change and learning, but this work has been, for me, a real challenge.

Antonio: One of the things that is needed here is compromise. I mean, what you would write and what I would write, if we wrote it on our own, would be two completely different things. When we co-write, I must compromise by being less academic and you must compromise by having a more academic structure. The perspective is also essential, as it should be negotiated beforehand. We agreed on what perspective to follow before starting our work together, and this pre-agreement made things smoother.

In addition, something crucial is the issue of time adjustment and management. Academic schedules are different from activist ones. Finding the right timing to work together has become a challenge because, as you know, you have your ways of working and your times and I have mine. Mine are shaped by the university terms, and the other publications I work on. Yours are shaped by your activism, the training sessions you deliver and so on. I remember that in the weeks before your speech in the Spanish Parliament, doing research and writing together was not possible.

We are writing in English, and I am acting as your translator, which involves a lot of work and adds an element of power to our working dynamics. Although I try to be faithful to what you mean, I adapt and edit your writing to meet academic standards, make stylistic choices and decide the wording as well as the tone of your sentences. In other words, I hold significant control.

You then read, review and amend, but I always feel I can somehow shape the general framework. That worries me.

Importantly, our work is greatly encouraged by a convergence of interests. You are interested in shaping academic discourses, and I am eager to explore collaborative approaches in my academic practice. In other words, we are determined to make this project work. We mutually benefit from working together, which is key to understanding why we are devoting time and effort to the project.

Demetrio: Yes, doing research together has been, for sure, a formidable challenge. I always feel sorry for you. Translating is hard work. In addition to what you have just mentioned, it greatly helps us that we have known each other for a long time, and we have a strong sense of trust, and both elements, trust, and a previously established relationship, are fundamental for teamwork. Despite the inevitable language difficulties, of which I am aware, you know what and how I think, we have talked about my ideas endlessly, so I trust you are trying your best and that my words are accurately reflected. Despite the challenges, I must say I am delighted with our project!

Academia, (mis)representation and knowledge production

Antonio: What do you think of academia? How do you think scholars are approaching studies about and with Gitanos?

Demetrio: I must say the academic world has always interested me. Funnily enough, I wanted to study anthropology. I started to read some books at some point. I think studying anthropology passes through the minds of many people who belong to minorities. But well, I began with activism, and, in the end, I didn't continue studying it, but I do like it. Something that brings together academia and activism is the curiosity to explore, take nothing for granted and question the status quo. However, I believe academia fails to represent Rroma minorities, at least from what I have read. There seems to be a standardization or a monolithic view of what it means to be Rroma. The existence of Rroma is usually understood as a problem. So, the studies on the Spanish Rroma communities overtly focus on negative things: school absenteeism,

school failure, unemployment and so on. Consequently, contributions to society made by Rroma people keep being forgotten. Have you read the famous poem 'Los Nadies' (The Nobodies) by Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano? In a section of this short poem, Galeano speaks about the disregard of dominant cultures for non-dominant cultural expressions, primarily when they originate from poor people. The poem goes like this:

The nobodies: nobody's children, owners of nothing.
The nobodies: the no ones, the nobodied, running
    like rabbits,
dying through life, screwed every which way.
…
Who don't speak languages, but dialects.
Who don't have religions, but superstitions.
Who don't create art, but handicrafts.
Who don't have culture, but folklore
                    (Extract from Galeano, 'The Nobodies',
                        1989. English translation by Belfrage
                    published in *The Book of Embraces*, 1993)

I feel that the same principle described in the poem applies to Rroma cultural production. Thereby, the Rroma do not make art but crafts, they do not make music but folklore, and so on. Unfortunately, widespread denigration and invisibility of what and how Rroma people contribute to societies are very much a thing. I will give you some telling examples. Very few people would know that the great Russian mathematician Sofia Vasilyevna Kovalevskaya, the first woman ever to secure a position as a university lecturer in Europe (Sweden, 1851), had Rroma heritage. The celebrated poet Joan Salvat-Papasseit, one of the greatest Catalan literature writers that ever lived, was of Rroma origin. The list goes on and on.

  In a nutshell, my point is that positive references are missing and not available. Having positive examples helps to put stereotypes and prejudices into perspective. Ignorance about these references biases our images of what Rroma people are like, consequently, social perceptions about the Rroma tend to be very superficial and negative. The lack of positive references harms Rroma self-perception too. In other words, the Rroma population often lacks arguments

to contest stereotypes. I believe academia could do its bit to make positive references visible and offer an alternative vision of Rroma people beyond poverty, marginalization and so on.

Antonio: I agree with your point to some extent. However, I must say that finding a balance and fair representation is incredibly challenging. Gitano interlocutors rarely can escape stigma and discrimination, and social scientists rightly point to such violence against Gitanos. In my own work, my fieldwork material pushes me to investigate power and inequalities. Critical elements of the Gitanos' core cultural repertoire, such as the prominence of kinship, cannot be explained without analysing the broader social structures that oppress Gitanos and define the social experience of Romani groups. Social sciences such as anthropology and sociology have developed a rich set of concepts and theories equipping scholars to identify power formations. Studying the social experiences of Gitanos can enhance our understanding of why and how some groups remain stigmatized. Yet, some anthropologists have argued that since the 1980s anthropology has taken a 'dark turn' and focuses too much on the harsh dimensions of social life (power, domination, inequality and oppression), as well as on the subjective experience of these dimensions in the form of depression and hopelessness (Robbins, 2013; Ortner, 2016).

Be that as it may, as you have pointed out, it is necessary to project a more diverse and positive image of Gitanos and give visibility to figures other than excluded Gitano figures. We scholars often make the mistake of using one-dimensional, damage-centred narratives to portray Gitano realities. This tendency to draw on a negative image of Gitanos goes hand in hand with a broader inclination to portray them as victims needing help. Maybe scholars' predisposition to reinforce those views partly has to do with how the academic market is structured. First, this image allows researchers to justify their research regarding social impact. I feel it's easier to get funding if you approach it from that point of view. There is also another element, which is the white saviour complex we academics sometimes uphold. Despite having good intentions, we tend to build stereotypical images that focus too much on the negative aspects.

As for your point about the standardization or monolithic view of what it means to be Gitano, you are also correct. Many social science traditions inherited their preconceptions from the natural sciences, so they like a good generalization. Also, it is easier for researchers to build monolithic images because dealing with diversity and nuances demands a more vigorous intellectual and methodological effort, and theoretically, it is far more uncomfortable.

Demetrio: That discomfort to which you refer also stems from academics' position as knowledge producers. Scholars generally refuse to admit that they are part of the problem. Among academics, there is usually a good intention; they want to create a change through studying a particular issue, but of course, that's what we talked about before, that vision of the white saviour is clearly insufficient. When Rroma 'natives' point out that academia may be part of the problem or even worse, or question scholars' privileges, some scholars feel challenged. I have seen them feeling highly uncomfortable in roundtables and public talks that I attended or participated in as a speaker. That is the moment when their discomfort indeed arises. Academics think that they are cool, progressive people. So, if I'm cool, don't put me into the group of oppressors! However, when we Rroma activists challenge academics, we do not mean to make personal attacks. I think it is essential to discuss who has the privileges and why someone can get to certain places when others cannot. The number of Rroma academics is minimal, which is detrimental to how knowledge is produced in academic settings. Overall, my point is that the Rroma need no saviours, but allies.

As paradoxical as it may sound, that I am criticizing academics while working with one, I honestly believe including Rroma voices can help research and enhance the quality of the findings. I mean, if they started treating us as authors or collaborators, not laboratory rats. Because of my job as a freelance political advisor and activist, I have travelled across Europe and met some Rroma academics, and I am convinced academia can provide interesting insights into how we activists think about ourselves and the world. Do not get me wrong, I would

not like to frame the relationship between academia and activist on Rroma issues as antagonistic. I know some activists understand it as a battlefield and some White scholars feel they are under siege, but this conception is pulling activists and scholars away, which is wrong. On the contrary, I advocate for further integration. Academia and activist need one another. Otherwise, academia may become a bubble in which everything is overtly abstract with no practical application and activism may become a groundless narrative which lacks empirical findings to support its ideas. Thus, we need some middle ground, some people to mediate, and some projects that bring academia and activism together. At least, that is how I see it.

Antonio: Regarding the Gitano population in Spain, what issues do you think academia should most urgently address?

Demetrio: Rather than specific issues or topics, what concerns me is the perspective scholars implement. Depending on how you see the world, you will write or describe what you see in one way or another. To change the mindset in more productive ways, scholars must work and collaborate further with Rroma professionals and scholars. I like a lot projects that work towards such goals. For example, I find our research project very exciting because it is usually people who do not belong to the Rroma collective who speak within academic settings and publications. Such a situation must be challenged and reverted. Something I appreciate about our project is that we are giving value to my knowledge because I am not only a 'native' person, but an activist whose expertise and experience are critical to defining the goals, methodology and design of our academic research. I also think it is important to find spaces where we can show and give visibility to this sort of research. The digital magazine *SAPIENS*[6] in the United States provided us with that space. Martin and Paloma as editors of the book where this chapter is published and the Bristol University Press as our publisher are granting us much space too. Despite its colonial past as a discipline, I find it not surprising that anthropology institutions and scholars are helping us out and pioneering in supporting collaborative projects. Nowadays, anthropology is willing to experiment and there is more openness to the ways they work.

Let me ask you something. Why do you think academics are so reluctant to do collaborative things with Rroma activists and people?

Antonio: That is a good question. Some anthropologists have pushed to implement collaborative approaches for decades. There are some fantastic works out there. Yet, as far as I know, it is true that collaborative methodologies are not mainstream practice among researchers investigating the social reality of the Romani people. However, some authors, such as Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria Hernández, have created a significant body of collaborative work and advocated for reshaping in more egalitarian ways knowledge-production practices and the working relationships between non-Romani scholars and their Romani interlocutors for over a decade. It was because of the growing body of ground-breaking anthropological literature concerned with collaborative research projects with Romani communities (Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz, 2012; Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020; Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023) that I started to reconsider the ways in which my work could better engage the active participation of Gitano interlocutors.

However, my hunch is that scholars still find collaborating with non-academic interlocutors difficult and time consuming. Mobility is also a significant impediment. In contemporary neoliberal market-driven academia, scholars are expected to be mobile and change institutions, fieldwork places and countries very often. Against that backdrop, it isn't very easy to be present and root yourselves into communities, and co-presence is usually a prerequisite to building up relationships and creating trust and mutual understanding between scholars and interlocutors. Equally important, our scientific output is produced in frameworks of evaluation and competitiveness. Academic careers are a fundamental issue, especially for young academics: to be an academic, to grow in your career, to have income and survive in this world, you need to publish in high-impact journals. But what is the problem? Many high-impact journals are not open to collaborative or experimental work. Thus, some scholars must choose between engaging with non-academic audiences and authors – this work is usually

less valued in academia – or doing standardized academic work, which will make it easier for them to secure a job or progress in their careers. In that choice, my feeling is that most academics choose the latter.

Nevertheless, I am seeing a growing predisposition to engage with non–academic interlocutors and co-authors within academia in recent years (Buitron et al, 2021; Kennemore and Postero, 2021), and there are some journals and publishing houses open to accepting and endorsing experimental ways of producing knowledge. Fortunately, funding agencies are also increasingly sensitive and receptive to financing such projects. Indeed, we probably have more funding available than previous generations to engage in experimental work. But it still may not be enough.

Demetrio: I am not surprised collaborative approaches are arriving late to Romani studies. It seems to me this is just another dimension of antigypsyism. Do you remember the poem by Galeano I mentioned before? Most people believe we cannot own our voices or contribute to society positively.

May I say something before finishing our conversation? I have been sharing my ideas and thoughts about Rroma politics for decades everywhere, from international forums to local gatherings in small towns in Spain. Only now that I am starting to work with you is academia paying attention to what I have to say.

Antonio: Academia is like any other discipline or social space; unfortunately, sometimes you need a gatekeeper to let you in. That is why reflections and conversations about power, control and access to resources are essential to democratize academia.

Lessons and recommendations

- Disruptions to research such as those generated by lockdown, albeit undoubtedly stressful and taxing, may offer a much-needed time of reflection to reconsider research and methodological approaches.
- Unsettling events such as the COVID-19 pandemic can become turning points that lead researchers to question the usefulness of their research. Researchers might also favour politically aware and engaged methodological strategies blurring the distinction between action and research.

- Trust, relationship building and recognizing the value of non-academic knowledge are critical for a successful collaboration between academics and Romani (or Traveller) activists.
- Collaborating with non-academic interlocutors implies the need to bring discussions about researchers' positionality, consensus and accountability to the forefront. It also requires a willingness to experiment, adapt and compromise.

Notes

[1] In this chapter, we use our first names, in bold (**Antonio** and **Demetrio**) to make visible to the reader who is speaking and keep our voices distinct, yet related.

[2] Far from being simple stylistic choices, the politics of naming involved in the writing of this chapter index differences in linguistic contexts as well as significative divergences in the ways Spanish Rroma/Gitanos perceive themselves vis-à-vis other non-Spanish Romani cultural groups. Following the Rromani alphabet, which was standardised in 1990 at the Fourth World Romani Congress in Poland, Demetrio uses 'Rroma' as an all-encompassing generic term to describe the set of cultural groups that identify themselves as part of the international Romani diaspora. Antonio uses the term Romani, a widely used terms in the English language, to refer to such set of cultural groups. Except for the introduction in which he introduces Demetrio, when talking specifically about Spanish Romanies, Antonio prefers to use the word Gitano. Antonio chooses to use the term Gitano because his non-activist interlocutors unanimously utilize this word to refer to themselves. Some of Antonio's interlocutors and friends ignore the meaning or the words Rroma and Romani and would reject those terms to describe themselves. In contrast, for Demetrio the term Gitano is an exonym, a non-native term created by non-Rroma people. Demetrio finds the term Gitanos derogatory, thus, he favours the use of the term Spanish Rroma instead of Gitanos.

[3] Demetrios' views on Romani sexual diversity have been gathered in the book *Orgullo* (*Pride*), published in 2022 and edited by Sandra Carmona Duran – available in Spanish only – as well as the short documentary 'We Queer Roma', released in 2019 and directed by László Farkas.

[4] Baxtalo's Blog: Blog dedicado a la interculturalidad y la lucha contra la romafobia y el antigitanismo. https://baxtalo.wordpress.com/

[5] Payo means non-Gitano individual.

[6] Available at www.sapiens.org. In 2021, we attended a pilot workshop titled 'A masterclass in writing for the Public', organized by SAPIENS and funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (https://wennergren.org/article/sapiens-workshop-a-masterclass-in-writing-for-the-public/). Subsequently, we were invited to write a piece for the magazine (Montañés Jiménez and Gómez Ávila, 2022).

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5

The Anthropologist's Engagement: Lessons from a Digital Ethnography of a Nomad Camp in Times of COVID-19

Marco Solimene

Themes discussed in this chapter

- impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on fieldwork research;
- interconnectedness between the offline and online worlds, and between embodied ethnographic practices and digital fieldwork;
- dilemmas faced by a researcher related to public denunciations of structural disadvantages witnessed during fieldwork.

The Anthropologist's Engagement: Lessons from a Digital Ethnography of a Nomad Camp in Times of COVID-1
Marco Solimene
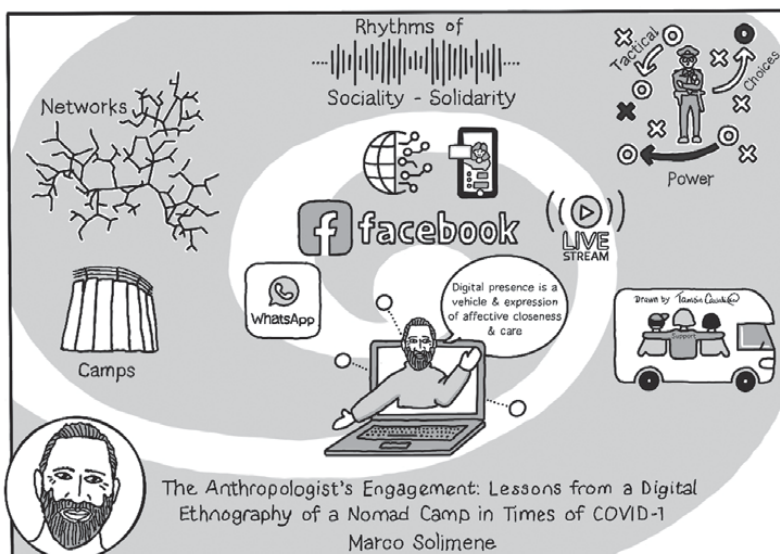
Introduction

We are in late spring 2021, it is past 4 pm in Reykjavík, Iceland, where I live, which means it's past 6 pm in Rome, Italy. I assume that by 6 pm most of my Roma friends, who live in a shantytown at the city's periphery, a so-called nomad camp (*campo nomadi*[1]), should be home and might have time for a chat. Had I tried phoning them earlier in the day, I would have found them busy driving their vans, (un)loading metal scraps, queuing at the metal dealer, and the connection would likely have been unstable. I open Messenger to see who is available. After an unsuccessful attempt to reach Leonardo (he is probably helping his father), I call his sister Silvia, who answers while sitting – as she tells me – 'on the 719', a bus line connecting the Trullo district to the camp where she lives. The white noise produced by conversations of other passengers in *Romanés* masks the sounds of the motor and of the air gusting from the windows slits, suggesting that the bus is in the final part of the route, when those on board are almost exclusively Roma returning to the settlement. Nostalgic feelings surge from accessing, through hearing, a familiar scene I have not experienced in person for 16 months.

Silvia tells me that her father went to collect scrap metal: "There is not much iron (*sastrì*) around, people are afraid to let us in [their homes], we are scared too, for the corona[virus] … but at least they [the local police guarding the settlement] let us leave for work." Silvia's mother, Behara, stayed at home (*čhéré*) today. Her diabetes had worsened over the past few months, due also to the difficulties in getting an appointment with the doctor. Once Behara had eventually managed to book one, the death of her mother-in-law after

contracting COVID-19 had forced her to postpone it. Silvia tells me Behara finally saw a doctor, few days ago, who found out that her medication dosage was no longer correct, which made the diabetes "go up to the eyes" – that is, put her eyesight at risk.

I hear Silvia stepping off the bus and joining the stream of Roma entering the camp. She yells at her younger sister to "be careful with the trolley" – that road section is full of holes and bumps; then she informs me that "people from the municipality" came to the settlement few days ago to notify them of a planned eviction, one year from now. "They came with papers to be filled, where we have to write how many we are in the family, citizenship, visa, work, income … all this stuff, you know." I no longer hear surrounding conversations in *Romanés* with Romanian inflexion, which means that Silvia and her sister are now walking along the road that leads to the Bosnian part of the camp. Silvia continues explaining that the purpose of the papers brought by the municipal agents is obscure: "They just said: 'you have to sign … if you do it, we can help you with the ranking [for accessing social housing], with money to pay a rent' … If we do not sign, we'll be without the camp and left on the road." Many, especially on the Romanian side, have already signed; Silvia's parents were not at home that day … but they are undecided, as many in the Bosnian community are: "among ours, there is no trust … you know".

Since this conversation (reproduced here from my field notes) took place, I have reflected on the fact that nomad camps cyclically become a topic of political debates in Italy, constantly and univocally described as spaces of social and moral decay. Scholars (for example, Clough Marinaro, 2009; Piasere, 2012) and activists (for example, ERRC, 2000) have highlighted that nomad camps express and contribute to racializing, discriminating and segregating discourses against a population categorized as 'Gypsies/Roma/Nomads' and treated as a social waste threatening (symbolically and materially) the majority and its values. The 2012 National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti adopted a critical stance toward the *campi nomadi* and in the name of care and human rights called for alternative housing solutions to camps. Paradoxically, the criticism has been also raised by the populist rhetoric, but to legitimize repressive interventions, with the rationale that the segregation and discrimination produced by camps were incompatible with contemporary democracies and the camps needed to be demolished (with no actual plan of relocation for the evicted inhabitants).[2] It was not the first time that rumours of an eviction had reached the settlement where my Roma friends live. The elections for the city mayor were due in the autumn, so this could have been part of the usual clamour of the electoral campaign; yet one never knows when the threat of an eviction will be actualized. After the prolonged absence of the authorities from the settlement during the pandemic, their return worried me and my Roma friends, who in the past had seldom gained anything from institutional attention (Solimene, 2018).

This chapter revolves around the impacts of the pandemic outbreak on a Bosnian Roma community living in a state-run *campo nomadi* on the periphery of Rome. This topic provides me with an entry point for reflecting on two aspects. Methodologically, I discuss the changes that the pandemic triggered in my fieldwork, which moved from the domain of embodied ethnographic practices to that of digital platforms. Politically, I reflect on risks that may shadow the advocacy discourse that focuses on public denunciations of structural disadvantages. Besides the pandemic of COVID-19, the threads running through my discussion are my positionality as a researcher and the wider field of power within which my fieldwork is embedded. Teasing out these issues enables me to reflect on a thorny question for politically engaged anthropologists: if, as Scheper Hughes (1995, 148) argued, 'the work of anthropologists demands an explicit ethical orientation to "the other"', does this always mean loud, visible and public denunciations of societal injustice, or – as argued by some (for example, Simpson, 2007; McGrahanan, 2016; Prasse-Freeman, 2022) – can such engagement demand that anthropologists remain silent? When and why, then, would silence be appropriate?

Anthropological fieldwork in times of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic upset the unfolding of our everyday lives and exposed the fragility of many certainties about what normalcy is. It also triggered global anxieties concerning future scenarios putting at risk our health, socioeconomic well-being, self-determination, and the right to movement and sociability that many took for granted. The pandemic and the measures adopted to tackle it, however, evolved differently in different parts of the globe and impacted more harshly on already vulnerable groups, exacerbating existing socioeconomic inequalities (compare Berescu et al, 2021; Bringe and Pleyers, 2021; Carvalho de Noronha and Danta de Olivera, 2021). The pandemic emergency also affected research and fostered a readjustment of fieldwork activities (Kara and Khoo, 2020).

Since the year 1999 I have been doing research with Bosnian Roma families – or *Xomá*, as they define themselves – living in one of Rome's *campi nomadi*. During this period my research has relied first and foremost on 'being there' and on the related forms of embodiment and serendipity characterizing ethnographic fieldwork (Piasere, 2002; Olivier de Sardan, 2015). Since spring 2020, however, the COVID-19 outbreak made this fieldwork methodology basically impossible and pushed me to rely primarily on digital technologies. Even before the pandemic, since 2018, digital technologies had been part of my research toolbox. When not 'there', I have been using WhatsApp and Messenger for direct communication with my *Xomá* friends, exchanging information and pictures, conducting informal interviews, even organizing a trip with some families from Rome to Bosnia. Intensified reliance on

digital platforms was thus a natural solution to the need to continue doing fieldwork in times of forced immobility, when I was in Iceland and could not travel to Rome. It also made me appreciate that the holistic approach characterizing the ethnographic inquiry could not avoid engaging with the online dimension of people's lives, in its 'inter-connectedness' with the offline world (compare Caliandro, 2018; Bluteau, 2021). The shift to the digital world, indeed, led to a serendipitous realization: in the past years, and especially during the pandemic, the *Xomá* have been increasingly incorporating technological communication into their everyday lives. I refer especially to Facebook posts and live streaming, which have become the main stage, especially during lockdowns, for strategic self-representation in relation to quarrels and conflict mediations, political activism and, more widely, social competition (exhibiting dress, commodities, the authority of giving a speech and so on). Facebook has practical uses, such as organizing the scrap metal business, but it has also helped to reinforce bonds between individuals and families – both those living apart and those sharing the same dwelling space – who invite each other and participate in live streaming of celebrations and social events (marriages, birthdays, festivities), as well as news and ordinary activities such as eating, drinking and listening to music.

The pandemic made me discover the interconnectedness of online and offline worlds and brought to the fore the importance of the digital world as an object of, and tool for, socio-anthropological inquiry (Miller and Horst, 2012; Pink et al, 2016). It also called for a more methodical observation of *Xomá* use of social media and their online practices and prompted me to reflect on the power of things (in this case, social media) to mediate social relationships and shape them (Miller, 2018). I started noticing how networks and interactions, which I had previously observed in the offline world, were shaping those I observed online. I also noticed the emergence of novel social dynamics that the online world was triggering in the offline world. Interconnectedness also facilitated and legitimated my digital fieldwork, as I could rely on a deep, intimate knowledge of the field in its physical, relational and cultural dimensions. Intimacy and mutual trust generated during previous offline fieldwork has given me a relative freedom of movement in direct online communication. Though many elderly *Xomá* lack digital literacy and do not have accounts on social media, I have been able to contact them by using their children's Facebook or WhatsApp accounts. In some families, and under certain circumstances, the trust I had constructed in offline fieldwork has enabled me to communicate even with women and unmarried girls without this seeming inappropriate. Sometimes digital communication opened spaces for one-on-one conversations that are rare in the offline world, where I am seldom alone with one person. Finally, I knew most persons and spaces appearing on the background of the *Xomá*'s posts and videos (or in the comments) and could thus identify

who was beyond the names and pictures that (sometimes) were intentionally tailored for an online audience.

In other words, mutual trust, cultural intimacy and the knowledge of specific forms of communication have enabled me to access the digital field, contextualize and decode what I accessed therein, grasp unspoken aspects and, ultimately, participate in a shared digital space. Indeed, as Bluteau (2021) demonstrated, ethnographers' digital presence may become part of their interlocutors' digital life, just like ethnographers' physical presence becomes part of their interlocutors' everyday life. However, relying exclusively on digital platforms also has its drawbacks. *In primis*, it drastically narrows the sensory experience and the forms of 'wasting time' which are crucial in anthropological fieldwork (Piasere, 2002; Pink, 2009). Besides, while participating in an online event (such as a live streaming of a party) is possible, engaging through digital technologies in events that are not meant to be displayed on social media is not. This is true for ordinary life (being on the phone with an ethnographer is a challenging task while taking care of hungry children, loading a van or facing a police control), and especially in moments of intense joy or discomfort, where the physical co-presence can only partly be substituted by a digital one. My point is here that my digital presence was a vehicle and an expression of affective closeness and care, but it also highlighted distance from a world I could access digitally but not bodily – thus forgoing the holistic, multisensory experience and understanding that characterize in-place ethnographic fieldwork (Pink, 2009). The relief and excitement of being able to give continuity to fieldwork has been, sometimes, replaced by frustration at the limits of my gaze and my very partial and intermittent presence. Surely, this unease was nurtured by nostalgic idealizations of fieldwork, which overlooked the fact that anthropological knowledge is always situated and partial (Piasere, 2002; Olivier de Sardan, 2016). But I nonetheless felt that all I could grasp of the pandemic were fragmented glimpses that I could only partially (and painstakingly) put together. This work was possible only through a 'shared reflexivity' (Hervik, 1995)[3] with the *Xomá*, which enabled me to go beyond the limits of my personal gaze and understanding. The following section briefly summarizes the results of this joined effort and discusses the main impacts of COVID-19 on life in the settlement, highlighting nuances and ambiguities characterizing it.

The camp in times of COVID-19

Since their arrival in Italy in the early 1990s fleeing the Yugoslav wars, the families I talk about here have been predominantly dwelling in (in)formal *campi nomadi*. In the early 2000s, after a struggle to regularize their position as migrants, they eventually accessed legal documents and residency in a

state-run camp, where they have lived ever since (Solimene, 2018). The camp is a shantytown situated outside the urban area, and inhabited by Roma families from Bosnia, Montenegro and Romania with each group occupying a distinct area. On two sides it is enclosed by a hill and on the other two by fences. The camp itself is an assemblage of old portacabins (provided by the authorities) and self-made constructions and trailers that the inhabitants have added to cope with overcrowding and lack of infrastructure and maintenance. The camp's entrance is usually guarded by local police officers who control vehicles entering or leaving. Police regularly patrol the settlement too, allegedly in order to monitor unruly inhabitants and prevent unregulated uses of dwellings. As other *campi nomadi* in Rome, the camp serves as a device to control and contain what is considered a social waste (Solimene, 2011; 2018) and materializes the internal boundaries (Fassin, 2011; De Genova, 2013) that define the Roma as an illicit and dangerous presence.

How did the pandemic impact on this arrangement? I cannot provide a detailed description covering developments during almost two years, only outline them. In Rome from March 2020 until April 2022, exceptional measures were adopted to counter the spread of COVID-19. These predominantly revolved around mobility and sociability, and included social distancing, prohibition of gatherings and restrictions on (and in certain moments suspension of) circulation in the city unless strictly necessary, such as in order to buy food and medicines or go to hospital. While certainly impacting on the whole society, these measures posed major challenges to vulnerable groups (Tagliacozzo et al, 2021). For example, necessities had to be certified with a self-declaration, printed from the government web page. With only cellphones and no access to printers, the *Xomá* in the settlement had no possibility to produce a self-declaration and, therefore, technically could not exit the camp. This awkward situation was eventually solved through negotiations with the officers at the camp's entrance. The *Xomá* told me that paper copies of the self-declaration, to be filled by the camp's inhabitants, were made available at the police car. However, whenever circulation in the city territory was suspended due to lockdowns,[4] vehicles were allowed to exit the settlement only once a day and were required to provide a proof of the strict necessity – such as the receipt from the supermarket or the pharmacy – on return. This rule was not implemented for those leaving on foot. The camp, however, is far from the nearest urban area, and the two bus lines connecting to it reduced their operations and limited the number of passengers allowed on board, while taking a bus meant increased exposure to contagion. The arrangement with the authorities, therefore, solved a potential legal impasse and granted the camp's inhabitants a possibility to access the city, but, combined with pre-existing structural disadvantages, it resulted in further segregation from the city territory.

This situation impacted heavily on people's economic activities. Scrap metal collection – a main source of income for the *Xomá* – was completely interrupted during the first lockdown; later, it was allowed (to those with a regular permit) even during lockdowns, but the fear of contagion and restricted access to sites and metal dealers (in accordance with restrictions on gatherings) had a negative impact on business. The digitalization of bureaucracy further complicated access to state protection and economic support for vulnerable families and autonomous workers,[5] which the *Xomá* received partially late, and often only by mobilizing personal networks in the administration. Many *Xomá* had therefore to rely on their savings and internal mechanics of solidarity. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and charitable associations, after they brought food parcels in spring 2020, did not show up until the next spring, when a team of doctors from a Roman hospital started providing medical assistance to the camp's children and encouraging vaccinations, and a charitable association started coming to the camp to convince families to send their children back to school. Indeed, the pandemic provoked a long interruption of didactic activities. The fear of contagion led many *Xomá* parents to keep their children at home; besides, primary schools and vocational courses suspended their activities for months. Whenever offered, online teaching relied on tablets, which the *Xomá* had rarely access to and were difficult to use in overcrowded habitations without Wi-Fi connection. The toll on health was even higher: overcrowding, bad infrastructure and pre-existing health pathologies related to harsh living conditions exacerbated the risk and severity of contagion. Sadly, three *Xomá* passed away due to COVID-19, many others contracted the virus and its side effects on those with chronic pathologies are still apparent.[6]

In other words, the pandemic further forced on the *Xomá* the structural violence inherent to life in urban ghettos, radically worsening the discriminatory and segregating processes expressed and reproduced by the camp. In 'normal' times, the *Xomá* counter these processes by exiting the camp regularly and accessing the city as any other citizen would. Their practices and relational networks in the city do not solve the pervading and diffuse antigypsyism; nonetheless they express and produce rootedness and integration in the city's socioeconomic and cultural fabric (Solimene, 2014). During the pandemic, however, the *Xomá* had very limited access to the outside world and became confined to the camp, abandoned to poor infrastructure, economic difficulties, little access to services and high risks of contagion.

However, there are elements of continuity between the states of emergency and normalcy that speak of a complex and nuanced situation. The first element concerns institutional approaches: despite the exceptional character of the pandemic and the measures to tackle it, the *Xomá* did not actually experience substantial changes in how state institutions approached them.

The exceptional situation radicalized the institutional abandonment, as it interrupted for months any form of intervention aimed at assistance, but it did not break the blend of neglect and repression that characterizes the governance of the Roma in normal times (Simoni, 2005). The second element concerns the *Xomá*'s capacity to appropriate a space of exclusion and transform it into something else: home. Camps have been described, rightly, as spaces of the Agambendian exception, where the law and the basic rights of their inhabitants are suspended (Clough Marinaro, 2009; Piasere, 2012; Brooks, 2018). But to the *Xomá*, the camp also represents a space wherein specific sociocultural practices, rhythms and forms of sociability have consolidated over time: it is the stage of a normalcy that cannot be reduced to biopolitical discourses (Solimene, 2022). This aspect was only partially suspended during the pandemic. Indeed, throughout the whole emergency, but especially during lockdowns, while increasing border controls, the authorities simultaneously lifted the regimentation and surveillance of everyday life within the space of the settlement. Its inhabitants could thus escape the control and discipline that the authorities normally enforce inside the camp. Consequently, they could also escape some restrictions on sociability and movement that, during the same period, forced most city residents into social isolation and confinement within the four walls of a flat. Personal communication and observation of social media indicate that, enclosed in the camp, the *Xomá* had no other choice than to continue spending their days between small and overcrowded habitations and the in-space outside them, living as members of extended families who (through a blend of imposition and autonomous choice) share everyday gestures and support each other, practically and emotionally, against antigypsyism and life adversities, which then included the pandemic and isolation. As Semira told me in July 2020, commenting on the situation: "It's hard but no one starves here … you know, if one has no money or food … we help each other." The mutual help Semira highlighted also meant going to the city to buy medicines or food for those stuck at home through quarantine or sickness, or visiting hospitalized *Xomá* whose close relatives could not enter the hospital due to sickness or lack of vaccination. Therefore, abandoned to their destiny, in the camp the *Xomá* felt safe and were able to maintain some normalcy, which seemed otherwise suspended in the rest of the city. It was precisely the practices of sociability and solidarity inherent to the space of the camp, which the pandemic only scratched the surface of, that provided the *Xomá* with the resources to navigate such difficult and challenging times.

Conclusion

I have argued that during the pandemic, and especially during the lockdowns, the *Xomá* were abandoned to the camp and its difficult living conditions. As

with the inhabitants of the Meré favelas in Rio de Janeiro (Friendly, 2022) or with agricultural workers dwelling in informal shanties in Southern Italy (Tagliacozzo et al, 2021), structural disadvantages combined with the exceptional situation of the pandemic and intensified segregation and exposure to structural harm. I have also reconstructed a more nuanced portrait of life under pandemic conditions, showing how the camp also represented a safe space replete with intimacy, sociability and solidarity that enabled the *Xomá* to endure such dire and hostile circumstances.

This ambivalence emerged from my digital anthropology but remained invisible in the portraits put forward by the advocacy discourse, which since the first lockdown in March 2020 started expressing societal concerns about the risk of a pandemic outbreak in *campi nomadi* and other urban ghettos. NGOs and activists drew public attention to the structural disadvantages – poverty, overcrowding, poor hygienic and housing conditions, health risk and so on – faced by urban shanty dwellers, and invited local authorities and charitable associations to bring food and aid to the camps before people used up their savings and started to starve (for example, Pavlovic, 2020; RR, 2020). The legitimacy of the denunciation of social inequalities and injustice is not a matter for debate. But it would be naïve to ignore the fact that, at least in the case presented here, this denunciation did not translate into specific policies or actions of care and aid. Indeed, despite the public calls for intervention, no tests were run in the community, no masks or disinfectant were brought to the camp and the distribution of food parcels was limited to the first lockdown. Meanwhile, the inefficiencies, delays and contradictions of the institutional mainstream response to COVID-19 continued to impact harshly on the camp's population: the death rate, three to four times higher than among the non-Roma population, speaks for itself.[7] The sad irony is that putting harshness and difficulties under the spotlight nurtured the collective imagination which frames nomad camps as spaces of misery and contagion. The stereotypical images of camps as hotbeds of tuberculosis, skin and lung infections and social disorders were now complemented by new portraits of camps as potential epicentres of the pandemic. My *Xomá* friends expressed concerns about this discourse and feared being considered as potential spreaders; as I write this chapter in November 2021, they still lament the obvious implications of this label for economic activities that depend on interpersonal relations, such as scrap metal collection.

My point is that the sacrosanct emphasis on – I paraphrase Ortner (2016, 65) – exploitation, inequality and the workings of power may, paradoxically, reinforce society's internal boundaries (Fassin, 2011). In this case, it corroborated the image of Roma as dangerous and polluting 'Others', and of camps as 'hells in the periphery' [*inferni di periferia*] – as one magazine section title from April 2020 put it with reference to the situation in *campi nomadi* (Pavlovic, 2020). Images have consequences. During the last 20 years,

Roma settlements have been demolished by the Rome's administration in the name of care and solidarity, arguing that letting people continue to live in those places of misery and decay is unacceptable. This reasoning is used to justify the eviction plans for the camp inhabited by the *Xomá*, which would deprive them of their homes without offering a feasible housing alternative. Indeed, the so-called 'transition' to houses, which local authorities are now presenting as one-size-fits-all solution, encounters many obstacles, such as difficult access to social housing, resistance by the local population against the arrival of Gypsy families and the prohibitive costs of rents (ISTAT, 2021). The result is that most Roma evicted from *campi nomadi* over the past years, after being forcedly uprooted, have ended up in some other (in)formal camp, even after negotiations with the authorities in the search of more humane alternatives (compare Daniele, 2011; Solimene, 2011; Associazione 21 Luglio, 2021).

Protesting openly against structural inequalities and discrimination can be a political strategy to put pressure on policy makers; it can bring results and is often embraced by communities. In the case described by Friendly (2022), for instance, the mobilization strategies that aimed at improving living conditions in the favelas in Brazil during the pandemic included open and loud communication where the public denounced the state's failure to deal with the pandemic, which convinced the Supreme Court to temporarily suspend police operations in the favelas. But in cases such as the one here described, things may be more complicated, as local communities might not welcome this kind of rhetoric and agency, and rather prefer a strategic 'refusal' to publicly address specific experiences and topics (Simpson, 2007; McGranahan, 2016). Like many other Roma and Sinti communities in Italy, the *Xomá* have been ambivalent about whether to speak out against injustice or remain silent, and in what situation. Indeed, they are well aware of their lack of political leverage; and they are aware that the public denunciations of structural disadvantages, which so appeal to NGOs and activists, not only often remain unaddressed, but also easily escape control and, once hijacked by the populist rhetoric, provide ideological ground to a repression that is sugar-coated as humanitarianism (Fassin, 2013).

Silence and invisibility in the public arena, it should be noticed, do not necessarily imply lack of agency and, as Prasse-Freeman (2022) argued, 'refusal' can generate social change. In the context of the immobility of institutions and their irresponsiveness to civil society's calls for assistance described in this chapter, the *Xomá* chose silence and invisibility in the public arena. At the same time, they were informally negotiating with the authorities directly involved in the everyday governance of the camp. This form of 'street-politics' (Bayat, 2000) seemed more at hand to the *Xomá*, who have extensive knowledge of how to deal, in everyday life, with street-level officials, the '*Gağé* clad in the state garb' (Solimene,

2013) whose discretion regulates the 'tension between formal structures and informal practices' (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2019, 248; Pailli and Simoni, 2016). The results were limited, but concrete: for instance, the local police making the self-declaration available, turning a blind eye to those exiting the camp on foot or lifting surveillance within the camp. This latter achievement, *nota bene*, is the same as was obtained by the inhabitants of the Meré favelas through an organized and publicly visible denunciation, but the *Xomá* achieved it through a process of 'quiet encroachment' (Bayat, 2000) over which they felt in control – much more than over public statements.

I therefore pose, provocatively, a question. Even if the failures of the camps' system are clear and widely acknowledged, should researchers easily and unreservedly align themselves with the mainstream critical discourse against the camps? The question is relevant because, although not always impactful, academic research does provide reference points for the decision-making process, and it can be pragmatically leveraged by officials to support their decisions – whatever these are (Duina, 2022). Speaking out against inequality and exploitation means producing the cultural critique that lies at the foundations of anthropology, but anthropologists are also entangled in the intricacies of the specific local political situation in which their fieldwork takes place – and they cannot just ignore it. As this case study suggests, there is no safe answer to the dilemma of whether to speak out or remain silent. Reflecting on campaigns aimed at increasing Roma visibility, such as through Roma pride movements, as a tool to counter antigypsyism, Albert Atkin, a philosopher of Romanichal (British Roma) descent, recently argued that Roma 'must ensure that pride and visibility serve [their] ends' (Atkin, 2021, 157). What we, politically engaged researchers can do – especially when our understanding of the intricacies of the local political situation is affected by the limitations inherent to exclusively remote research – is then to take seriously the tactical choices that our interlocutors 'pursue irrespectively of what we, social scientists, think of it' (Bayat, 2000, 554). In certain circumstances this means voicing dissent. In others, it means engaging 'productively' with refusal (Simpson, 2007) and thus remaining silent. The right answer to the dilemma, if it exists, remains ineluctably circumstantial and inextricably linked to the shared reasoning that characterizes anthropological work.

Lessons and recommendations

- The pandemic has reiterated and even augmented the role of digital technologies in the contemporary world and in research. More than before, researchers need to incorporate digital technologies as both an object of and tool for their research.

- Mutual trust, cultural intimacy and the knowledge of specific forms of communication generated from offline fieldwork help in accessing the digital field and understanding the materials collected from online research.
- Researchers need to pay attention to how the communities they study do politics and to follow their lead when deciding whether to speak against societal injustices and make some issues visible, or to remain silent.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Plural: *campi nomadi*. The term builds on the questionable equation between GRT life-style and nomadism and refers to a variety of dwelling situations, ranging from small, informal and precarious encampments to large state-run and highly regimented settlements (see Clough Marinaro, 2009; Piasere, 2012; Solimene, 2018).

[2] For an exemplary case see the demolition of the authorized Camping River settlement in Rome, executed in 2017 by the municipal authorities with the support of the interior minister Matteo Salvini and in contravention of EU decisions (Associazione 21 Luglio, 2021).

[3] Hervik defines 'shared reflexivity' as the 'materialization' of the anthropological encounter, which occurs between persons with 'different but congruent cultural models' who, during fieldwork, share experience and reasoning (1995, 65).

[4] This occurred in the first lockdown (March – May 2020), and then repeatedly every time national Health authorities, on the ground of number and rate of contagions, categorized the Lazio region as red.

[5] Regarding state support, see MEF (2020).

[6] For a detailed description of the impacts of COVID-19 on this settlement, see Solimene (2023).

[7] Indicatively, consider that from the beginning of the pandemic to November 2021 the population fatality rate among the *Xomá* community (which counts about 300 individuals, half of whom are under age) was 1 per cent, compared to the 0.29 per cent estimated by Modi et al (2021) for the Lombardy region.

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Roma Ethnographies of Grief in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Iliana Sarafian

Themes discussed in this chapter

- research participants' ways of expressing loss and grief under existing and new forms of disadvantage and inequality created by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- interrelatedness of researcher's and research participant's experiences in unanticipated moments;
- use of ethnography and autoethnography including the potential of ethnographic listening.

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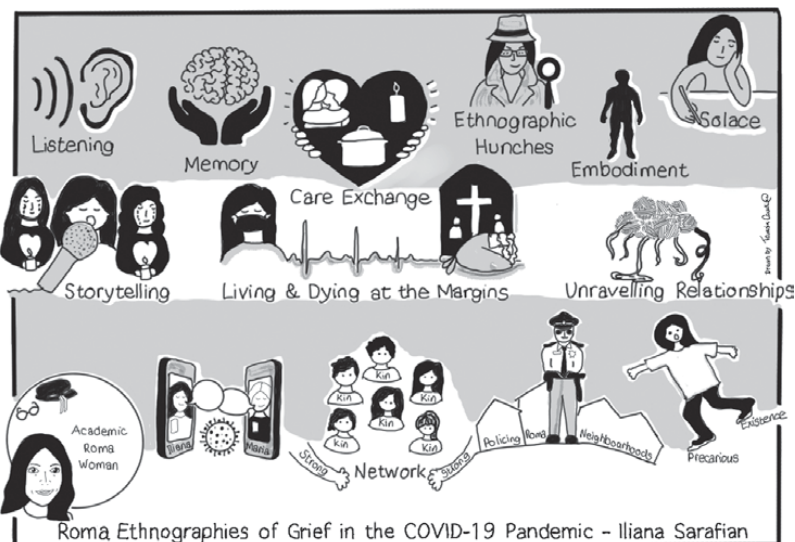
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought multiple forms of grief to the surface of life: the loss of plans, the loss of connection with others, the loss of freedom to do the things we used to do and, tragically, the loss of livelihoods and loved ones, all required dealing with. Yet the pandemic also normalized this loss, it silenced it, and it made it somewhat acceptable and expected. Grief became part of the everyday. So, in the following pages, I explore the silenced lived experience behind the expressions of grief happening amid the turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the core of the ethnographic materials presented in this chapter is the ineffable nature of pain and suffering in Roma lives brought about by the compounding effects of historical inequalities merged with the emergencies of the pandemic. In an unprecedented way, the crisis exposed the existing precariousness of the Roma everyday and highlighted the disparities existing in their lives, households, relationships, losses, hopes and potentialities. The crisis also revealed the fragility and the strength of Roma kin-based, mutual, communal and social structures to counteract the inadequacy, belatedness and confusion of state responses (Korunovska and Jovanovic, 2020; Sarafian, 2022b; Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023).

Just as the pandemic took place unexpectedly it also affected abruptly the research methods used to capture the complexity of lived experiences. This has been a time when researchers, arguably more so than previously, have recognized the importance of exploring alternative methods. Thus, this chapter is as much about the context in which research takes place as it is about research methods in unanticipated times such as the COVID-19

pandemic. Evident in the structure of the chapter is my intent to privilege empiricism over theory by first affording space to ethnographic storytelling of lived experience and then locating the narratives as contributing to theory and method, rather than vice versa. The methodology I employ is an amalgamation of ethnography and evocative autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis, 2016), with my point of departure being grief as experienced by my friend Maria, whom I first met in 2012 during fieldwork in the Bulgarian town of Radost.[1] I endeavour to illustrate the predicaments of the COVID-19 crisis by conveying Maria's and my own experiences of grief while relating these to a collective Roma dealing with the end of life and mourning under unforeseen circumstances.

I must note that I use autoethnography to suggest a way of facilitating new epistemologies in times of crisis, and a dialogic and critical interrogation of method and knowledge production (Denzin et al, 2008; Chawla and Atay, 2018; Smith, 2021). The politics of my identity as a Roma woman and a researcher coalesce and complicate each other through autoethnography 'as a mode of writing, and a way of life' (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, 45). I do not employ autoethnography for solipsistic interests but to give way to agency where it is due, to give back and to reciprocate for the stories shared with me (Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz, 2012). I aim to recognize and to 'bear witness' (Hill collins, 2000) to the many struggles faced by Roma in the pandemic as an accelerated continuum of existing crises. I also provide narrations of Roma agency, mutual support and survival. I set out to uncover the emotionality of grief as an intensified state of human vulnerability and to explore grief as an action, practice and lived process (Cholbi, 2022). In between these considerations, I reflect on an unresolved tension between worldly and academic deliberations – grief as a philosophical term and grief as a quotidian expression.

Ethnography in the way of life

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, governments introduced various measures to contain the spread of the virus. Across Europe and Bulgaria, public health measures involved the policing of entire Roma neighbourhoods while restricting movement and impacting on lifelines and livelihoods (Korunovska and Jovanovic, 2020). A tragedy unfolded, one of lives lived under political, socioeconomic and emotional distress. While measures adopted by public authorities focused on dealing with the excess of contagion containment, social distancing and pandemic mortality, the emotional, collective and ritual aspects of dealing with death and mourning were swept away by the prioritization of biopolitical safety and protection concerns. This act of neglecting the cultural, religious, communal and ritual aspects of mourning created conditions for trauma, loss and lack of closure (Bear et al, 2020; Simpson et al, 2021; Hernández, 2023; Silva Júnior, 2023).

Maria, my fieldwork friend, and I had kept in touch in the years following my doctoral research (2012–14), and as the pandemic happened, I learned of her economic insecurity and struggles to care for her children and family. Her partner had left her when she was pregnant with her second child. It was impossible to find enough money for food, clothes and shoes, and sending her children to school had become impossible. This is how she came to the attention of the social services. When I met her for the first time, back in 2012, she was fighting for her two children to not be taken into state care. In time, she managed to find a job at a local sewing factory, her mother helped with providing accommodation and, after a brief stay in foster care, Maria's children were reunited with her. In the following years, Maria's mother suffered from poor health and, after her death, Maria's younger brother Jasen stepped in to provide shelter and support.

Maria had never imagined that Christmas 2020 would be the last she would spend with Jasen. He contracted COVID-19 and passed away aged 43, at the end of December 2020, leaving behind a wife and three young children. When Jasen died, Maria lost a brother, a friend, a supporter and another key figure in her life and future. Jasen was a truck driver and the main breadwinner. His premature death left an enormous physical and emotional hole in the lives of his family members; it destabilized their livelihoods and derailed their plans. Now Maria, a single mother with two children who shared a household with Jasen and his wife and children, had become the family head. As the older sister, she needed to step into the role of guardian, provider and matriarch and attempt to rebuild the structure of the future, that of her children and her brother's children. Jasen's death ruptured the fabric of kinship, intimately woven to provide essential informal support and care for one another. Thus, Maria and her sister-in-law agreed to share the responsibility of looking after all their children, five in total. This kinship strategy was governed by the necessity to survive physically and emotionally both as individuals and as mothers to children who carry the potentiality of life and its practicality.

Maria's and her sister-in-law's salaries from the local sewing factory were not enough to support their family. A couple of months after Jasen's funeral and during another COVID-19 wave across Bulgaria, in early March 2021, Maria therefore travelled to England to start a job on a fruit-picking farm. She was caught in the impossible situation, again, of leaving her children behind with relatives to find a job abroad. One morning, Maria called me from a city in the Midlands. Like others in the urgency of the situation, she needed to provide for her now larger family financially and she found a physically demanding job outside Bulgaria far away from them. "I have become the father and the mother of everyone. My brother helped me while he was alive, so now I must do this for his children and his wife," she explained to me. Gradually, her voice changed, and she began crying: "I need to speak to someone. You are in England like me. I know you can understand because both of us are away

from our families in Bulgaria. I cannot bear this pain inside me … I tried to be strong, but I cannot be strong anymore." Maria's life situation was exacerbated by the sheer accumulation of previous histories of pain, suffering, poverty and struggles to survive. As it happened, the pandemic also buried Maria's grief under the unpredicted material circumstances of life and the priority to care for her family. When I asked her about the risk of contracting COVID-19 she replied: "I either die of COVID or my children die of hunger. I had no choice, I had to travel." She needed to appear strong, take risks, encourage her family and provide support while suppressing her expression of sorrow. Maria thought that giving space to grieving was threatening to bring about more economic, social and relational loss, but her sorrow kept resurfacing and had become overwhelming. This was when "this horrible feeling of not being able to breathe came back. I need to talk, cry, and shout … it is so heavy," Maria told me on the phone. The enormous burden of unexpressed grief entangled with the pressure of past and present responsibilities had taken a toll on her. Maria's silenced grief needed tackling and, days after our call, she went back to Bulgaria to be reunited with her family.

Maria's call reminded me of another call I received in January 2021, less than a month after Jasen's death. My aunt in Bulgaria called me early one morning to say: "He is gone …", followed by a highly unsettling pause. "What do you mean he is gone?" I asked. "If you can … come home. The funeral will be tomorrow," she said through tears. The range of the intensely overwhelming emotions I felt at that moment escapes description. I hung up the phone to take a breath. My disbelief gradually turned into multiple thoughts that crossed worlds, spaces, households and futures. Resembling Maria's case, in a close-knit Roma family such as mine, the death of a loved one impacts on immediate kin and wider social networks. My uncle Kiril, my mother's younger brother, a man who had always supported me and my family, was taken away from his children, wife and family. My uncle's death came as a caesura in connectedness, time and the presence of a loved person; what is more, my kin network and its future changed course, its disruption cut deeply into the meshwork of relationality, meaning-making, practicality and support. Like Jasen, he was the family breadwinner and the employer of several people in the neighbourhood. The families in my neighbourhood, as in Maria's family, live in close proximity and they depend on each other for their social and economic survival. Therefore, death comes as an exceedingly traumatic unravelling of multitudes of interdependent relationships and intimate social networks, not only for immediate family members but for others too.

I called my aunt minutes later, trying to sound as composed as I could, and then I understood more. My uncle had complained of chest pain. He was taken to the hospital where he initially tested positive for COVID-19, only to have a second, negative test. His heart attack was diagnosed after a delay, and five days later he passed away. When I met my uncle (then aged

54) in the summer of 2020, I never imagined that this would be the last time I would see him alive. After the call from my aunt, I desperately searched for flights to Sofia the same day, but the number of flights during the COVID-19 pandemic was significantly reduced and there were no available seats. I managed to find a flight to Sofia early in the morning the next day, but I arrived in my home town only minutes before the funeral procession in the late afternoon. When I arrived a large crowd of people were already gathered outside my uncle's house. There was no embracing, no human contact, only the terrifying sounds of human pain and loss of life, hiding behind protective surgical facemasks. I could not make it to my uncle's 'sitting up' (*престо яване*/*prestoyavane*) – the practice of not leaving the body of the deceased alone in their home and throughout the night until the burial next day. Again, like Maria's family, my family lives in a community with no access to funeral homes. The preparation of the body for burial, the purchase of a casket, the digging of the grave, the administration of death records, the consoling of the bereaved and a multitude of other tasks are undertaken by family and community members themselves. All of this happens within 24 to 48 hours after death, according to the Bulgarian legal requirements for dealing with deceased bodies and in cases where measures cannot be taken to store the body of the deceased for longer.

The strength of the kinship response to death lies in the very networks of kinship, mutuality, consolation, emotional support, practicality and respect for the individual. People, close kin or not, are there to console and to show humanity using expressions such as: "I am sorry for your loss", "Life goes on", "He is in a better place now". Dealing with grief is sought not through comforting words only, but through deeds, acts of kindness and solidarity. Bringing food. Cleaning. Visiting the home of the deceased. Yet, due to COVID-19 restrictions, Jasen's funeral, which happened in December 2020, was not the usual public affair. His body had to be isolated to prevent viral spread. The Radost Roma learned of his death on Facebook, which provided an outpouring of condolences from the online community. There was no 'sitting up' throughout the night. His securely closed coffin arrived on the day of the funeral directly at the Roma cemetery in Radost. Maria and her family were not allowed to visit him while in the hospital and they could not see his body at the funeral. The macro biopolitics of the state (Campbell and Sitze, 2013) intervened in the minuscule world of the household, including in its rituals and ways of dealing with grief (Silverman et al, 2021).

Nevertheless, such sanitizing containment was not new to the people of Maria's Roma neighbourhood, which was located on the outskirts of the town. Long before the onset of the pandemic, neighbourhoods such as hers had already been portrayed as spaces of contamination. During my fieldwork Radost was perceived by the locals as an unregulated, dirty and dangerous site, warranting enforced spatial boundedness and segregation from other

neighbourhoods in the town. Amid the pandemic, Roma settlements such as the one in Radost were once more perceived as threatening sites (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2021), associated with 'racist morbidities' (Murji and Picker, 2021) and eliciting the need to be contained and controlled (Sarafian, 2022a and 2022b; Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023). The pandemic enabled the continuation of residual, already established marginalization trends (Simpson et al, 2021), and it also disrupted the kinship structures, the meaning-making rituals and the daily life of Roma neighbourhoods.

Disrupted life and death

The pandemic affected the Roma everyday in unparalleled ways. Kinship, social, professional, educational, household structures and arrays of relationships were impinged on. In many countries, the COVID-19 social distancing regulations did not allow people's participation in the dying process of their relatives and friends (Simpson et al, 2021; Silva Júnior, 2023) . This physical distancing, enforced to curb the spread of the virus, added another layer of impossibility to caring for loved ones, to paying respect to the deceased and their families and to grieving. Ritual, in all its forms, was impossible and forcefully interfered with by the lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Maria felt that she could not grieve "properly, as is done" in her community, for several reasons. She was not allowed to see her brother during his last moments in the Radost hospital. "It feels as if he has gone abroad with his truck for work. I never saw, touched, or cried over his body. I could not tell him how much he meant to me." His funeral was void of the familiar ritual, the 'rites of passage', to help the acceptance of his finality and of a moral and symbolic communal order (Van Gennep, 2013). Moreover, for Maria the death of her brother did not cause only emotional pain: it caused fissures in practical livelihood. Her grief was intensified because the socioeconomic circumstances prevailed over the expression of emotionality and mourning.
Maria tells me:

'Grief is hard to explain. It is like sea waves. They come and go. One minute I am angry, another time I laugh and then I just want to cry again. It hurts in my soul and in my body … I have no choice but to get on with life, to provide for my children. Life for me is only worth living for my children now. This is the life of many Roma.'

For Maria's community, early mortality was already a familiar occurrence before the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistically high and early mortality is an undeniable and tragic trait of Roma lives in several European countries, as Roma have lower life expectancy and worse health outcomes as compared to their non-Roma counterparts (Gloria and Deirdre, 2016; Orton et al, 2019).

Experiencing mortality was and continues to be commonplace. In the case of higher mortality, ritual becomes a coping mechanism (Scheper-Hughes 1993; Rosaldo, 2014), a form of communal prescribing, a support framework for survival, to deal with the unbearable pain of pre-existing traumatic memories and the experiences of the present – of being people living and dying at the margins of the state (Das and Poole, 2004). In Maria's neighbourhood, the way to deal with death, loss and grief happened through the rituals people performed, consisting of consolation, exchange of resources and mutuality that they provided for each other in time of mourning. These various forms of mutual support stepped in when the state had withdrawn and implemented social bordering (Aradau and Tazzioli, 2021; Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023).

The crisis revealed both the strength and fragility of these kinship relationships, communal and social organizations to counteract the effects of the pandemic. Inside Maria's neighbourhood, community members kept in touch with Maria and her sister-in-law for 40 days after Jasen's death, when the mourning ritual of visiting the home of the deceased finished. The locals found ingenious ways to check in on them, to bring food and consolation. Mourning is a relational process, a mechanism to maintain and create meaning-making in gatherings and rituals (Klass et al, 2014). This is in accordance with the unspoken practical rule which Maria and I have known for life, and she tells me:

> 'Our people are together when it comes to death and funerals. It is our way. There is hardly any person from the neighbourhood that would miss the funeral. It is like the law. No matter whether you have had arguments or you did not like the deceased, you must show respect. It is in death that we show who we really are. It is easy to go to a wedding but to go to a funeral is a matter of respect, it is human, it is Roma.'

These forms of 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins, 2011) and solidarity are there for a reason. They represent the communal and kin way to help and to show compassion to the family of the deceased; they are there to reciprocate a universal trait of what it is to be human and to empathize; and they carry the communal aspect of preservation of identity, including through silence (Fraser, 1992; Williams, 2003; Stewart, 2004). This communal respect is about belonging to the same group, the group that has been historically ostracized and discriminated against. It is the material and cultural survival of this very group and its rituals, identity and kinship postulates that people live by and perform in order to affirm belonging. The goal is the practical association with the bereaved so that no one will have to meet and deal with mortality alone. This mutuality then also carries the communal expectation of the exchange of kindness, of care, of propelling the culture of the kin and the group forward. Such a kinship survival process is about 'relatives

living each other's lives and dying each other's deaths' (Sahlins, 2011, 1). Bereavement then becomes communal and dealing with it and the historicity it carries is a public matter. The pandemic restrictions interrupted these communal ways of necessitating survival, they disrupted life and death.

The unexpected death of a significant other brings uneasiness, enormous pain and a range of other emotions (Rosaldo, 2014). Maria was grieving Jasen's death; she was grieving for not being able to say goodbye to him while also being overwhelmed by the socioeconomic impact of his death on her family. She found herself in an unbearable position. As I relay, or even 'translate' (Behar, 2003), Maria's experience, I tap into my perspectives of grief and why I chose to write about her story. Maria's experience resonates with my own dealings with grief. Uncle's death hit me hard. I had lost my grandmother the year before, but I was able to say goodbye to her in person before she passed away. Being with my grandmother physically in her last moments helped my mourning journey. My uncle's unexpected death brought much heartache to my family. I wanted to help Maria, my family and myself, and in April 2021 I approached a community centre in London offering bereavement counselling. Through the materials they sent me I discovered that speaking and writing down the emotions in coping with the death of a loved one could help. So, Maria and I speak often as we learn to express the emotional worlds we inhabit. When I was approached by the editors of this volume to write a piece exploring the possibilities and pragmatics of doing Romani studies during the COVID-19 pandemic I kept thinking of Maria's life as well as the two disrupted lives, the two Roma tales of untimely death and the multiple life destinies impacted upon by the passing of Jasen and Kiril. "Grief never fully goes away", Maria teaches me, as she prepares to travel back to England for another fruit-picking season. I am prepared to listen to her calls, hoping that I will finally be able to meet her again in person as the COVID-19 pandemic dissipates.

Positionality and method in unforeseen circumstances

Grief is difficult to understand, it is 'emotionally complex and seemingly idiosyncratic … it confronts our understandings and resistance to think of the people we love as impermanent' (Cholbi, 2022, 2). How was I to make sense of these encounters and could I call what I was dealing with ethnography (Behar, 1996)? I gradually came to value the potential of the ethnographic ear (not the eye) in 'participatory listening' to capture the nuances and developments of Maria's life story and to examine my own experiences (Forsey, 2010). Facing death, loss and absence is when one's entanglements with others become most deeply felt (Derrida, 1995). As researchers we can be drawn into spaces of human life that we do not 'know how to go about getting out except through writing, which draws others there as well, making them party to

the act of witnessing' (Scheper-Hughes, 1993, xii). Ethnographically, it can take a while for investigators to comprehend the lives of their interlocutors in the field, to seemingly sort out the messiness of life and explain it using theories and methods. But what more can academic theories possibly disclose to our informants about the facts of grief, poverty, hunger, socioeconomic dependence of related kin and the struggle to survive (Denzin et al, 2008)? Maria and my family could not relate to theory, but they did understand the sharing of common experiences and what in research is called positionality. When methodology, theoretical considerations and positionalities converge, I find my personal experience of grief, which I tap into so as to be able to make sense of Maria's story, better or at least partially, at a time when I was not able to meet her in person.

Here I employ ethnography as a method with a twist, a method that can adjust itself, to tell stories that have shaped me more than I have shaped them. This method may be what is called 'accidental ethnography', an attitude and a process of pushing back the boundaries of the established forms of research, of planned initiatives, to engage with the complexities of human life as they appear (Fujii, 2015; Poulos, 2018). In social science this approach has also been called 'accidental wisdom' (Calhoun, 2004), whereby serendipity as a scientific method not only tests the research hypothesis but also brings new ideas and research questions to the fore (Pieke, 2000). Undoubtedly, there are potentials as well as complications when we engage with the alhoun, C. 2004. 'Accidental wisdom: Robert Merton's serendipitous findings', Book Forum, Summer. emotional aspects of the human condition, and these can be research junctures of uncertainty, indeterminacy and serendipity entangled with the familiar and established social and cultural grounding. These moments can follow on from fieldwork, similar to what Sarah Pink calls 'ethnographic hunches', when we think we know something but a serendipitous moment during our fieldwork or in our research relationships, not part of the predetermined analysis, emerges from 'checking things out with each other' (Pink, 2021, 35). In my PhD research, I spent months doing fieldwork, including collecting stories of rituals involving death and grieving (Sarafian, 2023, 35–41), but it was Maria's grief story that I 'stumbled into' when I realized that grief is one of the enduring themes that followed on from fieldwork, transcending the 'seeing' component of physical presence and enabling both 'listening' to what I thought I knew and learning to be open to new ways of research analysis.

Crucially, tackling my researcher's position(s) is also a relevant methodological consideration (Harding, 2004). Anthropology teaches us to empathize with our informants. We live with them, we step into their worlds, we create relationships and then we leave, attempting to articulate what we saw, heard, felt and embodied in the spaces and time-bound moments we inhabited. Importantly, however, often the relationships we create during fieldwork are not severed with the end of our research projects, there may be a series of

encounters to follow, sometimes through social media where the field can be reconfigured to encompass a digital space (Pink et al, 2015). Our 'fields' can follow us; beyond physical and digital presence, we embody their joys, struggles and continuum of learning aspects in our own lives (Okely, 2007). Along the way, Maria contacted me and I then found myself examining my experience together with hers. Rather than trying to exclusively be a neutral listener, I learned from her. Maria helped me to come to new understandings, to an 'ethnographic hunch' (Pink, 2021), a shared, collaborated understanding through conversations about what grief and loss entailed.

Maria and I have become more open to discussing grief and loss in our calls. "I am learning more and more to express what I feel and now I teach my children to do the same," she tells me. I, on the other hand, am learning to be a better listener as an ethnographer. My encounters with Maria teach me that when human beings seek advice, what is said is often less important than the process of voicing and listening to one's pain, emotion and, in this case, expression of grief. Unquestionably, there are themes that are challenging to listen to and write about; these can be vexing to discuss and comprehend. Grief is one of those themes for me as it is for others (Scheper-Hughes, 1993; Rosaldo, 2014). Yet ethnography, with all its strengths and depths, can bring uneasy themes to the surface and form them into 'possible' knowledge (Pandian, 2019). As anthropologists we can be surrounded by serendipitous moments, grounded in relevant and contextualizing knowledge prerequisites of anthropological fieldwork. Following long-term fieldwork, my epistemological inference or 'ethnographic hunch', prompted by Maria's shared expression of grief, is that there are unresolved, sometimes unexpected, quasi-accidental moments of worldly and academic considerations – grief as a philosophical and analytical term and a mundane expression, grief as a process and action, grief as individual and collective expression (Cholbi, 2022).

Having learned about 'the reflexive turn' in anthropology (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), I have come to appreciate that I cannot write about grief, as well as other themes involving human experience, through 'clean and sanitized', non-compromised theoretical and methodological explanations only (Tomaselli et al, 2008). The search for value-free science and for theory is limiting in that it cannot help me to grasp the serendipity, the 'inbetweenness of things' (Basu, 2017), the liminality, the transience of life, the unsettled rites of passage, the meeting with human mortality, the uncoupling of vital relationships, the subjectiveness and the centrality of grief to human existence. Methodologically, I have engaged with a subject which is difficult to convey and deal with, but it is also amenable to reflection and analysis through evocative storytelling (Bochner and Ellis, 2016). These are the stories we tell as 'I-witness', where we need to be the persuading 'I's first (Geertz, 1988), when we 'concentrate on meanings that can take readers into the heart of lived experience' (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, 34). Moreover,

ethnography is a practice of education, altering our own perceptions of the world, beyond the generating of 'data' and learning about the societies we study (Ingold, 2014).

By reflecting on my own experience of grief and sharing this with Maria I acknowledge my relationality with her. Maria taught me to write her story by placing me into conversation with her and my own analytical and emotional preconceptions. Ethnography is a dialogical process and researchers are intrinsically implicated by the research they do (Okely and Callaway, 1992). There are links between our positionality and the narratives of our informants. Arguably these can be 'partial connections' (Strathern, 2004), 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988) and 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld, 2005). These are positions of seeing, listening and being which require a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973); positions concerned not with the authoritative voice of the researcher but with their autobiography and the way their life experiences influence the research they choose to undertake.

Sharing how I have come to know, and my position, is not only an ethical research consideration but also a way to delve deeper into the researcher's identity and its markers – be they gender, race, class or other. Ethical research codes and guidelines often focus on the rights of individual interlocutors, on securing the anonymity, informed consent and confidentiality of our informants, but they are less about co-production, reciprocity and the ways our studies impact on the lives of those whom we study outside the realms of our research (Ryder, 2021). In pre-pandemic times, conducting long-term fieldwork and participant observation enabled me to live with and be a part of the daily lives of my interlocutors. This participant observation and 'doing ethnography' became an embodied knowledge (Okely and Callaway, 1992; Halstead et al, 2008). Such life experiences, sensory experiences, emotions and embodiments influence our personal views of the world and the ethnographic story and the themes we present (Pink, 2015). Some themes can follow us beyond fieldwork and writing up. These themes inhabited and distilled by the stories of the people in our research projects can find us, we do not necessarily look for them, but these are important to be reflected on.

Finally, autoethnography is also a way to respond to a call to produce knowledge by making visible, centring conceptions, understanding, knowing, being and doing research together with our interlocutors (Denzin et al, 2008; Rappaport, 2008). This mutuality of knowledge production is not about a self-indulgent politics of who speaks, writes and represents, be they Roma or non-Roma, but it is a cogent and intellectually defensible way to acknowledge eagerness to learn and convey meaning-making in everyday life. I employ autoethnography to reciprocate the stories shared with me, to acknowledge and to make sense of the many struggles faced by the silenced Roma narratives enveloped in the pandemic avalanche of

emergencies, security and state control. The emotional entanglements of positionality involved in the writing of autoethnographic texts enhance our awareness of inequalities in research, and so it is my hope that they can enable us to ask better questions and utilize research methods with genuine candour and care for the people and communities we research (compare Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020).

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have reflected on life during unanticipated moments and research on uneasy themes. Death, closure and ritual during the pandemic happened at odds with previously established social norms, causing disruption in dealing with loss (Simpson et al, 2021). These snippets of disrupted life can be found in the potent narratives of our informants. Sometimes, as I have shown here, we as researchers come across fragments of information almost accidentally or serendipitously because fieldwork and people's stories, sorrows, joys, disappointments, satisfactions and losses can follow us. Maria's story of life, grief and survival has been one of these post-fieldwork constants for me and our dialogues prompted an 'ethnographic hunch', consisting of the realization of the need to write about the experiences of grief.

I also drew on my long-term fieldwork and positionality – Ruth Behar calls this 'at once the inscription of a self and description of an object' – to blur the boundaries between 'self and other' (Behar, 1996, 20). Methodologically, I have presented a dialogue between ethnography and autoethnography. This dialogue speaks to theory, it listens and responds, and it connects lifeworlds, materialities and emotions, including those that need to find a voice and their own story. This endeavour is also about studying the conditions of being human, precisely what anthropology does, through ethnography as a way of thinking and always in the making, in dialogue with the people we study.

Finally, while I have presented a specific ethnographic and methodological case, I think I have also illuminated *something*, not everything (Geertz, 1973, 4), that is at stake for us as researchers who make attempts at the interpretation of culture while being confronted by our own pain intersecting with the distress and despair of others. Ultimately, the explanation of this *something* is related to how often we find ourselves at a loss to do anything about *it* while finding solace in the act of writing ethnographically. It is my hope that we as researchers in Romani studies can challenge monolithic categories, not assuming *something* but provoking, and asking more questions, not necessarily answering them while utilizing methodologies privileging, recognizing, constructing and validating the agency, that of the individual and collective Roma.

Lessons and recommendations

- Ethnography is a powerful way of bringing out the spaces 'in-between', the aspects of social life which we cannot quite put into words and the themes which we are afraid of or not willing to engage with.
- Ethnography is not only about seeing and being in the field in person. Ethnography is about listening, embodiment and memory. Ethnography is also about a continuation and building up of established and new relationships.
- Autoethnography can be empowering; it is not only a method for the researcher to share their own story and positionality, but it can be the means to reciprocate, share, respect informants and critically engage with their own understandings of the phenomena under study.

Note

1   Radost is the anonymized name of one of the localities of my doctoral fieldwork.

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Beyond the Screen: An Attempt to Conduct Remote Anthropological Research on Perceptions of a Global Crisis

Nathalie Manrique

Themes discussed in this chapter

- difficulties involved in collecting *in situ* data when travel becomes impossible;
- importance and advantages of previous fieldwork experience and of the embodied knowledge acquired through it;
- limitations of data obtained through remote methodological tools;
- usefulness of the constitution of an archive of *in situ* observations by local ethnographers.
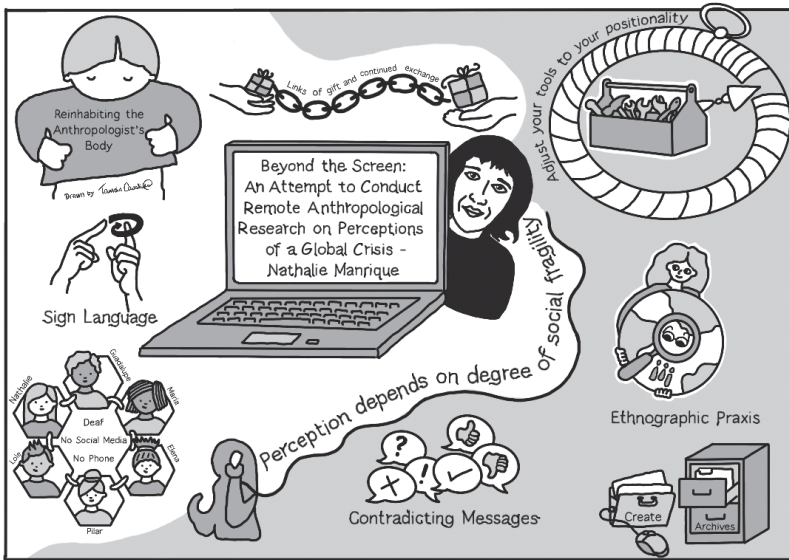
Introduction

For anthropologists since Bronisław Malinowski, participant observation *in situ* has been inseparable from ethnography as 'the field experience that guarantees that the truth is found in the ethnographic text' (Kilani, 1994, 47).[1] Early ethnographers argued that this total immersion in the field enabled the true understanding of the object of study (Malinowski, 1932; Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Lévi-Strauss, 1989). More recently, as Jocelyn Dakhlia (1995, 141) observed, there has been a shift '[f]rom the field as a site where the truth of a cultural system becomes revealed to the ethnologist' towards 'a model where, conversely, it is the anthropologist who is the holder of the truth of the field'.[2] Ethnographic truth no longer appears as a ready-made entity with smooth contours that can be discerned by dint of observation, participation and self-transformation (even if the boundary between observer and observed remains central to ethnographic praxis), but it emerges as the anthropologist's construction from multiple local discourses. The encounter of the researcher, at a specific time, in a specific place, with concrete and unique individuals, becomes itself the object of research. At times, this anthropological position brings into question the reality of observed facts and presupposes therefore a certain intellectual honesty of the researcher and the need to recognize the discourses of the different parties (the intersubjective relation), which Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1995) calls 'the ethnographic pact' (see also Agier, 2019). James Clifford (1988; 1997) goes as far as to claim that an anthropologist's authority and ethnographic reality of the 'field' are effects of ethnographic writing.

If ethnographic knowledge has been derived from the fact of 'being there' in the field, an associated problem of 'fields' as geographically, yet unattainable, distinct locales has also been experienced by generations of anthropologists. Confronted with armed conflicts, border closures or the lack of travel funding, many research plans are routinely abandoned or altered, with researchers needing to change their locations or develop new research approaches. But what can a fieldworker do when the whole world is under lockdown or affected by restrictions, and face-to-face fieldwork becomes completely impossible everywhere, just as it happened during the first half of 2020? What does this moment of extreme separation from the field – the field's unreachability – reveal about the practice of participant observation, both in exceptional circumstances and in 'normal' times? How do we work with the fact that, in these circumstances, the internet becomes not just an object of study and one research tool among many but the only possible way of carrying out a fieldwork project that was to take place 'elsewhere'? Can the internet compensate for the absence of physical co-presence? How does this situation force researchers to question the very definition and the 'place' of the field, both within social science and physically as a geographically distinct locale?

To explore the question of the primacy given to face-to-face fieldwork as the source of data in anthropological research, I reflect on the problems I encountered when attempting to conduct research within a particular fieldsite, with a particular group, at a particular moment, namely with the Gitano community of a small Andalusian (Spain) town, Morote,[3] during the first lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020.

Being in France and unable to travel made it difficult for me to find reliable and diversified sources of information that would provide multiple perspectives on a situation that affected all social fields (health, education, economy, housing, religious practices, family lives and so on). It was all the more difficult for me as my main informants in Morote (Maria, Elena, Guadalupe, Pilar and Lole), those with whom I have developed over the years a deep friendship and with whom I would normally communicate freely about all kind of topics, are deaf, like a substantial number of Gitanos in the town. In fact, because of financial problems, they do not have mobile phones. They do not borrow others' phones to send messages, nor use social media, because they are also illiterate or semi-literate. During my fieldwork, we communicated in a language of signs created locally over several generations by the Gitanos of this village, which they taught me. At home in France, unable to communicate with my friends face to face, I had to turn to their hearing relatives and close friends, who are less close to me but who are prolific on social networks.

Thus, over several weeks in the spring of 2020, my only source of news were the social media communications of my other Gitano and non-Gitano

acquaintances living in this town, some of whom were close relatives of Maria, Elena, Guadalupe, Pilar and Lole. But I constantly wondered how to process and assess these social media data without the insight that my lived experience and observations *in situ* would otherwise provide me with, and without the commentaries and insights of my trusted deaf friends. The problem became acute as the messages I received via social media frequently contradicted each other.

Somewhat unwittingly, then, the pandemic situation made me tackle a question which has been discussed by other scholars but that emerged as central within this special context: are all sources of information equal? I was confronted not only with the importance of the 'fiction of truth' (Clifford, 1988; 1997), the subjective re/construction of facts, but also with something that, in this context of lockdown, arose one step before, in the process of collecting data: the necessity, with no other possibility, that research participants would become something akin to ethnographers, responsible for data collection without the guidance of the anthropologist *in situ* and proceeding as if without an ethnographer's gaze (who, 'at home', away from the field, then proceeded to write and reconstruct the 'truth').

What tools can allow anthropologists to continue to encounter and experiment with serendipity (Piasere, 2010) – that is to say with the experience acquired in unexpected ways so essential to the discipline – when collecting field data? This question is particularly important in the context of research with Romani communities within which face-to-face communication, co-presence, sharing of affects and reciprocal exchange, in short, what Patrick Williams (2021, 626) described as '[t]he knowledge offered by the sharing of life (*La connaissance offerte par le partage de la vie*)', are central for defining family and community belonging (Williams, 1993; Manrique, 2008; Piasere, 2010, 169; Pontrandolfo and Solimene, 2021). This is also a context where social relationships between groups and individuals must be constantly confirmed and recreated in a process in which expressions of emotions play an essential role (Williams, 1993).

Given my and others' experiences of research with Romani communities, my initial decision to study the perceptions and social impact of the pandemic among Gitano families seemed at first to have reached a dead end. But before I introduce the reader to this community – which I have known since my doctoral research and whose daily life I shared for more than two years in the mid-1990s – and before I elaborate any further on the research process, it seems essential to explain the particularities of my situation as a researcher.

Fieldwork

For several years I have been an independent researcher. I do not have an academic position that would provide me with funding for research and

enable me to stay 'in the field'. Although I have continued my ethnographic research, I have funded it through several precarious jobs I have held in France. Only in this way I was able to return repeatedly over the years to Morote, a small town in the province of Granada where I first arrived in 1996 to conduct research for my PhD. Later, two grants in 2004[4] and 2016[5] allowed me to spend several months in the town.

In the meantime, to keep in touch and accompany the lives of the Gitano families I know and who have become my dear friends, I relied on social media. Indeed, before social networking services and smartphones became ubiquitous, it was very difficult to get regular news: Gitanos in Morote did not have landlines and very few of them could write or use a computer. Today, WhatsApp and Facebook serve as a convenient way through which young adults inform me, even if they are not my key informants in the field but their close relatives or friends, about the families with whom I have maintained close relationships. In this way, over the years, I have learned about the marriages of several young adults, about births and, very sadly, also about the passing away of some of my closest friends.

As the first wave of COVID-19 hit the world in late 2019 and early 2020, and while I was under lockdown in France and following the news about the deteriorating situation in Spain, one of the worst-affected countries, I became filled with fear for the already fragile health of several of my friends. I tried to find out as soon as possible information about the impact of the pandemic on their families and on life in Morote. Starting off as a friend worried about her close companions, I soon realized that I was reinhabiting the anthropologist's body, so to speak, utilizing my already embodied knowledge and skills. I was mobilizing my anthropological sensibilities whenever I tried to discover the scope of the damage wrought by the epidemic on the families of Morote. And one of the things I realized was that I was drawing heavily on my previous experiences gained *in situ*. My previous permeation by the field through participant observation and immersion in the daily life of the community now became essential to me in my quest to identify informants and networks that I thought could find the local data about the pandemic that I was looking for.

The Gitano community of Morote

Morote is a small town of about 9,000 inhabitants, of which almost 800 are Gitanos. It is located in the eastern mountains of southern Spain, almost 150 kilometres from Granada, the capital of the province of the same name.

In these Andalusian mountains, the Gitanos of Morote live in relative segregation, although their jobs require them to travel frequently and they regularly come into contact with people outside their community. Almost all live in the three most disadvantaged districts, situated outside the town

and separated from the rest of the population by a river. These dwellings in these districts are small houses and cave houses.

The Gitano people of Morote, busy with their daily tasks and continuously involved in looking for jobs to survive, have always showed very little interest in my research. During my original doctoral research in 1996–98, they often described me as the 'teacher' (*maestra*) and they let me observe and ask them questions pretty much as I pleased. During the first months of my stay, they responded with more or less goodwill, depending on my integration into the social networks of specific persons. Later, a few frictions emerged between myself and some women and young people, who became suspicious of me and my work and kept asking me why I was so interested in their 'shit' (*mierda*). But friendships were also blooming with many, and conversations became more natural, especially during our coffee-drinking sessions. It is thanks to their support and advice that I was able to build new relationships and networks.[6] After I left, only a small circle of close friends continued to respond to my requests for news. When I returned to Morote in 2004 and 2016, I reconnected with other local networks.

The partial and situated understanding of Gitano social life that I developed as a result of these experiences and my readings in anthropology can be summarized by saying that my Gitano interlocutors often evaluate individuals according to their degree of generosity (Manrique, 2016). Each social person is integrated in the Gitano community through links of gifts. As a consequence, strangers, including anthropologists, may also be valued. But people forged a place for me in their networks as a person, and not as a professional researcher. When Gitanos helped me during my research they did so because of our close relationship – the recognition of a relationship with another, including the anthropologist, depends on and is supported by continued exchanges (for example, Williams, 1993, 13) or, in the case of the Gitanos of Morote, by gift-giving (Manrique, 2016). Thus, what interested Gitano interlocutors the most about me was rarely my research itself but my commitment to them: my capacity to share time and confidences with them. I helped with homework, summer school and with preparation of the snacks every afternoon for children. I assisted in adult literacy courses and gym classes for women. All these activities greatly aided my integration into the community. I also participated in a renovation programme for unsanitary cave houses financed by ROMI, an association of Gitana women, where I had volunteered for two years during my stay in the city of Granada. Above all, my house became a place of refuge and respite for women of all ages who came there to drink coffee and smoke, away from the eyes of the men of their families.

My shifting position over time can be described as underlined by 'perduction' (French *perduction*), which Piasere (2010, 68) describes as a 'prolonged co-experience in which the processes of free-floating attention and empathy,

abduction and mimesis, play a fundamental role'.[7] This process is similar to Olivier de Sardan's 'permeation' or 'impregnation' (*imprégnation*) during a prolonged fieldwork (in spite of ourselves) with new ways of doing and being (Olivier de Sardan, 2000, 434). For this to occur, however, physical co-presence and reciprocity are essential. Yet, during the pandemic, I was physically distant and locked out. Given my knowledge of Gitano sociality, I also feared that I had no legitimacy to ask questions of my more distant contacts. All of this, of course, raises even more distinct problems for those who are new to their field or for whom perduction did not have time to develop.

Health and the Gitano community of Morote

During the second half of March and the whole of April 2020, lockdown and home confinement in Spain was one of the strictest in the world. People were not allowed to go out or to do sports, children were not allowed to leave their homes for six consecutive weeks. In Morote, like in all of Spain at the time, families had very little physical contact with each other. Contacts between Gitanos and other inhabitants of the town were even less frequent, as they live in separate neighbourhoods. The Gitanos of Morote rarely attend large gatherings of people. The only exceptions are marriages, births, serious illnesses or deaths, when several dozen people can gather in one place, that is to say, in hospitals and the homes of the sick or the deceased. The national lockdown between 15 March and 21 June 2020 disrupted all such moments of festivity and meeting. On the other hand, Gitanos are primarily farm labourers and they were allowed to travel (but only with those with who they shared the same dwelling), since their work activity was considered essential (see Narotzky, 2021, 247). As a consequence, the majority experienced only limited economic impact from the lockdown. After this first state of emergency, which lasted a total of 98 days, the Spanish government resorted to another one from the end of October 2020 until early May 2021, but this time without the compulsory confinement of people within their homes.

Since the beginning of the 20th century (and perhaps before), the Gitanos in Morote have lived in cave houses in particularly precarious living conditions without basic sanitation. Besides various accidents related to their environment (falls, collapses of shelters and so on), this population has always suffered from several poverty-related diseases. In the past these were tuberculosis, gastritis or leprosy. Later, with the improvement of Gitano living standards and healthcare, these were replaced by other, no less prevalent ills, such as cancers of the digestive system, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and so on. These are also probably linked to dietary habits – frugal and irregular meals, but also fatty and nutrient-poor foods.

Indeed, despite a notable drop in infant mortality since the end of the 19th century in Spain (Gamella and Martin, 2017), these health specificities

go some way towards explaining the differences between the age structure of the Morote population overall, on the one hand, and Gitanos, on the other (Manrique, 2008, 81–94). The data show that, in 1998, the life expectancy of the Gitanos of Morote was almost 15 years lower than that of the population in general. Twenty years later, figures compiled by the Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG) for the Gitano population of Spain as a whole reveal a similar pattern (FSG, 2019, 13).

This situation of earlier mortality has shaped Gitano perceptions of harm. When I asked Vicenta, who lives with her non-Gitano husband and their son, about mortality due to COVID-19, she responded: "Among us there's no Covid. Here we die because of cancer." For her, this pandemic did not change the Gitanos' health situation.[8] Gitano health, which is linked to their socioeconomic situation, is a pressing public health issue in Spain overall.

Learning about the unfolding crisis

Being in France, it was difficult for me, both as a researcher and as a friend, to gather information on the situation of the Gitanos of Morote during the first lockdown in the spring of 2020. Wondering what data it was possible to collect and whether one could indeed do an anthropological study of Romani communities and families without face-to-face fieldwork, I, like most people – researchers or not – turned to the internet for information. I turned first to the media, namely newspapers; I then contacted local social workers via social media;[9] and, finally, I utilized social networking sites. The practical impossibility of obtaining current first-hand news led me also to think about the actual feasibility and limits of conducting a virtual ethnographic study of an unfolding phenomenon as it occurred in a specific distant community. In the sections that follow I reflect on my experiences.

Data from newspapers

The first point to note is that there are limits to what information one can gather about certain locales through online media. The remote situation of Morote, for instance, in the eastern Andalusian mountains, drew almost no attention from the newspapers during this period. Unlike in the case of Gitano families in Haro (see Gay y Blasco and Camacho, 2020), in the north of Spain, the first cases of coronavirus did not attract journalists. Only a few scattered online posts provided a surface view of the health impact of the pandemic in this place.

What I learned from these publications – and it seemed paradoxical to me at the time – is that COVID-19 had spared the great majority of Gitano families until the end of 2021. The younger age profile of the population, lower life expectancy (fewer elderly people) and isolation in segregated housing meant that they were not a population particularly at risk.

One tabloid newspaper tried to create a sensation from these developments.[10] It based its arguments on its own article from 2017 in which it had argued that the high rate of genetic disease – deafness and achondroplasia – among the Gitanos of Morote had been caused by a 'deficiency of gene renewal' as a result of a long history of consanguineous marriages. Observing the absence of COVID-19 among the Gitanos, the journalist concluded that the social self-isolation of the Gitano families – the formation of a 'cultural island' that favours their 'isolation' – had in this case had a beneficial effect on the population. Of course, the journalist conveniently ignored that these families did not choose to be segregated in the poorer parts of the town (Manrique, 2008). The journalist also ignored the overall statistics for the town: the number of cases in Morote as a whole – among Gitanos as well as non-Gitanos – was comparatively low during the first wave.

Data from local administration

Gitanos across Spain, especially those living in the more marginalized and segregated areas, are monitored and invigilated by various administrative services, such as social and health services (Gay y Blasco, 2016). For several weeks during the first lockdown, without any news from my Gitano contacts, I tried, without success, to contact the social workers of Morote and the workers at the health centre in order to find out what health impact the pandemic had on the local Gitano families in general and on my friends in particular. I was not able to speak to them for understandable reasons: people in these positions were essential to the survival of the most vulnerable and, if they were not under lockdown in their own houses, they were overworked, trying to adapt to the new situation.

I was nevertheless able to attend a city plenary meeting online in June 2020. I learned that the economic consequences of the pandemic were serious and that many small stores were in liquidation. Supermarkets were opening only during short time slots and few people were shopping there. I feared that for the Gitanos this situation could be even more serious, since they, unlike the majority of the local population, do not generally have vegetable gardens or raise chickens: only a few raise rabbits for festive meals. They were therefore less self-sufficient than their non-Gitano neighbours, and more dependent on those services that were most likely to be more severely affected by the lockdown.

Data from social networks

Like the rest of the Spanish population, my Gitano interlocutors in Morote relied heavily on social media during the pandemic, both to get access to news and to establish and maintain links with friends and family. In the

process, like everybody else, they became part of a wide network for the circulation of both genuine and fake news.

As a consequence, at least on this level Gitanos have been less cut off from the world and a part of the global culture available on social networks. For instance, the fake news supposedly broadcasted by CNN and claiming that alcohol killed the coronavirus toured the planet via Facebook and Twitter until it reached the eastern mountains of the province of Granada (see for example, M.Co., 2020). One day, a Gitano woman told me on a phone call that, according to her uncle, "You have to drink wine against the coronavirus (*Hay que beber vino contra el coronavirus*)".

At first, I thought that the youth's skilled usage of new technologies would give me a wonderful opportunity to learn what was going on while I was in France. For this purpose, social networks seemed to me to be the best tools to gather these informal data, especially from two of my youngest contacts who regularly accessed social networks, Vicenta and her cousin Alicia.[11] I approached them online, wanting to find out how severely the Gitano families of Morote were being affected by the pandemic. Vicenta, who along with her family continued working as a farm labourer, told me in April 2021 that there had been no cases of COVID-19 among the Gitanos of Morote. She also attested that people were careful to follow the rules. By contrast, Alicia, who was not an essential worker and therefore could not leave her house, noted a few cases of the epidemic and little awareness among Gitano families of the importance of sanitary instructions. Neither interlocutor would elaborate much about the general situation, and the conversation rapidly changed to private discussions concerning our respective families (our children, the health situation of our close relatives, marriages, births, several deaths unrelated to the virus and so forth) and work.

The situations my two friends found themselves in during lockdown were quite different. While Vicenta (37) lives in a stable and close-knit family and has a regular income as an agricultural worker, Alicia (38) lives essentially on social benefits. Indeed, as her companion and eldest son were imprisoned after they had broken into a restaurant to find food some months previously, agricultural employers did not call her to go to work and her only possible occasional source of income was the making and sale of wicker baskets that today only a few old people know how to do. During the spring 2020 Alicia was in a particularly vulnerable position: she had nothing to eat and social services were closed. Her family could not help her financially.

The fact is that information provided by the two women did not overlap completely and that their accounts sometimes contradicted each other: while one depicted a substantial impact of the pandemic among local Gitanos in terms of health and little adherence to rules, the other emphasized how

"we stay at home and have little contact each other" and "here, there's no Covid". I cross-checked these observations and testimonies with others I collected from other Gitanas, from a non-Gitana woman who lives in one of the Gitano neighbourhoods, as well as from Gitanas from the city of Granada, and came to the conclusion that the information from my Gitano interlocutors differed depending on the impact of lockdown on their lives. Lockdown affected families' capacities to go to work, their falling deeper into poverty and growing isolation or, on the contrary, their continued resourcefulness and openness to the world.

My interlocutors' perceptions of the consequences of the lockdown were in fact tied to work opportunities provided by farm owners. People's position in work networks is controlled by Gitano foremen who mediate such work opportunities. Thus, it seems to me, and this is to be confirmed by actual research in the field, the more the families were integrated into agricultural networks and the more contact they had with others outside Morote, the less likely they were to express negative perceptions of the pandemic's impact on them and their relatives during the first lockdown. For me, that was the most surprising fact in that research: that the perception of the pandemic, as conveyed verbally across distance, depended on the degree of social fragility and vulnerability experienced by each family and individual.

Conclusions

In short, due to travel constraints during the 2020 lockdown, I had to change the way I worked. Rather than using first-hand observations and conversations held face-to-face, I attempted to transmute existing private contacts into professional contacts, relying on their time and willingness to help me. In some ways, this is no different from doing ethnographic in-person fieldwork where boundaries between private and professional domains and interests become often blurred, and where we as anthropologists rely on help from our informants to make sense of what we encounter. In this particular case, my informants, as they agreed to ask for news within their networks for me, became data collectors and, in turn, I became, despite myself, a sort of 'armchair anthropologist' with all the negative connotations that can be attached to this uncomfortable position.

Second, while my friends agreed to provide me with some factual information about others' lives (marriages, deaths, births for example), they were less willing or able to relay information about how others were interpreting or experiencing the pandemic (they were reluctant to provide me with information regarding others' emotions, feelings and so on). As a result of my distance from the field I could not get a precise picture of the extent and impact of the contagion in this population at the moment of

its unfolding. I realized that I would have to wait for my eventual return to Morote and speak with more informants in order to arrive at a more comprehensive interpretation of that now historical moment than the very partial one I had managed to construct in 'real time', during its unfolding. Indeed, as a researcher cut off from my field, wanting to collect data but having to work with partial secondary materials gathered by others, I felt that I had become in some ways more like an archivist, or a 'miner of memories',[12] and second-hand memories at that, as limited results obtained by others became the only data to be studied.

Attempting to discern what was happening in Morote from a distance made it clear to me that, without face-to-face fieldwork and using the tools I had at my disposal, especially as regards people who do not belong to my closest network, only a small portion of the facts could be 'seen' or accessed, and these were often facts devoid of their emotional and local substance – of their actual meaning for the people themselves. Indeed, what I could learn from outside was not very different from what I saw was happening elsewhere in the world, so as an ethnographer I could no longer attempt to reconstruct a local story (based on local events) in its specificity: all I could discern was the vertiginous fall of Morote, like all other different communities, in the intertwining of global history. And what better example of this than the dissemination of fake news, like the one about treatment with wine against COVID-19, among the Gitanos of Morote to demonstrate their inclusion in global and not just local historical processes?

In sum, in such a configuration, the research by the outsider anthropologist becomes similar to that of the historian who investigates the events of the past from traces and fragments left in the memory of individuals, and in images, texts and publications produced for media dissemination or not. But if the anthropologist attempts to conduct research from a distance on what is happening in the moment, to overcome the lack of qualitative data, they have to work instead with statistical tools (statistical data freely available on the internet) and through discourse analysis of diverse sources such as archives, newspaper articles, online meetings, telephone calls to local social services and so on. The multiplication of sources becomes essential and a prerequisite. Permeation and perduction gained during the previous fieldwork *in situ* become useful in order to triangulate and make sense of the 'screen' data.

As a general point, perceptions of facts held by different people may or may not overlap, and so I believe that anthropologists not living in a community should if possible communicate with local researchers from within the community in order to enhance the reliability of any conclusions arrived at from a distance and through the help of local contacts and acquaintances, and in due time try to return to the field.

Lessons and recommendations

- Disaggregate the consequences of global events according to locally important factors (such as segregation, poverty, health). The social and economic impacts of external events locally are tied to an already existing situation.
- Adjust your tools to your positionality – physical and emotional distance – and realize that working conditions limit what research questions one can reasonably ask. For instance, some data is accessible only through face-to-face exchanges and co-presence and cannot be obtained virtually.
- Multiply sources of information (newspapers, informants and social networks, scientific articles), triangulate them and look for patterns and relationships.
- Consciously work on creating archives to come back to in the future when the return to the field will be possible.

Notes

1 Many thanks to Paloma and Martin for their wise remarks and their precious help in the construction and clarifications of this chapter.
2 'Du terrain comme lieu où se révèle à l'ethnologue la vérité d'un système culturel, modèle dont l'initiation de Griaule par Ogotemmêli pourrait être l'archétype, s'est opéré un glissement vers un modèle où, à l'inverse, c'est l'anthropologue qui est le détenteur de la vérité du terrain.'
3 I chose to change the name of the village in order to preserve the anonymity of the Gitano families who live there.
4 A travel grant provided by the Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale (Paris) to which I belonged then.
5 A one-year post-doctoral fellowship named Assegno di Ricerca 2162/13, awarded by the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona for research in the archives of several small towns located approximately 80 to 210 km from Morote in the province of Almeria.
6 Olivier de Sardan (1995) observes that: 'The researcher's insertion in a society is never made with the society as a whole, but through particular groups. He [sic!] inserts himself in certain networks and not in others.'
7 'co-expérience prolongée dans laquelle les processus d'attention flottante et d'empathie, d'abduction et de mimesis jouent un rôle fondamental'
8 Even though, since 1989, the General State Administration through the Ministry of Education, Social Policy and Sports, aware of the complicated economic and social situation of a relevant part of the Gitano population, has been running a programme called *Plan de desarrollo gitano* (www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-1989-12306) in collaboration with the regional administrations and local ones (Communities Autonomous and Local Corporations), this has obviously been insufficient.
9 In Morote, they were very committed to the Gitano population even if their perception of well-being was often very far from mine.
10 In order to preserve the anonymity of the little town, I am unable to quote the references of the article.

[11] I contacted mainly Alicia, Vicenta but also Olga and Maria Jose, close relatives or friends of my key informants in the field (Maria, Elena, Guadalupe, Pilar and Lole – not very skilled with technologies in general and affected by deafness), who I knew would answer to easily to my questions via social networks. Older people do not use these means of communication. In fact, like in everyday life in the Gitano community of Morote, to have news while outside the town, the referent person serves as an anchor point, that is to say, the person with whom you are in contact in the family is the person through whom you can obtain news and have access to their home. That is an additional reason for the need of face-to-face fieldwork.

[12] '"Memory is very fragile and is conditioned by how many times we have recounted things. Narrating them at the moment of their happening has an anthropological and historical value. In 50 or 60 years they will be of incalculable value because the story that will have been told through the repetition of memories will be very different to how it was lived", points out Itziar Luri, manager of Labrit Patrimonio, which employs a team of anthropologists and communicators as "miners of memory".' The project aimed at gathering 'first-rate oral sources' about the lockdown period that could be analysed and used comparatively in the future (Garcia Flores, 2021).

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Luxa's Prism: A Collaborative Ethnography of Im/mobilities in Pandemic Times

Stefano Piemontese and Luxa Leoco

Themes discussed in this chapter

- the practical and conceptual implications of experimenting with collaborative methodologies with people of different socioeconomic and experiential backgrounds;
- the positive role of uncertainty and failure in building trust relationships and diluting power differentials within participatory groups;
- the potential of digital technologies in reconfiguring the modes of collaboration and reducing asymmetries within participatory groups.

Luxa's prism – A Collaborative Ethnography of Im/mobilities in Pandemic Times
Stefano Piemontese and Luxa Leoco
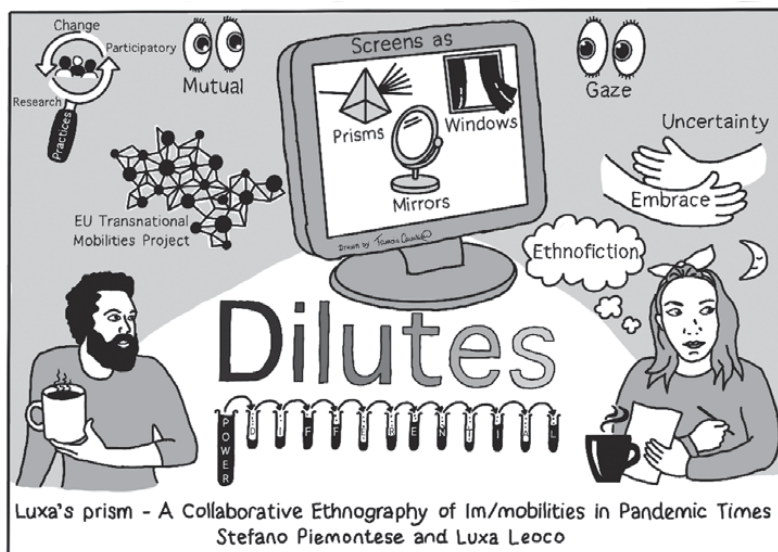
Introduction

This chapter is the fruit of a collaborative exercise between us, Stefano and Luxa. Its purpose is to reflect on our attempts to conduct a collaborative ethnography of the social and geographical mobilities of disadvantaged European youths in pandemic times. In what follows, we present a theoretically informed, empirical account of our joint endeavour over the course of six months and 30 online video conversations to carve out a space for sharing our knowledge and building a common understanding of this topic.

The idea of co-authoring a research paper had been in the air since the beginning of our collaboration. However, the initial proposal to write this chapter came from Stefano after being invited to contribute to this volume. He first provided Luxa with a common writing structure and, at her request, with some guidelines on finalizing each section. Then, the writing process took place individually, with Stefano composing in English on a word-processing software and Luxa handwriting in Spanish and then copying her writings into a shared note-taking app. After a couple of weeks, Stefano combined the narratives into a single document translated into both languages, one for Luxa and one for the editors of this volume. This first draft then underwent a process of mutual commenting and further synthesis, with Luxa asking for more clarity and Stefano for more details. Ultimately, Stefano's editorial work on Luxa's final text was limited to providing comments, selecting and integrating extracts from field notes she took previously, and making minor syntax changes required for a nearly literal translation from Spanish to English.

The text stemming from this process is not a mere account but an essential component of the collaborative process it describes. Indeed, this chapter

represents both the summation and culmination of our collaboration in that, by working together on it, we relied on the work practices learned during our earliest months of collaboration. In the first section, we set the background of our encounter and describe why we chose to work together. The second section accounts for the multiple forms of collaboration we tested along this journey and what they meant for us. Finally, Stefano explores the practical and theoretical implications of our experience. To faithfully represent our understanding of collaboration as a 'chain of conversations' (Rappaport, 2016, 20), and in the wake of the seminal work by Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria Hernández (2020), we have assembled the text in the form of a dialogue.

Doing ethnography in pandemic times

Stefano

In autumn 2019, I started working on an EU-funded research project called 'Resilience and Resignation among Transnational Roma and non-Roma Youths'. This project aimed to understand the drivers of educational and post-educational marginality and inclusion in contemporary Europe, looking particularly at the movements into adulthood of disadvantaged young people affected by mobility. The project built upon my doctoral thesis on the experiences and expectations of Romanian Roma youths growing up in Madrid (Piemontese, 2017) but aimed to expand the field of observation beyond Roma biographies to include non-Roma peers sharing similar patterns of social and geographical im/mobility. My approach sought to examine Roma inequality in relation to broader socioeconomic dynamics and challenge their common portrayal in public debates as a group that is socially excluded and culturally separated from the majority society. A further methodological ambition was to privilege the experiences and competencies of disadvantaged Roma youths and use them as a prism to examine and signify the broader phenomenon of youth mobilities in Europe. For this reason, I arranged to recruit two young Roma as co-inquirers and proposed that they contribute to research planning, data collection, analysis and communication throughout the project.

Compared to other more conventional approaches, I assumed that involving research participants as co-inquirers would have been desirable in several respects. In the first place, I believed that welcoming and validating young people's insights and analytical acumen would have led to a more reliable understanding of their social and geographical navigations. I also assumed that actively involving disadvantaged Roma participants in my project would help to challenge the public portrayal of Roma as vulnerable, passive or threatening subjects. Eventually, I expected that unpacking and overturning power relations within the participatory group and across the research process would have contributed to ongoing efforts to decolonizing the field

of Romani studies. In particular, my project aimed to achieve this goal by enabling members of an ethnic minority historically treated as an object of study to unsettle epistemic relations, not only by producing knowledge about themselves but also by devising a critical understanding of a phenomenon broader than their ethnic ascription, such as youth mobility in Europe.

This methodological direction was not accidental but inserted into a broader movement to decolonize knowledge production within Romani studies. For centuries, non-Roma like me have produced most academic research about the Roma, positioning themselves as the authorities or 'experts' on them (Silverman, 2019, 79). Such power imbalances have resulted in scholarships tending to essentialize, objectify and romanticize the Roma. Recently, Romani and non-Romani scholars and activists have begun to recognize the colonial biases in this academic field and interrogate issues of power, positionality and participation in knowledge production, primarily focusing on the relationship between researchers and their interlocutors (Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021, 228). Far from sabotaging the legitimacy of non-Romani scholars (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2015), this approach invites them to understand their role in maintaining the structure of privilege and, at the same time, welcomes their support to dismantle such structures (Vajda, 2015). Consequently, anthropologists have become more attentive to including Romani perspectives and non-Romani reflexivity in research practices, with participatory and emancipatory approaches materializing as a keystone to this process.

Participatory research seeks to address existing power imbalances in knowledge production by creating space for the voices and experiences of those who are rarely heard, actively involving them in all stages of the research process: it is about bringing people together in a creative act of knowledge production based on horizontal, reciprocal and dialogical relationships between researcher and researched. During the last decade, scholars have increasingly adopted collaborative approaches in research with Roma, spanning reciprocal ethnography (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020), visual methodologies (Marcu, 2019; Piemontese, 2021), community-based action research (Greenfields and Ryder, 2012; Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021) and the involvement of Roma in scholarly research on Roma (Munté et al, 2011; Matras and Leggio, 2017). What all these scholarships accommodate is the idea that methods, interpretations and knowledge are 'situated' (Haraway, 1988) in our particular lived experiences and, therefore, are influenced by asymmetrical relationships of power based on our ascribed social memberships and identities. However, rather than limiting the attainment of objective knowledge, this epistemological approximation appeals to profound and genuine reflexivity on one's positionality as a way to 'situate' the perspective from which knowledge is constructed and, therefore, to produce research that is more sensitive, ethical and academically sound (Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021).

When, in the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread into Europe, I had to reimagine the overall fieldwork activities and adapt the recruitment of co-researchers to a changing global scenario. At that time, I had already started the paperwork for employing Lauren, a former research participant from Romania who was supposed to join me in Birmingham to commence collaborative ethnography through his transnational ties and connections. In the beginning, the pandemic did nothing but limit our conversations to the phone. For some weeks, I listened to and took note of Lauren's oral accounts regarding his young friends' and acquaintances' dreams, educational choices and working conditions. I assumed he had already scrutinized and analysed the world I wanted to investigate. Therefore, I only needed to help him remember and reveal his 'situated knowledge'. But unfortunately, our experiment ended very soon. Lauren was very busy working as a seasonal agricultural worker, with few breaks, tired, often with little or no connection and dependent on the internet data of wealthier friends. As a result, he did not have time to engage in these conversations regularly. So, after the increase in COVID-19 cases in autumn 2020, I began envisioning alternative solutions to ensure my fieldwork could unfold despite the circumstances. It was at that juncture that I thought of Luxa.[1]

I met Luxa, a young Romanian Roma woman, in 2015 during my doctoral research, and we have remained in contact since then. Our relationship was mainly based on a patchwork of casual meetings, shared acquaintances, small talk and mutual sympathy. As I had recorded in my field notes from that period, I considered her stubborn resilience to the hardships of life as a privileged entry-point for developing a critical understanding of disadvantaged young people's biographical navigations. Moreover, knowing her openness to learning and the entrepreneurial way she approaches new challenges, I was persuaded that offering her to collaborate with me would provide her with experience, material resources and intellectual stimulation that she could mobilize in her toil for a better life. Thus, towards the end of October 2020, I invited Luxa to join my research project, offering her a flexible 100-hours casual work contract as a fieldwork assistant, paid from my research budget. Proposing her a salary, albeit for a limited time, was a first way of legitimizing her expertise by experience as a source of knowledge and letting her know that I would trust her whatever the outcome. Although managing the project money put me in a position of command, my greater reliance on her assistance partially counterbalanced our economic and power disparities: indeed, while Luxa could do without my money, I could not do without her. Furthermore, I thought she should also enjoy the economic and symbolic dividends of our partnership: as much as I relish doing research, I refuse to do it for free, so why should I offer Luxa different treatment? She finally accepted, and for the next six months, during the second peak of lockdown restrictions, we met weekly on Zoom, the popular online

video conferencing platform, and experimented with alternative ways of conducting an ethnography of mobility from the motionless isolation of our rooms in Birmingham and Madrid.

Luxa

I met Stefano in Romania when we went on vacation with my two children and my husband in the summer of 2015. Well, I do not know if it was a vacation. In reality, we were going through a bad situation in Spain, so we decided to return to Romania. But we only stayed there for about five months. It turns out our neighbour, Lauren, was a friend of Stefano, who had already been there during the winter. Since he was doing fieldwork, he came during the summer as well. I do not remember how long he stayed there, probably two weeks. I barely exchanged a few words with him. Then, he told me that he was studying at the university in Budapest and interviewed young Roma, but he lived in Spain. A few months later, I returned to Spain with my parents, four sisters, two children and my husband. Before we all came back, my father and my husband went to Madrid to prepare a house and get some money for our trip. My mother was pregnant, so she had to get there soon because her pregnancy was getting complicated. My younger sister Ramona was also in Spain working as a cleaning lady to help my parents with the money for the trip. My father had scraped together some cash and 'bought'[2] a two-bedroom flat. Then he came to Romania for us, together with my husband.

When we arrived in Madrid, we went to the house in the Entrevías district, which was a house that we had squatted in more than three years earlier. The place was nearly collapsed, and there was no electricity or water. In the past, we had lived there only when there was nowhere else to stay. We had constantly been moving into slightly better houses in previous years, but we were used to going back there when they kicked us out from other places. Anyway, the next day we went to the new flat that my father had paid for to see if we could live there or not. There was no light there either. The flat was not comfortable at all. It was spooky, like it had ghosts or something, I do not know. Maybe it was just my imagination. And there was no space. It only had two rooms, and I needed one for my husband and two children. We were a total of nine people, ten with a newborn. So, my husband and I decided to return to Entrevías and leave my parents and sisters in the flat. They stayed two more days there and then went to Gabi's house for a week. Later they also returned to the home in Entrevías.

After my mother gave birth, Stefano came with his girlfriend Cristina to eat at our house one day, since he knew my sister Ramona. That day Stefano interviewed her, and the following week he came to interview my father and my husband. We told him we didn't want to stay in that house anymore because it was dangerous and damp. He informed us about a local

housing rights assembly. He suggested we get help from them to get into a bank-owned flat in the block where Gabi lived. I thought it was dangerous. We were afraid that social services would take the children from us. Then, Stefano read about the Spanish Association Against Depopulation. He got the contact number and passed it on to my father, suggesting that he contact them. Thanks to this, my father got a house and a job in a small village near Burgos. After that, I saw Stefano as one of our few friends, since he helped my family and sometimes visited us.

When, in October 2020, he contacted me, my life was neither bad nor good, considering that I had experienced many difficulties since I arrived in Spain in 2007, at 14. What happened is that, at that time, I was unemployed. At the beginning of 2020, I started working in a restaurant. But when the first COVID-19 cases were detected, the restaurant owners had to close their business, like many others in Spain and worldwide. As a result, they put me on furlough. I was a little sad because it was the first job I had ever gotten, since I always found it difficult to find a job. We felt terrible because of all the COVID-19 cases and the people who lost their loved ones. Yet, like many, I could not change anything. Although the pandemic had caused many to lose their jobs or businesses, it was good for us. A few days after they declared a global pandemic, our social worker called me to tell me we could rent the flat we were irregularly occupying. The apartment was owned by a bank. We wanted it so much since we had been squatters for a long time and had also been to the courthouse. I was crazy with happiness. We all were. We signed the contract, and they made us pay the amount of €240 per month. Getting an affordable rent (*alquiler social*) was terrific, since renting an apartment generally costs €700–800 per month. Now we had a flat, but we had lost our jobs.

At the end of the summer of 2020 we had used up all the unemployment and furlough money and were no longer entitled to it. My husband found a job in a car wash, but his salary was much smaller than what he used to get in his other jobs. I was also looking for work, but there was none because many bars had closed again by the end of the year because there were too many cases of COVID-19. Then, one of those days, I received a message from Stefano telling me he would call me to talk about something important. He then contacted me, asking if I wanted to participate in a project on young immigrants and saying that he would offer me a contract. I had never imagined something like that. He suggested that I interview young resources–poor immigrants who lived in Madrid to see their mobility and how they could get ahead and reach their dreams. I was very excited to do it, but I was very afraid of not knowing how to do it well and that he would be upset for trusting me and then me not meeting expectations. All I knew was more or less how he worked, and I imagined him to be very demanding. So, I accepted, but I was not too sure, but I was also excited. My husband also encouraged me

to do it, since only he worked, and he thought it was good that I earned some money as well. I do not know if I would have accepted if Stefano had not paid me. I am not sure about doing it for free, but the truth is that I was excited. At first, it made me feel like someone important. Because, of so many people he knew, he had chosen me for the project. And that made me happy. For me, it was like an achievement. And also, I could show off a little to my friends. We did not know where it would lead.

New forms of collaboration

Taking field notes

Stefano

At the end of the summer, the possibility of meeting people on work-related grounds despite the progressive tightening of restrictions on physical distancing persuaded us that Luxa could start conducting exploratory fieldwork visits in one of the slums where she had previously lived. Indeed, if I were in Madrid with her, we would have recruited participants in those same suburbs where, during previous decades, a concatenation of centrifugal forces had relentlessly accumulated dreams of social mobility, interrupted aspirations and experiences of resilience and resignation. So, I proposed that Luxa followed the ties and connections she had forged over the last decade with the individuals inhabiting these locations and lay the foundations for our ethnography of im/mobility, starting from her personal observations, impressions and conversations with them. Consequently, I invited her to verify people's availability to participate in interviews and write down some field notes about her visits too. I expected we could use her logs to elicit reflections and identify some common lines of research during our following Zoom conversations. Moreover, introducing her to note-taking and inviting her to navigate these places and networks without a precise direction was a way to let her familiarize herself with ethnographic methodologies and train ourselves to conduct fieldwork together after the end of lockdown restrictions.

Luxa

At the end of October 2020, I started visiting some friends dwelling in a shantytown in Fuencarral, a district in Madrid. Some of them are from my village in Romania. Stefano suggested that I take field notes. I did not even know what it was about, but he explained it to me. The process was complex. I had doubts because, before feeling comfortable telling them why I was there, I did not know how to have a conversation without letting them notice that I was taking notes, so I did not. When I came home and wrote about what we had talked about, I surprised myself with how much I could remember.

It was like an achievement. And since then, I have learned to observe people more. For instance, during my first visit, I remember I met a girl from a town close to mine. We introduced ourselves and started talking a bit. I asked if she was going to school, and she told me that she had accomplished the 3rd year of ESO (compulsory secondary education), but now she was not studying anymore. She was 18 years old. I asked her why she did not study anymore, and she replied that it was because of COVID-19, but I noticed she was not motivated to continue learning anyway. She was looking for a job. However, she did not have the proper documents to be employed. Her parents had always collected scrap metal, so they never had the necessary resources. So I advised her to continue studying, since she would need it, and I know what I am talking about because I do not have much education, and now it is complicated for me when it comes to looking for a job. She told me that at that moment she was not interested. Then I asked her if they were going to continue living there. She said they barely got enough food with what her parents earned, and the rent for a flat was very high. After this visit, I continued going to the shantytown from time to time. Some people knew I had also lived there, but the main problem was that people feared me because some of them did bad things and were afraid that I had direct contact with the police. The reason was that once I told them I was collaborating with the University of Birmingham and desired to interview them. Some of them said things like, "I should tell you my life, so you take me to the police?" They would not let me interview them even for €100.

Writing fictional stories
Stefano

My research project had carefully thought-out research questions and a detailed methodology. Yet, like any ethnography, its orientation relied heavily on the cues I would find in the field. Anti-contagion measures, however, robbed me of the empirical world to which I could apply my ambitious plans. I felt the pandemic had stripped me of my sensing body, the tool without which I could not do ethnography. Against this backdrop, I expected that Luxa, with her wealth of personal experience and physical presence in the field, could help me reveal a suitable research direction and provide an entry point into the experiences of other underprivileged young migrants like her. And so it happened. Progressively, Luxa's written notes and oral reporting regarding her daily encounters and observations came to represent a driving force for our conversations and, in the long run, became the compass I was looking for. So, during our meetings, four recurring themes emerged that she considered crucial for understanding the world of the people around her: the nexus between poverty and criminality, the phenomenon of male prostitution, the experience of labour exploitation and

the issue of illegal housing occupations. Accordingly, we decided to devote at least one session to each theme, during which we shared our experience, knowledge, questions and objections related to each topic.

With these thematic conversations, I expected we could familiarize ourselves with topics that we would subsequently discuss during our interviews with research participants. However, the more days passed, the more we became aware of the difficulty of conducting face-to-face interviews in the near future. In fact, outside of her small group of close-knit friends, Luxa felt unable to build trusting relationships with potential participants, whether they were perfect strangers or residents of the slum she had previously inhabited. Moreover, physical distancing measures and the upcoming closure of commercial activities did nothing but increase her anxiety about being unable to contact potential research participants, and my concerns about the viability of our strategy. So, because Luxa had disclosed to me on several occasions that she would like to write about her life, I invited her to explore writing as a way to organize her 'situated knowledge'. For each topic, Luxa wrote a fictional story based on real-life events. For her, 'ethnofiction' (VanSlyke-Briggs, 2015) became a way to reflect upon her experience as a migrant, claim a space for herself and describe her world without exposing the people who inhabited it. Furthermore, through the practice of writing, Luxa encountered an answer to a problem that haunted me, but that I was unable to solve exclusively by moderating my behaviour: the fact that, despite having the appearance of exchange, our interactions tended to become monologues or, at best, conversations dominated by one – my – leading voice (see Briones, 2016, 33). Instead, Luxa's fictional stories, written in the solitude of the night, became a space in which I could not interfere but, if anything, only observe, comment and admire in deferred time: a space for personal discovery and self-determination. The four accounts she wrote left me speechless, as they revealed narrative skills, analytical depth and a wealth of experience that I believe would have never emerged otherwise. I would like to highlight how, reading Luxa's narratives, as well as her passages in this chapter, always moves me. Yet this reaction generally embarrasses me because, in my view, it epitomizes the measure of my 'situated bias'. However, discovering that Luxa's virtuosity unsettled my scale of expectations in the same way that the uncertainty and non-directivity of my approach upset hers shows how recognizing and challenging mutual prejudices is the starting point of any collaboration.

Luxa

When I first took notes about my friends living in the shantytown, this is when Stefano had the idea that I could try to write down something I already

knew. I had started taking some field notes, but I was not convinced about what I was doing. The problem was not that I did not like it, but I felt I was not good at it. Then Stefano suggested that I wrote about something I knew. So I started writing a dialogue between a male prostitute and a former woman prostitute who had fallen in love with each other. I liked it. Stefano also liked it, and he told me that I had talent. I had told him that I had yearned to write something long ago, but I never dared. I also told him about my insecurities, that I have never felt capable of doing what I set out to do. He told me that he also feels insecure sometimes. So, I wrote these stories in a notebook and later transferred them to our shared online notebook. I usually did some housework, such as cleaning, and then I wrote. When I felt inspired, I did not stop. But since I did not always have time during the day, I would start writing at night, when I also felt more inspired. I am not a writer; I often get stuck and am very insecure, but one could see a passion for writing in these stories. I liked to write and arrange facts a bit in my way. Although the stories had true things in them, I could put them in the way I wanted. Somehow, I was the one who controlled the story, and that gave me confidence. When details were missing, Stefano would ask me questions and provide comments, and then I modified the text a little bit later, and the result would be more or less acceptable. The first story arose from a conversation with Stefano when I told him about someone I knew involved in prostitution. So, he told me to try to write something on the subject. In addition to the story about prostitution, I have written three more. One is called 'Learning to Steal' and talks about the robbery of a car from four points of view: the thief, his brother, his wife and the policeman. I did not change many things in this story: that's how it happened. I wrote about this to understand why some young people see stealing as an easy way to make money. The story about labour exploitation is inspired by a person very close to me. Instead, the last one, 'A Real–life Story about a Migrant Squatter', is still unfinished but very long already. It tells my story since when I arrived in Spain and expected something different and felt disappointed.

Conducting interviews
Stefano
Dialoguing on Zoom allowed us to explore and compare our experiences, knowledges and questions regarding specific topics. It also became a space where Luxa could feel encouraged and get feedback on her writing exercise, and I could try new methodological approaches. At the same time, our weekly meetings became an occasion to get her acquainted with the ethnographic method and questions of social inquiry and train her to conduct interviews autonomously. So, on the one hand, building on the notes that I was taking during each conversation, I drafted a basic methodological

and theoretical guide for Luxa. This document crystallized our shared understanding of the methods we would use and the essential sociological concepts she had to handle before conducting the interviews. On the other hand, during our sessions, we discussed the criteria for selecting the sample and designed a structure for interviews. This process monopolized a significant amount of time and was challenging in several respects. My urgency was to provide us with tools that could facilitate our transition to a post-pandemic collaboration and allow us to gather data beyond our own experiences. The interview structure also responded to our different concerns, namely, Luxa's apprehensions about the lack of a clear direction and my doubts about the value of our methodological experimentations. In contrast, working towards a standard data collection method like the interviews, in addition to reassuring Luxa, gave me confidence that, at worst, we would have had life stories to analyse and compare.

Focusing on the interview structure, however, turned problematic as it positioned our collaboration in the domain of scientific expertise, thus prioritizing my authority at the expense of Luxa's experience. Another element that contributed to amplifying pre-existent asymmetries in this phase was the imbalance of my investment in this tool and my reluctance to completely lose control over a device that could have become the methodological backbone of the whole project. Although I believe my worry was overt and legitimate, its results positioned our collaboration on sloping ground, reinforcing asymmetries of power and expectations. This process was affecting Luxa's self-esteem and driving her interest away. Also, her detachment fuelled my insecurities about my capacity to be a good researcher. If she didn't see 'the light at the end of the tunnel', as she often repeated, I wondered if what I saw was a mirage instead. So, after dragging Luxa into creating a multilevel structure for life-stories interviews that, weeks later, we realized was impossible to use, we started all over again. Similar to our work on this chapter, I provided her with a simple structure for collecting the primary observational dimensions we deliberated together and then asked her to fill them in with her interview questions. I later contributed to her proposal with comments and integrations. Finally, we interviewed each other to test this last structure and enable Luxa to train herself on how to conduct interviews. Between March and April 2021, Luxa interviewed three women: a close friend, an acquaintance of her husband and a stranger who had responded to an ad on Facebook.

Luxa

It took us a long time to design the interview structure because we had to do it in such a way that the questions we asked fitted our goals. Only in this way could we get good information and bring up topics that interested us. At first, I was a bit scared because I did not know what questions to ask.

Then my husband suggested three or four questions to me, so I thought: 'If he can do it, I can too.' Stefano told me that he thought I was able and that we would develop the questions together. This gave me confidence. I remember feeling terrible one day because I wanted to develop some research questions, but they did not come out. When I started to think about the questions, nothing at all came to my mind. I felt very frustrated and stuck. In the end, we edited the structure three or four times until we finally managed to find the right one together. The questions had to be clear so the interviewees knew what we were asking and did not get lost. When we first made the structures, we thought we had it, but then we realized something was missing or did not work even when we tested it ourselves. In general, it has been the most challenging part of the whole process due to my lack of experience. It seemed helpful to me but very long, and since something also came up in my family, it was even more difficult for me and sometimes I did not want to continue. But in the end, it went well, and I was delighted to see that it paid off. We tested the last version to see if it worked. I had to interview Stefano, and he had to interview me. I had no problem with him interviewing me again. The interviews went more or less well. He was teaching me how I had to ask questions. I felt I was not good at even interviewing Stefano. So, sometimes, when I was at home, my husband would let me ask him a few questions so I could see if they worked. This gave me more confidence when I had to interview people I could interview. Once we finished, I was happy and looked forward to doing the interviews, although the truth is that I also saw a lot of danger in interviewing strangers. But I was lucky because I already knew two people. So, Stefano suggested I try first with my sister to feel more secure and see if it worked. Initially, she said she was available, but I was not sure I could interview her at her house. So I thought about bringing her to my house, but she did not have much time either. Eventually, I did not manage to interview her but convinced a good friend living in the shantytown to do the interview with me. In general, it felt very good to know that I am also capable of doing things. Let's see if I change my mind and stop thinking I cannot do many things. Stefano is not always too sure either, but here we go. I thought it was very cool that he would also use the structure we made together to do his interviews in Birmingham.

Dealing with our emotions

Stefano

For about six months, Luxa and I enabled ourselves to delve into each other's lives, emotions and interpretations as a way to generate an understanding of a phenomenon – youth migration – that we had experienced from entirely different perspectives and social positions. This tentative process of producing

knowledge through mutual learning and reflexivity occurred by alternating well-structured thematic sessions with informal talks on the most disparate subjects. For us, rolling a cigarette or pouring coffee into our cups as if we were sitting in the same kitchen became a way to build a space of intimacy in which to converse about our desire to change the course of our lives, analyse the roots of our low self-esteem, recall our experiences of disempowering people and places and be astonished at how similar we were, despite the tremendous differences that separated us. Driven by the need to place our deviations under the umbrella of ethnographic practice, from time to time I used to remind ourselves how reflecting on our own fragilities was also a way to recognize and signify the emotions we would encounter during interviews and conversations with other participants. Moreover, training our 'mutual gaze' (Gay y Blasco, 2017) enabled us to set some comparison criteria between our different experiences and understandings of social and geographical mobility. For example, interviewing each other and drawing visual maps of our mobility experiences not only served to test some methodological tools but also allowed us to reflect upon the different faces, causes and impacts of urban and international hypermobility on our lives and the lives of our families and peers sharing similar experiences. In fact, although our maps were so similar that we could interchange them, the underlying causes of our trajectories were tremendously unequal. However, the most important result of these deviations was to build a personal relationship without which some thoughts would not have been guessed, some ideas would not have arisen, some confessions would have remained secret and we would not have written this chapter.

Luxa

What I liked most about this project was having conversations about topics I knew and writing fictional stories that had a significant part of the truth. I also enjoyed talking about my mobility experience. I do not know how much I have contributed to the project but what I do know is that I shared the little knowledge I had. I had a different perspective on life than Stefano, since I went through many adversities. And bad things give you experience. Besides, I knew many people from my town who had similar experiences, and I shared their stories with Stefano. I realized that if I did not manage to write and think, it had to do with my state of mind, not my ability to do it. And because good things were not happening in my life at that time, writing has been painful. I felt my life was awful because I could not find a job. So, focusing on this project helped me forget about my problems which sometimes made me sad, ashamed and frustrated. Sometimes, although it had nothing to do with what we did, I enjoyed talking with Stefano about how I felt or what had happened to me in my life, even if sometimes I felt

somehow uncomfortable. These conversations caused me to remember how we had lived before and our difficulties in accessing housing that would be in a good state. Although my children were little, they knew that we had nowhere to live, and they were afraid the police would come to take us out of the house. This made me feel very powerless as a mother. This is a chapter of my life that I sometimes would like to forget, but it is also part of me, and perhaps it has also made me grow as a person.

Conclusion

The pandemic has complicated everyone's plans. In particular, social scientists had to rethink their methodological approaches and develop more imaginative ways of doing research. Yet, anti-contagion measures not only impacted on carefully planned fieldwork activities but also demanded a further reconfiguration of the 'modes of collaboration' (Marcus, 2018). Building on my experience working with Luxa, in this last section, I, Stefano, will discuss how changes in the modes of collaboration caused by the pandemic contributed to (1) reducing hierarchies between us, (2) repositioning orality and memory at the centre of my anthropological inquiry and (3) unsettling existent regimes of participation.

Screens as windows

Some authors have highlighted how the normalization of digital technologies has played a prominent role in the 'refunctioning of ethnography' by allowing reflexive subjects outside academia to elaborate sophisticated analyses on emergent social issues, thus actively contributing to contemporary social thinking (Sánchez Criado and Estalella, 2018). This trend, which in pre-pandemic times was reflected in the democratization of editorial and cultural work through the proliferation of blogs, magazines and podcasts, during the COVID-19 pandemic has turned into the backbone of every collaborative effort, spilling over into the working practices, and tools of many professionals, including ethnographers.

In this context, online video calls have not only moved fieldwork encounters from physical to virtual spaces but also shaken existing hierarchies between places and the people who inhabit them, at least in terms of accessibility and visibility. For instance, in previous years, the places where Luxa and I used to meet contributed to further amplifying our asymmetrical relationship. Because my economic privilege allowed me to reach her places physically, I had been the one entering her apartment in Madrid, visiting her village in Romania and staying overnight at her father's place close to Burgos. In contrast, she never had access to the sites of my daily life. But when we started meeting online, our webcams became responsible

for balancing the portion of intimacy that we could reveal to each other, smoothing the line between seen and unseen and allowing us the same glimpse into each other's life. In this sense, video calls worked as 'critical points of intersections between lifeworlds, social fields, and moral and value systems' – a proper digital interface that 'simultaneously links together those things that it separates' (Waltorp, 2018, 117). As a result, I was no longer the dominant observer.

On the contrary, my webcam had placed Luxa's gaze on the same level as mine: she, too, could chat with my wife, take a tour of my home, comment on my furniture and the quality of my house and build a reasonable image of my private life. So, over time, our screens turned into facing windows of the same apartment building from which we could chat and observe each other's spaces, habits and relationships. Although our different positionalities, especially in terms of class, gender and ethnic identity, still blurred the 'mutual gazes' (Gay y Blasco, 2017) that bridged our private lives, the unusual symmetry that permeated our reciprocal observations became the keystone for building a space of intimacy in which to share our different emotions, memories and understandings.

Screens as mirrors

When anti-contagion measures obliterated physical spaces of socialization, making it difficult for Luxa and me to conduct fieldwork and interviews in person, I initially felt suffocated by the limitation of the ethnographic field to the isolation of my home. But then I realized how that space of observation for which I yearned in vain had to be searched for instead in another spatial and temporal dimension. I thought that, since we could not look 'outside', we were left with nothing but to observe ourselves as in a mirror and reflect reciprocally on our stories. Following Rappaport's (2016, 1) conceptualization of collaboration as a conversation that does not appropriate knowledge but explores what is 'already there', I started conceiving our isolated bodies as 'walking archives' (Okely, 2008, 58), that is, as a receptacle of unwritten ethnographic data ready to be elicited through memories and emotions. Our conversations then became a forum for revealing pre-existing personal interpretations and a catalyst for a collective knowledge that could not have existed without that dialogue. So, our 'experimental collaborations' (Sánchez Criado and Estalella, 2018) moved away from visual observation and fieldwork experience as a privileged modality for ethnographic knowing and started resorting to memory, the spoken word, creative writing and autobiographical accounts as a way to assemble knowledge (see Okely, 1992). Like participants' narratives in life-story research, Luxa's memories, and the conversations they sparked, became a prism through which I could capture a reality that she had already observed and conceptualized. However, her

memories also became the asynchronous proxy of an imagined field that the pandemic prevented me from crossing and observing and, more importantly, a compass that gave me access to an imaginary for research and oriented the research questions outside of the expected plot (Holmes and Marcus, 2008). Indeed, Luxa's contribution was never limited to a descriptive and reflexive account of her own life. Instead, emerging exclusively from her personal experience, it was obstinately directed towards elaborating hypotheses and interpretations helpful for understanding broader social phenomena she had experienced at first hand.

Our approach to collaborative ethnography assumed that, as Briones (2016, 32) put it, 'we always produce situated knowledge within situated contexts and histories. Thus, instead of general statements on the topic, what we all can share are situated experiences.' Eventually, we resorted to reflexivity and memory elicitation processes to validate our lived experience as a legitimate source of ethnographic knowledge. Yet, in doing so, our practices also reconciled the assumption that ethnography is a reflexive and experiential process mediated by the ethnographer's sensing body (Okely, 2008) with the limitations posed by anti-contagion measures and online interactions.

Screens as prisms

Acknowledging the role of power, positionality and reflexivity in research challenges the idea that only academics are legitimate for developing theory and validates the experience of their interlocutors as a source of empirical and theoretical knowledge. But if everyone's experience is a legitimate source of ethnographic knowledge, who is the ethnographer, and who is not?

The epistemic relationship between Luxa and me addressed this question by exploring and challenging the boundaries of collaborative ethnography. In fact, my initial attempt to define our experiment using the conceptual vocabulary of social research progressively revealed the existence of different 'regimes of participation' within which we were operating. With this expression, I refer to the multiple ways that scholars conceive, legitimize and semantically describe 'collaboration', depending on their positionality within the participatory group. These regimes also shape how researchers relate to co-researchers and conceptualize their expertise, and how participatory groups negotiate asymmetries of power, authorship and expectations.

Simplistically (as this is not the place to develop a theory of the politics of participatory research), we could place different participation regimes along a continuum between two opposites. At the one end, we find collaborative research with subjects (such as officials, activists and artists) whose thinking and professional practices resonate with scholarly researchers. Their involvement in ethnographic inquiry is based on the assumption that they are endowed with a sort of 'para-ethnographic consciousness'

or curiosity about their own practices that precedes the encounter with the ethnographer (Holmes and Marcus, 2008). These subjects are often described as 'epistemic partners' because they are seen as 'experts' in their own field and, therefore, able to shape the theoretical research agenda on an equal footing with the ethnographer. At the opposite end of our continuum, we find research with subjects perceived as vulnerable, oppressed and therefore needing to liberate themselves through processes of conscientization (Fals Borda and Anisur Rahman, 1991). In this case, ethnographers tend to favourably understand their work as a tool in the hands of oppressed communities that supports their struggles for social justice. However, this approach also risks neglecting the competencies and interests of subjugated groups when these are detached from the urgency of collective social transformation, thus visibilizing their lives only when they become a matter of political concern.

The double standard used to conceptualize participatory practices raises the question of whether and under what conditions disadvantaged subjects can be considered epistemic partners. Part of the answer lies in the prevailing understanding of 'expertise' as the practical and theoretical knowledge produced by elite cultures that disregards the know-how of people with the least wealth and power in society. This view echoes the reticence of mainstream scholarships to frame deprived subjects as capable research partners. As a matter of fact, although their experience represents the raw material of much social research, it hardly informs its theoretical scaffolding.

So, as I struggled to conceptualize the specific mode of collaboration developed with Luxa and to position our practices along the continuum of participation regimes, I observed how interpersonal affinities could represent both a first step towards establishing equal epistemic relationships and the bridging element between different scholarly ways of understanding expertise and collaboration. Affinities are not about having a shared object of curiosity but about abiding by each other's positionalities, stories, interpretations and ways to communicate them. In this regard, scholars conducting participatory research highlight the importance of interpersonal commonalities, especially when collaborating with people with racial, economic and experiential backgrounds different from theirs. Interestingly, several authors in the field of Romani studies have signalled womanhood (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020; Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021) and sexual orientation (Fremlova, 2018) as overarching bonding identities that help to overcome significant social distances within the participatory group and create temporary alliances that mitigate the inevitable frictional or conflictual moments (Vajda, 2015). In our case, this was not an option. Instead, during our encounters Luxa and I had to rely on other kinds of affinities, such as our shared experience of hyper-mobility, living in a foreign country, being subject to the same politics of labour precarization and being parents and partners. Without disregarding

the substantial difference in privileges and resources that separated us, becoming aware of the social structures looming over us not only brought us closer but also made us stand in solidarity with each other. However, the main ingredient of our relationship and the foundation of our affinity have been uncertainty and failure. Speaking our doubts, voicing our fragilities and failing together, besides resonating with an experimental ethos, contributed significantly to building more symmetrical ways of collaborating (see also Gay y Blasco, 2021). Indeed, embracing uncertainty and failure allowed us to balance reciprocal expectations and self-perceptions regarding our capabilities and, by diluting power differentials and recognizing our mutual biases, to demonstrate that there are also experts at the margins.

Lessons and recommendations

- Epistemic collaboration requires creating a relational space that both facilitates interpersonal connections beyond ascribed social roles and positionalities and is simultaneously deeply reflexive about their impact on knowledge-production processes.
- Memories, emotions and situated experiences are legitimate sources of ethnographic knowledge and constitute a common epistemological denominator in any participatory group. Scholarly efforts to recover and validate them can play an essential role in democratizing knowledge production processes and facilitating collaboration among people with different competencies and experiential backgrounds.
- Research can aspire to be transformative and empowering only if scholars are available to change their research practices and methodologies, adjusting them to their interlocutors' interests and abilities.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] The collaboration with Lauren and another fieldwork assistant, Alin, continued in different forms, resulting in the production of two video diaries: 'Lauren's video diary' and 'Alin in the ghost town' (see https://vimeo.com/stefanopiemontese).

[2] In this context, 'buying a house' refers to the practice, especially widespread during the 2008–14 Great Recession in Spain, of paying brokers for accessing generally bank-owned vacant flats they had previously kick-opened.

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Over and Back Again: Reflections on Inhabiting the Paradoxical Role of Insider Researcher during COVID-19

David Friel

Themes discussed in this chapter

- the centrality of emotional labour in research when representing participants' knowledge;
- navigating and negotiating the complex interplay between power, positionality and reflexivity in fieldwork with an Indigenous ethnic minority during COVID-19;
- a critical reflection on methodological challenges to create a praxis for a future research project drawing on Indigenous methodologies, participatory research and a decolonizing agenda.

Over and Back Again: Reflections on Inhabiting the Paradoxical Role of Insider Researcher during COVID-19
David Friel
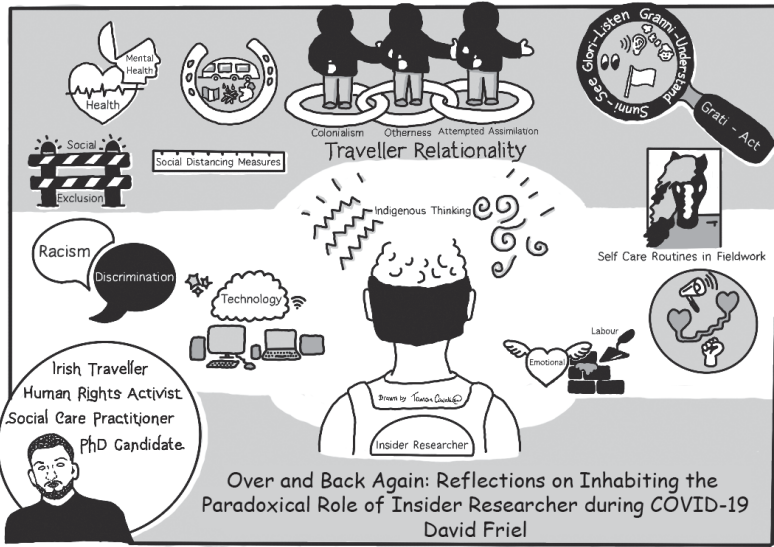
Introduction

Ending the Zoom interview with Owen, I could feel tears beading from my eyes. Was I upset? Angry? Annoyed? Was I permitted to be upset as a researcher? What action should I take on the injustices that Owen had described, as a researcher and as an activist? How should I navigate and negotiate Traveller relationality,[1] my deep connection with Owen as a fellow Traveller man facing many of the same injustices that I and my family face? Questions and emotions furiously overtook my mind and body as I listened to experiences of isolation, the loss of loved ones to suicide, and the crushing socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on Traveller men, women and children. While interviewing Owen, my own experiences and Traveller identity raised complex concerns relating to accountability, responsibility and academic expectations.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in implications surpassing the disease itself. Following the declaration of the pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), an immediate need emerged to produce, circulate and exchange research knowledge in order to support the effectual management of this global pandemic. In response to the need to generate and disseminate research on this matter, and as part of my MSc in Social Care and Social Justice at the Atlantic Technological University Sligo, I conducted a qualitative study with Irish Travellers which forms the basis for the methodological reflection within this chapter. My research entailed in-depth one-on-one interviews with Travellers to explore the

impact of COVID-19 on their social determinants of health and experience of social exclusion.

This chapter focuses on the role of emotions in shaping my encounter, as a Traveller social scientist, with my Traveller research participants in the midst of the pandemic. Emotions are inevitable in qualitative studies, as researchers cannot escape the social worlds they are part of when they decide to research them. As an insider researcher during the pandemic, my experience is that research by, with and for Irish Travellers is an embodied experience that affects the researcher emotionally: one cannot be simply a distant, disembodied or objective observer, despite this being a proposition of traditional research paradigms in some of the social sciences.

Social distancing posed a further methodological challenge for all those undertaking qualitative research during the first year of the pandemic (2020) and this study was no exception. However, my affects and emotions as a Traveller and a researcher enabled a nuanced and empathetic interview experience, despite using digital technology. As Traveller insider researcher, I have experienced the consistent concern that research 'can reinforce the very systems of oppression it seeks to address' (Ashby, 2011). At the same time, in my experience, if attended to carefully, emotions can aid in eliciting, unearthing and representing participants' knowledge in a meaningful manner even in the extremely challenging context of the pandemic.

A notable gap exists in the literature on the intersection of emotional labour and insider positionality within Irish Traveller scholarship. Despite qualitative research being described as emotionally intensive, very few researchers have explicitly discussed its implications in conducting insider research (Dickson-Swift et al, 2009, 61; Greene, 2014). Instead, the focus of many scholars is on identifying strategies that increase validity and trustworthiness for insider researchers (Leung, 2015; Noble, 2015; Hamilton, 2020). This chapter aims to expose my critical reflexive process regarding issues of power, positionality and emotions to discuss the complex methodological challenges of conducting insider research during COVID-19.

Research outline: process and findings

Irish Travellers (Pavees or Mincéirí as we refer to ourselves) are an ethnic minority group Indigenous to Ireland (Gmelch, 1985; Helleiner, 2003). We have our own culture, value system and shared history deriving from our nomadic tradition, distinct from the so-called sedentary population or buffers (non-Travellers) (Ní Shúinéar, 1994; Farrell and Watt, 2001, 99). We have a common language called Gammon, Cant and Shelta (Hout and Staniewicz, 2011, 195). There are approximately 31,000 Travellers in the Republic of Ireland, meaning the community constitutes only 0.7 per cent of the total population (CSO, 2016).

'Life on the Margins: An Exploration on the Impact of COVID-19 on Irish Travellers' Lives in the North West Ireland' (Friel, 2021) was the title of the research I conducted with and for Irish Travellers. It was also part of my MSc in Social Care and Social Justice: I was the first Traveller within the north-west region of Ireland to attain such qualifications (Holland, 2021). My project with and for Travellers entailed working collaboratively with community members by addressing local priorities via research. This required the research process to be theoretically and culturally sensitive to the community context and local protocols. Traveller experiential knowledge was respected and reflected in the research project and collaboration was prioritized, with Traveller participants partaking in pilot interviews, aiding in finalizing the interview guide and providing feedback on findings before publication. These research findings were made available to all participants and Traveller non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with the aspiration that they can provide support in yielding further funding to advance outcomes for Travellers in areas such as health, education, accommodation and employment.

Entering the unfamiliar landscape of academia to which family and peers had been denied access was daunting. Nonetheless, this project was prompted by my unique positionality as an Irish Traveller, a social care practitioner and a human rights activist. COVID-19 acted as an interlude in my life. During this interlude, the pandemic made strikingly visible the gross injustices facing Irish Travellers, which had made my community particularly vulnerable to the crisis. Given the lack of literature on the impact of COVID-19 on Irish Travellers and that very few Traveller peers have navigated the waters of research and academia, I was motivated to study Irish Travellers' perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on their lives in order to ensure that Traveller voices were heard in identifying the issues and possible solutions.

The study's main aim was to determine if COVID-19 had worsened Travellers' social determinants of health (SDOH) and their experience of social exclusion. A focus on the SDOH acted as a theoretical framework in this project, providing a lens for understanding how COVID-19 impacted on Travellers' marginalization and subsequent health status.

This study consisted of six one-on-one semi-structured interviews with adult men and women from the Traveller community. Participants in the study were recruited via a Traveller activist from a local Traveller organization in County Donegal Ireland. This Traveller man has been employed by the organization for over two decades as a men's health worker. Prior to the research I had worked with him on several Traveller-led initiatives, thus, he was keen to support the project. His role in this research was to be an intermediary for accessing a study setting and participants for the research. This encompassed informing the participants of the study and their opportunity to participate. Given that Travellers are a heterogeneous

group with various different identities and social locations, the sample included participants of various educational attainments, employment and accommodation status, sexuality, marital status, ability and so on. All participants lived in the geographical area of north-west Ireland and were referred for recruitment via the Traveller activist. I had not previously known the participants I interviewed; however, I was aware of their wider family network, given that Donegal comprises only 360 Traveller families. Interviews were carried out in March 2021 via Zoom, given that Ireland remained in one of the longest European lockdowns with in-person interactions continuing to be prohibited.

To analyse my interviews, I used a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarkes, 2006). A series of key themes in line with the SDOH emerged from the data and these included: education, employment, accommodation, health and mental health, and racism, discrimination and social exclusion. In examining these areas, the findings indicated that COVID-19 had negative implications on Travellers' experiences of education, access to safe and secure accommodation, health and mental health, and the community's experience of racism, discrimination and social exclusion. My study concluded with immediate policy and practice reforms and recommended that further research is needed to address the current and long-term implications of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that Travellers do not continue to experience 'life on the margins' of Irish settled society (Friel 2021, 67–70).

Researchers' positionality

Positionality can be described as an individual's worldview and the position they adopt as a researcher within a study (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013, 71; Holmes, 2014, 2). This worldview reflects the ontological and epistemological values the researcher discursively embeds into the research process. Since the researcher's position is situated vis-à-vis societal power hierarchies that are 'relational, unstable, not fixed, and contextually situated' (Grimaldi et al, 2015, 147), the exploration of positionality, reflexivity and knowledge production is fundamental for undertaking ethical research (Sultana, 2007, 380).

An insider researcher can be defined as an individual who considers themselves and is considered by others a member of a group they are studying, based on a shared characteristic such as ethnicity, impairment status, sexual orientation and so on (Erdal et al, 2013). An outsider researcher is not a group member, while an inbetweener occupies a fluid position where the researcher does not consider themselves fully an insider or an outsider, but in a position in the middle of the two (Carmona and Luschen, 2014). The insider, outsider and inbetweener positions have long been debated in social science and ethnography (Bryman, 2012). However, of late, the 'positionality

dichotomy' has been a central focus of scholarly argument within Romani studies (see Fremlova, 2018; Matras, 2017; Stewart, 2017; Ryder, 2019). A detailed discussion of differences inherent in these positions and the associated debates is beyond this chapter's scope. Still, it can be fundamentally explained in that 'the insider's strengths become the outsider's weaknesses and vice versa' (Merriam, 2001, 411). The experience I describe in this chapter as an insider Traveller researcher points to the complexities and nuances of positionality, as boundaries often become somewhat blurred and are contextually situated, as exemplified in the experience with the Traveller NGO, which I describe later.

Insider research has the potential to generate specific nuances and epistemological benefits and is urgent, given the historical and contemporary epistemicide of Traveller Indigenous[2] knowledge (Crowley and Kitchen, 2015). Indigenous academics such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), Dennis Foley (2003) or Michael Anthony Hart (2010) argue that Indigenous researchers are best suited to research with Indigenous groups, given that their critical consciousness enables a more nuanced theoretical, methodological and ethical understanding of Indigenous thinking, knowledge and ways of being. For example, Foley (2003, 46) argues that the capacity of outsider researchers to comprehend a group's culture and system of organization is more limited than that of insider researchers because they have not been socialized into the group, nor been involved in the experiences that comprise the group's social life. Fundamentally, Foley (2003, 50) contends that non–Indigenous researchers cannot understand the issues of Indigenous communities as an Indigenous researcher would. The nuance of the Indigenous insider researcher is captured by Smith when she points out that 'when Indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, and people participate on different terms' (Smith, 1999, 193). Unlike them, I am not radically opposed to outsiders researching with Travellers but encourage that questions of reflexivity, identity, power, knowledge and reciprocity are attended to carefully, systematically and critically, as demonstrated in the work of Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria Hernández (2020), Lucie Fremlova (2018) and Tamsin Cavaliero (2016).

As evidenced in this chapter and other scholarly writing (McDonagh, 2019; McGinley, 2020), the insider position is not without challenges requiring careful attention. While insider research is epistemologically fruitful (hooks, 1994, 104), distinct challenges must be acknowledged when adopting a reflexive stance. Melanie Greene argues that academic accounts of conducting insider research that explicitly addresses the researcher's position and associated challenges is often limited to specific approaches such as autoethnography and participatory action research (Greene, 2014, 1–2).

No research is neutral or apolitical (Halse and Honey, 2005). I am an Irish Traveller, a social care practitioner and a human rights activist, which is a paradoxical role when conducting research. On the one hand, I am privileged in the sense that I have a secure job, accommodation, a career and have obtained a high level of education. On the other hand, this privilege is often nullified by the racism, discrimination and oppression I face as a Traveller man. I have a critical awareness of the complex issue of power differentially situated within the multiple positions that I inhabit. These vectors of power have impacted on the research relationship with participants and the research process in the ways that I describe later.

One significant challenge I encountered during the research process was honouring my interlocutors' marginalized voices through accurate representation while negotiating the inherent power disparities in the researcher-and-researched relationship. As a Traveller, I was cognisant that certain academic research has resulted in the community being objectified, othered and oppressed (Crowley and Kitchin, 2015; McDonagh, 2019). Yet I was still surprised when my position as a researcher appeared to be more significant for my participants than my Traveller status. For instance, during the research process, I attended a local online consultation on the issues impacting on Travellers in education during the COVID-19 pandemic, hosted by a local Traveller project. I participated in the consultation and fellow community members were aware that I was conducting research exploring the impact of COVD-19 on Travellers. Some days later, I received correspondence from a non-Traveller staff member working in the organization saying that I made other community members uncomfortable, as they were unsure why I was in attendance. I was 'othered' by this Traveller organization on the multiple vectors linked to my social location, with economic privilege and social mobility acting as significant differentiators. The intersectional nature of my identity coupled, with the Traveller organization's view of Travellers as a homogeneous group, resulted in my being further disenfranchised from my community. It placed me in a position where I was faced with hostility from the settled population due to being a Traveller and disfranchisement from my own community due to being a researcher and social care practitioner. The power associated with being a researcher and an academic is one which the Traveller community is fearful of, as they have been written about but not with, which has led to significant misrepresentations (Condon et al, 2019).

Navigating and negotiating emotional labour as an insider researcher

Emotional labour is a term that is open to conflicting interpretations. Arlie Russell Hochschild, who coined the term, defined emotional labour as the management of one's emotional expressions which is expected as part of a

particular role for employees (Hochschild, 1983, 35–7). By contrast, in my case I would define emotional labour as the effort I had to make to manage the emotional burden that listening to my participants' hardships placed on me. Conducting this research demanded unprecedented emotional labour, given the complexities that arose from the multiple positions I inhabited throughout the research process as described earlier. The research findings were particularly emotional for me to disseminate, as the narrative they created was saturated in injustice and despair, mirroring the daily lives of my Traveller friends, family and community. Therefore, in the presentation of the findings, I was starkly reminded of these narratives and the emotions they stirred within me. As a social care practitioner and a Traveller, I have experienced and witnessed systemic racism and discrimination against Travellers. Yet, familiarity did not eradicate the emotional responses such experiences evoked within me.

For example, it was emotionally demanding listening to narratives of social injustice, inequality and powerlessness. I felt a range of emotions from sadness to guilt and anger. I will never forget a Traveller man describing the critical accommodation issues his family faced, and I can still vividly recall each word he said, 'Traveller families were carrying large jars of water to their caravans like they were living in Third World countries'. As a young boy, I lived in a small caravan on the side of the road with my parents and can still recall the daily difficulties encountered due to having no facilities such as running water, heat or electricity. My experiences as a Traveller man provided me with the capacity to provide him with deep validation of his experiences through expressions of empathy; however, as a researcher, I had to manage the affective responses our exchange stirred in me.

A particularly difficult topic for me to deal with was suicide – a complex phenomenon that has impacted on 82 per cent of the community (The National Traveller Data Steering Group and the Community Foundation for Ireland, 2017). Pre-pandemic, 11 per cent of all Traveller deaths had been by suicide. My family was particularly impacted during the pandemic, with my cousin completing suicide at the age of 21. Therefore, listening to my participants describe the increased instances of 'loneliness and isolation' was particularly alarming, as both are risk factors for suicide (McKey et al, 2022). One of my interlocutors reflected on isolation in the context of pandemic, demonstrating how COVID-19 has replicated and exacerbated Travellers' experiences of isolation: 'They tell us to social distance and isolate; what they should know is that Travellers have always been isolated.'

As a social care practitioner working with children in residential services, self-care is at the core of my practice to prevent burnout due to continuous exposure to secondary trauma (McHugh and Meenan, 2013). The self-care skills and techniques that I have learned over the years in this position helped me to deal with the emotional labour experienced in this research

and aided in regulating various emotions that I experienced. For instance, attending to the horses that my father owned supported me in calibrating my emotions. Simple tasks like feeding, washing and trotting the horses supported me in physically and emotionally grounding myself. I also found solace in journaling and debriefing during regular supervision sessions with my mentor, Dr Tamsin Cavaliero. Researchers in various disciplines have employed journaling, but it is prevalent in research concerning sensitive topics (see Davison, 2004). For aspiring researchers reading this chapter, I reinforce the prioritization of self-care when conducting fieldwork. This is not to say that the strategies I have employed are tailored for every researcher; however, they illustrate tactics to dismantle the embodied emotions that saturate our very being throughout the data collection process. Especially in the context of engaged research within one's own community and aimed at social transformation, it is worth recalling Audre Lorde's words that 'caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare' (Lorde, 2017, 181).

Social distancing

Social distancing has been the practice of limiting contact with others to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus. At the time of data collection in March 2021, Ireland's public health measures continued to be restrictive, due to the virus rapidly spreading, resulting in high infection, transmission and mortality rates. Furthermore, a majority of the population were unvaccinated, due to the tiered programme. Social distancing measures have had unprecedented implications for those conducting qualitative research throughout the pandemic (Tremblay et al, 2021). This prohibition of in-person interactions resulted in significant challenges during the data collection process, given the impossibility of direct in-person contact with participants. For instance, researchers were no longer permitted to physically go into the field and interact with interlocutors, which had negative implications for recruitment, due to the inability to circulate information at the grassroots level.

Additionally, I was extremely concerned about the safety of research participants. Despite the evidence-based guidelines on how to contain and prevent the transmission of the virus, the implementation of various preventive measures depends on context. Lower socioeconomic status coinciding with overcrowded accommodation and shared living facilities has been cited as an accelerant in the virus' rapid spread, since COVID-19 spreads more expeditiously in enclosed and crowded living conditions (Cevik et al, 2020). Today, 90 per cent of Irish Travellers live in insufficient and inadequate accommodation. As a result, the community was more susceptible to the virus, due to their inability to implement public health measures such

as social distancing (McGinnity et al, 2020). The participants' safety became a concern that transcended all of the positions I occupied and required that I elaborate on alternative approaches to data collection.

Conducting semi-structured interviews while social distancing required flexible approaches. In the research I capitalized on digital technology in the form of Zoom to conduct the interviews. However, this resulted in additional challenges and responsibilities that were inherently linked to Travellers' unequal social position and my own positionality. Poverty, social exclusion, illiteracy, digital illiteracy and the lack of space due to overcrowding were among the main challenges associated with using technology to conduct virtual one-to-one interviews with Travellers. These challenges entailed a multidimensional response, given my social location and positionality. As an Irish Traveller it required emotional labour to ensure Traveller voices were included and honoured by ensuring access to technology and broadband. For example, I contacted local Traveller organizations and community groups to supply Travellers with laptops or tablets that were made available as a response by the government to the technological divide during COVID-19. Additionally, I provided some members of the community with phone credit vouchers to avail themselves of mobile data to access Zoom. As a researcher, I was responsible for ensuring methodological rigour and ethical compliance. Finally, as a human rights activist, I had to ensure meaningful participation and empowerment of Travellers to enact true social transformation.

In spite of the barriers which resulted from the digital interface, I found that the emotions that arose from the topics being discussed facilitated a rich interview experience and generated a nuanced understanding of the impact of COVD-19 on my interlocutors, their families and wider community. As a social care practitioner, I was trained to deploy empathy, emotional intelligence, co-regulation and emotional first aid to support service users in dealing with trauma, disclosures of abuse, challenging behaviour or simply adversities they have experienced in life, and I used these skills during interviews (compare McHugh and Meenan, 2013). The interviews entailed narratives of gross social injustice, racism, structural violence and human rights breaches. Throughout the discussions, I encouraged fostering emotional connection between the participants and myself. As encapsulated by Mallozzi (2009), I expressed 'empathic moves' by sharing my emotions with interlocutors in a delicate, skilful and compassionate manner. This has been proposed by feminist scholars to facilitate a safe space for sharing narratives while providing validation of participants' experiences of injustice (Held, 2006; Ellis, 2007).

For example, during the interview process, a Traveller woman named Rosaleen (a pseudonym) spoke about the premature loss of her sister, who was only 41 years old. She elucidated on the isolation that came along with grief during COVID-19. Premature death is a common occurrence

among Travellers (AITHS, 2010) and at the time I was also experiencing grief for a baby cousin who had died a few weeks after being born. While in conversation with Rosaleen, I shared the experience of losing another cousin to suicide. In Ireland, poor health status, high levels of premature death and infant mortality are facets of life that are universal to Travellers, and that non-Travellers are not accustomed to. These common but complex issues fostered a connection and rapport during the interview and subsequently reduced the digital divide standing between us.

This rapport is best described through the notion of Traveller relationality, which can be understood as the system of connectedness and interdependence with Traveller kinship and community (Tynan, 2021). I conceptualize Traveller relationality as distinctive in that it is solidified by a shared history subsumed in colonialism, otherness and attempted assimilation: as such, it transcends through time and space, with the past interconnecting those in the present. Traveller relationality hangs in the air between Travellers, with connectedness arising from their communal culture and the shared struggle arising from racism, discrimination and oppression. As explained by Emma Elliott-Groves (2018), emotional well-being centres on this sense of connectedness and belonging. Therefore, the nurturing of emotions, the demonstration of empathy, understanding and interest created a space for Rosaleen to put across her experiences during COVID-19 eloquently. Post-interview, Rosaleen thanked me for allowing her to participate in the study as she found it authenticated her experiences during COVID-19.

Decolonizing research: critical participatory action research

> For too long Travellers have been unaware of the theories that have been constructed about them and have not been in a position to evaluate or judge these theories. Because of this we have been used to some extent by people who have researched our way of life and in the process become established as 'experts'. It is not good enough that Travellers should be the objects of other people's research. (Collins, 1995, 130)

Research is a noun that evokes disgust among many Indigenous people, including Irish Travellers (see Smith, 2012, 1). As a young Traveller boy it was impressed on me that sharing information with buffers who conducted research was prohibited. The historical remnants of previous academics' (mis)representation of Travellers led to fractured relationships. As for Indigenous people across the globe, research has presented as a veil for oppressive acts that perpetuated dangerous stereotypes of Travellers, focusing on negative social issues through a pathologizing lens. Therefore, like other Indigenous scholars (for example, Smith, 1999; Fals-Borda, 2006; Kindon

et al, 2007), I call for the decolonizing of research, which I define as an anti-colonial struggle which takes place at the margins of society, where minority groups set the research agenda rather than subscribe to the one 'laid out to us by others' (Smith, 2000, 210). Decolonization of research challenges the status quo by deconstructing the hierarchal relations of power in research, privileging experiential knowledge over academic, embracing the subjectivity of insider researchers as valuable situated knowledge and critically assessing the contribution of research to social justice and equality.

Learning derived from my pandemic research, and the challenges and insights outlined in this chapter, acted as powerful propulsion toward developing my PhD project, which I am undertaking at present. From this project, I wanted to surpass just documenting Travellers' experiences of injustice by engaging Travellers as co-researchers who take a lead in the research process from the conceptualization of the research questions to dissemination, with associated actions that might be most useful in effecting meaningful social change for Travellers. Therefore, I decided to employ critical participatory action research (CPAR) and a decolonial perspective within its research design. The aim is to reconfigure power relations within the research process, to respect the knowledge and expertise of the Traveller community and to dismantle the dynamics of inequality by advancing the struggle for social justice (Freire 2017). Within such research marginality has a potential to become a 'site of resistance' (hooks, 1990) where Travellers *sunni, glori, granni* and *grati* (see, listen, understand and act). Unlike traditional research, CPAR shifts the focus of research to action, pays attention to power relationships and calls for the active participation of individuals as co-researchers rather than 'subjects'.

CPAR can be described as a method that fosters engagement between researchers and communities that seek to document, challenge and transform conditions of social injustice (for example, Fine and Torre, 2021). It shifts from research 'on' to research 'with' communities in a manner that prioritizes personal perspectives and meaningful engagement. Unlike traditional research, a participatory paradigm utilizes the terms 'principal researcher' and 'co-researchers'[3] to describe research participants. In my own project, as 'co-researchers' Travellers are recognized as active agents within existing political, economic and social contexts where the knowledge that they produce is valued as a means to guide and mobilize social action.

All co-researchers are actively involved in the research's conceptualization, design, implementation and interpretation within this methodology. I initiated the project by establishing a Traveller Advisory Group (TAG) consisting of co-researchers from the Traveller community to collaboratively decide on the issues to be researched. This was followed by agreeing on the content of the literature review, research questions, research design and data collection methods. This was achieved through iterative cycles of diagnosis, planning, action, reflection and evaluation (Fine and Torre, 2021).

It is envisaged that the co-researchers will sustain this level of involvement during the analysis of the findings, outcomes and subsequent recommendations. This research will also employ Indigenous methodologies to 'produce knowledge' rather than 'collect data'. According to Smith (2012), Indigenous methodologies are techniques and methods drawn from the tradition and knowledge of the Indigenous people the research is conducted with. For example, this research will draw on the Indigenous methods of Irish Travellers such as storytelling, the walking method, paper-flower making and symbol reflection which have been employed by fellow Traveller scholars such as Sidney Joyce (2018), Rosaleen McDonagh (2019) and Hannagh McGinley (2020) researching with Travellers.[4] I hope that this approach will help to address the hierarchal relations of power and knowledge production intrinsic to traditional social research. The application of this approach may not be the panacea to all issues encountered within the research process relating to power, positionality and reflexivity; however, it does attempt to democratize the production of knowledge in committing to a decolonizing agenda.

Conclusion

This chapter has drawn upon my experiences with a research project I conducted in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic to capture the unique experiences and challenges associated with this positioning as an insider researcher. It explored three themes in particular: the emotional dimension of research, the insider position and challenges posed by social distancing. It suggests that as insider researchers we need to continuously reflect on our own positionality concerning what or with whom we are studying. A more explicit consideration of ourselves and our emotions in this reflexive process could enhance methodological rigour, enrich research relationships and yield more meaningful knowledge. The enhancing of qualitative research findings could then be used to generate meaningful and sustainable solutions to the embedded social and structural inequalities experienced by those we are studying with. Undertaking this critical reflexive position foregrounded the use of CPAR in a current research project with Irish Travellers in the hope to address the historically and culturally embedded marginalization they endure, through not only research but also associated *action*.

Lessons and recommendations

• If entering fieldwork and studying with an Indigenous community, including Irish Travellers, read literature concerned with decolonizing methodologies, such as the work by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012).

- Do not underestimate the role of emotions in your research. They are a natural human response to various situations that we find ourselves in.
- You are an essential component of the research process. Self-care practices must become an aspect of your research practice. Create a list of self-care activities that work for you and deploy them throughout the research process to ensure optimal well-being.
- Consider adopting participatory action research (PAR) approaches in your project. They are commensurate with social justice and decolonizing research agendas that seek to bring about social change through participation, research and action.

Notes

[1]   Two texts that develop the notion of relationality as an Indigenous analytical concept to explain Indigenous experiences are Elliott-Groves, Hardison-Stevens and Ullrich (2020) and Tynan (2021).

[2]   Despite the failure of the Irish State to formally recognize Irish Travellers as an Indigenous ethnic minority group until the year 2017, Travellers have been an Indigenous minority for centuries, as confirmed by historical sources and academic analysis alike. Therefore, as an Irish Traveller Indigenous to Ireland, I am inspired and stimulated by the work of Indigenous studies and associated scholars. I locate my philosophical position within an Indigenous and decolonial framework, given Travellers' resistance to assimilation, nationalism and internal colonialism (Heaslip et al, 2019).

[3]   Principal researcher refers to the individual responsible for the management of the overall research project. Co-researchers are participants that are seen as joint co-contributors and investigators within the project.

[4]   Storytelling and folklore have been and continue to be an oral tradition of Travellers. The walking method is consonant with Travellers' nomadic tradition with movement in this research being used as an observational analysis of Travellers' daily life. Paper-flower making is a traditional craft of Traveller women.

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Analysing Contradictions: Reflections on Ethnographic Work with Romanian Roma

Ana Chirițoiu

Themes discussed in this chapter

- how crises of the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic make salient competing or contradictory demands that society places onto vulnerable groups such as Romanies;
- how contradictory demands cut across scales from the structural level to the personal and familiar and back, and tend to be resolved at great personal cost along gender lines;
- confronting the epistemic discomfort of investigating the workings and effects of contradictory demands placed upon vulnerable communities.

Analysing Contradictions: Reflections on Ethnographic Work with Romanian Roma
— Ana Chiriţoiu —
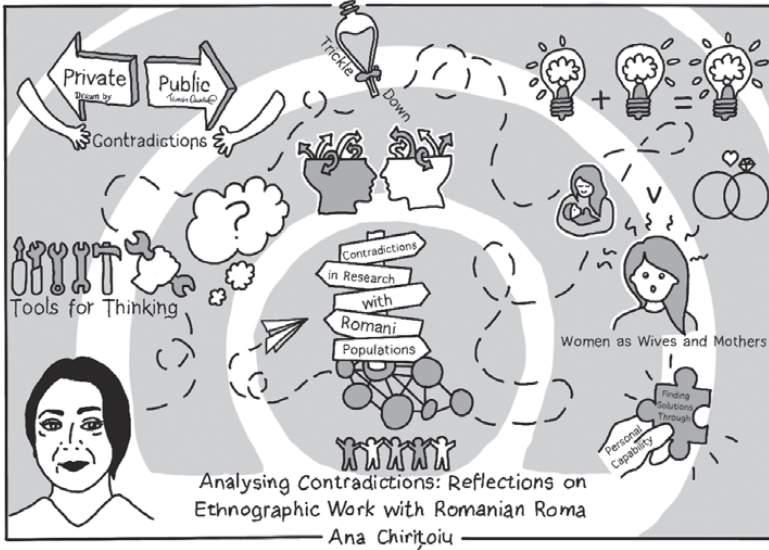
Introduction

Between December 2019, when COVID-19 began its global spread, and December 2020, when the first vaccine was authorized, under government-mandated lockdowns the spectre of contagion reigned across all societal scales, darting from the inter-personal to the geopolitical and back. Almost overnight, borders were closed, interaction moved online and whatever people had thought of as public space before 2019 turned into wasteland. The fear of others, kindled by medical and political imaginaries alike, drew existing inequalities into sharp relief and enhanced them (Ryan and Nanda, 2022). As ever in documented human history,[1] in the year 2020 fear of contagion reawakened dormant apprehensions regarding so-called 'problematic' social groups and the urge to contain them.[2] Across Europe, Roma, along with other stigmatized categories with which they partially overlap, such as homeless people (Schneider, 2020) and low-income migrants (Voicu, 2020), were targeted by persistent albeit unsubstantiated suspicions that they might contaminate society at large (OSCE, 2020). In short, the policies adopted to tackle the spread of the virus affected various social groups differently, bringing structural violence along with class, gender and racial inequalities into sharp focus, and they exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities to the point where they turned 'morbid' (Murji and Picker, 2021; see also Berta, 2020; Creţan and Light, 2020; Dragos, 2020; Gay y Blasco and Rodriguez Camacho, 2020; ERGO Network, 2020; Aradau and Tazzioli, 2021; Matache and Barbu, 2021; Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023). Likewise, the repressive measures set in place to limit the spread of the virus also affected various groups differently, and for some of them even

turned violent. Amnesty International (2020) reported several instances of state violence against Roma across Europe under the guise of militarized quarantines, ethnic profiling, the disproportionate impact of fines and police brutality.

All of these fast-paced developments helped to spell out a point that Romani activists had been making for several decades (for example, Sigona and Trehan, 2009), namely that Roma are ultimately perceived by majorities as not belonging to the body politic (Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023), and as threatening to the rest of society. Not only did public opinion show little interest in the welfare of these populations whose precarious living conditions left them more exposed to the virus than majority groups (Singer and Rylko-Bauer, 2021), but it also scapegoated them as responsible for the crisis by conflating infectiousness and criminality (Costache 2020; Dragos 2020; Plainer 2020). In Romania, where my research is located, the state-sponsored scapegoating of Roma mainly took the form of police violence, the cordoning off of several Roma localities and outspoken racism by the media, the social media commentariat and public intellectuals (Breazu and Machin, 2022). The fear of contagion was coupled from the outset with the fear of lawlessness. Law was mobilized not only to contain the spread of the virus but also to avert crime. Indeed, in discourse and practice the two became blurred, as discriminatory securitization measures were taken in the interest of public health. The Romanian Minister of Internal Affairs made this concern explicit by declaring, in April 2020, that the authorities would keep a watchful eye on 'areas with heightened risk of criminality, communities with people who have recently returned [from abroad] and are known for [their] criminal activities' (Amnesty International, 2020, 25). These areas became equated with breaking the quarantine rules and infecting the rest of society to which, more ambiguously than ever, Roma did and did not belong.

This chapter draws primarily on my ethnographic research in a Roma neighbourhood in southern Romania that I call 'Mahala', against the background of my prior experience as a non-Roma-engaged researcher in a community development non-governmental organization – both of which took place between 2010 and 2018. Throughout 2020, I was away from Romania and I kept in touch with my former hosts from Mahala via social media. Some of their stories and reflections about the first pandemic year that are included in this chapter stem from these online conversations; others are far more recent, as we all took the time to reflect on what had happened after we felt that the pandemic was becoming a thing of the past, as late as 2022.

The chapter emerges not so much from research undertaken during the pandemic but instead from the very distance that this crisis put between me and my former hosts. This sense of distance and helplessness, and the

realization, stronger than ever before, that there was nothing I could do about my friends' access to healthcare or the manifest antigypsyism that engulfed them, shed a new light on my previous research findings, particularly on how my interlocutors navigated competing demands, tackled the contradictions that came to define their place in society and simply 'stayed with the trouble', in Donna Haraway's (2016) apt phrasing. This chapter is my reckoning with the contradictions and the 'trouble' that plague the lives of the people I worked with, as they were made more salient than ever before by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In what follows I aim to show that the pandemic acted as a catalyst for bringing into plain sight the contradictions that besiege Romani livelihoods in my fieldsite and elsewhere across Eastern Europe. First, I elaborate on the notion of 'contradiction' as I use it in this chapter. Then, by way of providing the context of my argument, I comment on the contradictions encapsulated in the two main topics that were raised among non-Roma publics and institutions in relation to Roma in the earliest months of the pandemic: infectiousness and lawlessness. And finally, I move on to Mahala to show how these and other contradictions reverberated in my interlocutors' sociality and how, or whether, they were resolved.

Competing demands

Although it was not a novel phenomenon by any measure (Resnick 2020), the antigypsyism prompted by the pandemic, or rather its intensity, became for me an 'ethnographic hunch', one of those research insights that 'deepens what I think I know, sparks an ethnographic dialogue, turns around my thinking, and creates a strand of investigation through my research, analysis, or both' (Pink, 2021, 30). What stood out as I witnessed the speed and ferocity with which anti-Roma sentiments resurfaced in Romania was the contradictory pull of the competing demands placed upon Roma. On the one hand, Roma were instructed, perhaps even more insistently than the general population, to respect hygiene rules. On the other hand, a majority of Roma had been living for decades in unsanitary, overcrowded conditions (for example, European Commission, 2020), and were therefore simply unable to suddenly comply with the prescribed rules of hygiene and social distancing. Similarly, Roma were singled out in the media and by authorities for not respecting quarantine and other social distancing regulations – which was not ascribed to material conditions but rather to their presumed collectivist culture. These explanations served to bring once more the Roma's (collective) adherence to the social good into question, and to conveniently obscure the fact that the belonging of Roma to the social body that they were now urged to protect had been denied through centuries of slavery, deportation and racialization (Vincze and Stoica, 2020).

This is what I mean by contradictions: the competing and often clashing demands that broader society places upon marginalized groups, and that these groups in turn place upon their individual members, often resulting in interpersonal conflicts or personal impasses. The term that the Roma from Mahala use for such situations is, coincidentally (and by virtue of translation), the same one that Haraway (2016) uses: 'trouble' (Romani: *beleaua*). I had already picked up on the contradictions that encroach upon and, to some extent, define Romani lives during my doctoral field research (Chirițoiu, 2022). What the pandemic made more salient, however, was the way in which they are transferred and mutate, across scales, all the way to the individual level, where they either get resolved or result in 'trouble'. Structural processes such as racialization or social exclusion eventually end up being interiorized in group relations and handled privately. Navigating and solving competing demands is something that the Rom of Mahala would refer to as 'being capable' (Romani: *san capabilo/capabila*). More often than not, it is an attribute of women, whose task it eventually becomes to solve these contradictory demands.

Being 'capable' is one of the highest praises among the Rom of Mahala,[3] and is usually reserved for seemingly impossible situations, akin to a catch–22, on the successful resolution of which hinge women's personal worth and renown among their peers. Because contradictions are reproduced from the structural and state level onto that of the family and gender relations, contradictory demands placed upon women were virtually endless in my fieldsite: women were supposed to keep the house clean without ever being seen doing housework, prepare food without their clothes or hair ever smelling like food, be truthful without ever telling anything upsetting and so on. It would be easy to dismiss these demands as manifestations of patriarchal Roma culture; however, this label does not do much analytical work, so I suggest focusing instead on the dynamics of emic obligations and responsibilities that correlate with the structural demands placed upon Roma from outside. To illustrate, if a Roma woman smells of food in public, or of anything else but perfume, she is labelled far more harshly than a non-Roma woman who might have just emerged from the kitchen. At the same time, many households in Mahala rely on wood for heating, and it is a woman's job to make the fire; as I learned, the smoke impregnates hair and clothes, demanding one to wash before going out – unless the bathroom is occupied by someone else, in which case going out needs to be postponed or done under the nasty looks from passers-by. Roma women would summarize this series of constraints by concluding that they needed to be 'three times a woman' and show that they were capable not only of doing all the work non-Roma women would do, but also of making it look effortless.

The examples provided showcase the extent to which Roma have interiorized and naturalized the contradictions that result from their structural position and translated them into emic norms and values. The

same process was accelerated and made particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the contradictions between national belonging and enclavization, which became visible in social distancing regulations, were reflected in gender relations or internalized as family conflicts.

In the following sections of this chapter, then, I focus on the implications of the pandemic for the Rom of Mahala, attempting an ethnography of contradictions – not just as they exist 'out there' but also how they permeate our analyses, methods and ethics, keeping in mind that this is a process of scaling 'queer[s] categories of knowledge and being' (Posocco, 2019, 140).

Tackling contradictions is not a straightforward endeavour, for reasons to do with the intellectual history of anthropology, which has cultivated a low tolerance of contradictions and ambivalence as far as writing goes and an inclination to explanatory positivism that peaked with structural–functionalism but did not entirely wane from our approaches. Very crudely put, accommodating contradictions in our analysis risks portraying our interlocutors as non-logical; conversely, straightening out their contradictions for them is a condescending gesture. How, then, does one work with – rather than against – contradictions and, more importantly, what might be the benefits of such work? Moreover, what can we describe as a contradiction, especially where our interlocutors do not see one? We can begin to address these questions from the cues in our field: if the people we work with tend to be unbothered by contradictions, perhaps because these are so frequent in their lives, we could try to do the same in our analysis: portray them as things that are merely there and that we, much like our interlocutors, need to stay with; as things that need to be explained, but need not be explained away.

Anthropology has a long and complex engagement with contradictions: for instance, in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois (2015 [1903]) described how African Americans developed a 'double self' under the pressure of contradictory societal forces; this argument is still relevant today. For Marxists (and Hegelians) contradictions are central to explaining the clash between forces and relations of production that may eventually result in the demise of capitalism (Harvey, 2014). For ontologists, contradictions instantiate radical alterity (Heywood, 2018); and for phenomenologists, they are crucial to understanding how conflicting values are reconciled (or not) at the individual level (Berliner et al, 2016). This latter approach was criticized for insufficiently engaging with power and thus failing to recognize that 'contradictions consist of encounters with the social, political, and economic conditions on which people are reliant …, and which more than often "work against" them' (Jovanović, 2016, 4).

One of the most original takes on contradictions is that authored by Gregory Bateson and his collaborators (1956) through the concept of 'double bind', which he defined as a situation in which, 'no matter what the person does, he [sic] can't win' (Bateson, 1972, 201). What is particular to Bateson's conceptualization is the fact that, more than in common situations where

one feels caught between two conflicting demands, double bind interactions are necessarily shaped by hierarchy: the person who makes the conflicting demands is someone in authority, hence contradictions develop between two communicational levels, which are in turn shaped by contingencies. Since Bateson's argument builds on observations of individual psychology and behaviour, its impact on anthropology was limited, but it is nonetheless an important reminder that contradictions are the result of hierarchies and that they do not rest solely at the structural or at the individual level but are the product of encounters between them.

Taking my cue from Bateson's conceptualization of the double bind, in this chapter I take a hybrid approach, focusing on how structural factors are transposed onto cultural and practical contradictions, to be navigated all the way down to the level of the individual and their immediate social surroundings. I suggest that contradictions are 'good to think with' insofar as they reveal connections and, perhaps more importantly, breaking points between the various scales that our work cuts across (and, implicitly, the breaking points in our own understanding of them). I argue that the point of dwelling on the messy side of things is to use them as heuristic devices that enable us to grasp connections, parallels and conflicts which we might otherwise be tempted to flatten out or explain away.

Enclavization

The fact that Roma were singled out during the pandemic for endangering the social body to which they were repeatedly told they did not belong, and that they were expected to keep up with strict hygiene regulations when they had lived for decades in unhygienic conditions without the authorities doing anything about it, illustrates the contradictions faced by anthropologists working with Roma in particular, and with vulnerable populations more broadly. These examples also draw attention to the relation between states and Roma, which emerges as the main source of these contradictions, and whose treatment of Roma is best described as 'structural racism' (for example, Kóczé and Rövid, 2017). In order to capture this dynamic whereby states actively seek to contain Roma communities while at the same time leaving them to their own devices, I use the term 'enclavization', which I view as a two-sided process: as the inhabitants of such enclaves internalize this 'autonomy' and come to see themselves, for better or for worse, as separate from the social body, the enclaves are transformed into 'Gypsylands' (Rou. *țigănii*).

The setting of my ethnographic research (2016–18) could be described as such an 'enclave'. A marginal neighbourhood on the outskirts of a southern Romanian town, Mahala is assumed to be one of the largest and most compact *țigănii* in the country. It is located at the town's periphery, on the swampy grounds of the river that flows west of the town, where agriculture

meets small industry and the meandering rows of peasant-style dwellings are punctuated by occasional Art Deco villas. A place where the town's earliest industries began, this area was already infamous in the early 20th century as a place of crime and prostitution, but only became known as a *țigănie* a few decades later; its ill fame preceded the actual presence of Roma. After the Second World War, when industry developed elsewhere in town, Mahala and its surroundings fell into the dereliction in which it finds itself to this day.

Apart from providing basic infrastructure such as gas, electricity, water and asphalt (recently), the state is largely absent from Mahala: its most frequent emissaries are the police and gendarmes who check for irregular connections to the power grid or break into the households of suspects. State authorities tend to tackle the various Roma groups living in Mahala as a collective, through the mediation of a leader.[4] Despite its in-between belonging to the town's geography and its demographic heterogeneity, Mahala is typically dubbed as a dangerous 'no-go' area by the media and non-Roma locals and is in effect an enclave,[5] although other authors might dub it a 'ghetto'.[6]

Mahala's enclavization intensified during the pandemic, due to the widespread suspicions towards Roma that I outlined earlier. Mutual distrust also figured prominently in the accounts of life in Mahala under the lockdown that I was able to collect remotely via online communications with my friends there. One friend, for instance, observed that becoming infected with the virus became a source of shame and mutual blaming inside the neighbourhood. As she commented, the Roma appeared to have taken over the stigma that non-Roma projected onto them and turned it inwards, against one another. She added that, in the earliest months of the pandemic, when the virus still loomed unknown and moving about town was restricted, families whose members became infected were shamed and avoided by others. This caused previous alliances and hierarchies to reshuffle and prompted some people to hide the fact that they were sick for fear of being marginalized. Mutual suspicions and accusations made their way not just between related families, but also down to the individual level, and often resulted in 'trouble', *beleaua*. For instance, one woman told me that she went to visit the parents of her son's wife and was offended because they did not invite her inside the house, as would have been customary in non-pandemic times. Even though she visited with her in-laws in the courtyard, in the open, she nonetheless became sick and blamed this visit for getting the virus. Her son then got angry with his wife, because her parents had not only offended his mother by keeping her in the courtyard but had also infected her. Another woman who had been travelling brought the virus home unknowingly, infecting her husband, who died due to complications. Her children stopped talking to her, and continue to hold their father's death against her. Such conflicts were a result of tensions between external social distancing recommendations

and difficulties to control viral spread, on the one hand, and on the other internal norms and hierarchies that are in place precisely to control one's behaviour and relationships.

Add to this dynamic the Mahala Rom's mistrust of the authorities. While they were keenly aware of the dangers of the virus, the Rom were less convinced that the measures instituted by the state were going to protect them from infections, particularly quarantining, wearing masks, avoiding gatherings and producing a written declaration when leaving the house, as the regulations demanded. Deeper fears, which I had become familiar with since long before the COVID-19 pandemic, had to do with how they might be treated in hospitals, especially now that the situation was so dire. This mistrust against the state-mandated measures also persisted among the non-Roma, but the Roma in Mahala experienced these measures as yet another instance of the many obstacles that authorities raised against them, associating the COVID-19-related restrictions with their history of persecution by the state and with their lack of access to state services. Against this background of mutual suspicion, conflicts would erupt in crowded pharmacies and doctors' waiting rooms, where Roma were harshly interpellated by the non-Roma workers and customers asking them to queue and to wear masks, whereas Roma felt that the mask was but a detail: their bigger worry was what might happen to them if they ended up in hospital.

The observance of pandemic regulations was also erratic among non-Roma, as I noticed myself after moving back to Romania in late 2020, and as the low vaccination rates attested. But because Roma stood out as different from the majority, their behaviour was more likely to come into focus and be judged collectively, especially because the non-Roma always commonly assume that Roma deviate from norms. Soon enough the authorities came up with the notion that Roma constituted a special public that needed to be addressed separately. To this end, local Roma leaders were invited to address their constituencies and explain the risks of contagion and the measures taken to prevent it. Even the national coordinator of the vaccination programme appealed to Roma in the Romani language, urging them to get vaccinated. As one Romani activist commented, the fact of addressing Roma publics in Romani, even though less than half of all Romanian Roma speak the language, evidences the fact that Roma are 'not quite Romanians' but a different group than the majority.[7]

Amid the shortages in the health system and the restrictions that were put in place, the Roma of Mahala found that their access to healthcare had become more limited and their surveillance by the police harsher than ever before. However, if before the pandemic these issues could be negotiated through money and acquaintances, during the pandemic their sense of precariousness grew. One of the richest men in Mahala reportedly stated: "Even if I have money I can well die." Due to this reshuffling of social capital and relations,

the local leader of the Mahala Roma resorted to his political connections with non-Roma in state institutions to negotiate access for Roma to healthcare when most hospitals declared they were out of beds, and to help people navigate restrictions, for instance to visit relatives in the hospital, which was officially not allowed. His ability to mobilize his political connections to help fellow Roma at a time when even the richest ones felt that their money would not get them very far consolidated his leadership. He became known as an effective – 'capable' – leader because he managed to work a system that to most Roma and even to most non-Roma had become inaccessible.

The limits of capability

In the autumn of 2020, I caught word via Facebook that my former hosts from Mahala had become infected with the virus and were hospitalized. I was not in Romania at the time, and even if I had been, visiting them in the hospital would not have been possible. I wished them good health via Facebook and awaited news of their recovery. When we met half a year later, they asked me if I knew they had been sick. I answered that I knew. They were disappointed that I had not reached out to see how they were doing and had not wished them well personally via the phone. "Have you still not learned our ways?" they reprimanded me. I realized that the pandemic had blurred the scripts I thought I had learned during my stay with them. I knew that in cases of personal distress I was supposed to call and see how they were doing. But I also reasoned that, were I taken to hospital with a disease that made breathing difficult, I would not want to be engaged in unnecessary conversations. Not knowing how best to resolve the contradiction between these demands, I did nothing (apart from sending the get-well message via Facebook, as tens of other acquaintances did), causing my former hosts to conclude that "I had remained still a Romanian (non-Roma)" despite their best pedagogic efforts.

   It would be fair to say that a lot of people were similarly confused – something that my Roma interlocutors referred to as the virus "making us all crazy" (Rou. *ne-a înnebunit*). One example was related to me over a Facebook call by a former interlocutor from Mahala whom I called to see how she was holding up. She told me that she had unwittingly caused 'trouble' inside her family when she asked her young daughter-in-law to bring her some medicine from the pharmacy during lockdown. Quarantine rules requested a written declaration upon leaving the house that testified that the person carrying it went to work or had a medical emergency. The woman did not have a medical emergency as such but was suffering from severe stomach pains. She calculated that, since the daughter-in-law was visibly pregnant, the police might let her get away without a fine, which turned out to be true. However, the young woman's husband had forbidden his wife from leaving the house for fear that she might endanger her pregnancy. The young wife

found herself in a conundrum: she could not pit her husband's restriction against her mother-in-law's request, so she went to the pharmacy knowing full well that her husband would beat her up when he found out she had disobeyed him, which he did. (Had she disobeyed her mother-in-law, she likely risked the same treatment.) The woman's mother-in-law recounted this episode to me full of remorse and frustration, as an example of how her well-being and her family relations were complicated by the virus and the anti-pandemic measures. She had no intention to stir conflict in her son's marriage, but how was she supposed to get her stomach medicine, since doctors were not attending to anything that was not the virus and therefore she had no paper at hand to show the police? The episode shows that, while the increased restrictions and deprivations altered everyone's lives, in Mahala, due to pre-existing norms and hierarchies, their full force was transferred onto the most vulnerable members of the group, young women. In this case, the young wife could only resolve the contradiction she was faced with by the clashing forces of the pandemic and the demands of her own social group at the cost of a very private 'trouble'.

Another woman, a close friend, recounted in distress a visit she had made to a private clinic with her pregnant sister-in-law, who was afraid to go to the check-up on her own. My friend brought her one-year-old daughter along, as she had nobody to leave her with. At the clinic, the pregnant woman was admitted for her check-up; my friend and her daughter waited in the lobby for a few minutes, until a nurse came and started shouting that they had no business being there and urged them to get out immediately. My friend called me on the spot in anger asking how she could file a complaint against what she saw as a blatant case of discrimination, so that somebody could do something about it. She was especially distressed because this was not a public hospital, where they knew what treatment they might expect as Roma women, but a private one: "If they even discriminate us on our own money, where can we go?" was her very pertinent question. As she recounted the episode, she reasoned that because of COVID, the nurse might have been especially careful – as she was shouting at my friend to get out, the nurse asked what she was thinking, bringing a child into this environment – but the tone of her voice and the brusqueness of her behaviour had almost brought my friend to tears and caused her to recall many similar instances when she had been denied entry to public places or treated poorly on account of being Roma. Torn between the private insult and the public precautions, she gave up on filing her complaint and instead became frustrated with her sister-in-law who had brought her along and hence had 'caused' the incident. Once again, broad structural issues ultimately accumulated and erupted in interpersonal relations.

These two incidents show that, while wary of the risks posed by the virus, the Roma lacked the resources to fall back onto, especially social ones, so as

to navigate the non-Roma systems and institutions on which their survival came to depend. Second, these incidents also indicate the extent to which Roma end up internalizing responsibility when even things well beyond their control go astray. A series of processes, some of them private and others much less so – the pandemic, the way women socialize, how Roma are treated in public – accumulated into the contradictions that my interlocutors were faced with. The contradictions were resolved at high personal costs.

Conclusion

I started this chapter with an appeal for researchers working with vulnerable populations to engage more squarely with the conflicting demands and pressures that shape the lives of our interlocutors. Contradictions are uneasy and, at first sight, it may seem that they risk compromising the coherence of our analyses. And yet, critical moments such as the pandemic might provide an opportunity to analyse how seemingly contradictory behaviours are often the result of systemic tensions becoming transposed in private lives and relations. Likewise, practices that the wider public might write off as being specific to Roma, such as unruliness or disrespect for regulations, are in fact the result of competing demands that their marginal position accelerates.

When my friend blamed her sister-in-law for dragging her along to the clinic where the nurse was rude to her, I interjected that it was obviously the fault of the nurse, not of her sister-in-law. But for my friend, blame within the family was easier to handle than blaming an entire system to which she barely has any access. Interiorizing blame and contradictions is obviously very costly and troublesome, and even contradictory from an outsider's point of view, but it renders these issues manageable. Although pernicious, privatizing public contradictions and solving them through their personal capability is the only way they can do anything at all and possibly get some closure. Haraway pointed to this when writing that the solution to living in troubling and troubled times is 'to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response' (Haraway, 2016, 1). Apparently, the Rom had known that all along; for the rest of us, it took an ample crisis – whether COVID or the climate disaster that Haraway is writing about – to start living and thinking with contradictions, and probe our capability of handling them.

Lessons and recommendations

- As researcher, you must pay attention to the contradictory and competing demands that shape people's lives. These contradictions are not always easy to identify during fieldwork and to write about later on. They do not need to be flattened or otherwise

'resolved', but only to be depicted accurately by paying attention to their movement across scales.

- As researcher, you must acknowledge that your understanding will always be partial, time- and context-dependent. A moment of the crisis or unexpected events have a potential to bring into focus aspects in the ethnographic data that you previously ignored.
- Following 'ethnographic hunches' (Pink, 2021), you must be prepared to review your previous conclusions and arguments.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] See Herring and Swedlund (2020) for several case-studies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[2] While fear of contagion is an ample topic in anthropology (for example, Douglas, 1984 [1966]) and well beyond (for example, Kristeva, 1982; Goffman, 2009; Tyler, 2009), in this article I adopt a socially constructionist view of it, building largely on Paul Farmer's injunction that the violations to the human right to life and health can be analysed as 'a symptom of deeper pathologies of power that are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm' (2004, 7).

[3] I use the term 'Rom', or 'the Rom of Mahala', to refer strictly to the Roma group I worked with in Mahala, and 'Roma' to refer to the minority at large.

[4] This points to the useful distinction drawn by Ignacy-Marek Kaminski (1987) between external and internal leadership among Romani groups from Poland: while internal leadership emerges somewhat organically inside the group, in accordance to emic norms, an external leader is trusted by the group to mediate its relation to state institutions and representatives, and is largely a creation of non-Roma.

[5] I do not use references throughout this section, as they would compromise the anonymity of the place.

[6] See, for example, Gay y Blasco (2003). For a critique of applying the term 'ghetto' in the postsocialist context, see, for example, Pulay (2015) and Teodorescu (2018).

[7] Valeriu Nicolae as interviewed by Andreea Orosz (Orosz, 2021).

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Concluding Remarks: Methods and the Future of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller-related Research

Martin Fotta and Paloma Gay y Blasco

Introduction

The field of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT)-related research is undergoing an important moment of transformation. Since the mid–2010s the number of publications has grown exponentially. Scholars are increasingly acknowledging the power dynamics and inequalities that might be (re)produced through research practices. Debates around the decolonization of Romani studies are gaining traction. Most significantly, the number of academics of GRT background working with and for GRT communities is slowly rising. Already before the pandemic, the necessity to take stock of the methodological implications of these developments was clear. As a diverse community of scholars, we needed to examine whether our working methods, in the field and at our desks, were changing in tandem with these transformations, and how. Then came COVID-19. As researchers under lockdown attempted to document the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on marginalized GRT communities (see, for example, Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023), many questioned the viability of their projects and scrutinized anew their methodological approaches, roles and responsibilities.

  The authors gathered in this volume responded to these challenges by innovating while engaging ongoing debates about the ethics and politics of research and about its role in shaping practical interventions. Their chapters embody and assess these intertwined processes. The authors speak about the choices and compromises that they made to keep their projects going, reflect on the ethical and political implications of these shifts, and propose further fruitful avenues for methodological development. In this brief conclusion

we review their most significant contributions and their potential impact on future developments in the field of GRT-related research.

Strategies towards decolonization

The decolonization of the academy and of academic knowledge is one of the key concerns presently driving debate among scholars working on GRT-related issues (see, for example, Carmona 2018; Baar, 2020; Gay y Blasco and Hernandéz, 2020; Brooks et al, 2022; Hrešanová, 2023).[1] Decolonization is variously depicted as a metaphor for critiquing power relations and dominant narratives; as a tool for countering the epistemic violence and structuring effects of antigypsyism; as a challenge to the hegemonic suppression of non-normative modes of being in the world; and as a mechanism for progressive social transformation. What decolonization might involve in concrete methodological terms, both within the field of GRT research broadly defined and within specific research projects, has received less elaboration and is one of the core questions explored by the contributors to this book. As editors and non-GRT academics, we have eschewed proposing any parameters for decolonization and have instead encouraged individual authors to spell out how they are engaging these current conversations through methodological innovation in their work.

Contributors have answered in a variety of ways, both practically through experimental writing styles that foreground issues of voice and authority, and theoretically through reflections on the ethnographer's role as GRT or non-GRT scholar confronting the marginalization and oppression of GRTs. Chapter 4 by Antonio Montañés Jiménez and Demetrio Gómez Ávila and Chapter 8 by Stefano Piemontese and Luxa Leoco are presented as attempts to engage non-academic interlocutors in knowledge production and to make GRT voices heard in research practice. These chapters witness to the labour and commitment involved in attempting to transform methods and writing in ways that would make them better attuned to the priorities and skills of interlocutors. In Chapter 9, David Friel narrates the practical and emotional challenges he met as an Irish Traveller and Master's student attempting to carry out research with and for his own Irish Traveller community under lockdown. He presses on scholars the need to discard their expectations about expertise and to learn from GRT knowledge-making strategies when developing participatory research methods. For Friel the primary purpose of this methodological shift should not be a more precise or even more ethical form of academic knowledge but bringing about a project of social transformation that would be shaped by communities themselves.

Tackling the same problem as a non-GRT anthropologist, in Chapter 5 Marco Solimene challenges ethnographers to decentre their own understandings of social justice in order to pay heed to how communities

themselves choose or not to resist and why. He argues that scholars need to pay attention to how the communities with whom they work do politics and to support them in preserving their control over representation and its terms. In contrasting ways, both Friel and Solimene encourage researchers to consider what localized and even 'counter-hegemonic' GRT theories of power and resistance may look like. They ask that readers challenge their own taken-for-granted knowledge about the politics of research, that they consider whose interests are being served by particular research practices and that they assess how researchers formulate their questions.

Questioning research roles and relations

All contributors put forward concrete strategies for strengthening the critical analysis of researcher and interlocutor roles and capabilities. They candidly and rigorously scrutinize the complexities of so-called 'insider' and 'outsider' positions, and review their own assumptions about what these might entail. Roma anthropologist Iliana Sarafian (Chapter 6) and Irish Traveller sociologist David Friel (Chapter 9) foreground affect and emotional involvement – which in more positivist renderings that value distance might be dismissed as bias – as a source of insight. Non-GRT authors critically scrutinize their own standpoints and positionality within a pandemic context that foregrounded the multiple distances separating them from their interlocutors, and that made them question the nature of their ethnographic immersion (see, for example, Chapter 7 by Nathalie Manrique and Chapter 10 by Ana Chirițoiu).

All the chapters in the volume put relations between ethnographers and others – communities, participants, interlocutors, research assistants – centre stage, foregrounding the fact that ethnographers always learn and theorize in cooperation with, and thanks to the help of, others, whether this is acknowledged or not.[2] The strategies the authors use for bringing to the surface previously unexamined aspects of these relationships vary. Manrique deploys her failure to learn under lockdown to zoom in on her reliance on research participants' cooperation and insights in non-pandemic times. Sarafian (Chapter 6) discusses embodied autoethnography and the exploration of researcher emotions as a way to trace links and disconnections between researcher and participant. Piemontese and Leoco (Chapter 8) describe the process of carving out a space for ethnographic collaboration between ethnographer and interlocutor through the continuous joint acknowledgement of vulnerability and uncertainty. Both Friel (Chapter 9) and Montañés Jiménez and Gómez Ávila (Chapter 4) put forward models of engaged research that are unabashedly political and that straddle the divide between activism and research. Lastly, in our own Chapter 3 we analyse the ethical and practical challenges that emerge out of the increasing turn

to collaborative research on the one hand, and of the growing reliance on the help of local research assistants on the other.

Working with limits, failures and lacunas

Despite their diverse methodological orientations, all of the chapters in this volume testify to authors' commitment to their ethnographic research projects. However, like many other scholars attempting to carry out research under lockdown in 2020 and 2021, the authors in this volume all confronted the very real possibility that these projects would fail. And so, underlying every chapter is the acknowledgement of limits, failures and lacunas, and of the central role they play within research – both in the extraordinary conditions generated by the pandemic and more broadly.

The authors describe how, while the first two years of the pandemic put constraints on their work (such as travel bans), the period also presented them with opportunities to learn, in new ways, new things about the social worlds under investigation and about their own place in it as researchers. Although the severe lockdowns stymied some research projects, they also required researchers to critically examine taken-for-granted methodological practices and research relationships, and challenged them to experiment with research design and methods. The situation demanded that they ask themselves clearly what motivated their research and what they wanted to learn about the social life, and whether relevant insights could or could not be gained even during the period of decreased mobility and social distancing. In turn, as a social phenomenon, the crisis also made more clearly visible aspects of social life more easily disregarded in non-pandemic times, pushing scholars to look upon existing data sets from new perspectives – a process explored in depth by Ana Chiriţoiu in Chapter 10.

Like many ethnographers, once the contributors to this volume found that they could not continue researching face to face, they diversified their research methods and contexts, stitching them together, covering lacunas in their ethnographic observations with 'patches' that originated from other data sources (Higgins et al, 2017). Digital and remote technologies became essential research tools – here to stay in post-pandemic times[3] – as well as complex research objects in themselves, as Solimene discusses in Chapter 5. Sometimes, by triangulating diverse kinds of data from multiple sources (previous ethnographic experiences, archival, quantitative and so forth), ethnographers such as Manrique (Chapter 7) were able to identify patterns and relationships overlooked in earlier work.

While these 'patchwork' approaches (see also Günel et al, 2020) might provide some advantages over more rigid research designs, they also require continued commitment to reflexivity and recursive evaluation, and therefore a thorough awareness of the provisionality of one's conclusions

(Fotta and Gay y Blasco, Chapter 3). Some patches, after all, might need to be unstitched and reorganized. Beyond the pandemic, what contributors such as Piemontese and Leoco, Solimene, Manrique, Sarafian and Chirițoiu evidence is the processual character of ethnographic knowledge, and the need to confront and build on this instability methodologically – in the field, when writing up and in the final text itself. One of the most innovative and relevant contributions of the chapters in this volume is the fact that authors demonstrate ways to work with, rather than against, doubt, hesitation and ignorance.

This emphasis on failure, provisionality and reflexivity as fieldwork methods, and as methods of analysis, means that researcher emotions come to the fore as essential to the research process. While this emotional engagement of researcher with their work often delivers useful insights that become essential to the evolution of a project, it can also be very challenging and difficult to manage. In Chapter 9, Friel argues that self-care activities should be rethought as an integral part of the ethnographic toolkit (see also Theidon, 2014; Yates-Doerr 2020). In other words, besides a core methodological training in how to build rapport, how to practise self-reflexivity or be attentive to power hierarchies, researchers planning projects need to anticipate how they might care for themselves. Researchers must find their own way to 'hold space for our own emotions in the field' (Backe, 2017), while deciding also what place to give to those emotions, and to their analytical potential, in their writing (Behar, 1997).

Communicating knowledge

The conceptualization of ethnographic research that we have described earlier emphasizes the relational, provisional and reflexive nature of knowledge, and locates methods firmly within the landscape of the politics of social science research. This conceptualization has implications also for how findings and analysis are presented to audiences (and indeed for what counts as findings and as analysis). Published ethnographic texts should not be treated as definitive (Smolka, 2021; Verran, 2021), and the chapters in this book are explicitly presented as tentative, open-ended moments within research trajectories that we hope will be critically engaged with by readers (compare Gay y Blasco, 2017).

We recognize, and the chapters evidence, that choices with regard to the communication of research are not just methodological or aesthetic, but ethical and political, and must be approached as such. As editors, we encouraged contributors to experiment with genre and voice, to dare to write experimentally and tentatively as much as assertively, and above all to reflect explicitly on the potential effects of their writing strategies. We therefore decided to collect the papers in an edited volume rather than a

journal special issue, since academic journals tend towards homogeneity in structure, style, voice and presentation, and endorse rather restrictive views of scholarly rigour. We also invited junior scholars and those who do not have permanent (or even any) academic position. Furthermore, Montañés Jiménez and Piemontese co-authored their contributions (Chapters 4 and 8, respectively) with GRT interlocutors who would not normally write for academic audiences. In these various ways the book extends approaches that we formulated in previous work (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020; Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023), where we attempted to help shift what counts as ethnographic knowledge and expertise in GRT-related research.

Throughout this volume, writing strategies are revealed as methodological choices which have the potential to challenge hierarchies between academics and others, and to begin to decentre hegemonic ways of knowing. Piemontese and Leoco contribute to an emergent genre of GRT ethnographic writing in which an academic and a non-academic write ethnography together while analysing the collaborative process itself (Gay y Blasco and Hernandéz, 2020). Their chapter recounts also how their collaboration has encouraged Leoco to write autobiographical short stories, pointing to the intertwining of academic and other ways of learning and representing. The autoethnographic piece by Sarafian (Chapter 6) deploys the exploration of personal vulnerability and affective sharing as a means to scrutinize the character of the ethnographer's authority. She experiments with style and voice in ways that encourage readers to reflect on the complex role of academic writing in the decolonial enterprise.

By bending academic genres, and by producing texts that challenge scholarly expectations of authority, hierarchy and expertise, the authors in this volume ask audiences to widen their understanding of what outputs of academic value should look like. Yet we also know that these strategies have many limits. For authors wanting to communicate GRT-related research in effective ways beyond the academic ivory tower, experimenting with multimodality is centrally important.[4] GRT groups continue to be deliberately and strongly excluded from access to literacy. It is therefore essential that scholars devise methods to share their findings, not just with other scholars but with research participants and local communities, in diverse written and non-written formats without compromising complexity, depth and rigour. To invite researchers to imagine how they might achieve this, Tamsin Cavaliero (Chapter 2) has produced graphic summaries of each of the chapters. Readers should examine the gaps and overlaps between text and illustration as a way to consider what written formats can and cannot accomplish.

<p style="text-align:center">★★★</p>

Building outwards from the pandemic moment, and from work with GRT groups, the chapters in this volume investigate the purpose and direction

of social scientific work in general. Although most authors here are not directly concerned with applied research or with research-informed practice, they pose important questions about the roles that the social sciences can play in facilitating social transformation. How can the social sciences be an arena where positive social changes are achieved and not just discussed? How can social science help to shape social priorities in the post-pandemic world? These are large questions, for debate and reflection in the academic community at large, but they are also immediate, practical questions for researchers planning and implementing their own projects, whatever the scale. Although they have many potential replies, the authors writing in this volume demonstrate that any answer must necessarily revolve around methods, that change starts close at hand, in the immediacy of one's daily work, and that it starts with practice and action, not with theory and argument. These authors show that, by paying close attention to research methods, it is possible to carry out engaged research – research that is relevant, reflexive, responsible and responsive – even in the midst of a global pandemic.

Notes

[1] The interest in reflecting on ways that decolonization of the production of knowledge is and should be practised in relation to GRT communities is evidenced, among other things, by the fact that, as we write this, a group of Polish Roma and non-Roma researchers are organizing a special journal issue (Fiałkowska et al, 2023), and a special issue on the topic is being prepared by the Czech journal *Romano Džaniben* (Ort, 2023).

[2] For more recent discussions of these issues see Weiss, 2021; McGranahan 2022. For a critical distinction between co-theorizing and reciprocal ethnography, see Gay y Blasco and Hernandez, 2020, 171.

[3] See, for instance, Marzi and Tarr (2023).

[4] For instance, Piemontese's long-term collaboration with a Roma fieldwork assistant, Lauren Ionescu, has resulted in the production of video diaries. As the pandemic broke out, which inhibited Piemontese's travels, he sent Ionescu a smartphone and invited him to record his life (see https://vimeo.com/stefanopiemontese).

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