

# ROMANI STUDIES

Continuing *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*

## Special issue on Epistemologies in Romani studies

Guest editors: *Victoria Shmidt and Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky*

**Editorial:** Epistemologies in Romani studies: Moving beyond othering otherness

*Victoria Shmidt and Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky*

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Romani American history: Historical absences and their consequences

*Ann Ostendorf*

Romanies within the interlocking matrix of racialization: How Ciganos in Brazil became accused of introducing an infectious disease

*Martin Fotta*

Discursive subjugation and the ways out: Narratives of othering among Czech Roma mothers

*Kateřina Sidiropulu-Janků and Jana Obrovská*

Fashion and pilgrimage: Discourses constructing Romani identity

*Petra Egri, Zoltán Beck, and Antal Bókay*

Invincible racism? The misuse of genetically informed arguments against Roma in Central and Eastern Europe

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# ROMANI STUDIES

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# Editorial: Epistemologies in Romani studies: Moving beyond othering otherness

VICTORIA SHMIDT AND  
BERNADETTE NADYA JAWORSKY

Like many other highly politicized spheres in the humanities, the field of Romani studies operates as a space full of epistemic “bubbles” – social epistemic structures often represented by those who (re)produce knowledge about Romani people by relying on epistemic filters. These filters allow some information to pass through and block out others, creating an epistemic bubble, “which has inadequate coverage through a process of exclusion by omission” (Nguyen 2020: 142). For instance, an overly generalized view on the negative impact of the socialist politics surrounding Roma leads to describing the politics of all communist states regarding Romani people as “Soviet-styled,” thereby attributing the primary responsibility for the persecution that Roma have experienced to communist authoritarianism.<sup>1</sup>

Alternatively, the so-called “tragic destiny” of many Romani people during the Second World War is examined (like many other historical events) through the lens of the Hapsburg Empire as the timeless center of European civilization in all its glory and ignominy (Zahra 2017). The question of what must constitute obvious differences in the politics concerning Romani people in different states that share the same geopolitical experience of being part of an empire or an empire’s satellite remains relegated to the margins.

Along with the temptation, as with all grand narratives, to situate the history of Romani people around “big” events and epochal-driving forces, such as changes in political regimes or wars, epistemic filters are driven by the various ideological affiliations of those who produce knowledge. We must

1. One illustrative example is evident in the statement made by Jacqueline Bhabha (2021: 198), in her review of the book by Felix B. Chang and Sunnie T. Rucker-Chang, *Roma Rights and Civil Rights*: “Soviet dominated socialist governments in South and Central East Europe (SCEE) imposed assimilationist policies that, at least prior to the dismantling of Communism, diminished Roma educational and employment segregation.”

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acknowledge the predominance of liberal, or even libertarian, approaches with their focus on human rights, the freedom of the individual, autonomy, and emancipatory projects aligned with idea of liberal nationalism, consistent with the ideas of an “open society” and a purely civic nationalism, which equates liberal democratic government with the absence of, often solely, legal discrimination. With the inevitable opposition between socialist and capitalist worlds, this epistemic filter leads to a conflation of better-off-society and epistemic virtues on the one hand, and worse-off-society and epistemic vices on the other (Medina 2013: 30), decreasing the critical acceptance of applying epistemologies labeled as “Western.”

Through constructing multiple binary oppositions between socialist and capitalist, totalitarian and democratic, “liberal” and illiberal, these filters fix a Western lens by giving systematic predominance to a particular geopolitical order and localities – Europe, and especially its Central Eastern and Southern parts – as the dominant locus for Romani studies. The application of epistemic filters, such as these, results in a narrow temporality as well as spatiality for Romani studies, with a focus on historical transitions: from empire to nation state, from authoritarianism to democracy, from a state-regulated economy to a free market.

Through a liberal epistemic filter, scholars view Roma as those who again and again experience the trauma of delayed transitional justice, and whose experience is only aggravated, and never improved, by changes in the political order.

This exaggeration of the constant demands of transitional justice (Kritz 1995) leads to multiple representations of Romani people, under various regimes of stigma and discrimination as the last in the line for justice. To Eli Pariser (2011: 51), one of the pioneers in exploring practices aimed at producing and sharing knowledge through the concept of epistemic bubbles, “filters can interfere with our ability to properly understand the world ... they often remove its blank spots, transforming known unknowns into unknown ones,” which makes the “length” or “horizon” of our vision regarding the issue short.

Focusing on the trauma of a “failed transition” to justice as the central explanation for the fate of Roma relegates the analysis of the assumptions and limitations of justice to the periphery. Comparing Roma with other groups lacking transitional justice, mostly African Americans and Jews, situates Romani people within a specific hierarchy of victims who are more or less able to fight for their rights, and more or less able to develop strategies of accommodation, assimilation, and acculturation. We define this epistemic manipulation as “othering otherness.”

In their comparative historicization of the struggle for rights between African Americans and Roma, Felix B. Chang and Sunnie T. Rucker-Chang



(2020: 25) support such a comparison by underscoring the similarity of trajectories of racialization: “The racial formation of the Roma has unfolded along similar lines, that is, with the dominant majority and the state exploiting, augmenting, and inventing Romani differences (and therefore distance) and then translating those differences into law.” To explain the systematic inputs in the politics of Romani integration in former socialist countries, the authors apply Derrick Bell’s interest–convergence hypothesis, which attributes the political calculation of whites to any successful action in favor of racial equality.

According to Bell (1980: 524), long-term racial progress

cannot be understood without some consideration of the decision’s value to whites, not simply those concerned about the immorality of racial inequality, but also those whites in policymaking positions able to see the economic and political advances at home and abroad that would follow abandonment of segregation.

Through this explanatory scheme, Bell redefines the history of abolitionism as a movement in which its inception was connected with the pragmatic interests and interested calculations of white Americans, rather than the noble intention of emancipating people of color. By accepting the interest–convergence hypothesis as an “iconic but controversial product of critical race theory” (1980: 51), Chang and Rucker-Chang (2020) assert that the racial progress of Roma after 1989 has been determined through and determined by the interests of political elites, both national and supranational, stating that “[T]he motivation of CSEE [Central Southern Eastern Europe] governments to integrate their Roma lay in joining the EU” (Chang and Rucker-Chang 2020: 54).

The question as to what degree the governments of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) countries or supranational European structures could be defined in terms of white elites, or the consideration of the limits to interpreting the history of racial discrimination in terms of the interest–convergence hypothesis are not discussed. Even though the authors blame “Socialism and Communism”<sup>2</sup> for the discrimination against Romani people, the book does not elaborate the specifically socialist or communist driving forces behind this process. They ignore the obvious differences among the politics in socialist states in relation to the burgeoning developments in the international representation of Roma. These and other contradictions that appear in the book can be interpreted as not only the result of missing information but also as an attempt to avoid the

2. Chang and Rucker-Chang use this combination throughout the book.

trap of unambiguous interpretation. Further, the authors cannot avoid the conclusion that despite multiple commonalities with African Americans, European Roma have not achieved the same degree of success in their efforts toward the sustainable implementation of civil and human rights. According to the interest–convergence hypothesis, this conclusion addresses political elites rather than Romani people themselves.

In a similar vein, in his book entitled *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust*, Ari Joskowitz (2023: xi) addresses the memories and responsibilities of Jews in the face of Roma victims of Nazi politics by underscoring that “the relations between Jewish and Romani victims of Nazism during the Holocaust as well as their attempts to come to terms with their parallel fates ever since” should be the center of attention. Joskowitz’s point of departure is the memories of his relatives and the crucial difference between Jews and Romani people in experiencing atrocities and responding to them post-survival. Through a detailed historicization of the relationship between Jews and Roma, he examines the potentiality “to create meaningful and lasting ties” (Joskowitz 2023: 37).

Documenting the fragmented experiences of mutual understanding and help reverberates with a continuing focus on important differences in the two victim groups:

Just as Jews and Roma had experienced and responded to crises differently in the past, they did so again after the war. Whereas Romani survivors relied principally on kinship networks for relief, Jews turned to familial ties as well as international associations and state-recognized national bodies. (Joskowitz 2023: 52)

Despite recurring references to the limitations of these comparisons and the hidden ethical risks of such an epistemology, the author fails to exit his path dependence:

Profound inequalities in the infrastructure of knowledge are difficult to change ... How should the salaried guardians of the past deal with the histories of the marginalized, nested obscurely within the archives of other marginalized groups? It is not enough to address familial traumas, offer spaces to express collective histories, or promote artistic representations. Usable knowledge about past injustice requires resources. (Joskowitz 2023: 204)

Unsurprisingly, with such a view on this epistemic inequality, Joskowitz offers a multiplicity of arguments to place Jews in a higher position in the hierarchy of victims, as those who passed a longer history of institutionalizing their struggle for justice and as a result more resourceful and even responsible for producing an entangled history.

Knowledge entrepreneurs (experts, scholars, publishers) often persist in being corrupted by their devotion to certain explanatory schemes: “[A]nd after a few years of working on them, they tend to see them everywhere” (Pariser 2011: 11). Furthermore, it is not only knowledge producers that become dependent on this confirmation bias. Those who consume knowledge and must rely on and trust expert opinions, for instance, helping practitioners, such as social workers, psychologists, and social educators, are involved in epistemic bubbles and tend to consume information that confirms their existing ideas, ignoring information that challenges them to think in new ways (Pariser 2011). This so-called epistemic deficit, created through ignorance of certain perspectives and facts, or through practicing selective awareness in different social contexts (Nguyen 2020), ensures that Roma experience structural and other forms of injustice in the short and long term.

Overreacting to the issue of transitional justice, however, reduces the options for applying a participatory approach; while testimonies provided by Romani people are brought forward, their access to hermeneutical justice, with its wide range of options to produce knowledge about themselves, is efficiently blocked. This risk is combined with the fact that a liberal epistemic bubble has effectively captured and encapsulated the experience of Roma, thereby furthering its reproduction. This capture and reproduction points to a further risk, namely, eliding and overgeneralizing the diversity of Romani experiences. Two edited volumes, *The Legacies of the Romani Genocide in Europe since 1945* (2022, edited by Celia Donert and Eve Rosenhaft) and *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and its Aftermath* (2020, edited by Eliyana R. Adler and Kateřina Čapková) attempt to respond to this challenge. Both books introduce the microhistories of survivors through different ethnographic methods, to contextualize, or even to individualize, the circulation of knowledge about Romani genocide and its aftermath. Moreover, both works largely operate in favor of reversing the strategy of othering otherness by manifesting and illustrating the “normalcy” of those othered, through consistent attention either to universalized norms of humanity or family life. Being closely affiliated with family studies whose practical aim is to improve family life (Allen 2000: 6), *Jewish and Romani Families* risks the inevitable application of a conservative lens, sometimes on the verge of patriarchy.<sup>3</sup> As such, the infiltration of epistemologies from family studies operates as a kind of hidden, ideologically driven commitment and does not warrant sufficient critical reception.

3. One of the many examples is mentioning the exodus of Jewish men, “the physically strongest members of the community” who had to abandon “the most vulnerable ones – the women, children, and elderly” (Adler and Čapková 2020: 7).

This dissonance, between the intent to provide options for practicing epistemic justice and to normalize memories, is clearly related to the dilemma of gaining trust of the public and maintaining the autonomy and objectivity, so-called, of historicization. The contributors and editors of these volumes solve this dilemma by attributing epistemic privilege to socially marginalized subjects, which are often considered to be the main predispositions for reestablishing justice.

But for many of those who practice feminist epistemologies, the rejection of epistemic privilege operates as a key solution in favor of justice (Bar On 1993: 85–9). Thus, the opposition of those in the center and on the periphery, or even favoring the periphery, only reinforces epistemic filters due to focusing on advantages more than the transparent contest of alternative interpretations and self-critical approaches essential for deconstructing epistemic bubbles – along with the important questions: “Are there conflicting views? Are there different takes, and different kinds of people reflecting?” (Pariser 2011: 15).

Romani studies is characterized by the multiple epicenters of mutually contested approaches that reflect multiple contestations regarding the identity of Romani people. Such contestation begins with the opposition of “Roma” vs. “Gypsies” and continues with mutually contradictory answers to the question regarding which community Romani people should embrace, whether Romani diaspora or Roma ethnicity or one or another nationality (Grossman 2019: 1265). Clearly, attempts at a resolution, through practicing sensitivity to multiple experiences, represent one of the core epistemic methods for moving beyond the epistemic bubbles in producing knowledge about Romani people in particular and ethnic groups in general.

Since the publication of a groundbreaking overview of approaches to ethnicity by Virginia Tilley (1997), the revision of the explanatory schemes behind political (ab)use of ethnicity increasingly operates in favor of connecting knowledge production about ethnic groups and facilitating their practices of identity. Cognitive frameworks shape and inform the affect that ethnic groups experience in complex social settings (Tilley 1997: 503–5). The diversity of this cognitive experience reverberates with the different visions among those who examine it in terms of the cultural and political segmentation of ethnic groups. In these terms, Romani studies remains mired in the long-term epistemic crisis in studies of ethnicity.

Applying either a multicultural or an activist lens leads to the division of ethnic movements into *inflationary* movements, which preserve the group’s cohesion against the forces of assimilation, and *reconstructive* movements, aimed at introducing ethnic groups into the state political arena (Tilley 1997: 509). With quite an accurate and thoughtful view on this division as one of the most demandable for resolving questions of ethnicity, Tilley warns

against exaggerating the social authority of ideas that tend to intellectualize not only ethnic identity but also the larger body of social experience that informs such identity (Tilley 1997: 512–3).

Tilley's caution stresses not only the entirely false idea regarding how easily prejudice can be overcome with a shift to alternative discourse, but also a kind of obligation from the side of those who conceptualize ethnic movements to accept their flexibility, including multiple cases of incompatibility between subordinate cultural institutions and dominant politics. Jan Láníček considers such questions and chooses an unusual focus for his historicization of the Holocaust, namely, the multiple microhistories of Czech police officers employed by Protectorate authorities to surveil imprisoned Jews and Roma, through which he presents the variety of public discourses on the persecution of minorities by Nazis (Láníček 2021).

If regional specialization aggravates the naïve optimism of those who attribute ideas with the role of exclusive agents of change (Tilley 1997: 516), moving toward entangled histories and beyond particular geopolitical clusters provides options to limit such regional bias. The recently completed project "Roma Civic Emancipation Between the Two World Wars" aims at exploring activism among Romani people during the interwar period, through comparing and connecting policies governing Romani people in different countries. Many of the project's researchers move a step further and recognize the history of Roma in non-European regions (Marushiakova and Popov 2023). A focus on Romani people in Central Asia, Latin America, and Australia (Marushiakova and Popov 2014; Dolabela and Fotta 2023; Armillei 2014) is a growing trend.

Those who focus on Central and Eastern Europe actively employ a wide range of methodologies in social geography, including the lens of racialized localities (Lipsitz 2007). Critical ethnographic methods stem from understanding ethnicity as a larger field for the social referencing of kinship. Understanding ethnicity as a socially constructed signifier, whose borders are transparent and self-determined by its members, calls for emancipating the category of ethnicity from citizenship, nationality, and race because of the very plausible redefinition of the importance of one or another signifier in different situations by those who are "within" such groups (Bilge et al. 2021: 228). In this turn, examining shared history and shared struggle (Bilge et al. 2021: 215) operates as a ground for ethnicity as a communicative process. The recently published book, *Facets of a Harmony: The Roma and Their Locatedness in Eastern Slovakia* (2022), by Jan Ort, represents one such example.

Along with revising the locality and temporality of Romani studies, scholars (especially those who cooperate with Romani activists) have introduced leftist optics such as racial capitalism – and this too is accompanied by the inevitable temptation to reproduce the trap of othering others. The research by Barbora

Černušáková (2020) can be seen as a very promising example of revising the relationship between the social scientific perspective of political agency and the fieldwork-based perspective of ethnography (Widlock 2015: 95). The collection of articles *Roma Activism: Reimagining Power and Knowledge* (2018), edited by Sam Beck and Ana Ivasiuc, is an example of yet another strategy to move beyond limited and taken-for-granted approaches to historicizing Romani activism. The contributors to this special issue practice these and other methodological techniques as a way of bursting open epistemic bubbles and adopting analytical lenses that make the horizon of Romani studies, and possible solutions to the issues around justice and other imperatives, as wide and open-ended as possible. The contributors redefine the collective identities of Romani people as repeated patterned references in particular situations (Widlock 2015: 91) in favor of exploring the role of the relative universality or rights.

In this special issue, the authors seek to make further steps along this analytical journey. The article “Romani American history: Historical absences and their consequences,” by Ann Ostendorf, examines one of the most extreme cases of epistemic bunkering regarding Romani people, namely, the vacuum of critical discursive practices regarding the history of Roma in the United States. Through documenting this blatant case of epistemic injustice, Ostendorf illuminates the wide range of driving forces that have shaped the long-term and systematic neglect of the presence of Roma in US history. The article discusses interventions, including those by Ostendorf herself, aimed at challenging this state of neglect and inattention. These acts of academic activism integrate critical historicization with dialogic approaches to other scholars. The author goes beyond the limits of the short-term interests of those who criticized “gypsyism” as a source of permanent reproduction of injustice against the Romani people and moves into the picture of a more complex landscape of shortcomings in the attempts to historicize the Romani Americans.

In his article, “Romanies within the interlocking matrix of racialisation: How Ciganos in Brazil became accused of introducing an infectious disease,” Martin Fotta articulates the call for exploring racialization as a kind of relational process. In other words, the racialization of an ethnic minority should not be conceptualized through its opposition to the majority or to the titular nation, but rather be explored as a dynamic process of racializing the entirety of ethnic diversity and human variation. Fotta brings his analytical lens into focus on the case of racializing Romani people through ascribing them responsibility for spreading trachoma.<sup>4</sup> He thus dispels one of the medicalized tropes of racialization applied to Romani people and other

4. A bacterial infection of the eye which may lead to blindness.

ethnic minorities around the globe, such as the Tatars in the former Soviet Union. Along with recognizing the global circulation of patterns of racialization, Fotta engages in a detailed and critical historicization of applying this trope to Brazil in the early twentieth century. Through this analysis, readers can follow the vicissitudes of public health expertise as an agent and structure of relational racialization in regard to the Romani people.

In “Discursive subjugation and the ways out: Narratives of othering among Czech Roma mothers,” Kateřina Sidiropulu-Janků and Jana Obrovská bring together a historicized view on practicing authenticity among Roma whose families moved to the Czech lands after the Second World War with the contemporary challenges of self-acceptance among Romani mothers. Choosing motherhood, one of the social practices that addresses the dilemma between autonomy and collective engagement, they introduce the main strategies employed by Romani women for producing knowledge about their experience in the face of covert and overt racism. This intervention within the bounds of hermeneutical justice problematizes emancipatory discourses often imposed upon Romani people, especially women, in the context of multiple stereotypes regarding “good motherhood.”

Petra Egri, Zoltán Beck, and Antal Bókay move beyond producing knowledge as a science and focus on fashion as a realm for producing, challenging, and fitting identities. Their piece, “Fashion and pilgrimage: Discourses constructing Romani identity,” illuminates the role of material culture in accepting the in-betweenness of identities and the option to reflect and traverse through these identities. Retelling the history of the fashion house Romani Design and its particular focus on the figure of the Virgin Mary, the authors provide a critical overview of the variety of collective practices in the fashion industry and its role in producing knowledge, while resolving the conflict between different identities.

Exploring scientific racism, Victoria Shmidt and Christopher R. Donohue, in their article “Invincible racism? The misuse of genetically informed arguments against Roma in Central and Eastern Europe,” raise the question of how plausible the transformation of epistemic bubbles as well as much more pernicious epistemic bunkers are in the context of the misuse of genetic evidence, while also discussing strategies for intervention. The dynamics of the geneticization of Roma, rooted in the long-term biologization of minorities, provides a number of options for exploring and mitigating this risk, while also underscoring present-day racialization and othering using contemporary biomedical tools and frameworks. The authors focus on the use of sociobiology by an international group of racially minded scholars from Western and Eastern Europe. The authors argue that contemporary racialization and othering is a significant, and unrecognized, challenge



to those experts seeking to emancipate Romani studies from reproducing race-informed arguments.

Conducting epistemic life makes our experience of epistemic bubbles inevitable, not least because the number of cognitive challenges exceeds our ability to develop independent, objective, and detailed knowledge in each case. Moreover, in facing the tension between a desirable and detailed understanding, and the propensity to generalize our explanatory schemes, we must take into account the fact that in our research, epistemic advantage and epistemic privilege remain in mutual opposition if we are to practice epistemic justice. The multiple epistemological challenges within Romani studies can attest to this statement. These challenges call for the critical revision of Romani studies from global perspectives, interdisciplinary, and unreservedly critical perspectives, which connects as well as details the trajectories of Roma in different geopolitical clusters and at the supranational level. We hope this special issue contributes to this task.

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# Romani American history: Historical absences and their consequences

ANN OSTENDORF

American historians have created a historical absence by ignoring Romani people's presence in evidence from the past. The origins of this "absence-ing" are multifaceted and interrelated, but fundamentally stem from the continued influence of out-of-date and unprofessional ways of thinking and knowing. Examining and understanding "absence-ing" requires a consideration of the nature of the discipline of history as well as a history of the missing historicization of Romani Americans. The consequences of the "absence-ing" of Romani people from American histories have negatively and distinctively influenced four different groups of people: historians of the Americas; historians of Romani people in Europe; Romani studies scholars of the Americas who are not historians; and Romani Americans. The harm that each of these four groups experiences builds upon and influences the others. Epistemic injustice is thus perpetuated in linked ways.

*Keywords:* Romani Americans, history, historiography, North America, South America, United States, Atlantic World, trans-Atlantic, absence, silence, epistemic injustice

## Introduction

Silences. Silences haunt us as scholars. We instinctively move to fill spaces from which no sounds, no voices, resonate. This aural metaphor has inspired and continues to motivate many Romani studies scholars. Whether by "giving voice to the voiceless," "making space for more voices," or "voicing our own experience," silence orients action. But what happens when the lack of resonance comes not from a lack of sound emanating, but from the orientation of the instruments used to capture sound? If there have been voices all along but no one has been listening, is silence the best metaphor?

Absence, a much less inspiring word than silence, better expresses professional historians of the Americas' engagement with Romani people.<sup>1</sup> Yet

1. See also Adrian Marsh's reflection on similar causes and consequences of the absence of Romani history but situated in a European rather than American context (Marsh 2007: 22–6) and Jodi Matthews for Britain (Matthews 2015). I use the term "Romani people" when writing in my own voice since it has become the most standardized English language

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absence implies potential presence (Simon 2019: 69; Brooks 2018; Fowles 2010: 25–6) similar to the way silence suggests expectant sound because, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, “absences ... are neither neutral or natural. They are created” (2015: 48; Richter 2023: 158). And as he and other historians have shown, it is much easier to hear the unheard than to conjure the unmade (Fuentes 2016). In her work on British Romani people, Jodie Matthews’s “insistence on ‘absent presence’ as opposed to just ‘absence’” emphasizes the quiet existence of those made out to be missing from national narratives (2015: 80). Similarly, American historians have created an historical absence by ignoring Romani people’s presence in evidence from the past.

Romani people have been made absent from the scholarship written by historians of the Americas.<sup>2</sup> Although there have been Romani people present in the Americas since 1498 (Gómez Alfaro, Costa, and Floate 1999: 10), and although traces of Romani peoples’ lives exist in records from diverse times and places, professional historians have not included Romani people in the histories they tell. Historians have created this historical absence despite Romani peoples’ presence in the American past. This “absence-ing,” thus, requires an explanation. If Romani people have lived in the Americas for centuries, why have professional historians so rarely included them in the histories they write? And, more importantly, especially in this issue devoted to epistemic virtue and vice (considered here as a knowledge system’s relative impact on the flourishing of its subjects), what are the consequences of this negligence on the part of historians of the Americas?

The origins of the “absence-ing” of Romani people from American histories are multifaceted but interrelated. They involve the continued influence of out-of-date and unprofessional ways of thinking and knowing on the work of contemporary scholars. As Kate Trumpener convincingly argued over two decades ago, Romani people have been placed “outside of historical record and outside of historical time.” They have been made into a people “without” history, in both senses of the word, “anchored in an eternal present” by western scholars over the past several centuries (1992: 860). Adrian Marsh continues, “The idea that Gypsies have little history has been extremely influential and is behind some of the misapprehension of non-Gypsy peoples about them”

scholarly expression, despite there being no universally accepted term and despite descendent communities having different preferences. I have retained the historical term when describing historical actors, for example as *Ciganos*, *Gitana/os* or *Bohémiens*. All quoted text is left as in the original.

2. Although this article deals exclusively with the work of professional scholars, it is important to note that “a diversity of memory agents, including memory activists who obey no protocol and are free of the blinders of academic knowledge,” are required for the fullest possible knowledge of the past. As Fahoum and Dubnov succinctly put it, “The past is too precious to be left in the hands of historians” (2023: 382).

(2007: 23). Epistemic injustice will continue to influence Romani Americans unless scholars break free from these origins. Examining and understanding this requires a consideration of the nature of the discipline of history as well as a history of the missing historicization of Romani Americans.

The consequences of the “absence-ing” of Romani people from American histories have negatively influenced four different groups of people in different kinds of ways. First, it has limited *historians of the Americas* and hence an understanding of the American past in its fullness and complexity. This in turn limits the knowledge all Americans hold of their own pasts and Romani peoples’ places within them. Second, it has limited *historians of Romani people in Europe*. These historians could have benefited methodologically, contextually, comparatively, and collaboratively from an engagement with American historiographies inclusive of Romani people. Third, it has limited *Romani studies scholars of the Americas who are not historians*. Most scholars of contemporary phenomena tether their work to past realities. When professional historians fail to provide meaningful histories, non-historians default to knowledge about the past from other available sources. And fourth, it has been, and remains, harmful to *Romani Americans*, who have been relegated to the realm of fictional characters because they lack a legitimate place in the available historical narratives (Trumpener 1992: 860–1, 884; Ferrari and Fotta 2014: 113). The harm that each of these four groups experiences builds upon and influences the others. Epistemic injustice is thus perpetuated in linked ways.

### The nature of history

Historians study the past. We might do this for different reasons and using various techniques, but a study of the past – or, more precisely, a study of the traces of the past accessible to us in the present – fundamentally undergirds all historical scholarship (Donnelly and Norton 2021: 6). While there is debate within the historical profession about the role of contemporary considerations in framing our questions, few professional historians would question the centrality of the past as the focus of our inquiry (Sweet 2022; Wilson 2022; Carr and Lipscomb 2021). Though historians write in the present and for the present, those who came before us remain our primary concern.

This temporal orientation might be seen as limiting, but only if the work of historians remains in isolation. If doing history is nothing more than the accumulation of more knowledge about the past, the discipline remains moribund. However, when done in partnership with other disciplines, history adds a dimension to those epistemologies in which the past is a peripheral concern. The historical method gently tugs at those working in other

disciplines to privilege temporal circumstances over autonomous objects of inquiry. Looking for Romani Americans *in* history rather than looking for a history *of* Romani Americans pivots away from an essentializing orientation. For example, including Romani people in American histories of race, colonization, and modernity (just to name a few areas) can allow Romani people to be considered in ongoing and more comprehensive conversations about race, colonization, and modernity in the present. Then, scholarship more directly addressing contemporary concerns has greater depth, is made more vibrant, and can do less harm.

Only a few things are required to do history well. Historians need traces from the past in the present that can be contextualized; this is often called an archive, which can, but does not have to, be a physical collection of documents. They also need a substantive collection of other historians' scholarship that can be built upon and engaged with in conversation; this is usually referred to as an historiography. Finally, historians need an audience for the narratives they construct; while the immediate audience is typically other historians (or at least other academics), the ultimate audiences are the publics with which their works eventually find resonance. Historians buttress journalism, jurisprudence, public policy, art, cultural criticism, activism, and more.

### **The missing historicization of Romani American history**

Just as some claims and stories about the past can be “ahistorical” (that is, “verifiably untrue”), what I am calling an “ahistoriography” can develop when a scholarly tradition exists about the past that has not been built using accepted historical methodologies. “Ahistoriographies” can come into existence when the absence of an actual historiography is so strongly felt that it pulls others to fill the void. My creation of this term is reminiscent of Lia Brozgal’s “anarchive” in which “the prefix an- can mean both ‘without’ or ‘not’” and which describes a “rogue collection of cultural texts” that spill into empty space and “do history” differently (2020: 5, 26). An “ahistoriography” is a rogue collection of the histories themselves that has developed through a process of “surrogation” and through “attempts to fit satisfactory alternatives” into “actual or perceived vacancies” (Roach 1996: 2). That historians of the Americas have not considered Romani people in the histories they produce (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 6) has fundamentally caused this “ahistoriography.”

The first works written about Romani people in the Americas were made by a group of aficionados, commonly referred to today as “gypsylorists” (Mayall 2004: 162–79). Probing late-nineteenth and early twentieth century questions with all the assumptions of their time and socio-cultural positions, they

originated and spread much of the information about Romani Americans consumed by curious experts and amateurs alike.<sup>3</sup> Though scholars might find their linguistic and ethnological commentary useful, their attempts at history are largely unusable by contemporary historians. These “gypsyorists” rarely referenced their sources related to Romani American history making verification of even their factual claims impossible.

That few historians of the Americas have attempted a critical analysis of “gypsyorist” claims within more recent historiographical concerns of the profession – concerns such as labor and class relations; immigration, race, and civil rights; feminist critiques; transnational Atlantic and Pacific connections; postcolonialism and indigeneity; and the critical cultural turn – has isolated Romani history from the American historical profession’s developments. The stories of Romani Americans remain stranded in the past, as yet unrecovered by historians of the Americas. That most attempts at developing a systematic Romani American history are nearly a century old impede easy inclusion of Romani people into contemporary American historical scholarship. Thus, the failure to transcend the “gypsyorist” legacy is both a cause and effect of Romani people’s absence from contemporary American histories and the resulting “ahistoriography.” This cycle has proven difficult to break.

Beyond the failure to transcend “gypsyorist” writings, historians’ reticence to write Romani people into their histories stems from multiple interdependent factors. Some of these are quite legitimate, others less so. The scattered, sparse, and uneven sources available can prevent historians from attempting research related to Romani Americans. Pressure to publish orients work (of young scholars especially) and leads to historical questions being asked with certain archives in mind. Many archives were created for reasons and remain organized in ways, though this is gradually changing, that hide certain experiences and thus naturalize and perpetuate state violence. Romani Americans, if they are even identified as such in records, are often found in collections related to criminalized behaviors precisely because such regulatory records were abundantly created and preserved. The most obvious reading of Romani Americans in archival sources would continue

3. For an non-exhaustive list of those “gypsyorists” who mentioned Romani North Americans specifically, see Lockwood and Salo’s bibliography (1994) for the following entries: Black (1916), Brown (1929), Crofton (1910), Groome (1890), Leland (1883), Pennell (1882), Prince (1907), Shoemaker (1926; 1929), Simson (1866), Sinclair (1917), Thompson (1911), Wright (1938). For some early writing on Brazil, see, Moraes Filho (1886) and Coelho (1892), especially Appendix II. Most of their work was ethnological or linguistic in nature – that is they described or documented what they observed or heard. When they ventured to describe the past beyond their direct experiences, they rarely documented the sources of their information. The exception to this is when they reprinted extractions from historical documents. These extractions, however, were rarely contextualized historically.

this concealment or violence without a critical understanding of why such archives were created in the first place (Lee 2022; Putnam 2016: 389–94; Stoler 2010). Though sources exist to write Romani American histories, systemic issues hamper such efforts.

In addition, the assumptions American historians have held (and often still hold) about Romani people prevent their consideration as a people able to be historicized or deserving of historical treatment. In their bibliography titled, “Gypsies and Travelers of North America,” William Lockwood and Sheila Salo noted that, “trained historians have ignored the daunting task of studying the history of Gypsy groups in North America. The history of these groups has been left to authors of general works with less than successful results” (1994: 6). Little has changed in the decades since their compilation. Without professional historical scholarship to draw on, historians – like others – are undoubtedly influenced by popular histories about Romani people. Much of this is riddled with factual inaccuracies; little of it historicizes Romani Americans; virtually none of it is written by professional historians.<sup>4</sup> The popular history of Romani Americans concerns itself with questions of origins, culture, and ethnic group boundaries. As Martin Fotta explores elsewhere in this issue, there is then a “formulaic repetition” that creates a “certain disembodied ‘truth’” and a “forgetting” of the immediacy, complexity, and contingency of all lives lived in the past.

This “ahistoriography” has also occurred because of American historians’ lack of engagement with other disciplines and the histories of other places. Through an engagement with other disciplines, American historians could have exposed themselves to scholarship about present day Romani Americans (some of which is detailed below) and thus envisioned a need to trace the “before now” of these other studies and stories. In addition, if historians of the Americas framed the scope of their inquiry with a less nationalistic orientation, they may have learned about Romani people from histories of Europe and beyond (again, more on this below). Historians of the United States in particular are notoriously insulated from scholarship on the larger Americas; historians of either American continent rarely consider their scholarship in relation to Europe or Asia (Lowe 2015: 37).

An example from British history might serve as a helpful comparative to fully illuminate the absence of Romani people from American historiographies. Recently, Becky Taylor and Jim Hinks published an article titled, “What field? Where? Bringing Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History into

4. For just two popular examples, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romani\\_Americans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romani_Americans); <https://www.everyculture.com/multi/Du-Ha/Gypsy-Americans.html>. For a recent non-academic history, see Bloomfield (2019).



View.” This piece offers a historiography of these populations, with the goal of giving the “non-specialist an understanding of the key pieces of scholarship and debates within the field.” It also argues that “it is not sufficient for these histories to remain only a concern of ‘Romani’ scholars, and so exist largely separate from both mainstream histories and histories of Britain’s other minority populations” (Taylor and Hinks 2021: 629). These goals are laudatory but ones that could not be reproduced for the Americas, much less for any distinct American nation.

While there have been scattered references to and a few article-length studies on Romani people in American historical scholarship, there is nothing remotely approaching a historiography of Romani Americans. There are no “key pieces of scholarship.” There are no “debates.” There certainly is no “field.” American historians, when they have encountered Romani people in the archives seem either to ignore their identification as Romani people or doubt what to make of it. Had historians of race, labor, immigration, or civil rights (just to name a few) considered Romani people within the scope of their inquiry, as yet to be imagined nuances to each field of the American past would no doubt have emerged. While historians of Romani people outside the Americas also regularly lament a scholarly lacuna for some historical periods (Pym 2022: 553; Steiner 2023: 91, 104), the size and scope of the American historical profession reveals the extent of this absence writ large.

### **The limitations to historians of the Americas**

What follows is a survey of historical references related to Romani Americans, with nods to ways histories of the Americas could be made more robust with examples from my own research. Undoubtedly, these examples illustrate merely a sliver of the historical “absence-ing” but they touch upon lines of inquiry that historians are currently exploring and show how placing Romani people into these frames could significantly enhance our understanding of Romani lives in the past. While not nearly enough to constitute a historiography of Romani Americans – the studies are too isolated and disconnected from each other – what does exist proves that Romani American history can be written. The previously named challenges can be overcome.

Virtually all full-length historical studies published in English (and they are all article-length studies) related to Romani people in the Americas do so in a trans-Atlantic context. This is logical because of the mobility of Romani people throughout the Atlantic world, the richness of the field of Atlantic history, and because historians can supplement limited American-centered sources with those from elsewhere. Examples include Bill Donovan’s work on “Gypsies in Early Modern Portugal and Brazil” in the *Journal of*

*Social History* (1992), Martin Fotta's article on *Ciganos* in Brazil (2020), Rafael Buhigas Jiménez's examination of Argentine immigration (2021b), and Adèle Sutre's study of the early twentieth-century transnational movements (especially in the United States and Canada) of the extended Toshoron family (2014). Dalen Wakeley-Smith's recent dissertation and article (2022; 2023) suggests the possible growth of this scholarly trickle. Beyond my articles on colonial North American Romani people in Louisiana (2020; 2021a; 2021b), Maryland (2018), and Virginia (2017; 2019), there are no other academic histories of Romani Americans published in English.

In Spanish, scholarship by Manuel Martínez Martínez (2004; 2010) considers colonial-era Spanish *Gitana/os*, although his work is more about Spanish attempts to keep them out of the Americas rather than Romani experiences within the Americas. Along similar lines, a compilation of primary sources dealing with Romani deportations to the Spanish, Portuguese, and British colonies by Antonio Gómez Alfaro, Elisa Maria Lopes da Costa, and Sharon Sillers Floate (1999) includes numerous examples of deported individuals and the laws that led to their exile. However, it provides little historical context to explain these pieces of evidence. Gómez Alfaro (e.g. 1982) and Costa (e.g. 2001; 2005) have written other works related to the Americas as well. Two brief accounts (Martins Torres 2017; Ortiz 2021) and a thesis (Baroco Gálvez 2014: 71–142) drawn from inquisitorial records of New Spain hint at the possibility of studying *Gitanas* historically.<sup>5</sup> One more nationally focused history, that of Carlos Pardo-Figueroa Thays (2013) on Romani people in Peru, is mostly a summary of references to that country from other published secondary sources. A published conference paper by Péter Torbágyi (2003) on the Latin American use of the word *húngaros* rounds out the historical scholarship.

These few publications led Fernanda Baroco and David Lagunas, anthropologists who survey the minimal writing on Roma in the Mexican past, to come to the depressing conclusion that “in spite of their presence throughout Mexican history, the Roma do not represent either an academic or a political topic of relevance.... There are virtually no works on this matter” (2014: 97–8). “Archival work is virtually non-existent” on “Roma in the Americas,” echo the linguists Cristian Padure, Stefano de Pascale, and Evangelia Adamou, who also study Mexican topics (2018: 265). In a very recent article surveying the state of the field of Romani studies in Latin America (Fotta and Sabino Salazar 2023), the authors report that, “despite increased interest in Romanies in recent years, rigorous research was still rare rather than a rule. One

5. For a transcription of the 1668 inquisitorial case against María de la Concepción, see Flores and Masera (2010: 133–6).

historian observed that one of the biggest challenges has been the lack of ‘solid archival research.’”<sup>6</sup>

Such a limited Romani American historiography hampers American historians who are not primarily interested in Romani people but who encounter them in the archives. A recent email to me from the president of the foremost US historical society on immigration and ethnicity sums up the degree of this problem (email message to author, 8 June 2022). During the process of writing a book (then heading into production) on nineteenth-century US immigration policy, this established and successful historian of immigration and ethnic history first considered a reading of the US Congressional debates on the fourteenth amendment to the US Constitution for what they included – a racist, antigypsy rant (*Congressional Globe* 1866: 2,890–2).<sup>7</sup> Previously, this historian seems to have considered the “gypsies” of this well-known, commonly studied, and easily accessible public document merely a euphemism for some other group of people. This historian suggested that one senator’s remarks during the debates “invoked the ‘Gypsy’ mainly because of concerns that the children of Chinese immigrants would be citizens. [But] I have to assume that he was also referring to some tangible reality in his own state.” Could there be “some transient migrant (possibly or probably non-Roma)” who lived in the US in the mid-nineteenth century, he wondered? That this particular historian can still ask such a question reveals the scale of the consequences this historical absence has produced.

Even those American historians who do document the Romani people they encounter in their research usually seem uncertain about what to make of them. For example, Cecile Vidal’s (2019: 300) important study of colonial Louisiana includes a brief mention of the experiences of a *Bohémien* family, but with no analysis related to this label attached to them in the records, despite the fact that she translated *Bohémien* as “gypsy” in a prior study (2005: 96). Another scholar of the Louisiana colony, Kimberly Hanger (1997a: 15, 93; 1997b: 222), describes a case of interracial marriage, uniquely of a “white” woman who married a “black” man. Although Hanger notes that this woman was labeled *Gitana* in the record, she does nothing to analyze that label further. Both of these highly regarded historians recognize that these Romani labels mattered, but without scholarship to draw on seem

6. Fotta and Sabino Salazar (2023) identify many of the same concerns as I do in this article, such as the isolation of scholars working within a single national or imperial tradition, the need to connect European and American scholarship, the heavy lean towards anthropological or ethnographical (rather than historical) questions and methodologies, and fragmented research agendas not in conversation with each other.

7. The fourteenth amendment was to decide terms of federal citizenship in the context of the recently freed slaves immediately following the nation’s civil war. For more on this history, see Ostendorf (2019: 54–5).

unsure of what to do with this information. Yet even documenting references to Romani people in the archives as these two scholars have done is rare by American historians.<sup>8</sup>

Other historians of the Americas who have encountered Romani people in the archives have written about them, although without documenting their Romani identity. For example, there is a well-studied case (Ingersoll 1999: 138–42; Aubert 2004: 473–5; Spear 2003: 92–3; Spear 2009: 79–80; Vidal 2013: 128–30) from 1720 of a young French woman considered part of the first interracial marriage in the Louisiana colony. An entire scholarly debate has developed around this young woman's marriage related to what can be learned about racialization at this time and place. Yet, none of the several scholars who consider her ever note her and her family's labeling in the records as *Bohémien*. In another well-studied event, during which members of the Native American Natchez nation resisted French encroachment into their territory in 1729, several people labeled *Bohémien* were included among those killed. Supplementary records made just prior to the violence by a French traveler in the region also described *Bohémien* families farming in the area. However, without a Romani American historiography from which to draw that would clarify the usage of the term *Bohémien* in early French America, historians of these events (Sayre 2012: 209; Milne 2015: 142) have assumed these individuals were immigrants from the region of Bohemia and translate them variably as German and Czech. There are also instances of modern transcribers and translators of historical census and ship records not transcribing the *Bohémien* marker attached to certain individuals in the original records, even though they transcribe other racial, national, and ethnic designators. This effectively eliminates these people as *Bohémien* within published sources. As this evidence suggests, the barriers to constructing Romani American history are diverse, interconnected, and debilitating.

This “ahistoriography” of Romani Americans, both a cause and consequence of the limitations of American historians, negatively impacts our understanding of the American past. Questions remain unasked, interpretations remain unconsidered, methodologies remain unpursued, and accepted assumptions remain unchallenged. Evidence proves Romani American presence in a wide variety of times and places, but these stories are not known, even by the historians who should know them. Thus, Romani Americans remain “without” American history (Trumpener 1992). This limits our understanding of Romani Americans and American history as a whole.

8. Similarly, in their scholarship on English, Scottish, and Irish deportations, Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton (2004: 68–70; 2013) note a number of individuals as “Gypsies” and consider their experiences within that broader context.

### The limitations to historians of Europe

Such a limited historiography related to Romani Americans has limited the histories written about Romani people in Europe as well. This is because the transimperial and transnational movements of Romani people between Europe and the Americas cannot be fully considered when historians of Europe lack partner scholarship with which to connect their work. Maria Helena Sánchez Ortega (1977), Bernard Leblon (1985), Richard Pym (2007), and Tamar Herzog (2012) writing on Spain, Laurinda Abreau (2007) writing on Portugal, David Cressy (2018) writing on England, William O'Reilly (2003) writing on the Hapsburg Empire, Francois Vaux de Foletier (e.g. 1961; 1968) and Henriette Asséo (1974; 2000) writing on France, Jennifer Illuzzi (2019) writing on Germany and Italy, Ari Joskowicz (2023) writing on the Holocaust, and even Becky Taylor (2014) in her general survey of Europe (just to name a few), could have significantly benefited from an American historiography to supplement the Romani histories they uncover. Instead, strands of the stories they tell are left unfinished when trying to tie in American connections.

As a result, they mostly are left to uncritically regurgitate the handful of well-known American examples, if an American connection is drawn out at all, although each historian would no doubt prefer to do more. Each scholar could have benefited from a complementary Romani American historiography from which they might have drawn, but these histories do not exist. It is impossible to delineate with precision how their scholarship might have differed had equivalently detailed histories of Romani Americans existed for them to converse with and connect to. However, one speculative possibility can serve to illustrate.

Tamar Herzog's work (2012) on early modern imperial Spanish thinking about race and exclusion includes a section on Romani people as well as sections on indigenous and African Americans. Had there been a body of scholarship dealing with racial formation inclusive of Romani people in the Spanish *Americas* that she had been able to draw from, as there is for indigenous and African Americans, her analysis would have been more expansive. As a result, a deeper understanding of the history of Romani Americans remained undeveloped. Lacking this work from which to draw impeded her scholarship in ways that cannot be known precisely, but that no doubt reverberates through unexplored fields of inquiry. Specifically, my own work that considers Romani people in the context of racial formation in the Americas would certainly have benefited had she been able to integrate her scholarship on Europe with scholarship from an American context. This absence reverberates unknown lost possibilities.

The point is not to shame these scholars or discount their very important work. A historian cannot be at fault for not drawing on other scholarship that does not exist. I empathize, sympathize, and include myself among them. On the contrary, our methodology asks us to consult other historians when we encounter evidence outside our expertise or immediate inquiry. When there are no other historians to consult, the methodology breaks down. When the methodology breaks down for historians, other scholars step in to determine the answers about the past that they need.

This “ahistoriography” of Romani Americans thus limits historians of Romani people working on Europe and other places. Historians could learn from each other through comparative or entangled scholarship. We could knit our stories together, especially where they meet, often within the Atlantic rim. Though there is much to be said for producing local, regional, and national narratives, the exchange and movements of people and ideas (especially between Europe and the Americas) has been fundamental to the lives of people in both places for the past five hundred years. Stories remain half told, domains less richly intertwined, methodologies less meaningfully developed, absences unfilled. European Romani history is thus diminished without access to this American dimension so significant to the lives of those in the past.

### **The limitations to Romani studies scholars who are not historians**

The neglect by historians of the American pasts to consider the lives of Romani people has led to many problematic results in the present. Scholars in other disciplines in need of a historical grounding on which to contextualize their findings have written (or implied) the histories they needed. These histories often lack an engagement with accepted historical methodologies – such as extensive and systematic grounding in time and place – or rely on outdated and/or ahistorical scholarship – such as a heavy reliance on “gypsylorist” information and orientation. The quality of the histories they create themselves or repeat from prior sources varies tremendously.

While it is admirable to pursue absent knowledge that could prove useful to one’s work, the disciplinary gap (like a cultural gap or generation gap) can hinder the development of communication and relationships. Scholarship ignorant of contemporary historiographical concerns or ambivalent about accepted historical methodologies is usually ignored by historians (Marsh 2007: 25–6, 27); this disciplinary boundary work is a habit common in other disciplines as well (Gieryn 1983; 1999). This can be illustrated with a hypothetical example. If historians had only become seriously interested in telling Native American or African American histories today (as opposed

to decades or generations ago), considering the current state of accepted historical practice these hypothetical modern historians would not find it acceptable to use scholarship from the 1890s or 1910s upon which to base their work. This is because the epistemological assumptions from these older eras (such as taking race and civilization as fixed biological and cultural categories) would be impossible to integrate with twenty-first century knowledge. These hypothetical historians would also not find it acceptable to use the scholarship of contemporary sociologists, ethnologists, and anthropologists (no matter how plentiful and quality the work produced) to explain *the past*. They would instead engage directly with primary source evidence and look to histories being written on related topics, into which they would nestle their new lines of inquiry. This hypothetical illustration describes the actual state of Romani American history today.

The absence of contemporary historical scholarship inclusive of Romani American people results in Romani studies scholars who are not trained historians to lean heavily on the century-plus old “gypsylorist” scholarship. At times this reliance is done knowingly, at other times it is inadvertent. This is done either by directly citing this body of work or, as is increasingly common, citing someone who cites someone who cites someone who does. This long lineage, without any direct engagement with the primary sources, without any contextualization of these sources within contemporary historical conversations, and without consideration of modern historical conventions, results in the stagnation of Romani American history and its seeming irrelevance to significant contemporary historical questions. Though this is also a problem in histories of Romani people in Europe, in which “numerous mystifications are accepted as irrefutable historical facts, often without any attempts at verification,” (Marushiakova and Popov 2021: introduction) the dearth of scholarship related to Romani Americans significantly compounds the issue.

This could be illustrated with many different examples, however I’ve chosen just a few. Marlene Sway (1988: 37–9) and Brian Belton (2005: chapter 4) come to mind here as important links in this genealogy.<sup>9</sup> Neither Sway nor Belton are historians, yet both wanted to ground their studies in a history that had not been written and so did their best with what they could find. Sway’s sociological study, *Familiar Strangers: Gypsy Life in America*, describes Gypsies as an ethnic group and is based on fieldwork primarily from Los Angeles in the 1970s. In her brief section describing Romani

9. The anthropologist Rena Gropper (1975: 18, 20) could also be included here, although she is rarely cited for historical content. This could be because the history she relates reads as much less scholarly (there are no citations for instance), however it could also be because the history she tells came directly from her informants. If so, that makes her historical recounting an important source that should be given much more attention by historians.



American history, she cites “gypsyologist” studies from the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars contemporary to her who are not historians, and two pieces of primary source evidence from Britain. Belton’s *Questing Gypsy Identity: Ethnic Narratives in Britain and America*, includes a chapter titled “Historical Genesis of Gypsies in America.” He almost exclusively uses information from nineteenth-century “gypsyologist” studies from which to build his Romani American history, although he cites Sway’s and Ian Hancock’s (1987) narratives as well. The significance of Sway and Belton within their respective disciplines has led to constant re-citing of the American Romani histories they tell. In just one example, one full paragraph related to Romani Americans in Becky Taylor’s general Romani history survey (2014: 92) is taken almost verbatim from Belton’s text. None of these scholars engage with the historical scholarship which could have helped them contextualize the historical experiences of the Romani subjects whose lives they consider.

One of the more problematic, though possibly most cited, examples of an attempt to write Romani American history that does not engage with accepted historical methodologies and is built upon “gypsyologist” tellings of the past, is seen in the linguist Ian Hancock’s *The Pariah Syndrome* (1987: 86–99). In the segments related to Romani American history, most pieces of evidence are merely restatements from “gypsyologist” works and remain uncontextualized and isolated from contemporary historical conversations. In just one example, Hancock merely reprints text from Henry Shoemaker’s “Origins of the Pennsylvania German Gypsies” without considering any histories of immigration to the region or even noting the era when these immigrants arrived. (Shoemaker likewise provides no sources to suggest how he knows the when, where, how, or why these individuals came to North America, despite narrating extensively on their “origins”). Hancock does not consider the works of American historians who study the topics he describes which leads to ahistorical interpretations of primary source evidence.

In another example, his conclusion that Romani people were enslaved and raped (Hancock 1987: 92, 95) in British North America cannot be verified in any contextualized reading of any known piece of archival evidence (which is not to say it didn’t happen, just that there is just no known evidence that it did). Evidence does prove Romani people to have been present in various parts of eighteenth-century North America but with the status of indentured servants or free people, the same as other colonists (Ostendorf 2018). He expands the claim of Romani enslavement in *We are the Romani People* (2002: 27) to include eighteenth-century Louisiana – a place home to many Romani families, but who in every documented case lived as an indentured, enlisted, or free person (Ostendorf 2020: 142; 2021a). The claim of rape is



based on evidence describing only an unmarried mother being taken to court, a very common occurrence at the time, and reveals nothing about the circumstances of this woman's pregnancy (Ostendorf 2017; 2019). The scholarly gap created by an absent Romani American history may have been filled in for good reason if, unfortunately, through bad practice.

It is understandable why Hancock made the claims he did, even while historians cannot. By the late 1980s, historians of the African American past and those concerned with the experiences of American women had begun producing key pieces of historical scholarship, defining historical debates, and even delineating these respective areas as legitimate historical fields. No such scholarly significance existed for Romani Americans. Romani Americans remained absent from the radically new American history that had been consciously expanded to include previously excluded voices. An absence of Romani Americans in this new American history begged the question: was it just that no one was listening or had no one ever been there at all? Hancock ensured that future scholars knew that Romani Americans had lived in the American past and he did so by mapping Romani Americans onto the histories of others. Making legible through comparison can be an appropriate academic exercise, but this was an exercise he – a non-historian – should not have had to perform. The nuance, diversity, and accuracy of the lived experiences of past Romani Americans did not need to be mapped onto or inserted into the stories of other people. Romani Americans have their own past stories. They speak through the sources; historians have not been listening.

Other scholars' heavy reliance on the legitimacy of Hancock's expertise has significantly contributed to the repetition of his claims. The strength of his claims about Romani American history draws in more Romani studies scholars whose further citations increase the weight of the claims. At the same time historians, whose demands for documentary evidence cannot be satisfied in this instance, distance themselves further from intervening in such conversations, thus allowing the "ahistoriography" to develop uncontested. This is problematic because historians serve a specific purpose. They pull evidence from archives and construct "foundation stories" so other scholars don't have to but can build on these footings with their own work related to questions about contemporary concerns. Without a well-built historical foundation, the intellectual houses raised on them are significantly less secure.

And so, due to a lack of historical methodological rigor, claims about Romani American history become accepted without evidence, nuance, or a consideration of the already extant robust related scholarship. The absence of one scholar can become the error of another. This precipitates "ahistory"

as well as “ahistoriography.” It opens space for a critique of Romani studies if the history it tethers itself to is easily dismissed by historians. With the increase in the critical cultural turn, and the accompanying critique of it, a solid historical grounding could help defend this methodological approach (which is used in a wide variety of disciplines) by securing its often highly theoretical scope into more solid real-life stories from the past that are more difficult to dismiss.

This “ahistoriography” thus also limits scholars in disciplines other than history researching Romani Americans. Though Romani studies scholars who are not historians produce significant historical contributions as parts of larger projects in ethnography, folklore, sociology, ethnomusicology, and anthropology, they do so as part of attempts to find in the past answers to their questions about the present, or in a consideration of the past merely as a prologue to the present, rather than as considerations of the past on its own terms. This means that knowledge about Romani Americans who lived *in the past* remains underdeveloped even in these studies.

Brian Belton’s work falls into this category, with his frame of “describing the historical background from which the American Gypsy population emerges,” as he surveys the literature on “the progenitors of the current Gypsy population” (2005: 91). In her award-winning ethnomusicological study, *Romani Routes* (2012), Carol Silverman interviewed Macedonian Roma in the United States whose personal histories she described. However, her study’s purpose is not to analyze these histories, but rather to explain Romani music and life in the present. More recent examples include the work of anthropologists like Martin Fotta (2020), Patricia Galletti (2021), and Esteban Acuña Cabanzo (2019), who have each uncovered new archival sources or reinterpreted familiar ones to address relevant historical questions. A recent edited collection by ethnographer Neyra Patricia Alvarado Solís (2020), includes some selections that make significant contributions to Romani histories of the Spanish-speaking Americas. The earlier ethnographic work of Matt Salo (1982; 1986), Shiela Salo (1992), and Carol Silverman (2017) have provided documentation for more recent US histories, even if usually to foreground their more ethnographic aims. There are similar cases from Spanish and Portuguese American places, most recently David Lagunas’s *American Gitanos in Mexico City* (2023) that pulls an assortment of historical details from published scholarship to ground his ethnography. James Deutsch (2022) contributes a biography of the Romani American Steve Kaslov to a collection of “portraits” of elite Romani activists around the world, while Cynthia Levine-Rasky (2016) describes late twentieth century immigration to Canada to ground her sociological concerns. Each of these scholars appears only to have turned to writing history once they noticed the consequences of

its absence to the contemporary stories they told. These scholars firstly want to understand Romani Americans and only secondly want to understand Romani American history.

When scholarship lacks primary source evidence that can be corroborated, appropriate historical contextualization, and peer review by others in the discipline, it is likely to be dismissed as unusable knowledge by historians (even if it might be true). Much of the work related to Romani American history falls into one of these three categories. Thus, American history as created by professionals remains diminished as a result of their disengagement with stories from the past that do not appear to adhere to the historical method. This absence has lasting effects on Romani studies scholars and Romani Americans alike.

### **The harmful consequences to Romani Americans**

Contextualizing the lives of Romani people in the American past within an accurate historical context will allow those working in all disciplines and sectors, including human rights (Meyer and Uyehara 2017), a firmer foundation on which to do their work.<sup>10</sup> This more solid historical foundation should allow new questions to be asked and new lines of inquiry to be followed to better explain and understand Romani American lives in the present.

When these absences, silences, and “ahistories” become normative they reverberate into the lives of contemporary Romani people and activists whose energies are (rightly) focused elsewhere, but who nonetheless look to history to make sense of their lives and the work that they do. This work often involves fighting against erasure and utilizing facts of history to legitimize their claims for the present and hopes for the future. The theme of Roma Week 2023 – “Reveal our Past to Reclaim our Future” – suggests the significance of history to activist agendas (Roma Week: 2023). This lack of Romani American history also has implications in other participatory democracies like the United States. Carol Silverman, writing in 2017, noted that “No Oregon Roma are currently activists ... [but] ... I believe if more Roma knew their history, they would be more activist; however, it is neither taught in schools nor discussed at home.” (2017: 545) This legacy of American historians’ “absence-ing” has real-world implications.

Placing Romani people from diverse times and places into their accurate historical context exposes the specificity of their lived experiences. The

10. These authors only draw historical information from an unattributed museum website for the collection of Carlos de Wendler-Funaro: <https://smithsonianeducation.org/migrations/gyp/gypstart.html>.

resultant diversity of experience belies any essentializing frameworks or conclusions that extend across time and place universally. The ramifications of essentializing, fictionalizing, and “ahistoricizing” Romani people who lived in the past extend into the daily lives of diverse Romani Americans today. Such damages can be addressed for Romani people, as have begun to be for others, but only with accurate histories. Movements for reparations, for example, involve addressing historical injustices. But successful reparations movements virtually always require documented injustices from the past (Immler 2021: 153–4; Matache and Bhabha 2021: 263–4). The discipline of history, then, is central in these efforts even if how history might be used and created for such efforts remains contested.

This is most clearly seen in some of the recent findings from the Harvard University Health and Human Rights and Voice of Roma study from 2020. The study’s authors wanted to understand how “the approximately 1 million or so Romani people in the U.S ... experience their minority status.” They found that:

the responses are worrying indeed. Nearly all respondents felt that most Americans know little or nothing about the Romani Americans, but nonetheless, by far the majority had experienced anti-Romani sentiments, citing prevailing stereotypes of Romani people as criminals, liars, and thieves. As a consequence, most respondents both valued and hid their Romani identity. Being Roma was widely observed to hurt chances at schooling, housing, and work. These findings add yet more evidence of the pervasiveness of racism in the United States. (Matache et al. 2020: 4)

The authors concluded by stating, “We hope that the study will stimulate a greater interest in and understanding of this unique heritage and strengthen collective determination to defend American Romani people” (Matache et al. 2020: 4).

Although understanding the history of Romani people won’t by itself eliminate anti-Romani racism (Matache and Bhabha 2021: 261), there is little hope of addressing anti-Romani sentiments in the United States and throughout the Americas without an understanding of where it has come from, how it has changed over time, and how it has been grounded in time and place. To do so requires a historical orientation; this understanding should start with histories of Romani people. The lived experience of Romani Americans in all its vast diversity, including the racism and other forms of discrimination they have faced, would go a long way to removing fictional assumptions held about them, as histories of other American people has already shown possible (Deloria 1999; Deloria 2004).

Romani people need to be involved in building this history. As a non-Romani scholar, I can perform the historical method in a way my professional peers

find acceptable, but I cannot step outside of my own subjectivities. The stories I choose to tell with the evidence I uncover could always be framed otherwise. Were I writing histories with a different connection to the evidence, my stories would no doubt be different. For a sample of how this impacts historiography, the historian Rafael Buhigas Jiménez's (2021a) musings about "the exercise of making history 'being a Gypsy historian,'" describe a Spanish "historiographical problem that has not finished germinating." He "intertwine(s) the autobiographical and the intellectual in an attempt to approach the debate from the *egohistorie*, confronting the situation face to face." Buhigas Jiménez touches on many of the same problems and concerns that I consider in this essay, but importantly does so from a different subjectivity. In doing so he reveals additional limitations to a robust contemporary Romani American historiography; he also reveals the potential that new approaches might provide. If histories that are constructed about the Romani American past are more about the historian's discovery rather than about the useful lessons of the past for the present or the future, Romani American history seems unlikely to be appealing to Romani Americans.

Romani Americans of the past and the present deserve more than what historians have given them. They deserve to have their true past stories told in contexts that would have made sense to them, not just in ways that make sense to us. Since American history is still largely understood by the public as an additive multicultural story that is used to defend and promote a more inclusive present, historical absence can justify, explain, and even cause the fictive presence of Romani Americans in many people's consciousnesses today. If historians are not obligated to tell true past stories about Romani Americans, we should demand to know why when they are required for everyone else. If Romani Americans have no place in this history – a story that links past and present – then Romani Americans have no place in modern American nations beyond their presence in degrading and damaging fictions.

### History for the Future

Breaking this cycle remains difficult since initiating new routes requires more energy and greater faith than furthering or steering already extent trajectories. Many of the issues – structural, methodological, and personal – that prevent American historians from writing Romani history exist because no one has written this history before. However, many other people previously absent from American history now find a growing and even substantial presence within it (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2015). Women, racialized groups, and queer people most obviously come to mind. But this did not occur naturally; people

made choices that allowed new histories to be written. Advisors encouraged students to listen to the silences; they welcomed (or at least tolerated) new approaches and methodologies that resonated with a new generation. Editors generously published work that didn't quite fit with what had come before. Historians learned from other scholarship about the absences they had not yet felt. Encouraging a colleague, a student, or an editor towards Romani American history is an option for each of us.

Historians are obliged to privilege past lives over those in the present in the knowledge they produce. This is unique to the discipline and its resultant methodology. That Romani American history has not been written is due to conscious choices made by historians. Historians have shown time and time again that “the subaltern can speak,” has spoken, does speak (Morris 2010). So while creating a documentable past remains the domain of professional historians, when historians evade their responsibility, others make the past stories that they need. To move beyond denying fictions requires replacing them with true stories – stories from the past that can be linked with stories from the present. The sources exist to tell these true past stories. Romani people were present. Romani people were speaking. It remains to be seen if historians will start listening.

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# Romanies within the interlocking matrix of racialization: How Ciganos in Brazil became accused of introducing an infectious disease

MARTIN FOTTA

Brazilian medical texts sometimes forge a link between Ciganos (Romanies) and the spread of trachoma, an infectious eye disease. The form of the claim has become standardized into something like this: trachoma was brought to the country in the eighteenth century by Ciganos who were deported from Portugal to the provinces of Maranhão and Ceará. This article traces the origins of this claim to a group of early twentieth-century ophthalmologists from Northeast Brazil, particularly in Ceará. It reveals that several racial projects are folded into the claim and makes a case for the need to approach the dynamics of racialization of Romanies relationally. The analysis of the Romani societal position, characteristics ascribed to them in relation to other communities, and the ways those communities are racialized not only reveals new insights but breaches the continued insularity of Romani studies.

*Keywords:* Romanies, trachoma, Brazil, relational racialization, public health

## A formulaic single sentence about Ciganos and trachoma

This article considers a curious sidenote in Brazilian medical history: the claim that trachoma was brought to the country by Ciganos (Romanies). An infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia trachomatis*, a trachoma infection causes roughening of the inner surface of the eyelids, which can lead to eye pain and eventual blindness. The first area of the disease's outbreak in Brazil is thought to be in the Northeastern region (*Nordeste*), specifically the valley of Cariri in the state of Ceará. Literature refers to it as the “*foco de Cariri*” or “*foco de Nordeste*” – the Cariri or Northeastern “hotspot” (“outbreak”). It is distinguished from another hotspot area in the south (Illustration 1).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, some medical doctors asserted that trachoma was introduced to Brazil by Ciganos deported from Portugal in the eighteenth century. This claim appears in trachoma-related texts up to the twenty-first century. For instance, a guide to trachoma control published by the Ministry of Health in 2001 reads:

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FIGURE 1. "Geographic distribution of trachoma in Brazil, indicating the two most endemic areas: São Paulo, to the south, and Ceará, to the north" (Conde 1930: 278)

It [trachoma] is said to have been present in Brazil from the eighteenth century onward, in the Northeast, appearing with the deportation of the Ciganos who had been expelled from Portugal and settled in the provinces of Ceará and Maranhão, constituting the first “hotspots” of trachoma in the country, the most famous of which was the “Cariri hotspot,” in the south of what is now the state of Ceará. (Barros 2001: 9)

Similar statements can be found in scientific articles, such as the following published in the *Brazilian Journal of Ophthalmology* in 2012:

It [trachoma] is said to have been introduced in Brazil as of the eighteenth century, in the Northeast, with the deportation of the Ciganos who had been expelled from Portugal and settled in the provinces of Ceará and Maranhão, thus constituting the first “outbreaks” of trachoma in the country, of which the most famous was the “outbreak of Cariri,” in the south of the current state of Ceará. (Schellini and Sousa 2012: 200)

A 2008 newspaper article describing preventive actions against trachoma organized at schools in the interior of Ceará makes a similar claim:

According to the relevant literature, the provinces of Ceará, in the Cariri region, and Maranhão became, with the deportation of Ciganos expelled from Portugal, in the eighteenth century the entry gates for the disease into Brazil. (Joathan, 29 November 2008)

All such statements share certain features: the details used, the stringing together of arguments, the location of the claim in the overall narrative, and the fact that they invariably take the form of a single sentence. Whenever Brazilian texts about trachoma discuss the disease’s origins and spread, it is first asserted that trachoma is not endemic to the country. This observation is sometimes followed by a few lines that suggest more or less the same thing: “Trachoma was first brought to the country by Ciganos deported from Portugal to Ceará [sometimes also Maranhão] in the eighteenth century [sometimes specifically in 1718], with the Cariri Valley experiencing the first outbreak of the infection.” In form and content, these medical texts have echoed each other since the early twentieth century; through repetition of such formulaic evidence, a kind of disembedded truth – a maxim – emerges.

There is no overt focus on, or concern with, Romanies in the trachoma-related literature, however. Their connection to the infection is made in passing and presented as a historical curiosity without any further consequence or interpretation, while the texts themselves focus on other aspects – those cited above, for instance, provide guidance for controlling trachoma’s transmission; report on the continued need to train medical



professionals in the area; and inform readers about trachoma prophylaxis at local schools. Precisely for these reasons, however, looking at this association more closely becomes illuminating.

As I will show in this article, the maxim emerged in the first decades of the early twentieth century – a period of intense concern about trachoma infection both nationally and internationally. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, states across the world had begun to adopt initiatives to control its spread. Internal and external labor migrants were generally considered to be prime carriers of infection. Trachoma prophylaxis thus occupies a specific place in the history of the racialization of minorities or control of internal migrants by means of the medical surveillance of infectious diseases.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, insufficient to treat the Brazilian one-liner as a mere variation on the theme. Rather, this article is premised on the idea that the ideas and logics that grounded the emergence of this “truth,” and the statement’s appeal even today, speak of the specific context within which such a claim resonated and appeared as reasonable.

In the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, different social processes were reflected in diverse racial projects, in turn shaping them. These different racial logics, categories, and ideas became interrelated and sedimented, drawing on and co-constructing an “interlocked architecture” of “the racial matrix” that made *Ciganos* visible – a historically contingent racial formation from which the claim between trachoma and *Ciganos* emerged as meaningful and coherent. I borrow the concept of “the racial matrix” from Noémie Ndiaye (2022: 1270), who uses it to describe the connectedness of diverse racial formations, which often emerged in different periods and places,<sup>2</sup> and that normally would be considered in separation.<sup>3</sup> My argument in this article is that even though the one-liner appears today as a curio that sets *Ciganos* apart by utilizing a common antigypsy trope of them as exotic nomads, different racial projects are folded within it that in fact bring *Ciganos* into proximity to other populations and communities. To put it somewhat bluntly, this is what made the claim stick.

To appreciate this connectedness, however, requires going beyond a mere analysis of the genealogy of the stereotype or relating the Romani position only to the non-Romani majority. Although the Romani racial project cannot be treated in isolation from other projects and Romani racialization does not occur in seclusion from other communities, this isolative approach

1. I thank Victoria Shmidt for alerting me to this fact.

2. Even prior to the emergence of the concept of “race” and modern racial thought as such (Ndiaye and Markey 2023).

3. Ndiaye mobilizes this concept to make visible the network of Afro-Romani relations in seventeenth-century West European drama.

dominates the field of Romani studies, including critical Romani studies – thus reproducing antigypsyism’s very logic even as it critically engages with antigypsyism. By means of reconstructing the origins of the scientific “truth” about trachoma and Ciganos, this article instead makes a case for the need to approach the racialization of Romanies relationally. To bring this methodological and theoretical angle into sharper focus, I first contrast it with two analytical moves that are commonly used in Romani studies when examining similar phenomena. I then reconstruct the association between Ciganos and trachoma in Brazil, suggesting that the standardized claim originates in an article of an influential ophthalmologist who became responsible for the federal campaign against trachoma. He in turn had been influenced by a doctor of a preceding generation. Finally, in the last section, I analyze and compare their texts in order to tease out different racial projects that subtended the making of the connection between the introduction of trachoma and Ciganos.

### Studying the racialization of Romanies relationally

When making sense of the association between trachoma and Ciganos, one obvious analytical move that offers itself to a Romani studies scholar is to treat it as a stereotype and place it within the universe of antigypsy stereotypes and the history of stigmatization. Such an exercise might result in a text with a title such as “Views of Romanies in Nineteenth-Century Brazil” or “A Representation of Romanies in Medical Literature.” I could point to other moments when Ciganos in Brazil became linked to disease, infection, or infirmity. Although these references are scarce, as Brazilian authors and foreign observers rarely comment on Romanies, one does find them. For instance, commenting on correspondence between authorities in the early eighteenth century, João Dornas Filho, one founding figure of Brazilian “Ciganologia” (Ferrari and Fotta 2014), writes:

On July 6 of that turbulent year [1737], the commander of the mounted troops wrote again at length to the Governor of the Captaincy [of Minas Gerais], still complaining about the epidemic of smallpox that ravaged the people, a plague perhaps brought by the Bohemians themselves (*peste talvez conduzida pelos próprios boêmios*). (Dornas Filho 1948: 149)

In fact, the captain of the dragoons did not make a connection between smallpox and Ciganos in his letter; Dornas Filho likely felt inspired to hypothesize it due to the association between Ciganos and trachoma, which had become established by this time and which he repeats elsewhere in the text (Dornas Filho 1948: 139).

Or consider Gilberto Freyre, who in *Nordeste (Northeast)*, a book published in 1937 that attempted to capture the social and cultural specificity of the region, writes:

It is possible, still, that, such extremely filthy people, the Ciganos, deported to the Northeast since the seventeenth century – since 1686, at least – were great propagators of fleas and bedbugs in this Brazilian region. (Freyre 1937: 117)

In this book (and his other works), this influential sociologist makes only a few passing references to Ciganos, which do not play any significant role in his characterizations of the society and culture of the Northeast. He mentions them merely as entertainers, dishonest traders, thieves of animals and sometimes of children (Freyre 1937: 155, 157). In Freyre's famous rendering, Brazilian civilization was characterized by racial mixing and personalized forms of relating, which he saw as having emerged from the intimacies of plantation life. Romanies were tangential to this racial project and fit into it only awkwardly, "marginally," as itinerant traders.

These characterizations of Ciganos and of their social place are echoed in one of the earliest references that links them with trachoma. The observations were recorded almost a decade earlier than Freyre's and are attributed to probably the most famous Brazilian ophthalmologist of that generation. According to one of his students:

Investigating who would have carried to those distant regions of the interior of Ceará the germ of that terrible disease, namely, trachoma, Dr. Moura was convinced that, trachoma being endemic in Egypt, still spreading there today in an astonishing way, it would have been brought to our midst by Egyptian Gypsies (*ciganos egypcios*), who, in ancient times, travelled through our country in huge caravans, in search of money. When they arrived in Ceará and penetrated our backlands, they sought out Crato, at the time a city of great resources and a very intense population nucleus within that vast region. (Ferreira 1928: 20; quoted in Lima and Lima 2021: 374)

José Cardoso de Moura Brazil (1848–1928) was born in the state of Ceará. After working in Europe and before settling in Rio de Janeiro, he documented many cases of trachoma while practicing medicine in Ceará for a short period in the mid-1870s (Lima and Lima 2021: 372). His reasoning draws on views of Ciganos as primarily peripatetic traders and service providers who, due to their lifestyle, were responsible for the diffusion of social and medical ills. Moura Brazil also makes a connection with Egypt. In today's Brazil, some Calon Romanies as well as non-Romanies still argue that Ciganos originated in Egypt. The first books on Brazilian Ciganos also characterize Romanies as linked to Egypt – as "castaways of an extinct civilization" (Moraes Filho 1885:

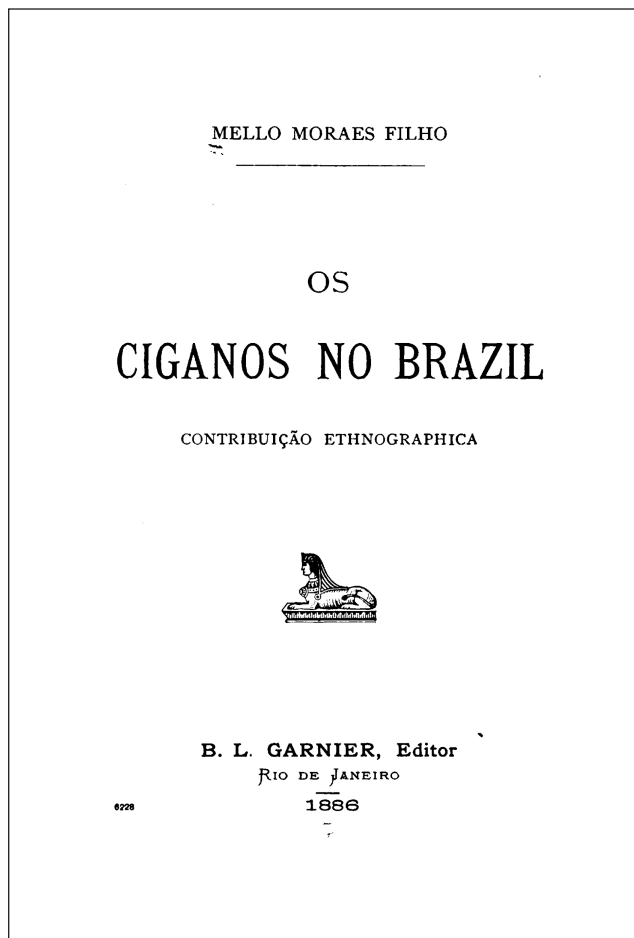


FIGURE 2. Cover of the first edition of *Os Ciganos no Brasil* (1886)

xxiii; see also Moraes Filho 1886). Since trachoma has been known in Brazil (and internationally) as the “Egyptian Ophthalmia” or, more popularly, the “Egyptian eye disease,” this association was too suggestive to be ignored.

Listing stereotypes and views of Romanies – as untrustworthy peripatetic traders with mythical Egyptian origins, accusing them of spreading vices and diseases – is an evocative analytical move. But it is also presentist and context-independent since these stereotypes are implied to follow a single antigypsyist logic.

The second analytic move would be to compare the occurrence of a phenomenon to its existence in other places. In this manner, I would be able to discern whether a link between trachoma and Romanies appeared elsewhere during this period. Indeed, such an association was not unique to

Brazil. Victoria Shmidt shows how the Czechoslovak campaign to eradicate trachoma (1920–1925), especially in the Subcarpathian region of the country, “introduced a name for the disease (“Egyptic eye inflammation”) which would directly link trachoma with the Roma, whose Egyptian origin remained one of the most disseminated stereotypes” (Shmidt 2019: 49). Czechoslovak medical authorities saw Roma as the main vectors of trachoma infection, and the propaganda consistently employed the connection between two stigmas: Egyptian origins and the spread of disease.

At first, it may appear puzzling to bring the First Brazilian Republic (1889–1930) and the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) into one frame. However, in both countries the views of Romanies drew on the same European pool of antigypsy tropes. In both cases we are also dealing with two poor peripheral regions where Romanies became relatively visible, thanks in part to the dynamics through which these regions were being incorporated into the new states. One aspect of this process involved programs aimed at eradicating infectious diseases. Medical practitioners shared knowledge about trachoma prophylaxis and treatment, and one could imagine that the belief in the connection between Romanies and trachoma circulated among them.

Nevertheless, the problem remains that this kind of analysis implicates scholars in reproducing the structure of antigypsyism and its terms, which treat Romanies as a case *sui generis* and consider their fate unrelated to that of other racialized and minoritized groups, but only to the “majority.” Paradoxically, while such an attitude legitimizes Romani studies as an area of inquiry, it simultaneously stymies conversation across domains and limits the area’s impact.<sup>4</sup> This article, however, is premised on the idea that analysis should not proceed through ideal types and with reference to a single point, but instead needs to be relational. It must try to capture historically contingent relationships of power and place Romanies in the overall racial regime along with other communities. Moreover, rather than looking at “race relations” (or “ethnic relations”), I propose to analyze the process of racialization (or ethnicization) in this article.

Shmidt’s article goes in this direction by zooming in on the dynamic of internal colonization of the Subcarpathian region, examining the impact of

4. Even when an analyst argues that, for instance, other minorities were also accused of spreading infirmities (migrants – internal and external – were credited with transmitting trachoma), groups are thought of as discrete, their identities and boundaries as given, and they are contrasted using majority (state, elite) views — listed as if in columns of a table, in parallel, as different but equivalent. As will be seen throughout this article, I am instead in favour of relational comparison from concrete racial formations (see Hong and Ferguson 2011; Shih 2008).

this process on the ways in which health professionals viewed the relationship between the Czechs (the core) and other ethnic groups (Shmidt 2019: 35; Shmidt and Kaser 2023: 118). The link between trachoma and Roma in Czechoslovakia thus reflected not only any contemporary greater prevalence of trachoma among impoverished Roma living in this peripheral zone but was consistent with the experts' ethnic project. This project hierarchically related Czechs, Slovaks, Rusyns, Hungarians, Jews, Roma, and others. Roma were treated as suspicious figures who colluded with Hungarians to undermine the modernization of the region, its incorporation into the Czechoslovak state, and the emancipation of ethnic Slovaks and Rusyns.

Shmidt's analysis thus emplaces Romanies along with other groups within the dynamic of internal colonialization, identifying an overarching hierarchy that operated along a single logic (Czech—"other") and which emerged in this historical moment. While this does bring hegemonic dynamics into sharper focus, I want to suggest that at least in the Brazilian case, a matrix of different racial projects – some dominant, other emergent or residual, to use Raymond Williams's (1997) terms – brought individual communities variously together and underpinned the consolidation of the connection between trachoma and Ciganos. This move requires approaching racialization "as a dynamic and interactive process [since] group-based racial constructions are formed in relation not only to whiteness [or a single core] but also to other devalued and marginalized groups" (HoSang and Molina 2019: 2). In short, the racialization of Romanies has to be analyzed relationally (Molina, HoSang, and Gutiérrez 2019; Shih 2008). It cannot be reduced to one binary (minority/majority; Roma/non-Roma, etc.), which is itself a product of antigypsyism, internal colonization, and the modern division of knowledge.

In the Brazilian context, a relational analysis enables the recognition that the racialization of Romanies does not occur in a self-contained and isolated manner.<sup>5</sup> Liberal thinkers such as Freyre developed a specific conception of racial relations and promoted certain ideas of racial mixing which they derived from their analysis of African enslavement and the patriarchal plantation system. Ciganos were more or less fitted, or "adapted,"<sup>6</sup> to this

5. Ann Ostendorf (e.g. 2020; 2021) adopts a similar approach to the study of the early modern Atlantic, while Dalen Wakeley-Smith (2022b) explores relational racial projects of Romanies and other groups in late nineteenth-century New York. Although the three of us focus on the Americas, Wakeley-Smith argues that this approach can also be useful for Romani-related scholarship in Europe (Wakeley-Smith 2022a: 174).

6. Romanies' tangential place within both the Freyrian racial project and the liberal racial project described here is visible in arguments Freyre makes in *Sobrados e Mucambos* (*Mansions and Shanties*), published in 1936 as part of a trilogy on the formation of Brazilian society: "These nomads [Ciganos] have adapted to our patriarchal system only as marginals: as small and sometimes sadistic slave traders in the cities and, in the interior, as horse dealers and

system; they were tangential and not directly connected to this narrative, but were nevertheless marked by it – it turned them, as these medical one-liners reveal, into a certain curio.

Following this methodological cue, in the remainder of this article I will reconstruct the emergence of the association between Ciganos and trachoma – and its formulaic character – in early twentieth-century Brazil. Even such small historical traces reveal “a shared field of meaning and power” (HoSang and Molina 2019: 10) that connects the position of Romanies, and characteristics ascribed to them, to those of other racialized groups. Racialization within various racial projects does not occur along a single axis, however, and the process cannot be reduced to a single racial hierarchy. Regimes and local orderings of race are historically contingent, as they emerge to serve different agendas and become implicated in one another. As I will show, these different racial projects, concepts, and constructs – including, of course, neo-European antigypsyism – are interconnected within the formulaic sentence about the introduction of trachoma in Brazil.

### The Northeastern outbreak

The Northeast region of Brazil – the country’s poorest – consists of nine states. At the beginning of the twentieth century, hunger and extreme poverty affected the region, especially the *sertão* – the semi-arid pastoralist backlands. Conditions in the *sertão* were conducive to the spread of trachoma, as the factors associated with intense personal transmission include inadequate hygiene and sanitation, overcrowded households, and lack of access to potable water. Only a few hospitals existed, all of which were in coastal capitals.

The region became “the oculists’ paradise” (Dornas Filho 1948: 139), and medical doctors had begun documenting cases of trachoma already by the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1920, according to the Central Statistical Office, there were 15 blind individuals per every 10,000 inhabitants in the states of Ceará, Piauí, and Paraíba, and 16 per 10,000 in Maranhão (Conde 1930: 379). Trachoma was the most prevalent reason for blindness. School inspections revealed the scale of the epidemic; according to an article published in a Maranhão newspaper in 1929, out of 1,000 children examined in Teresina, a city in the neighboring state of Piauí, 200 were affected. The article complains of the government’s “criminal inactivity” in addressing the outbreak.<sup>7</sup>

traders, and repairers of pans, cauldrons, and machines for sugar refinement.” Consequently, “many Ciganos, following the initial phase of the socially pathological marginality, dissolved within the Brazilian whole” (Freyre 1951: 790–1).

7. “O trachoma nas escolas piauihyenses,” *O Combate*, 6 May 1929.



Reflecting on his decades-long experience in the state of Bahia, one ophthalmologist observes:

In the exercise of our profession, we visited households where we found not a single person free of this disease, and a few where entire families had been completely reduced to the cruellest blindness. (Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 71)

A book on folklore from Cariri even offers a whole chapter on “Tracoma e Folklore” (Figueiredo Filho 1962: 44–8). It documents how the infection became “integrated” into the folkloric tradition, for instance into *repentes*,<sup>8</sup> such as this one through which neighbors teased the people from Cariri (Figueiredo Filho 1962: 45):

<i>Lá vem o carro cantando</i>	Here comes the singing wagon
<i>Cheio de olhos de cana,</i>	Full of those sugar-cane eyes,
<i>As moças do Cariri</i>	The maidens of Cariri
<i>Têm olhos, não têm pestanas.</i>	Have eyes, but no eyelashes.

In sum, trachoma was not merely a medical concern in Brazil, but impacted economic, social, cultural, and political life. But where does the connection with Ciganos come from?

In 1929, the same year when the abovementioned newspaper article was published, a young ophthalmologist was advertising his services in the state of Maranhão. Advertisements specified that his “modern ophthalmological practice” included “special amenities for the diagnosis and treatment of trachoma.” The doctor, Hermínio da Moraes Brito Conde (1905–1964), was born in Piracuruca, Piauí. He studied medicine at the Faculdade Nacional de Medicina in Rio de Janeiro and graduated in 1927, specializing in ophthalmology. In 1929, as he was just launching his career, he remained in the Northeast for a few months before returning to Rio de Janeiro. He would go on to become one of the top authorities on the disease in the country, as well as one of the most important Brazilian ophthalmologists of the first half of the twentieth century. In 1943, he was made responsible for the *Campanha Federal contra o Tracoma* (Federal Campaign against Trachoma), and in 1952, he became a member of the WHO expert committee on Trachoma.

Although today the idea that Ciganos brought trachoma to Brazil is largely unattributed, I believe that this claim owes its popularity, its content, and its formulaic structure to Hermínio Conde, namely his article “Antiguidade do Trachoma no Norte do Brasil” (“Origins of Trachoma in Northern Brazil”). Published in 1930 in the specialist journal *Annaes de Oculistica do Rio de*

8. A form of improvised sung poetry.

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**MOLESTIAS DOS OLHOS**  
**EXAME DA VISTA**  
**Dr. Herminio Conde**  
*Da Santa Casa de Misericórdia do Rio de Janeiro. — Ex-interno official da Clinica Ophtalmologica de Faculdade de Medicina do Rio (serviço do Prof. Abreu Fialho).*

Está inaugurado, á Praça João Lisboa nº. 2, 1º andar, o moderno consultorio ophtalmologico do

**DR. HERMINIO CONDE**  
exclusivamente destinado ao tratamento das

**MOLESTIAS DOS OLHOS**  
e ao  
**EXAME DA VISTA**  
Com aparelhamento completo, Zeiss e Lutz Ferrando, para cirurgia e clinica oculares, receita de oculos, exame de fundo dos olhos (ophtalmoscopia electrica de Gullstrand), etc.

Appartamentos especiaes para diagnostico e  
**TRATAMENTO DO TRACHOMA**  
Consultas em S. Luiz, diariamente, á Praça João Lisboa, nº. 2, 1º andar, durante os mezes de Setembro e Outubro.

FIGURE 3. “Eye diseases – Eye examination, Dr. Herminio Conde”: advertisement in the newspaper *Pacotilha*, published in São Luís, Maranhão (7 September 1929, XLVIII, 155: 3)

*Janeiro*, the article sets out, as the title suggests, to describe the origins of the disease in the country. It opens with three quotes from various authorities, including the abovementioned Moura Brasil, who observed the existence of trachoma in the North in the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Conde then legitimizes his authority by saying that after working as an oculist for two years in Piauí and

9. The present-day distinction between North and Northeast Brazil was not yet firm at that time.

Maranhão, he felt confident enough to present his observations. He argues that the ophthalmological, social, and climactic conditions in septentrional Brazil resembled those of tropical countries, especially India. He also presents available statistical data and assesses trachoma's social and economic impact. According to him, Ceará opticians had been treating trachoma for half a century and "it would be, therefore, interesting to try to determine the date of the trachoma's invasion and the way it happened" (Conde 1930: 382).

The climax of Conde's narrative constructs the case for a connection between Ciganos and trachoma. He first quotes ethnologist Antônio Bezerra de Menezes to the effect that "waves of Ciganos" settling in the region resulted in the inhabitants of Ceará inheriting some Cigano characteristics (Conde 1930: 383). In the following paragraph, he argues that the folk beliefs and practices that Moraes Filho found among Ciganos in Rio de Janeiro were comparable to those found in Ceará, adding that in 1914 Dr. Ribeiro da Silva held a presentation about cases of trachoma among the Ciganos in Bahia. Conde then makes an argumentative slip: "The problem, then, in my opinion, boils down to establishing the [fact of] expatriation of Ciganos to Brazil, and its respective date" (Conde 1930: 383). Thanks to the help of historians, he says, he was able to ascertain the date as 15 April 1718, the beginning of the campaign to deport Ciganos from Portugal to its colonies – including, in Brazil, Ceará, and Maranhão – and cites at length the document announcing it.<sup>10</sup> In his words, "[t]his was the seed, which in a propitious environment, made the present-day pandemic germinate" thanks to the subsequent waves of deportations of Ciganos throughout the early eighteenth century (Conde 1930: 384).

To affirm this origin point, the article goes on to cite travelers and medical professionals who, as early as 1823 – i.e. after the presence of Ciganos was documented in the region – observed ophthalmological problems, many of which were later identified as trachoma. Conde concludes the article by summarizing his argument in three points:

- a) The introduction of trachoma in the North of Brazil dates to 1718, when the first group of Ciganos was expelled from Portugal to Maranhão and Ceará.
- b) The south of Ceará, especially the Cariri Valley, became a hotbed (*foco*) of intense affliction, spreading trachoma to neighbouring states.

10. In early 1718, a decree ordered Cigano imprisonment across Portugal, and the royal letter sent to colonial governors dating 15 April 1718 announced their deportation to the colonies (Donovan 1992: 34). The year 1718 also plays an important role in Moraes Filho's book, on which Conde draws as well: according to Moraes Filho's main informant, Sr. Pinto Noites (age 89), this is when his predecessors arrived (Moraes Filho 1886: 25). It should be noted that this was not when Ciganos first appeared in Brazil, although between 1718 and 1755 there was an increase in banishment of Ciganos to (and between) Portuguese colonies.

- c) The eradication of trachoma from the North of Brazil, a complex and almost insoluble problem, requires the unifying action of the National Department of Public Health (DNSP). (Conde 1930: 386)

Conde, who at the time was a volunteer assistant at a clinic in Rio de Janeiro, was not the first to make a connection between the introduction of trachoma and Romanies, but his comments differ from those of people like Moura Brazil in that he does not make any mention of Egypt. It is likely, however, that the article explicitly aimed at elucidating the origins of trachoma in Brazil and written by somebody who would soon become a renowned specialist in the field would have served as the key reference for those interested in the topic. Indeed, several texts from this period attest to it. Two years after Conde's publication, Dr. Penido Burnier published an article about the history and spread of trachoma in the country in which he accepts Conde's hypothesis, even more so "because Ciganos came from Egypt or India, countries plagued by trachoma, and did in fact concentrate in Ceará, as historical records show" (Burnier 1932: 62).

In 1938, the ophthalmologist Higino Costa Brito wrote in *A União*, a newspaper from João Pessoa (Paraíba):

This deadly entity, which arrived here in the north in 1718 with the first group of Ciganos expelled from Portugal to Maranhão and Ceará (*Herminio Conde*), is almost unknown to the laymen in medical matters. While everybody talks and comments on the problem of syphilis, tuberculosis, leprosy, bouba, and so many other endemics, nobody mentions the problem of trachoma, much vaster and more distressing than some of those mentioned above. (Costa Brito, July 12, 1938; italics mine)

In a footnote to the 1936 edition of Varnhagen's *Historia Geral do Brasil*, the editor comments that, "Dr Herminio Conde attributes, on plausible historical grounds, that the invasion of trachoma in the North of Brazil was caused by Ciganos who were banished during the colonial period" and refers to Conde's 1930 article in *Annaes de Oculistica do Rio de Janeiro* (Varnhagen 1936: 24).<sup>11</sup>

In general, over time, texts discussing trachoma's origins and spread in Brazil stopped referring explicitly to Conde's article. What remains is the content and the form of Conde's claim: points a and b from the conclusion

11. First published in 1877, *Historia Geral do Brasil* is a classic source text on Brazilian history. The section to which the footnote refers deals with the continued deportation of Ciganos to Maranhão, Rio Grande do Norte and other provinces at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, despite the Crown limiting free migration to the colonies. The footnote was added by the editor Rodolfo Garcia. Garcia is also one of two historians whom Conde thanks for identifying relevant historical documents.

are merged and reiterated almost verbatim until the twenty-first century. As I will show, this formulaic repetition results not only in the creation of a disembedded “truth,” but also displaces and erases the layers of racialized argumentation that buttress it, leaving only a small curio that sets Ciganos apart and draws its energy from their exoticization.

### Associating trachoma and Ciganos

Conde bases his thesis about the origins of trachoma in Brazil and the exact dating of its appearance on his reading of historical and ethnological sources. The only medical authority that he cites to support this claim is Dr. Ribeiro da Silva. According to Conde, in 1914, Ribeiro da Silva gave a lecture to the Medical Society of the Hospitals of Bahia in which he “presented statistics of cases of trachoma identified among Ciganos” (Conde 1930: 383). I was not able to locate documentation of the lecture; possibly someone misattributed the year. In 1916 Ribeiro da Silva published an article entitled “O trachoma na Bahia” in *Gazeta Medica da Bahia (GMB)*. It had been presented at a meeting of the same society, on 27 August 1916, and a few pages concern Ciganos.

Raymundo Ribeiro da Silva was, in his own words, a doctor in the Bahian town of Amargosa, located in the coastal *Zona da Mata* [Forest Zone] (Atlantic Forest zone). Before moving to Amargosa in 1911, he had held a consultancy for 13 years in Mundo Novo, in the interior of the state, and had visited locales in the *sertão*. In the first part of his 1916 article, he discusses his experiences with the infection in these various places – “small outbreaks here, large outbreaks there, hindering the development of our farming, threatening our future” (Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 71). He explains that his intention in writing the article is to make authorities aware of what the spread of this “dangerous and harmful enemy” means and demand that they take relevant measures.

The next part of the article (Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 72–8) is of direct interest here. Ribeiro da Silva tries to answer how this “plague” with origins in Egypt – a point that he highlights or alludes to on several occasions (Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 72, 79, 90) – was introduced in Brazil. He suggests that normally immigrants were responsible for the introduction and spread of trachoma, which was the case in southern Brazil. This vector, however, was negligible in Bahia, where trachoma had existed for decades and foreign farm workers were rare. Moreover, among those few workers, the infection had not been documented. He then considers the importation of enslaved Africans who had been central to Bahia’s plantation economy in the recent past. However, his own statistics and observations of other national and international scholars suggest a “relative immunity or greater resistance [to trachoma] which exists

among the black race” (Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 76). Unable to attribute this “plague” to the “forced immigration” of Africans or the European migration, he concludes:

Only the Ciganos, a nomadic people who immigrated in such large numbers to our country, must be held responsible for the transmission of trachoma. (Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 77)

Ribeiro da Silva asserts that ethnology lends credence to his hypothesis. First, according to him, Moraes Filho proved the Egyptian origins of Ciganos by noting that both the Spanish “Gitano” and the English “Gypsy” were corruptions of the word “Egyptian.” Ribeiro da Silva’s characterization of Ciganos as a “*raça de gente vagabunda, que diz vir do Egipto*” (“a race of vagabond people, who claim to come from Egypt”; Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 77), comes from Moraes Filho’s *Os Ciganos no Brasil* or a contemporary dictionary.<sup>12</sup> Second, according to Ribeiro da Silva, Ciganos in Bahia lead a life of privation and misery, living exposed to elements and in a promiscuous manner that is an affront to morality and conducive to the spread of the infection:

It is very common to find individuals suffering from trachoma among these Cigano groups, as we have repeatedly observed, and judging by their habits, their origin, and the frequency of the disease, we are led to express the opinion that we owe to them the spread of the disease throughout the interior of Bahia, if not throughout the North of Brazil. (Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 77)

The third section of the article moves to Ribeiro da Silva’s observations regarding the spread of trachoma. He hypothesizes that high soil humidity promotes its development, supporting this idea with observations that the infection spreads primarily within families thanks to the high density among the agricultural population who, in places like Amargosa, live in overcrowded conditions without basic hygiene. The focus on this coffee-producing region is not accidental – to him, this is the economic backbone of Bahia.

In the fourth section, Ribeiro da Silva goes on to urge authorities to adopt urgent prophylactic measures, without which the region’s stagnation and decay would be inevitable (Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 83). Progress in agriculture

12. Moraes Filho (1886: 15) cites lexicographer Antônio de Morais e Silva, who defines the term “Ciganos” as “*Raça de gente vagabunda, que diz vem do Egipto — e pretende conhecer o futuro pelas raias ou linhas da mão* [A race of vagabonds, who claim to come from Egypt — and pretend to see the future based on the hand creases or lines].” This exact phrase is found in various dictionaries of the Portuguese language from at least the late eighteenth century onward (Lima, Marilene Gomes de Sousa et al. 2020).

and public health are interconnected, he argues: the poor farmers and rural workers, “following the old routine, completely unaware of scientific methods that have so greatly improved agriculture” end up “suffering the greatest privations, becoming a debilitated body, always predisposed to infectious diseases” (Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 85–6). They do not have the means to secure medical help themselves, he writes; indeed, he observes that the number of his patients decreases during economic downturns. Governmental intervention is needed: he believes the state of Bahia should establish free medical assistance to the infected and learn from the successful measures adopted elsewhere – in the state of São Paulo, the United States, Russia, Prussia, or Hungary.

Theses on trachoma written at the Bahian medical school before 1916 do not contain any reference to Ciganos. It is therefore likely that not only Conde but other Brazilian ophthalmologists, such as Moura Brasil, were inspired by Ribeiro da Silva’s article. After all, *GMB*, where it was published, was a leading medical journal with wide circulation at the time.

Works of Ribeiro da Silva and Conde should be seen in the context of intense scientific and public health mobilization related to infectious diseases at the beginning of the twentieth century. I do not have space to go into great detail here, but this intense activity occurred at both international and national levels and involved, among other things, the exchange of knowledge, scientific collaboration, and policy transfer (coordinated by the Health Committee of the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s). In Brazil, high rates of trachoma infection among foreign migrants in São Paulo raised alarm. The discovery of the Chagas disease by physician Carlos Chagas and the work of epidemiologist Oswaldo Gonçalves Cruz led to a debate on infectious and preventable diseases more generally, as well as to the campaign for “rural sanitation” (*saneamento rural*). The latter highlighted the scope of various localized epidemics throughout the interior of the Northeast region; for instance, the statistics that Conde used in his articles were gathered by the National Public Health Department (DNSP), founded in 1920. In 1929, the first anti-trachoma posts were established in the Northeast. The activities culminated in 1943 with the launch of the Federal Campaign against Trachoma headed by Conde, which conducted systematic local surveys and established prophylaxis posts in endemic areas (Scarpi 1991: 203–4).

Much knowledge on trachoma was gained by medical practitioners in the Northeast, and many influential practitioners came from this region; Conde stresses that Moura Brasil and others who shed light on the situation in the region were Cearensians and compares their work to that of British colonial scientists in India. Even when they worked in the capital, these practitioners’ interest in trachoma was intimately tied to the “autocolonization” of their



native region and its incorporation into the modern nation, while highlighting the region's historical significance and its contemporary specificities.

### Reading across the archives

Both Ribeiro da Silva and Conde refer to the work of Alexandre de José Mello Moraes Filho (1844–1919), mentioned earlier in this article. Moraes Filho, a medical doctor himself, became known primarily as a folklorist and poet. He belonged to a group of intellectuals who in the late nineteenth century aimed at stimulating national pride based on Brazilian traditions. These intellectuals also sought to rethink racial miscegenation and worked on identifying the contribution of the three originating “races” (Portuguese, African, and Indigenous) to the formation of Brazilian civilization. Into this liberal nationalist founding myth, Moraes Filho fits Ciganos: “The mixing with the three existing races took place, with the Cigano being the weld that united the three founding pieces of Brazil’s current crossbreeding” (Moraes Filho 1886: 26).<sup>13</sup>

Moraes Filho is the author of the first Portuguese-language books on Romanies: *Cancioneiro dos Ciganos* (1885) and the previously mentioned *Os Ciganos no Brasil* (1886). Today, these are valuable for their descriptions of the social life of Calon in Rio de Janeiro and as a record of verses of songs performed by Calon. These books also belong to the field of nineteenth-century Gypsyism. The first chapter of *Os Ciganos* draws on various international authors in order to establish Romani origins and their migrations. Moraes Filho accepts that modern Gypsyism established the Indian origins of Romanies, but maintains that their sojourn in Egypt had left a lasting imprint on their culture, which he identifies in Calon mortuary rituals.

Moraes Filho can be credited with making the Cigano presence in Brazil into a matter of intellectual concern. While this “doctor of a Cigano colony in Rio de Janeiro,” as Conde (1930: 383) described him, did not make any association between Ciganos and trachoma (or other infirmities, for that matter), those who did had read his work. Indeed, *Os Ciganos no Brasil* was dedicated to Moura Brazil, “the wise physician and renowned ophthalmologist.”

This entanglement of medical thought, social thought, and national project was characteristic of the period. As I previously mentioned, Ribeiro da Silva appealed to the government to establish public health initiatives aimed at

13. Moraes Filho’s assertion of the co-constitutive role of the Romani people was not accepted by others. Indeed, his friend and one of the most important intellectuals of the period, Sílvio Romero, downplayed it in the afterword to the *Cancioneiro*.

trachoma and thus guarantee national prosperity. Contributors to the *GMB* took on the roles of “political physicians,” a type of medical professional who combined medical and social-scientific analysis and made suggestions for governmental and legal interventions (Schwarcz 1993: 248–9). They appealed to science and argued for the need to apply the latest scientific methods – but they also discussed topics such as economic growth that did not belong to medicine, narrowly speaking.

Between the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century,<sup>14</sup> the focus of Brazilian medical professionals was on “the weakened nation in need of intervention” (Schwarcz 1993: 247). The nation was conceptualized in racial terms, and racial issues were central to many articles published in the *GMB*. Medical scholars in Bahia were particularly concerned with the impact of racial miscegenation on the future of the nation (Schwarcz 1993: 245–60). Like many contributors, Ribeiro da Silva associated the infection with hygiene as well as with race. He too saw the practice of hygiene as revolutionary, advocated for sanitation projects, and argued that those who did not pay attention to personal hygiene were mostly affected by trachoma. While Ribeiro da Silva’s article was typical of the time, I know of no other article that speaks of *Ciganos*, normally not explicitly considered in these debates on race and illness.

Contemporary ideas about the political nation and race thus informed the creation of the connection between trachoma and *Ciganos*. Lilia Schwarcz (1993) shows how liberal elites combined racism and liberalism: race became an answer to what “was” Brazil and justified differential citizenship. Racial “whitening” (*branqueamento*) through “racial mixing” (*mestiçagem*) became the elite project for the emerging nation. This ideology presented itself as a solution to the large proportion of the African population, which in the evolutionist view of the period condemned Brazil to failure. The logic of miscegenation is also connected to policies toward Indigenous people, as the elite and governmental objective was Indigenous erasure (Miki 2018).<sup>15</sup>

In Ribeiro da Silva’s article about trachoma, his focus on labor productivity, progress, and the shortage of European migrants in Bahia reflects these contemporary debates. In the first half of the nineteenth century, it was already becoming clear that the era of slavery was coming to an end. European migrants were hailed as a way of “improving” Brazil racially and economically (e.g. Lesser 2013). Economically, European migrants were desired as agents of colonization and bearers of agricultural innovation. The

14. It is notable, for instance, that, in contrast to Ribeiro da Silva’s article, Conde’s article focuses much more strictly on medicine.

15. Symptomatically, although epidemics had been ravaging Indigenous communities since the arrival of the Europeans, they never became a real concern for the state.

land that they were to colonize was imagined as empty – the Black, *mestiço*, Indigenous, and *Caboclo*<sup>16</sup> presence was ignored, and these people were not considered for the project of internal colonization (Seyferth 1996). Destined to disappear through increased miscegenation with white migrants, they were seen as incapable of economic initiative and suited only for heavy labor, a sentiment echoed in Ribeiro da Silva’s patronizing descriptions cited above.

However, unlike the south of the country, the Northeast, with its lagging economic structure, was unable to attract European migrants to work in agriculture.<sup>17</sup> To extract cheap labor, the planter class therefore relied on alliance with the state. Vagrancy statutes and various forms of coercive labor recruitment were put in place to discipline formerly enslaved Blacks. At the end of the nineteenth century, “being free and without work, having irregular work habits, or simply moving around too much were viewed as problems by the planters and, ultimately, by the lawmakers and police” (Huggins 1985: 57). The increase in Cigano visibility to the police, noticeable in newspaper articles of the early twentieth century, is intimately connected to the anti-Black criminalization of vagrancy and labor control through the criminal justice system. This ideology subtends Ribeiro da Silva’s accusation that Ciganos in Bahia lived in “condemnable idleness” and his assertion that wherever they encamped, they dispersed themselves to make a living through reselling animals or relying on public charity (Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 78).

While Ribeiro da Silva believed that rural workers should receive state assistance to prevent trachoma, like others he was also aware that the country’s disease-ridden image made it unappealing even to more desperate European migrants (Lesser 2013: 63). State intervention was necessary:

How can we think of attracting European immigrants to our State, the only way of stimulating its various plantations, if the lack of respect for public health leaves thousands of countrymen inactive, condemned to a future of darkness, people who would certainly contribute with their work to the development of their native land? (Ribeiro da Silva 1916: 84)

Immigration was a double-edged sword, however. The southern outbreak of trachoma developed thanks to immigrants from the Mediterranean. For this reason, in 1904, the state of São Paulo had established a system of screening and treating migrants, which many, including Ribeiro da Silva,

16. A person of mixed Indigenous and white ancestry or, less commonly, a detribalized Indigenous person.

17. Ribeiro da Silva (1916: 74) makes the same point: “Rare are the foreign rural workers in Bahia: the few immigrants we receive immediately devote themselves to commercial life, which is much more profitable than agriculture.”

found inspirational. By the 1920s, large immigrant colonies in the south were also seen as undermining the Brazilian nationality (*nacionalidade*) (Seyferth 1996).

In 1938, Getúlio Vargas, the president of the dictatorial “New State” (1937–1946), signed a law prohibiting the entry of, among others, those suffering from infectious diseases including trachoma, as well as the “destitute, vagabonds, Ciganos and the like.”<sup>18</sup> The law was a culmination of a shift away from pro-migration and whitening policies of the previous era and toward nativism, “Brazilianization,” and the exclusion of “unassimilable” elements. Jews and Arabs were the prime targets of anti-migrant scapegoating (Lesser 2013: 136–40). While an extensive discussion of this period is beyond the scope of this article, it allows me to turn to the last connection hidden in the association between Ciganos and trachoma in Conde’s text: a connection between Semites and Ciganos.

While Ribeiro da Silva uses Moraes Filho to establish a link to Egypt, which also corresponds to existing folk ideas, for Conde this does not need to be proven. He is concerned, rather, with establishing Cigano embeddedness in the culture of the Northeast, including as the origin of trachoma that was so profoundly shaping contemporary life in the region. He suggests that the Calon superstitions and folk practices Moraes Filho had described were like those found throughout the Northeast. The reference to Moraes Filho serves primarily to buttress his prime ethnographic source: the work of Cearian naturalist, historian, and poet Antônio Bezerra de Menezes (1841–1921). In “O Ceará e os Cearenses” (1900),<sup>19</sup> Bezerra de Menezes forges a view of Ceará as a unique region and attempts to explain the character of its people. He sees their mobility, musical preferences, carelessness with material goods, love of autonomy, and other characteristics as being inherited from Ciganos. Like Conde, he dates the arrival of Ciganos to the deportation order of 15 April 1718. Ultimately, Bezerra de Menezes develops a localized version of the “myth of three races,” which, unlike the traditional rendering, excludes Africans (Barboza and Mariz 2021) and replaces them with Ciganos: “From the fusion of these two elements [Indigenous and Cigano] and the European element emerged the population of Ceará” (1900: 159).

While Bezerra de Menezes might have gone the furthest with such an argument, his ideas were far from isolated. Dornas Filho (1948: 139) argued along similar lines when he suggested that “the Northeasterner’s love of horses and the errant and haggard life is not only due to the pastoralist economic regime,” but a result of the influence of Ciganos. He further speculated that

18. Decree-Law No. 406, 4 May 1938, “On the entry of foreigners into the national territory.”

19. A book with the same title was published in 1906; it is unclear which text Conde used.

Ciganos brought Arab horses with them to Brazil, which shaped the horse stock in Piauí. For Freyre, the physical characteristics of people living in the *sertão* were a result of “abandonment by Jewish elements of the coast and especially of the area dominated by sugarcane plantations and by the Inquisition’s gaze, in favor of the pastoral Northeast, which perhaps retains Semitic traits in its population more than the agrarian [Northeast]. Semitic and Cigano” (1937: 2016).

Ciganos, Arabs, and Jews thus shared the position of an origin point of the people of the backlands. “Arabs and Jews had a special place among the [Brazilian] elite as both friend and enemy, exotically different yet somehow familiar,” observes Jeffrey Lesser (2013: 117). Late nineteenth-century Portuguese scholars, such as Teófilo Braga, suggested that Brazil’s Portuguese colonizers were Semites, while others made links between Tupí natives and either Arab voyagers or tribes of Israel. Brazilian “national identity makers” (Lesser 2013: 117), in turn, were keen to identify Arab and Jewish aspects of the national character, particularly in the Northeast. The directionality of this argument was often antigypsyist and antisemitic and certainly did not result in openness toward Arab, Jewish, and Romani migrants. It erased these identities and those of the Indigenous people in the authors’ contemporary present and made neo-Brazilians rightful heirs of the land. The ideology of miscegenation and the absence of homogeneous migrant communities, which were seen as a threat by Conde’s time, resulted in visions of the Northeast as a somewhat backward cradle of Brazilian civilization. Indeed, as Lima and Lima (2021: 375) observe, trachoma in Ceará was framed as originating from elsewhere, namely with Ciganos, because this allowed Ceará intellectuals to sidestep a contradiction with which they were faced: to present Ceará as a civilized place where national sentiments were manifested while acknowledging the prevalence of several endemic diseases.

## Conclusion

In early twentieth-century Brazil, trachoma’s visibility as a medical concern and as a metaphor for internal colonization and population management created conditions favorable to the reception of the idea that associated trachoma and Ciganos. This idea may have even circulated internationally. However, I have argued that it would be wrong to reduce the idea’s form, longevity, and resonance in Brazil to neo-European antigypsyism. Although this was certainly one strain of logic involved, Conde’s one-liner emerges from specificities of the Brazilian racial formation. Folded into this association is a whole series of categories, concepts, logics, and ideas about difference, including miscegenation and the Brazilian nation; Semitic influences on

the Northeastern culture; the planter-class coercion of Black labor after abolition; ideas about whitening through European migration; erasure of Indigenous people; centuries-old beliefs about Romanies' Egyptian origins and their folk exoticization; and the emerging project of Romani difference in modern Gypsylorism. These logics created a network of connections between Brazilian Romanies and other communities. The passages between various racial logics, which are not always obvious and had to be made visible, revealed an interlinked racial matrix that grounded the association between Ciganos and the introduction of trachoma to make it appear justified and reasonable. The fact that the idea is still repeated today, even if as a historical curio, reveals the plasticity of this racial matrix.

A relational analysis of racial formations such as this may not always be suitable as a methodology (Lipsitz et al. 2019: 23–4). It also left me with a certain sense of incompleteness. This lack of closure was caused not only by the brevity of this article, as I could not flesh out all the links in a way that would have been possible in a (short) book, but also by the necessity to “read across archives” (Lowe 2015: 6) – to engage with traditions, histories, and literatures beyond my limited expertise (HoSang and Molina 2019: 9). However, approaching the racialization of Romanies relationally – seeing it as a project intimately bound to ways other communities were racialized – can bring new insights and breach the insularity of Romani studies. It is also a political and ethical move (see Ndiaye 2022): it helps avoid the facile leveling and erasure of specific experiences while recognizing their interconnectedness. Ultimately, tracing varied, imbricated, and often contradictory connections between Romanies and other populations allows for the recognition of racialization as an ongoing process, as well as an acknowledgement of the ways that various dynamics can shape any moment.

## Coda

In a detailed description of a famous pilgrimage site in Bom Jesus da Lapa from the mid-1960s, American anthropologist Daniel R. Gross brings the federal campaign against trachoma and Romanies in Brazil into one frame:

The days of August 1 through 6 are tense and animated in Bom Jesus da Lapa. According to our estimates, on August 2, 1966, more than 2,000 pilgrims entered the city. On the following day nearly 5,000 arrived, and on August 4 there were 7,749 registered as having entered through the eastern entrance alone. Practically all of these pilgrims came with the intention of seeing the great procession of August 6, so that by that date there were certainly well over 25,000 people in the town including the permanent residents. The wide, flat area at the river's edge, which is flooded during the rainy season, was covered with trucks converted into lean-tos. *Among*

*them was an encampment of Gypsies who had come to sell their pots and pans. A Federal Health team set up an inoculation centre in the prefecture, and all arriving pilgrims were ordered to descend from their trucks to receive typhoid and smallpox inoculations, as well as cursory examinations for trachoma, skin diseases, and malaria. Those found to have trachoma – and there were many – found themselves outside again in a few minutes with a tube of ointment in their hands but usually with no instructions as to its use. (Gross 1971: 139; emphasis mine)*

The mention of the federal health team and of Romanies appears to be a mere coincidence, caused by their proximity within the locale and the visibility of both to a professional ethnographer. However, as this article has argued, Ciganos were on the minds of at least some medical professionals who were constructing the campaign against this infectious disease well into the twentieth century.

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# Discursive subjugation and the ways out: Narratives of othering among Czech Roma mothers

KATEŘINA SIDIROPULU-JANKŮ AND JANA OBROVSKÁ

This paper introduces the analysis of biographical interviews focusing on the negotiation of the day-to-day child-raising by Czech Roma mothers. We demonstrate the narrative reflection of ethnic identity, as well as coping strategies and ways out of the discursive subjugation of being marginalized by ethnic othering. We present coping strategies based on 1) vacillating between refusal and resigned acceptance of the negative discourse among the ethnic majority, 2) claiming normality through universal humanism, the submission of racialized microaggression, and the psychologizing of an aggressor, and 3) embracing family pride and social dissent. We find that primary socialization is an important element in tackling the discursive subjugation of ethnic othering. Further, we outline suggestions for the following research of othering mechanisms that seem to endure in European societies in terms of the reproduction of social inequalities.

*Keywords:* biographical research, Roma people, coping strategies, identity, mothering, othering, primary socialization, social inequalities, social exclusion, Czechia

## Introduction

This paper is historically anchored in the period following the Second World War, when thousands of Slovak Roma people came to the Czech lands in order to contribute to the post-war reconstruction of industry and city landscapes. This historical course of events is part of a wider demographic trend of labor migration in the late twentieth century, considered one of the milestones in modern European migration history (Castles and Miller 1998). An international perspective on narratives collected among Czech Roma mothers reveals the wider context of the narrators' everyday lives. The contemporary Czech cultural and social macro context is hostile toward Roma people, underpinned by structural racism and antigypsyism (Rostas 2017) which have been historically reproduced through centuries of marginalization and persecution by local populations and governments (Nečas

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1999). This negative relationship is also embedded in the very term “Roma,” often discussed among the Czech social science community (Obrovská and Sidiropulu-Janků 2019). Looking at the term from an emic perspective, it has replaced the exonym “Gypsy,” which had been dominant in the Czech lands until the 1990s, even in professional discourses. Nevertheless, as a lived term, the denomination “Gypsy” prevails, and the term “Roma” is, in contrast, sometimes perceived as alienating and offensive. This ambiguity reflects the nature of Czech Roma relationships until now. In this article, we use the term Roma without quotation marks, but we are aware of this terminology’s complex and contested nature.

Even nowadays, Czech Roma, as well as other darker-skinned outgroup members in Czech society (Alexander 1988; Janků 2003), face negative stereotyping, low expectations, and structural inequalities in many institutional domains, including education, the job market, housing, and so on (FRA 2022). Roma families often live in deprived conditions and low-quality housing (e.g. lodging houses, public hostels) and often in multigenerational households, as a reaction to poverty (Čanigová and Souralová 2022). Even though some people subjectively perceive the situation as less oppressive than before, recent research shows rather the opposite (Cviklová 2015; FRA 2022; Obrovská and Sidiropulu-Janků 2021). Therefore, we posit the fact that for generations Czech Roma have been – and continue to be – discriminated against and stigmatized as an analytical presupposition for our analysis. Czech Roma deal with stigmatization based on visible differentiation due to skin pigmentation, as well as intersectional forms of social marginalization, and as a consequence, they have developed and share complex compensating mechanisms. Roma mothers, who often possess low education, face severe marginalization in the job market, instead taking on the role of main caregivers in large families (Broekhuizen et al. 2019).

The role of a mother is closely interlinked with gender stereotypes, and achieving distance from normative ideals of motherhood may be especially challenging for socially disadvantaged people (Arendell 2000) who, in the case of Czech Roma, also face racialization by ethnic majority Czechs. An emancipatory parenting model is typically absent in the narratives of Roma mothers (Sidiropulu-Janků and Obrovská 2023). Previous research has also pointed to “othermothering” (Collins 2000), namely, the phenomenon of Roma girls taking care of younger siblings and the household (e.g. Levinson and Sparkes 2006). In contrast, boys are reminded of their future duties as fathers and breadwinners. This strongly embedded gendered normativity of Roma parenting is further cemented by Roma mothers’ socially scarce living conditions, in which public social service surveillance is present. This scenario is historically connected to socialist ideology, intertwined with

pronatalist and eugenic discourses (Hašková and Dudová 2020; Schmidt 2016), which closely regulated and disciplined the reproductive behavior of those women who did not undergo medical screenings, had too many children, or did not fit the ideal of socialist childcare. Roma women represent a group typically framed as the “biounderclass” (Prajeroová 2018), excluded from the “quality population,” prevented from having children, and forced to undergo sterilization (Schmidt 2016).

In 2018, a large-scale international biographical study among mothers was conducted as part of the research project “Inclusive Education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society” (ISOTIS). The country-specific analysis of 25 biographical interviews among the Roma minority with Czech Roma mothers uncovered a complex course of events related to dealing with the moments of othering that accompany the mothering practices of Czech Roma women. We explore their multiple self-perceptions of the ethnic, racial, cultural, and gendered parental layers of identity, thus shedding light on the intersections of such social categories; ethnicity, race, social class, and gender can overlap and exert strong symbolic as well as material power (Lareau 2011).

We focus on the narratives of belonging and ethnic othering among Czech Roma mothers, exploring interpretations of the positive experiences of belonging and coping strategies, along with the negative experiences of being othered based on ethnicity, within both formal and informal settings. During our research, we have given voice to our research participants, while avoiding stereotyping and essentialism. These contradictory efforts accompany much research conducted among Roma. In this article, we argue strongly for the potential of biographical research to avoid epistemic injustice (Klyve 2019), by showing the analytical and heuristic value of complex biographical narrative gathering, analysis, and interpretation. Narrative competence is not a matter of formal education or a shared cultural code; rather, it resides in the functionality of the biographical method. Therefore, we argue that epistemic justice is embedded in the biographical method itself because it has the potential to bring attention to the complexity of human experience and prevents labeling and stereotyping. At the same time, it offers plasticity in understanding the nuances of lived identity and its various layers. In the case of our research, these layers include parenting, mothering experiences, early childcare, Roma ethnic minority identity, living in Czech society, and experiences with the pre-school and elementary education systems. In this respect, we do not perceive “Romanifying science” as analytically specific in comparison to other identity layers of the meaning-making processes among research participants that we addressed in order to give them space for narrating their life conditions and contributing to epistemic justice (Klyve 2019).



### **Ethnic/racial othering: Towards narrative coping strategies**

*Othering* as a process of recognizing and/or creating the *other* has a long tradition in Western thinking and social order, either as mere dialectic opposition to a *familiar* self, or as a *power tool of oppression*. Some scholars refer to the Greek philosophers Parmenides and Plato “who defined the Other in relation to the Same” (Kearney 2003: 7), while others refer to the master-slave dialectic of Hegel that, besides following social philosophical traditions, underlies Spivak’s well-known notion of othering (Jensen 2011: 64). The postcolonial debate and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) anchors othering in the critique of the social order, while Erving Goffman’s focus on the dynamic processes of social interaction on the micro level have drawn attention to the individual level of response to symbolic social oppression. In Goffman’s writing on stigma, for example, he describes “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (1963: Preface). Some scholars focus on the analysis of othering as a mechanism that explains the liminal spaces of the human psyche reflected in cultural conditions and in diverse forms of estrangement (Kearney 2003; Kristeva 1995; Said 1978). Others devote attention to the psycho-social mechanisms induced by othering mechanisms in social interactions (Abutbul-Selinger 2020; Goffman 1963; Jensen 2011; Sue et al. 2007).

In our analysis, we follow the latter approach, focusing on the diversity and narrative disposition among forms of dealing with othering reflected across generations in the life stories of Czech Roma mothers. We bear in mind the intersectional nature of othering acts as perceived by the mothers, and highlight the suitability of the biographical method for its analysis (Rodríguez-Reche and Cerchiaro 2023). We closely follow the conceptual tradition on othering that portrays it as a process of creating distance and of excluding outgroup members from the core-group solidarity (Alexander 1988; Janků 2003), all of which can manifest in different ways.

Based on his ethnographic research among ethnic minority youth in Denmark, Jensen (2011) presents two types of reactions to othering. One can either *capitalize* on the fact that they are being othered, or *refuse* it either by disidentifying with the ethnically defined identity, or claiming a normality that stands outside ethnically defined boundaries. Inspired by Jensen’s approach, we unpack the diversity of reactions to othering in the narratives of Czech Roma mothers. Besides encompassing vivid examples of explicit othering, the biographies of Roma mothers demonstrate more subtle forms of the ethnic/racial boundaries that Roma mothers face on an everyday basis. Such othering experiences and strategies for dealing with

them function as facilitators of identity construction and boundary work processes (Barth 1969).

In this article, we elaborate both kinds of othering experiences, i.e. the more explicit ethnic othering, such as insults, assaults, attacks, scornful jokes, etc., as well as implicit and less obvious manifestations, such as microaggressions or tacit everyday insults (Abutbul-Selinger 2020). While most research in the field of ethnic and racial studies thematizes explicit and public forms of marginalization on the macrolevel, such as state, national, and policy discourses (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), recently, scholars have begun to stress everyday ethnicity, lived realities, and ordinary experiences (Brubaker et al. 2008). As Tremlett (2017: 736) pinpoints, “[P]ortraying the ‘everyday ethnicity’ of Roma is about questioning the established ‘norm’ from which contemporary negative dominant portrayals continue to be circulated.” At the same time, the theoretical shift to everyday ethnicity corresponds to the critique of primordialized and essentialized notions of ethnic groups as being composed of a stable, unchanging set of cultural traits (Barth 1969; Brubaker 2004; Jenkins 1997). This shift is represented, for instance, by Brubaker’s (2004) critique of analytical groupism, which instead of considering ethnic groups as basic units of social reality, and thus, primary analytical units, stresses the ways social reality is produced through the practical acts of ethnic classification and identification. Everyday ethnicity is thus depicted as multiple and dynamic, sometimes reproducing structural classifications and official discourses in a top-down manner, sometimes bringing forth unexpected meanings and overtly challenging the cycle of suppressive ethnicization.

In Romani studies, the debate regarding the proper conceptualization of ethnicity/race is ubiquitous and highly conceptual, as well as ethical. Our argumentation regarding othering and narrative coping strategies is anchored both in the discourses of ethnicity *and* race. The context of post-socialist Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, where the population is rather socio-culturally homogeneous, differs from countries with long histories of colonialism and migration. Racial diversity and inequalities based on race are thus not so central in the CEE social space, compared to the North American context, for example, in which race is one of the core categories causing structural inequalities, revealed more than four decades ago by feminist theorists of intersectionality (Alarcón 1981). Nevertheless, the lived experience of Czech Roma mothers speaks to the validity of perspectives on racialized oppression and racial microaggressions (Sue et al. 2007), especially in its power to frame differences as essential, inherited, imbodyed, and not changeable. Therefore, in line with Sciortino (2012), we argue for a more integrated approach to ethnicity, race, and nationality, one

that sees them as a family of forms of cultural understanding and social organization (Brubaker 2009). We sympathize with Sciortino's decision just to use the term *difference* "as a synthetic label" (2012: 383). While ethnicity, race, and nationality can be considered semantic categories related to social identity, distinctions such as race/ethnicity, and civic/ethnic are powerful binary codes and categories of practice that structure narratives endowed with powerful symbolic and social power. We are aware that as an analytical category the distinctions between ethnicity and race can obfuscate much more than they clarify (Brubaker 2009), and our analysis of the narratives supports such an approach. Nevertheless, especially on the macrolevel, the terms ethnicity and race still play an important symbolic and structural role in association with othering, worthy of explicit reflection. In our analysis, we focus on narratives depicting experiences that reveal the ethnic/racial identity of both Roma mothers and their children, as well as on the coping strategies in response to othering. We consider biographical research methods an important and encouraging tool for non-essentialist treatment of complex experiences in the ethnic minority interactional context. We also reflect on the phenomenon that we call "discursive subjugation," when the narrators are (more or less successfully) looking for proper, comfortable, and subjectively authentic narrative forms when it comes to reflecting on experiences of othering and identity construction. At the same time, we are interested to discover whether and how explicit and implicit forms of ethnic/racial othering are internalized, challenged, or completely refused by Roma mothers and if/how ethnic/racial boundaries are solidified or rather crossed.

### Methodology

The analysis presented in this article is based on a sub-study of the larger ISOTIS research project conducted in 11 European countries in the years 2017–2019, which focused on unraveling the complexity of educational inequalities and developing tools for tackling them at the level of schools, communities, and family environments. The European comparative biographical sub-study looked more closely into how disadvantaged families perceive, interpret, and negotiate their day-to-day situation in bringing up their children, reflected in the informants' life stories across ethnic-cultural minority and low-income groups (Nurse and Melhuish 2018). The biographical interviews consisted of three parts: 1) a spontaneous life story narration, honing in on the issue of the target child's education and development, including filling out a family tree; 2) clarification of the narrative, in which the researcher posed narrativizing incentives for each of the events mentioned; and 3) a semi-structured section, covering the key themes of child care and educational support. The analysis

consisted of synchronized steps across the country teams, according to a coding tree that was discussed step by step and augmented by new ideas from all the teams. At the same time, each national team maintained a record of country-specific and especially rich topics as they emerged during the analysis. In the case of Czechia, the topics revealed through the analysis concerned existing discourse on Czech Roma relationships and ethnic identification.

For the purpose of the Czech country-specific analysis on othering that we present in this article, we formulated two analytical areas of focus:

- I. Which situations reveal ethnic/racial identities or facilitate the ethnic/racial boundary work of Roma mothers and their children?
  - How do they cope with situations forcing negative ethnic/racial identity or enabling positive feelings of belongingness?
  - How do they cope with explicit acts of othering (either based on ethnic minority identification or racialized oppression)?
  - How do they cope with implicit ethnic/racial othering and/or invisible boundaries?
  - Which paths do they choose/follow to exit discursive subjugation?
  - How do these experiences affect mothers' choices regarding the socialization of their children?
  
- II. Experiencing othering in their daily life as a mother of a child, or experienced by the child and perceived by the mother, which narrative strategies are used by Czech Roma mothers
  - to be able to find traces that facilitate an identity project towards more dignified and open-ended life prospects and narrative streams?
  - to be able to find a way to connect to the presumably normative ideas of a fitting social existence?
  - to reconcile with existing discourse and the associated reality (and thus supporting oppressive or othered social position of oneself)?

The narrative analysis of the first part of the interviews uncovered meaning structures among Czech Roma mothers that reflect their self-conception as mothers, and indicate the narrative context of their ethnic identity. When and how is such identity activated while telling the story of her life? In addition, we focused on the narrative structures associated with mothering itself, and how ethno-cultural identity is reproduced across generations. With these structures of meaning in mind, we returned to the data in order to conduct a more thorough narrative analysis of the spontaneous life story narration, focusing on its length, whether the issue of ethnicity appeared

in the spontaneous narrative, and if yes, in what form and under which context(s).

We next selected parts of the interviews that thematized the notions of ethno-cultural identity and coping with othering, and proceeded by using the analytical method of “pragmatic refraction,” introduced by Fritz Schütze:

Pragmatic refraction means not to take verbal – here: specifically autobiographical narrative – expressions at face value, but to contextualize them, and by this to find us their social functions. (Schütze 2008: 187)

During our analysis, we focused on strategies for coping with different forms of othering by highlighting the situations of biographical importance that uncover the systems of meaning present in the parenting actions of Czech Roma mothers who decide on their mode of cultural reproduction in the private sphere. The diversity of coping strategies in response to explicit acts of othering (either based on ethnic minority identification or racialized oppression) reveals the complex internal dynamics of ethnic minorities in the contemporary European social space (Nurse 2013: 116). Despite structural and symbolic similarities in the othering actions Czech Roma mothers and their children face, the reactions to them, as well as the biographical incorporations, differ. We were looking for analytical explanations of those differences and their narrative logic, presupposing that the Gestalt perspective would uncover the systems of meaning and underlying social structures that framed the individual narratives (Rosenthal 2004). We found that during this narrative work, discursive subjugation, or the state of using inappropriate terms while engaging in “biographical work,” plays a pivotal role (Corbin and Strauss 1988 in Schütze 2008: 6). These terms are either absorbed by the narrator from shared public discourse (and in cases lacking care and reflexivity on the part of the researcher) or used by the narrator simply because they do not possess more suitable terms to describe one’s life events. Such subjugation is often observable or perceptible during the narrative process as embodied discomfort, narrative stutters, slowing down, and wriggling, as if the word they would like to use is different but has difficulties finding its way into one’s linguistic repertoire.

## Analysis

In our analysis, we focus on biographical expressions among Czech Roma mothers, concerning their experiences of othering and three distinct ways of dealing with it: 1) vacillating between refusal and resigned acceptance; 2) claiming normality through universal humanism, the submission of

racialized microaggression, and the psychologizing of an aggressor; and 3) embracing family pride and social dissent. In the discussion following the analysis, we examine the interrelation of these three models for dealing with discursive subjugation and suggest directions for further research. Our findings are based on the thematic interpretive analysis of 25 narratives, as well as cross-national analysis and the overall methodology of biographical research on family experiences with educational and social support systems (Nurse and Melhuish 2018). We elaborate the three distinct ways of dealing with the discursive subjugation within ethno-cultural/racial identification and othering, presenting them in the contextualized biographical mode, using the specific cases of three mothers that demonstrate the dynamic nature of mothering (Nurse et al. 2023).

*“You are black, and you will pretend to be someone else”: Between refusal and resigned acceptance*

Blanka, a middle-aged mother of four children, formulates the topic of Roma identity during her initial spontaneous life narrative, in which the researcher encourages her to continue describing her life story and family relations in detail. She speaks about her husband, whom she met after already having two children:

Yeah, he worked all the time, he cared, he just wasn't like anyone else. And most importantly, he was my first Gypsy in my life. I just never wanted a Gypsy. I never felt like it. Yeah, but it's probably supposed to be like that. Gypsy to Gypsy, Czech to Czech.

This opening reflection on the ethnic minority identity of her husband nicely shows Blanka's disunity in understanding herself in terms of ethnic identification. Blanka claims to be Czech on several occasions, supporting it by speaking proper Czech, having high demands on her children's educational discipline, and keeping close parental control over their leisure time. At the same time, she feels distant from the Roma lifestyle and values, including language and habits. Her refusal stems from diverse sources. One of the strong cross-sectional tones in her narrative is the legacy of her father, a respected citizen and musician, whom she highly honors: “I am proud of how our father raised us. We were not raised among the Gypsies, so we have a completely different mentality. Or at least we try to.”

The second powerful impetus for Blanka's distance from her Roma ancestry is the awareness of differences among Roma groups and the reflection of her mixed roots in this regard. One of the notions concerning Roma ethnic minority identity is inner differentiation, which has connotations to the

Indian caste system (Budilová and Jakoubek 2005). Blanka refuses her mother's roots from Eastern Slovakia, which she considers more "backward," instead highlighting her father's legacy, coming from Western Slovakia. In short, she neither maintains connections to her relatives in Slovakia, nor expresses the need to learn the Romani language, which she considers incomprehensible, repugnant, and useless: "I love languages. All of them. But this Gypsy language, this is a catastrophe."

Blanka admits to having Roma family roots, appearance, and certain lifestyle traits, like listening to Roma music with her husband, living in close contact with relatives in her city, and expecting her older daughter to take over part of the household duties, as she herself did in her childhood. Nevertheless, Blanka generally disapproves of the Roma lifestyle. Her connotations point to a lack of "civilized" manners (in her understanding, "civilized" equals "Czech"), an absence of functional morals and ambitions, and the abuse of the social system she sees in her neighborhood and in her own family. (Her daughter had a child at a young age and could not finish higher education, just as occurred with Blanka, she regretfully remarks.) At the same time, Blanka admits on several occasions that the lifestyle of her family does not necessarily follow all the imagined standards of "civilized"/Czech life, but somehow, she manages to draw a line between her, being of "Gypsy" origin but having Czech upbringing and education, and the rest of the "Gypsies," who, in her perspective, do not dare adopt the standards of the country in which they live. In this respect, her narrative reminds us of well-assimilated second-generation migrants who speak critically about their less-integrated ethnic peers. Blanka's narrative uncovers an understanding of her own life as a journey towards becoming an integrated, comfortable, and well-respected citizen, something she saw in her father, rather an exceptional figure for her.

Blanka's life story features a series of fails, many of them Blanka considers to be a matter of her bad choices, and she blames neither her family roots and upbringing, nor the social system and discrimination. She openly expresses hatred towards Roma, and even sympathy for (Czech) nationalist sentiments and actions, not only against Roma, but also against people of any foreign descent. She describes her landlord's reaction to some foreign workers, who were behaving disrespectfully in the neighborhood: "So, I liked that the owner came and made a fuss and said that we are still Czechs and they are the social bottom. That they will behave here as they are supposed to, or they will have to go away."

The coexistence of oppressive racist discourse and self-identity negotiation is well represented by the racist expressions that Blanka incorporates into her narrative. She even goes so far as to admit that she is a "strong patriot"



and “black racist” and would not hesitate to hurt someone, even though such expressions are performed in exaggeration. She recounts visiting the city hall social subsidies office.

She [the municipal worker] said, “Come work for us, make three months of training. And you will work with Gypsies.” I said, “I will not. First, I cannot speak the Gypsy language, so if a Gypsy would come here, I would manage nothing. I would need a translator by my side.” And second, I have such an approach towards Gypsies, that if I worked here, I would say, “Give me a tommy gun and I would just stand by this desk and fire.”

In her private life, Blanka seems to have succeeded in finding a balance in the diversity of ethnic minority identity attitudes and practices. The discrepancies tend to appear in more general social contexts, outside the sphere of familiar acquaintances, typically bound to physical appearance. That is also where she has faced openly racist disapproval, rejection, or symbolic attacks. In both cases that she recalls (looking for a job and traveling in public transport), Blanka takes on an actively self-defensive role, typically at the edge of polite behavior. This role reflects her anti-Roma speech acts in the overall context of her social self; she presents herself as a fighter for what she thinks is right, even if it offends or hurts someone: “Simply put, I was raised among you [Czechs] ..., I simply must live like a proper person.”

How can we understand this seemingly contradictory narrative of a woman, who is simultaneously dark-skinned, married to a Roma man she is very happy with, and living in a Roma neighborhood because she likes that “there is life there”? Blanka often discusses the contradictions with her husband, who, unlike her, feels pride in being Roma: “I am not ashamed that I am a Gypsy. Simply, it is just a heritage. But in terms of nationality, I am Czech.” Blanka’s narrative is interwoven with refusals from the generalized and essentialist category of “Gypsy mentality – horror and terror.” Yet, at the same time, she admits in a resigned manner, not least because of her physical appearance (that is why her husband accuses her of hypocrisy and “pretending to be someone else”), family roots, and selected parts of her biography, to having Roma identity. Furthermore, she capitalizes her Czech ethnic majority identity by emphasizing practices such as speaking “proper” Czech and raising her children in a more disciplined and performance-oriented manner than her Roma neighbors and relatives. This *mélange* aptly demonstrates the dynamics of discursive subjugation in ethnic identification, which cannot be easily ignored throughout one’s life, not only when being subjugated by othering, but also when understanding one’s own biography and reflecting on upbringing and family life.

*“Bite the bullet and go on”: Claiming normality through universal humanism, the submission of racialized microaggression, and the psychologizing of an aggressor*

Adriana, a single mother of three children, first mentions her ethnic minority background when describing her family tree in the second part of the interview, during the development of the spontaneous narrative. It appears that some of her ancestors and relatives still live in Slovakia, but she is not in touch with them and last traveled there at the age of six. She describes her extensive family (the family tree contains 18 people plus one unspecified family branch from Slovakia), and she maintains intense contact with some of the relatives who live in the same city as she does. Adriana barely uses any Roma ethnic minority identifier, neither the formal denomination “Roma” nor the pejorative exonym “Gypsy.” She rather uses “us/them” expressions, pinpointing the stereotypical differences in lifestyle and success in education performance.

In some families, it is a matter of course and they do not make a big deal about it, because it is a matter of course. You finish elementary school, you go to high school, if you have good grades or show your talents, you can graduate, and so on. Because it is about the future. That is why there are doctors and advocates everywhere. I make a big deal about it. But we somehow cannot give this to the children, I do not know.

What can be considered a matter of education or overall habitual background, between the lines, Adriana sees as ethnicity based. But what, if anything, does it mean to Adriana to be a Roma? And does she even feel like one? The answer to this question is ambiguous, as is evident from her reasoning in reaction to a direct question regarding her self-identification.

Well, definitely, I am a Czech. I am a Roma; this I know. Do you understand me? I sometimes do not really understand myself either. I am a Czech. Here is what I think. We have Czechia, and inside, Moravia, Silesia, Bohemia, Western Bohemia, and so on. So, someone says: “I am from the south, from this part of Bohemia.” He does not say “I am a Western Bohemian.”; he says “I am a Czech.” It is the same. I know I am a Czech. But, Roma, where do I put it, when I do not have it; do you understand me? I do not know where to put it. We do not have anything. I know that I am a Czech, but I know that I am a Roma there. But there is not Silesia, Bohemia, do you understand me? Well, yeah.

Adriana analogizes Roma ethnic minority identity to the regional territorial identities of the Czech regions of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. Adriana is correct in that the age-old landlessness of the Roma population in Europe, always defined as non-indigenous, plays an important symbolic role. On the other hand, being easily identified as Roma (the Czech population

is accustomed to recognize and identify dark pigmentation and label it accordingly), imposes an ethnic minority identification agenda without permission. The implication of an external ethnic minority agenda does not necessarily impose a unified reaction. One of the signs of ethnic minority self-identification is the attitude towards the ethnic minority language and its daily practice. Adriana was raised in a fully Czech-speaking environment; nevertheless, she remembers that her grandmother used the Romani language in selected contexts and later in life, she learned the basics of the language for pragmatic reasons. In her narrative, Adriana does not show any signs of emotional attachment to the Romani language.

Interviewer: You said that your grandmother spoke Romani.

Adriana: Yes. Mainly with her brothers, when they came to visit her, or with her peers. But not with her daughters, or my father.

Interviewer: And why did you learn Romani when you were 15 years old?

Adriana: I do not know. I guess I wanted to. When we were going out, I had plenty of Roma friends and they spoke Gypsy and I did not understand them. I stood there; I did not understand what they were talking about.

Keeping in mind the notion of acts of explicit racial microaggression (Sue et al. 2007), we ask, how does Adriana react to such microaggressions? Adriana recalls the first experience of this kind spontaneously when she talks about her elementary school years.

I was happy in school since the first grade, and the teachers were satisfied with me as well. But, when I was in secondary school, around the sixth grade, my schoolmates started to mock us, even though we had gone to school together since the first grade. So, when I was a girl, I had to get tougher. It took about a year until things calmed down, maybe two years, until the eighth grade. At this time, I was not keen to go to school, [because] they mocked us all the time, and it was so-so. We were three in the school, me, my sister, and our friend, so-called Gypsies. So, the kids were simply mocking us a lot, but as a matter of fact, they did not have anything to mock us about. We were clean, we had everything in school, good grades, everything. And there were worse there, you know? There were dirty ones without snacks. But simply they had this gang, and you were for them that Gypsy....

When asked if she ever felt mistreated again, she elaborates further:

Many times, many times. Also, nowadays. I'll tell an example. I'm going from school, standing at the stop, and there are two men next to me. They're talking, and they definitely did not say it as a joke. We're standing at the traffic lights, and one says: "I'd cancel those convenience stores that are opened during the night." The latter says: "Me too." And the first one replies: "Well, these stores are only for Gypsies, for these darkies." I looked, and I thought, "How did he mean it? Could it be me?"

Why would he even...?" And I face that all the time. And then I say to myself: "You (saying such things) must have some troubles in your life. Because when a person is normally satisfied with life, then they don't search for mistakes somewhere, where they shouldn't." This is what I said to myself and then I walked away. Those situations sometimes make you so mad that you just start arguing or fighting. "Why are you saying this?" I've already learned to hold back a bit. Because be that as it may, you just know you're a Gypsy, even though you don't even know, where you're from, anything. But why? There are Indians, there are Arabs, there are the blacks, who are dark, too. Why only these Gypsies? They live kind of a noisier life, yeah? But most of them have already learned, after so many years, also another life, yeah? But it's everywhere, it's everywhere. But, after all, this person was born with the same heart, with the same kidneys, this person has everything the same.

Not fighting back when being mistreated, waiting until it passes; this is the reaction Adriana tends to adopt in diverse social situations. For example, when she explains why she lives in a public shelter, she explains that as a single mother of three children and bearing a Roma appearance, she simply does not have a chance in the open housing market. Her overall approach is well grasped in an expression she used to comment on the overall disapproving climate towards Roma people in Czechia: "It is unpleasant. But one simply has to bite the bullet and go on."

Adriana feels besieged by some habitual patterns that befall her, and despite her trials, she is not able to overcome them. She also mentions negative remarks based on her skin color, and its recognition on the streets, assuming that people making such remarks have some issues of their own. Nevertheless, she must cope with them, and her choice is to understand herself as human being, rather than openly fighting for her dignity. Adriana believes that her attackers are obviously not satisfied with their lives; the problem of structural racism is thus individualized and coded as an error of spoiled persons by Adriana. The second coping strategy identified in Adriana's biographical narrative draws from a universal humanistic approach. In her mind, every human being is equal and when she is being mistreated, she simply waits until it passes, or she finds sanctuary in her own interpretation of the situation. Overall, Adriana's narrative lacks any ethnic minority project, as intended by her ancestors for her, or to be passed on to her descendants by her. The third narrative we present contrasts with such an approach, revealing quite an opposite reaction.

*"Firstly, he has to know the history of our family and then he will cope with that better": Family pride and social dissent*

Cecilie starts her life story with a lengthy and rich narrative about her grandfather, a respected blacksmith, and her grandmother, a significant

woman well-versed in the school of life, moving on through the family history to her siblings, all educated, and, in her perspective, well-off. Her Roma self-conception is strong, and unambiguous.

Later in the narrative, it appears that she has developed a dissenting strategy, due to her relatively light skin tone; for example, she does not reveal in her workplace that she actually is a Roma. Although she does not admit she has experienced racism or discrimination (for instance, in access to education), she recounts many experiences of being othered and insulted in everyday settings, including the work environment. She believes that she obtained at least some of her jobs thanks to her only slightly brown skin color and is quite certain that if the employers had known she was a Roma, she would not have been hired. As Abutbul-Selinger (2020) points out, even ethnic minority members with a middle-class social status face marginalization caused by stereotypes or an occupational glass ceiling. Cecilie talked about many situations in which even her educated colleagues have made racist comments: for instance, one of her colleagues posted a hoax on a notice board about Mister Jan Hus, a famous Czech historical figure, who allegedly hated Roma people. In our interpretation, Cecilie stresses that even the educated members of the majority society engage in racism or xenophobia against Roma, somehow disrupting the supposedly emancipatory effects she ascribes to the education system. It seems that Cecilie is more fragile than she wants to admit: she has left several well-paid and interesting occupations due to various ethnic-based tensions she faced, giving preference to less prestigious occupations, for example, working as a teacher in an afterschool program at an ethnically segregated school attended by many Roma pupils. She reflects that it is relieving, offering her some space to blossom from within and fully perform her Roma identity.

Despite these conflicting identity pressures, she strives to feel like a proud Roma person. Nevertheless, this effort results in higher demands on her management of identity, as well as in psychological stress apparent from contradicting claims such as, “I do not admit the ethnic stereotypes about Roma; these do not speak to me,” as opposed to the racist incident at work with the hoax that offended Cecilie. Her story thus encompasses a mixture of pride in her Roma origins and coping strategies based on psychologizing an aggressor, which she even applied to an incident when her husband was beaten by a group of Nazis, along with references to her emotional stability (“I did not let myself be provoked”).

The deeply ambivalent tensions Cecilie faces in regard to her and her family’s ethnicity crystallize tangibly in her strategy to raise her son. Cecilie is currently looking for the right moment to tell her pre-school son that he is a Roma. She is looking for a way through, trying to pass on the pride and not

to immerse him in the hateful discourse surrounding Roma. The following passage reveals the narrative strategies Cecilie employs:

Interviewer: You said that you don't want somebody to look at (your child) in a bad way.

Cecilie: I can't influence that; it will happen. It will happen.

Interviewer: Is it happening?

Cecilie: Not yet.

Interviewer: Did you notice anything like that?

Cecilie: He goes to a kindergarten also attended by Roma kids, Vietnamese kids. However, he does not know yet that he is of Roma background. We haven't told him that yet. Once, he came home and said: "Mom, do you know that Sabina is Gypsy?" And I asked: "What does that mean?" "She is Gypsy; she is bad." So, I know that it is not the right time. Of course, we will tell him, because why should we be ashamed of that? We rather have to think about when, which will be probably after he will start attending primary school. Maybe, during primary school, not right at the beginning because he will not understand that. Actually, he knows now that it is something negative and he is in kindergarten and he knows that to be [a Roma] is something negative. So, it is a problem. ... I will do something similar with him – firstly, he has to know our family, the history of our family and then he will cope better with that.

Cecilie's four-year-old son Cyril does not know he has a Roma background. She wants to explain this to him later, once he is more mature and emotionally stable. She is convinced that Cyril firstly has to be proud of his family and only then can he gain a more coherent sense of his Roma identity. It is apparent that Cecilie is aware of the fact that Cyril's ascribed Romaness could work as a strong disqualifying marker and thus limit her son's interactional potential (Goffman 1963). Accordingly, she is very cautious in cultivating his Roma identity (e.g. she does not teach him the Romani language). Harassment based on skin color unfortunately passes from generation to generation in Roma families. They are bringing up their children with the fear that once "identified" as Roma, they must step by step prepare an initiation procedure of sorts, trying to pass on this fact, but avoiding trauma and biographical blockade. We can only speculate if Cecilia's cautiousness will result in the assimilationist style of upbringing she experienced as a child.

In sum, although at first sight Cecilie seems to possess the biography of an integrated and self-confident Roma person, later on in the interview she exhibits her and her family's ethnicity rather ambivalently.

## Conclusion and discussion

In this article, we have discussed the validity of the concept of othering for understanding the management of identity by Czech Roma mothers narrating

the conditions of their children's upbringing. By examining three analytical cases, we have shown that there are uncovered spaces between Jensen's (2011) opposing notions of capitalization and refusal. The reason for finding new forms of reaction may be both methodological and demographic; perhaps, using biographical interviewing uncovers another layer of identity politics over ethnographic observation. One of the most compelling aspects of our study is the element of primary socialization. Mothers uncover aspects of ethnic minority identification and self-identification within the frame of co-creating the social self of their offspring. Often, the question of ethnic identity comes from outside, in the form of racial microaggression (Abutbul-Selinger 2020; Sue et al. 2007). We have shown the conditions and situations in which such "identity work" must be performed within three different coping strategies: vacillating between refusal and resigned acceptance, claiming normality through universal humanism, the submission of racialized microaggression, and the psychologizing of an aggressor and embracing family pride and social dissent. Despite their diversity, all three stories have one element in common. The management of othering (cf. Goffman 1963; Rodríguez-Reche and Cerchiaro 2023) seems to be a never-ending process, a process that Czech Roma mothers have only partially under control. Racial microaggressions enter their everyday lives without their control or incentive; all they can do is to reflect, and re-act, often engaging in an inner dialogue with their own family history and self-understanding of who they are, and who they want their child to become.

To conclude, we summarize our overall findings and offer suggestions for further research:

1. *The identity process, including its ethno-cultural layer, is an ongoing, lifetime project*, while othering experiences often function as facilitators of identity construction processes and boundary work (Barth 1969; Jenkins 1997). Despite being deeply rooted in childhood primary socialization, identity construction is constantly updated, and sometimes even re-socialized, from within or outside. In further research, we suggest focusing on the later life stages of ethno-cultural identity development, revolving around dating, marriage, having a family, and other significant biographical events.
2. Besides habitual or socio-economic issues, the ethno-cultural layer of the identity process is closely tied to *understanding one's own family history*. In further research, we suggest aiming at understanding the dynamics of negotiating external vs. internal factors of the identity process and designing complex methodologies that would grasp both aspects of othering in the case of ethnic minority families, or any



social group experiencing stigmatization. We have demonstrated that the biographical method has great potential in this regard (Breckner et al. 2000; Chamberlayne et al. 2000; Rodríguez-Reche and Cerchiaro 2023).

3. *Narrative biographic interviews have tremendous potential for uncovering implicit meaning structures.* The ruptures in narratives may reflect external factors disrupting the life story. In the context of Czech Roma mothers, without a doubt, the influences of othering and racial microaggression/racialization are significant (cf. Abutbul-Selinger 2020; Sue et al. 2007). Often, the spontaneous narratives of our research participants flowed seemingly smoothly, including references to ethnic identity, but ruptures and ambivalences emerged during further elaboration, especially in connection to the experiences of their children with othering and racial microaggressions. In further research, we suggest continued analysis of complex life biographies, since they have great potential in uncovering social processes that are not obvious at first glance (Nurse 2013).
4. Finally, we suggest more gender-balanced research designs, in order to explore the primary socialization processes of shaping ethno-cultural and family identity in contemporary European societies from the perspective of fathers and male caregivers. Even though research shows that *mothers/female caregivers*, if present, *tend to play the key role* in shaping ethno-cultural and family identity of the children during primary socialization (Nurse et al. 2022), it is important to keep in mind that the male caregivers' perspective on parenting remains under-researched and the family-oriented research agenda is not gender balanced (Arendell 2000; Pringle et al. 2013).

Our aim is to contribute to the research on the conceptualization of social identity facing adverse conditions, as well as to maximize the potential of biographical research for researching ethnic identity in contemporary Europe, especially in a multigenerational scope. Further, we promote using biographic research methods that open up space for sharing everyday experiences, support treating disadvantaged members of society as active agents, prevent victimization (Reimer 2016), and consequently enhance epistemic justice (Klyve 2019). Therefore, we also strongly recommend further research on the dynamics of othering and management of social identity in diverse conditions, as it can uncover and contextualize the marginalized experiences of minority groups and help to better understand the mechanisms underlying the reproduction of social inequalities and social exclusion.

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# Fashion and pilgrimage: Discourses constructing Romani identity

PETRA EGRI, ZOLTÁN BECK, AND ANTAL BÓKAY

Our study interprets the activities and products of Romani Design, a Budapest-based high fashion company. We discuss their creative technique and ideology, which programmatically construct a distinctive Romani identity in their fashion products. Their activities take part not just in the mainstream world of fashion shows and fashion business but they also appear in special spaces of representation, for example, in a major city museum exhibition, mobilizing visual parallels with eighteenth-century artistic paintings. They also take part in a religious, ritual event, the dressing of the statue of the Virgin Mary in a church in the Romani community space of the Csátka pilgrimage feast. All three event spaces serve to position a “Gypsy” identity, as well as a confident but also contradictory Romani bodily-spiritual projection through objects and their placement.

*Keywords:* ethnic identity, Romani Design, cultural biography, fashion, pilgrimage feast, Virgin Mary

Romani Design is a Hungarian high-fashion enterprise organizing fashion shows and selling special garments, combining traditional and contemporary clothing culture. Their products and events act as platforms for social discourse. They are the world’s first Romani fashion house, founded in 2010 by the sisters Erika and Helena Varga, committed to the preservation of Romani cultural heritage. They incorporate traditional references into a contemporary design to raise social prestige and provide insight into Romani culture through fashion. The original-design fabrics are imbued with the visual codes of Romani culture, and upon leaving the tailor’s desk, they transform into sewn manifestations, and advocates for addressing social challenges. Through the work of Romani Design, a highly marginalized group is elevated into mainstream fashion. Countless fashion magazine

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articles have started to cover Romani Design. This event is significant for not only the brand itself, but also for promoting the representation of Hungarian Roma, both in terms of artistic and social public presence. The artistic and theoretical representation of the emancipatory social aspirations of the fashion house had also come into focus in Europe in the first decade of the 2000s, with an exhibition at the first Roma pavilion of the Venice Biennale (2007). Roma are Hungary's largest ethnic minority, comprising approximately 5–7 percent of the total population. “Anti-Gypsy” feelings have become deep-seated in Hungarian society, and Romani Design has taken on an important role against this prejudice: it brings the rich Romani culture to the attention of an often openly hostile public consciousness. Romani Design targets higher-status groups and confronts them with a culture they have so far outright ignored or rejected. The performative and constructive power of the dialogue between majority and minority cultures builds a bridge between them via the splendidly colorful fabrics of contemporary fashion. What better example of this than the fact that Romani Design is included in Bence Csalár's (2020) *Behind the Scene: Hungarian Fashion*, a primarily educational book that includes interviews conducted by the author, a fashion journalist. Only the most well-known and well-respected Hungarian brands are included.

Romani Design's “montage collection” was a huge success in high-fashion circles and among the general public at Budapest Central European Fashion Week 2020 Autumn (see Figure 1). After the show, we interviewed the designers, who told us that Roma are not their most important and most frequent customers. Roma prefer to hide their Romani identity and wear fast fashion,<sup>1</sup> which they believe is free of any “stigma” and “labeling”: “Many Roma use fast fashion as a tool because they think it will help them to fit in. But they can't... and they believe that fashion can be a tool in the whitening process,” notes designer Erika Varga. The same phenomenon was observed at the launch of the book *Gypsy Soul* about the Romani dandy, Zoli Kalapos Sztojka,<sup>2</sup> on 6 December 2022 in Budapest, where few Roma were in the audience. Zoli's wife, who was sitting among the participants, admitted to wearing clothes and jewelry not in line with Romani traditions because, “I don't dress like a Romni among the *Gazcho*.”

One of the most important findings of the interview with the Varga sisters was their insistence on “marking the Romani source” of their clothing line. This

1. “Fast fashion” is the term used to describe clothing designs that move quickly from the catwalk to stores to take advantage of trends. The collections are often based on styles presented at Fashion Week runway shows or worn by celebrities. Fast fashion allows mainstream consumers to purchase the hot new look or the next big thing at an affordable price (Press 2018).

2. Sztojka is also a private keeper of Romani costume.





FIGURE 1. Fashion model in Romani Design clothing. Budapest Central European Fashion Week 2020

insistence follows from the fact that since they are already marked as Roma (and they cannot remove this marking from themselves), they try to use this fact to move Roma “from the periphery to the center.” The designers are not bothered if a non-Roma wears the “authentic” motifs. As Erika Varga explained:

I don’t see this as a problem from the user side. Because I think that if the user – whether they are Roma, non-Roma, blonde, blue-eyed, or from anywhere in the world says that these are Gypsy motifs and they are linked to their story, then it shows that fashion can bring people together.

That’s also what the Varga sisters do when they print a photograph of their mother or grandmother instead of the traditional face of the Virgin Mary, proclaiming the emancipation of women. This devotion to Mary is the continuation of a custom and the restoration of a broken tradition, with a mix of pre-modern and ultra-modern elements of beliefs and practices: Romani Design mixes traditional Romani dress (sometimes they collect and use vintage materials) with religious references and portrait photographs of

their families. As Tatiana Zachar Podolinská notes, Roma use the Virgin Mary as a symbol to “cope with marginalisation, creating their islands of marginal centrality, and the role of the post-modern Virgin Mary in this internal process of self-centralisation” (2021: v–vi). The worship of Mary represents both a family tradition and a postmodern religiosity. The family ties and the Virgin Mary image are therefore important elements of identity construction. An important element of our research is to investigate how the so-called “Romani Madonna” created by Romani Design reinforces Romani identity and how this affects fashion design. In modernity, clothing and social identity are becoming more closely linked. As Joanne Entwistle observes: “Fashion and dress have a complex relationship to identity: on the one hand the clothes we choose to wear can be expressive of identity, telling others something about gender, class, status” (2015: 112). Later she adds, that how “we perform our identity has something to do with our location in the social world as members of particular groups, classes, cultural communities.” At the same time, however, modern fashion “exhibits contradictory desires to imitate others and to express commonality, but also express individuality” (Entwistle 2015: 114). Fashion, therefore, in addition to creating group identity, also carries the individual’s desire to be different. Romani Design’s patchwork “Romani Madonna” garments, with family portraits and sacred images, are thus a way of linking postmodern religiosity and presenting it through fashion. It is a technique for conversion “from the periphery to the center” in the sense of Zachar Podolinská (2021). By building heavily on the devotion to Mary, the design represents a protective and conciliatory figure in the textile. It becomes important not only for Roma (and not even primarily for Roma).

Besides the typical fashion functions, Romani Design has a more extensive cultural role. Its designs have brought a new “ethnic” representation into Hungarian high culture, activating and practicing an often conflicting, peripheral ethnic identity. The homepage of the fashion brand quotes Erika Varga: “Fashion means to me what words mean for writers, colors for painters. Through my clothes I can express my identity and create a world in which I enjoy living” (Romani.hu). Inspired by the rich cultural heritage of the traditional clothing of her Romani community, Erika sees her mission as building bridges among cultures by using fashion as a means to fight stereotypes.

Romani Design, however, is much more than just a new fashion style connected to a successful Romani designer group. In the remainder of the article, we elaborate the more generally relevant features that connect the fashion house’s production to complex performances of ethnic identity, and the creation of social connections that are (or can be) characteristic to its existence in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

### Romani Design as scholarly object: Theoretical and methodological considerations

Fashion is a cultural practice, a communication tool (Barnard 2002) that develops a specific epistemological position through the symbolic messages of the garments. Fashion transforms an originally functional (non-meaning-making) human activity, namely, dressing, which protects the naked human body from external influences, into an institutionally organized activity saturated with specific meanings, forms, and messages. Luxury fashion houses have played a decisive role in articulating a certain, ever-changing discursive space. As Entwistle (2015) observes, during the nineteenth century there was a quantitative rise in material culture (with shopping, consumption, and symbolic display). She calls upon sociologist George Simmel, who sees modernity as inherently contradictory: “Problems arise when the world of objects outstrips individuals’ attempts to come to terms with it when subjects do not appropriate objects in ways that relate to their projections but confront the world as alien” (Entwistle 2015: 116). In contemporary society, luxury fashion houses have constantly constructed and deconstructed, in a sense, “scientified” a kind of fashion discourse. In doing so, they exert significant influence on the knowledge of the social communities affected by this discourse and, of course, on the development of the system of symbols that influences the identity and self-awareness of these communities. The subject of our research is the processing of such a contemporary phenomenon that “scientifies” Roma, incorporates Romani tradition in an organized fashion system, and, at the same time, projects a systematic symbolism of the Romani way of life.

We choose as our analyzed example the 2021 “sacred image montage collection” created by Romani Design. The collection has been presented in a variety of ways within three different characteristic public spaces: the fashion week runway show, two museum exhibitions,<sup>3</sup> and a performance at the Csátka pilgrimage feast. We are interested in how these fashion products and the particular public spaces they inhabit activate a special “Roma identity”; our interest is in the “relationship between people and things” (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 169). Our research includes ethnographic observation participation in the Csátka pilgrimage feast, a visit to the exhibition “In Circulation,” and attendance at the Budapest Central European Fashion Week presenting the 2021 Spring-Summer collection, as well as an in-depth interview with the designers. We have analyzed the interview, relevant documents, our

3. In 2023, the Hungarian Heritage Museum organized another exhibition entitled *Romani Design Fashion Art: Activism for Tradition*, open from 18 August to 30 November.

field experiences, and artwork. Our methodology, undertaken through a contemporary critical social science perspective, is decidedly qualitative in nature. Our primary terrain is the urban space in which the artists of Romani Design work. The interview conducted with them, their works as internal, self-identifying representations of themselves, and their ideological horizons, are incorporated into our interpretive-reporting strategies. The complexity of the interpretation is also composed from the processing of the referential realities engaged by the works. The analysis is framed by the critical discourse experience of contemporary Roma and “Gypsy” identity narratives.

The theoretical and, at the same time, methodological, background is provided by the quasi-ideological and direct-technical horizon of the creation of fashion objects. Because “objects do not just provide a stage setting to human action; they are integral to it,” we try to formulate a “cultural biography of objects” (Tringham 1995: 79–107). In our approach, however, both the objects and their descriptions articulated by us are in bricolage form, imagined as an elaboration of a currently valid narrative along the lines of a specific selection and reorganization of already existing fragments (Levi-Strauss 1966: 19–21), and its critical further reflection (Johnson 2012). Our perspective is consequently subversive-deconstructive and, in this way, erodes the constructions of a static community narrative. We consider our theoretical background relevant only insofar as it allows us to approach the contexts of social phenomena, performances, and community events, or more precisely, to orient ourselves in the symbolic space they occupy. In this way, we relate to the experience of postcolonial discourse and become bricoleurs as analysts. According to Spivak: “I’m a very eclectic person. I use what comes to hand” (1990: 55). Identity (as self) and the representation of the communal self becomes the focus for us: this perspective is also built from the object of analysis. Identity is seen as narrative identity, thus unfinished and unfinishable (Butler 2006). The fashion objects and the spaces created by the project, as we later discuss in detail, perform these narratives of identity in the life of the designers, the experience of the museum visitors, the buyers of the fashion objects, and the social events of the Csatka pilgrimage feast. Artistic, creative products, and events are necessarily understood as narratives of identity. In these events, however, besides their totalizing intent, “the social field is to be read [also] as a symptom, the effect and remainder of a trauma that itself cannot be directly symbolized in language” (Butler 1993: 143).

### **Talking about Romani people: A note on terminology**

As scholars, we tend to think that we have to decide between two different terms for naming our ethnic group, that is, Roma(ni) or “Gypsy,” designations,

which obviously lead to different conclusions. It is, however, not our task to decide – or to justify – their meanings, even if we could unfold the strategies behind the two terms. The European Commission has announced the flexible term Roma through an open gesture, focusing on usability or practicality within its jurisdiction: it is a typical umbrella term. This term should (ostensibly) be suited to articulate social differences and exclusion in daily practice. Although Roma is an ethnonym representing the group's name-giving practices, this piece of legislation fixes the speculative differences rigidly and ethnicizes complex social problems. In a sense, "Gypsy" is, in contrast, a non-politically correct term, upholding or just accepting an identity, a self-reflective relation. Roma is a politically correct term, without preconceptions in European space, but it is also more descriptive than participative. It is instructive to refer to the reflexive perspective of Daniel Baker – one of the most well-known contemporary Traveler artists and scholars – regarding the term "Gypsy." One of his art installations is a mirror that features only one word: "Gypsies." When viewers look at the mirror, they can see their faces under this title. Their face will become part of the installation, and, moreover, the artwork pushes itself into their private space too. This artwork elicits a dialogue and forces questions and answers – the interaction between "here" and "there," "us" and "the Other" is unavoidable. We believe this artwork aptly encapsulates Baker's perspective, namely, that "art has the power to challenge long-held stereotypes and misconceptions" (2008: 415). Thus, the self-referential name "Gypsy" in the case of Romani Design is in line with Daniel Baker's presentation.

### **Roma visibility in the museum space**

Since 2018, "In Circulation," a long-established exhibition series at the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest, has invited contemporary designers, Eastern Europeans, and Hungarians to collaborate with the museum's permanent collection. The designers create their own designs by reflecting on objects selected from the museum. The new works of art created then become part of the collection itself. Romani Design has participated in this exhibition, selecting six objects of focus from the museum's collection. All of them depict the Virgin Mary or female saints, and inspired by these images, the designers created six women's outfits with accessories, in a fascinatingly rich pattern. The garments – as works of art – were displayed in the museum's Ráth György Villa from 23 September 2021 to 2 January 2022. The garments for the exhibition were inspired by the Gypsy pilgrimage feast of Csatka which will be further elaborated.

Such a space redefines the fashion object, giving it a significantly different meaning from what it originally possessed at the runway show; they become



artworks. Such a symbolically closely defined space forces designers to present themselves differently, and the runway audience is also significantly transformed, into a more learned, intellectual, and possibly less wealthy audience with the intention of understanding and interpreting the background processes. The dresses contained small portraits, symbolic or traditional Romani references, as shown in Figure 2.

It is particularly interesting how, alongside a very colorful tradition of Romani imagery, the characteristic Romani religiosity (see more in Zachar Podolinská 2019a; 2019b; Václavík et al. 2018; Ventura 2011) was central to the design of the garments. A montage of images of the Virgin Mary, sacred objects, and family photos was presented on the clothing and accessories. Romani Design's chief designers reflected on six artworks, drawing primarily on the themes of sacred images and religious rituals concerning the Virgin Mary, Saint Cecilia, and Saint Francisca (see a part of the exhibition in Figure 3). They were inspired by an eighteenth-century Austrian icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a seventeenth-century Antwerp icon of Saint Cecilia, a nineteenth-century icon of the Madonna with the Child Jesus on her lap by Bartolome Esteban Murillo, a devotional image of Saint Frances of Rome with her guardian angel from the eighteenth century, a 1730 icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary Helpful, and a twentieth-century pendant of the Virgin Mary and the Child Jesus. These museum artifacts and saintly images were then used as the pattern for the outfits, and using a patchwork technique, the



FIGURE 2. The montage of images (family portrait and the Virgin Mary)



FIGURE 3. In Circulation exhibition, Museum of Applied Arts

designers replaced the faces of the saints with their own personal portrait photographs.

The exhibited outfits present the designers' biographies and family trees. The devotional images are mounted around their childhood portraits and other family photographs. For example, they replace the Virgin Mary with a portrait of their mother, and the putto of the baby Jesus with their brother's picture. A long white skirt and tulle top, entitled "Celebration" (Barodyes), features a portrait of the sisters' mother with glory, a halo of the golden circle above the head signifying holiness juxtaposed with the relevant eighteenth-century picture of the museum's collection. The "Blessing" (Suncisaripo) outfit has a very similar pattern in black. It features an enamel Virgin Mary medallion, also available at the Csátka pilgrimage, with family photos in the shape of a cross and blessings and praises to the Virgin Mary with the blessed glory above her head. The outfit called the "Church" (Khangeri) is reminiscent of the Byzantine empress's robe and features iconic family portraits of the grandmother and mother of the designers. The colorful flowers framing the grandmother's face are digitally patterned and situated in a new context on the textile from the floral arrangements of the museum's image of Saint Cecilia. Of particular interest is the similarity between the pattern of the



outfit and the textile. In a *mise en abyme* continuity, a photograph of the grandmother's face is inserted into the painted image of the Virgin Mary.

Another outfit with a similar pattern can be seen on the statue of Mary of Csatka. The grandmother's picture inserted into the Virgin Mary frame is dressed in the same gown worn by the Virgin Mary statue in the Csatka church. There is thus a dual, deconstructive identification. The statue wears a picture of the grandmother inserted into the Virgin Mary's image frame, while the grandmother wears her own photograph inserted into the Virgin Mary's image. This whole "circulation" is brought together in the performance of the statue-dressing in the Csatka church. The "Church" outfit reveals a self-reflexive figure; the grandmother who appears in it is wearing the same Romani piece as the piece called the "Celebration," as a saintly image. There is no biographical reference in the pattern of the lush roses of the "Paradise on Earth" (Phuvaki) shirt, but the portraits of the "Blessing" and the "Church" outfits also have this traditional Romani rose motif pattern in the background. The "Women's Emancipation" (Zhuvjengi zor) outfit also carries a network of references. The pattern features the statue of Mary of Csatka but the portrait of Christ is a portrait of the designer herself, Helena Varga, as a little girl; Erika Varga's portrait takes the place of Mary. The final section of the exhibition features a short film with the designers and a pink and white silk dress with a unique printed pattern titled "Innocence" (Devlesko Rajimo). The pattern of each garment invites the viewer to play a labyrinthine game in the web of Romani tradition, mixing the pieces from the museum's collection with the biographies of the designers.

One of the most important aspects of the exhibition is that the textile patterns thus incorporate what is often called the "Romani Madonna," or sometimes even the "Gypsy Madonna." Erika Varga explains the representation in an in-depth interview in 2022:

The representation of a Romani woman in the highest position, this sacred representation, came about because we wanted to show the creative power that is inherent in all women, including Romani women. It is important to spread the words "Gypsy Madonna" or "Romani Madonna." We wanted to portray the Romani woman in the highest, most precious position. That's how we created "Mámi" (our mother), Helena, and me on the textile patterns.

Tatiana Zachar Podolinská (2021) devotes an entire book to ideas about the Virgin Mary and postmodern religiosity, focusing on Roma in Slovakia. She argues that the Virgin Mary is a multicultural symbol: the "mother of all nations." She further draws attention to the "enculturated" and "ethnicized" Mary (as a "voice from the periphery"), which becomes a tool of cultural

appropriation for Roma (Zachar Podolinská 2021: 15), and with which Roma can achieve greater visibility in society: “[M]arginalized communities tend to invite the transcendent and transethnic Queen of Heaven” (Zachar Podolinská 2021: 16):

There are many ethnicised and encultured versions of the Virgin Mary that have been appropriated by marginalised people and communities in order to achieve visibility and gain a voice; there is also a strong tendency among mainstream society to treat those Marys similarly to the people they represent – that is, to expropriate and silence them. (Zachar Podolinská 2021: 15)

The same is true for Romani Design when they replace the face of the Virgin Mary with their own family portraits. Zachar Podolinská refers to the case of Roma in Slovakia as embodying the “modern Mary,” brought to life by globalization and new technologies, who, in addition to being the “ideal mother symbol,” is also a peacemaker. In our in-depth interview, Helena Varga explains, “In Romani culture, the mother is seen as a kind of sacred image because she is the one who holds the family together.” The substitution of Mary’s face, the transcription of her face into their family portrait, seems to be the “Chocolate Mary” mentioned by Zachar Podolinská, a phenomenon she encountered while researching religious iconography in the homes of Roma in northern Slovakia between 2006 and 2007, and finding ethnicized depictions of the Virgin Mary.

The term “Chocolate Mary” is not pejorative; it is used to refer to drawings and objects of the ethnicized Virgin Mary. As Zachar Podolinská points out, the adjective “chocolate,” used by one of her interviewees (Greta) represents a creative word choice to replace the adjectives “black” or “white” with a positive notion, related to the taste and aroma of chocolate (Zachar Podolinská 2021: 114). The “Chocolate Mary” is none other than a woman “described in terms of the Roma aesthetic of beauty as a beautiful Romani woman with dark skin, curly hair, and brown eyes” (Zachar Podolinská 2021: 109). In a sense, the “Romani Madonna” is a “Chocolate Mary,” which will “protect traditions of the Roma and assertively promote their rights” (Zachar Podolinská 2021: 145) and which “was not only ethnic and cultural appropriation of the ‘White Mary’ by the Roma people, but also an important active agent in the fight for the ethnic and cultural rights of the Roma themselves” (Zachar Podolinská 2021: 117). It should be noted that a Romani Virgin Mary, imagined according to the Romani ideal of beauty, has been used before in textile design to signify a protector. István Szentandrassy, a prominent Romani painter of the Péli School,<sup>4</sup> experimented with something

4. See more about the Péli School in Takács (2018) and Kerékgyártó (2013).

similar, an “Autumn Madonna” or “Gypsy Madonna.” In his painting called “Madonna” (2005), the Virgin Mary (including her garment) appears in the image of a beautiful young Romani woman (one could say “chocolate brown”): she is dressed in a coat of gold, has brown eyes, long black hair, and brown skin. These are all iconic stylized images of the Virgin Mary, dominated by dark brown tones.

It is not only in terms of imagery and fashion that similar examples can be found among contemporary Hungarian Roma and “Gypsy” artists. In the novel, *Kányák* (*Kites*) (1978) by the writer József Holdosi, the protagonist, Néma Péter (Mute Peter – who cannot speak but is an excellent painter), is commissioned by the count to repaint the church. Néma Péter wants to paint a “Gypsy Christ.” While painting the chapel, he finally recognizes his own face in the portrait of Christ. It is worth widening our interpretative space: meaning is created in terms of the anxiety of the creative, intellectual individual, as Norbert Oláh formulates in his complex project “The anxiety of the Roma artist.” What should the artist do, then, to avoid labels, prejudice, cultural segregation, and yet not deny the issue? What should they do to be part of a really valuable discussion? What to do if the possibility of cultural assimilation is unacceptable or unethical? All these contradictory thoughts and feelings create awful anxieties in all creative individuals with the minimal critical sensibility (Oláh 2021).

From the sacralized, we come to the question of the personal responsibility of the creative individual. The voices of the first generation of Romani intellectuals in Hungary (they came to the public in the early 1970s) think in terms of redemption-redeemability and form their own Christ as a complex metaphor. This position, or worldview, is rooted in modernity, dissolving in representativity as a collective Self the ambitions, desires, and above all, the narrative process of the autonomous self-identity. At the same time, anxiety disrupts the power of the communal self as the only interpretative position – it is precisely this disruption, unmaking, and questioning that leads to anxiety. It offers no resting point for the constructed communal identity – neither failure, glorification, nor idealization, as the worlds of István Szentandrassy, Tamás Péli, József Holdosi, and other Roma artists and authors offer.

Thus, appropriating Christian figures and sewing them into garments is a deconstructive act, transcending, but also reflecting on, the creative endeavors that preceded it. The act claims self-representation, or an actual cultural occupation of space. And its progressivity and subversive will is manifested in a way that erodes both the foreign (*Gadjo/Gazcho*), non-Roma gaze and the model of Roma or “Gypsy” identity, built on stereotypes. This erosion is achieved by making transcendental (Christian faith) and material (fashion industry, capitalism, etc.) spaces both flexible and permeable to each

other. The practices – the rearrangement of fragments, disparate ideologies, traditions, and motifs, elements that exist in very different layers – are patchwork in nature, just as the actual handmade pieces arranged and sewn into the garments. That is a process that unfolds over time, insofar as the materials, shapes, figures, and tools were produced before the actual practice of sewing, brought to the creator from here and there, as well as the language of form, the ideas, the images of the creators' own and community identity, their experiences of Christian faith and practice, etc. But these are also spread out in space, eliminating time: they are assembled on the workshop table into a garment (a single garment or collection). In this way, a postmodern identity narrative is created, the essential aspect of which is to reveal and make *visible* this personally constructed Romani ethnic identity through the elements of postmodern religiosity.

Personal identity, however, can never be final and total. Butler warns that “my account of myself is never fully mine and is never fully for me, and I would like to suggest that this ‘interruption’ of the account always takes place through a loss of the sense of its being mine in any exclusive way” (2001: 26). Building personal identity on ethnic or even religious foundations is always problematic, as disruptive bodily and other life forces are always at work in the background. Damian le Bas, in his study of the Romani diaspora, states that “a common sense of exile unites” (2010: 61). The “Romani Madonna” textile collection in the museum, periodically open to the public, combines the worship of Mary with Romani family histories, in which the Virgin Mary’s story is rewritten and overwritten by a family history of its own. In the museum space, the earlier artworks and the sacrality are mixed with the history of the individual. This patchwork-like “Chocolate Mary” identity is presented through the textiles adorning the “Romani Madonna” in the Museum of Applied Arts, but it cannot become an actual or authentic representation of a unified Romani identity, ungeneralizable precisely because of the family photographs assembled into the garments. As Damian le Bas puts it, “For there never lived an abstract Gypsy, a ‘form’ or ‘archetype’ ... We are not factory-produced mannequins on conveyor belts that use a single pigment” (2010: 68).

*Identity and the Csátka pilgrimage feast: The space of religion and the popular public space*

The particular patchwork patterns of the Romani Design live beyond the space of the museum: they are also linked to a popular event in Csátka, a village in Komárom-Esztergom County in Hungary. During the annual pilgrimage of the Romani Greek Catholic feast of Csátka the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the statue of the church is dressed in new clothing. In

the year 2021, the outfit was created by the Varga sisters (see Figure 4). The garment, named “Blessing,” is inspired by a family portrait and the “Romani Madonna” pattern.

In Csátka, a pilgrimage site at which holy masses are celebrated every hour during this feast period, faithful Roma bring flowers and candles as donations and sew a cloak onto the statue of Mary, ritually “dressed” every hour. According to tradition, the garments made for the statue are added to the church collection and given to the Virgin Mary as a gift. However, to ensure that these gifts for the statue of Mary are the right size for the statue’s proportions, the devotee must petition a year in advance of their intention to make a gift, asking for a certain pattern. Some people make clothing for the statue of Mary from costly materials in the hope that it will help them to have a better life. There are also examples in which a pattern is requested, but the robe is not made for the following year’s feast.

As anthropologist Ágnes Mogyorósi notes in her study of the Csátka Gypsy pilgrimage feast, Csátka has been an official shrine since 1962. Until



FIGURE 4. The Virgin Mary statue in Csátka, dressed by Romani Design

then, the Hungarian Catholic Church had “tried to keep its visits to the shrine rather low-key” (Mogyorósi 2014: 56). Legend has it that in the late 1700s, a blind shepherd working in the fields of Csatka, Vilmos Meizler, relieved his thirst from the spring at that location and washed himself in the water. He then miraculously regained his sight and the miracle was attributed to the power of the water. There was a Marian apparition (an appearance of the Virgin Mary) declared at the place, and a chapel was built in 1864 and consecrated on 8 September in honor of the Immaculate Conception. Every year, on the weekend nearest to 8 September, the feast of the Holy Sepulchre is celebrated in Csatka. The history of the pilgrimage site and the stories of some miraculous healings are described by Emőke S. Lackovits (2010: 31336); decades prior to that, Aurél Vajkai had summed it up aptly: “The most striking colour to the already vivid picture of the Csatka feast is the huge number of Gypsies who gathered there” (1940: 63). An important question in the social anthropological research on Csatka concerns why it is called a “Gypsy feast,” popular among the Romani community. Nowadays, it is also a tourist attraction. Based on one of her interviews, Ágnes Mogyorósi connects this phenomenon to a recent Marian apparition, in which Mary appears to an “Olah-Gypsy” woman (Mogyorósi 2014: 66).

The Csatka pilgrimage feast offers a collective narrative for Romani communities. It is a meeting place for the otherwise culturally, religiously, linguistically, and socially fragmented Romani society in Hungary, and representations of its identity are interpreted through the visual and musical markers of Roma. The masses are conducted in both Hungarian and Romani languages. Csatka is a place of pilgrimage where Roma travel to drink and wash in the waters of the healing well. They hope for healing and the forgiveness of sins. The pilgrimage feast lasts from Saturday noon to Sunday noon, usually with revelry until dawn between the two days. It is a religious event, and the pilgrims want to pray, repent, be cleansed, and pray for healing, but they also want to relax, similar to local saints’ day feasts in some Hungarian villages. Alongside the religious events held during the day, it is also a family event, with festive table settings, a shooting gallery and other fairground amusements, and an evening of fun. In this respect, there is little difference between the feasts of other communities and the feast in Csatka: pilgrims eat, drink, and sing at tables laden to the brim. It is also a time for the “economy of the sacred” (Zachar Podolinská 2021: 21), with thousands of artifacts sold as souvenirs to pilgrims. In our own experience everything from incredibly expensive statues of Mary and giant candles to a “winking Jesus” purse is available at the market.

The faithful also erect altars to the Virgin Mary in their homes. Mary’s role is believed to be more important than that of Jesus. For example, Zoli Kalapos



Sztojka, an interesting Hungarian “Roma dandy,” changes the outfit on his statue of Mary in his home, which he once bought at the Csátka pilgrimage fair, every month or two, and decorates the altar with a multitude of candles and flowers (Borzák 2021: 43–7). As he asserts: “My altar room is perhaps unique in the country, and its positive atmosphere strengthens my own faith from time to time” (quoted in Borzák 2021: 43). In this way, the statue of the Virgin Mary has become a sacred object and an important component of identity for Roma.

Roma have strong emotional ties to the pilgrimage events, but at the same time, to strengthen their identity and cohesion, they have also built (with their own funds) a chapel of their own above the original, main chapel to the north. This new building holds a one-and-a-half-meter-high cherry and birchwood image of the crucified Christ, created by the “Gypsy” artist, István Hegedűs. He modeled this wooden Christ figure on a “Gypsy” man. The inscription reads in Lovari language (the main Hungarian Romani dialect): “Holy God, help the Roma” (“*Szuntona Dévla, zsutin e romen*”). In addition to hearing mass, the devotee and the tourists have a great time, eat, and drink, making Csátka a popular space for Romani identity, not just a sacred space. Venders soon realized the potential for profit in combining the cult of Mary with the miracle-working power of the local water; they have produced a plastic bottle in the shape of a statue of the Virgin Mary, which can hold a half liter of water from the holy well. This water is purchased and taken home by the devotee after the pilgrimage and used as holy water in their homes.

The dressed statue of the Virgin Mary at Csátka now possesses more than 150 different garments. Here, the vestments also function as offerings and have many meanings, both for the church and for the donors. Each garment has a special meaning, and the length of time it has been in the vicinity of the statue plays an important role. Like other objects, the cloth is sanctified through the “magic touch” of the wearer. Thus, even “worn out” garments should not be thrown away; instead, they are cut up and sold or donated as artifacts. The statue now has so many garments, of course, that they never really “wear out.” According to Ágnes Mogyorósi, the objects sold at the feast “function like the offerings in the past” (2014: 65). The souvenir sellers at the pilgrimage feast now offer a wide range of small souvenirs, plastic toys and balls imported from China, as well as candy sellers and carousels and other popular entertainment items.<sup>5</sup> Today, the souvenirs of the fair have evolved to meet the needs and opportunities of the twentieth century. In addition to the religious aspects of the fair, the aim of the faithful is recreation. What would

5. Aurél Vajkai (1940) discusses in detail the question of offerings, objects of consecration, and objects of vows.



have been the primary purpose, an encounter with the transcendent, has, over time, become only one element of the pilgrimage rather than the essence that defines the whole event. The “Gypsy Feast” in Csatka is undoubtedly an arena of popular culture. The artefacts, including the new type of fair souvenirs, will be important objects of representation of the “Post-Modern Religious,” as Zachar Podolinská has asserted: “In this way, the places of former small local Marian shrines have been profoundly transformed, capitalizing on their increasing religious meaning both economically and socially” (2021: 21). In the case of the Csatka pilgrimage feast, the sacred and the popular spaces are thus mixed, and the event becomes a religious “readymade event.”<sup>6</sup> It creates a postmodern religious identity that, while incorporating elements of identity borrowed from other Romani traditions and beliefs, remains an important expression of Romani identity. Mogyorósi notes:

In the case of Gypsies who come to the pilgrimage, it is easy to see how this religious event increasingly becomes a shaper and sustainer of their identity. The political or other public events that take place alongside the feast are becoming more and more prominent. For the Roma, this feast has a symbolic meaning, it means to them a sense of belonging. (2014: 68)

The Romani and “Gypsy” costumes in Hungary, and more broadly in Central and Eastern Europe, are constructed and structured in a similar way to national costume representations (patterns, colors, types of dress, male and female costumes, costumes specific to regions and different linguistic communities, etc.). This similarity also implies that their wearing and wearability transcend the practices and everyday aesthetics of dressing. It is an act of public representation of community identity. In this sense, it is never ordinary, since it is aware of its non-ordinary nature, it is “ceremonial” at every moment, even in terms of ethnic identity itself, which in the transcendent space of the feast of Csatka, is the act of dressing both the participants and the Virgin Mary. At the same time, the claim to be more formally Roma or more subjectively “Gypsy” in the space of high fashion becomes the reverse of this; the Virgin Mary’s patterns and the sacral motifs clothe the “human body,” and this sacrality contributes to the legitimacy of the expression of Romani/“Gypsy” identity in typically non-Roma spaces.

### **The performativity of Romani Design**

The special undertakings that give Romani Design its unique character extend beyond conventional fashion processes and events like fashion shows. The

6. The term “readymade event” is used by Zachar Podolinská (2019b: 326).

brand and the clothing are also represented and exhibited in a museum space, as well as at a characteristically “Gypsy” community event, the Csátka Feast. These discursive arenas create a certain fashion discourse by incorporating subjective meaning into these events, a discourse that not only demonstrates and declares, but also has the nature of a speech act. The idea of the “speech act,” introduced by J.L. Austin, has become an effective tool of interpretation in linguistic philosophy as well as in the social sciences. According to Austin, speech acts have a dual character. They are stated, without reference, without truth value, but “it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*” (Austin 1962: 8; emphasis in original) The circumstances and the appropriateness are the messages of the subjective, ideological aspects of the event.

In our case, Romani Design processes have a characteristic speech act nature. They are performative activities, and they create a subjectively defined event with “significance” in Kristeva’s (1984) sense of the word.<sup>7</sup> To understand the theoretical and interpretative depth of the performativity of Romani Design, we may also call upon Judith Butler’s ideas, which interpret gender as a performative, speech act. Butler argues that gender is not a given, but is created in constant flux and that we are constantly “constructing” ourselves throughout our lives. In this sense, we can assume that ethnicity (like gender itself) is not a given construct, but a performative construct. Butler poses the question “Which social agents *constitute* social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of the symbolic social sign?” (1990: 270; emphasis in original). Theorists have often assumed that this process creates apparently coherent identities, a voice of sorts, but in the case of Romani Design, it also creates a postmodern (not unified, but somewhat fragmented) narrative identity. Butler further argues, “In opposition to theatrical or phenomenological models which take the gendered self to be prior to its act ... I will understand constituting acts not only as constituting the identity of the actor but as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief” (1990: 271). She is primarily concerned with what processes (performances) are responsible for the creation of identity, and how (through what performative acts) the apparently coherent formation of gender takes place. There is no substance behind social gender; any inner essence of perception does not determine the appearance of the body in the world.

Following Butler, we may state that there is no such inner self that

7. “Significance” is the subjectively important, transformed signifier, which “puts the subject in process/on trial” (Kristeva 1984: 22). In the case of Romani Design, one example of such significance is the rhetorical transformation in the presentation of the Virgin Mary image mixed with portraits of the designers’ family.

precedes the action of constructing ethnic identity through repetition in the social space. Rather, there is a complex, always contradictory process of contextual articulation (the taking over of a storehouse of historical possibilities). It is performative to be Roma, a performativity shaped in a process of absences and interjections (and, according to Butler, sometimes excessive, coercive interjections). One of the two important self-forming/self-educational gestures occurs at a transcendental level, namely, the worship of Mary. The other is a social commitment to ethnicity in naming the fashion house Romani Design. It is a performative act that creates a communal-ethnic identity beyond itself as a conscious creative act. It is also a manifestation of the creative power of the autonomous creative individual. The acting agent as a certainty is fundamentally and existentially different in nature from the community-building strategy and ideological background of the Csatka pilgrimage.

Romani Design is about Roma being present in the commercial fashion space, in the high-end space of unique garments, and in the space of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Moreover, the garments, through their wearers, enter typically non-Roma, exclusive spaces, whether a fashion magazine, a social event, or the wardrobe of the social elite. The covering of the non-Roma, *gazcho* body with fashion from Romani Design opens up a new game. But imagined Roma or non-Roma gazes are fragmented and heterogenous; they force us all to recognize ethnicity and nation as ideas, not as prescriptive, rigid and normative spaces of power.

An important stage in the construction of identity is the complex system of “visual signs,” such as dressing or decoration, as discussed by Sheila Salo and Matt T. Salo (1977: 25). In this sense, the technique of “bricolage” (Levi-Strauss 1966: 16–22) employed by Romani Design is also applicable; Romani Design patterns can utilize a wide variety of craft techniques (e.g. the blueprint technique, which is now a part of UNESCO World Heritage) from other cultures around them, creating a new, coherent “Romani” world for them.

## Conclusion

Our study has explored and analyzed the work of Romani Design, a Budapest-based, high fashion company. We have investigated how Romani Design operates in the discursive space of fashion, elaborating its specificity, and what personal and associative functions it assumes beyond the usual fashion processes.

We have interpreted the creative techniques and ideology within their fashion production and demonstrated how it programmatically constructs a

distinctive Romani identity. Their work represents a series of performative acts creating ethnic identity, manifesting not only through fashion shows but also a city museum exhibition featuring visual parallels with eighteenth-century artistic paintings. Another field involves the ritual dressing of a church statue of the Virgin Mary in the community space of the Csátka pilgrimage feast, following a specific folk religious liturgy. All three event spaces serve to position “Romani” or “Gypsy” identity, a confident but also contradictory bodily-spiritual projection through objects and their placement. Romani Design’s two owners and fashion designers, Helena and Erika Varga, use their own personal traumas of ethnic identity to create high-fashion garments that can be sold as commodities.

The name of the company also carries a significant message, a duality. On the one hand, the word “design” in the name points to its business identity, a high-fashion enterprise that participates in fashion shows and markets its unique clothing. The word “Romani” takes us in a different direction; the ethnic reference highlights the owners’ social and personal commitment. The defining phrase on their Pinterest page reads, “Romani Design is more than a fashion company. Romani Design is a Gypsy fashion brand, that works for the peaceful coexistence of the Roma people and their neighbors.”

In this article, we have shown how Romani Design’s activities extend beyond the usual arenas of fashion. Clearly, as a fashion business, Romani Design produces clothing, shows it at fashion shows, and makes it available for purchase. At the same time, the artistic quality of these garments can also be claimed. Their central pictorial action creates a religiously connected patchwork, *mise en abyme* imagery, in which they fuse images of the Virgin Mary, used allegorically-metonymically in classical painted images, with their own and their family’s faces captured using photographic techniques and projected onto the image of Mary. Such a deconstructive image-performative action allows them to programmatically transform their ethnic marginalization into a central presence through transcendental-religious symbolism, using the potent device of high fashion.

The intentions of the designers are connected with their ethnic identity; as Helena Varga states emphatically in a *Euronews* interview, “When I design, I absolutely live my own Gypsy identity, and my roots are absolutely here in my heart and soul” (Gallagher 2021).

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# Invincible racism? The misuse of genetically informed arguments against Roma in Central and Eastern Europe

VICTORIA SHMIDT AND CHRISTOPHER R. DONOHUE

In this article, we challenge the idea that the development and the dissemination of scientific knowledge about Roma can be understood as “Eastern” or “Western.” Instead, we argue that the classical division between “science” and “pseudoscience” has the potential to fuel scientific racism and political and social exclusion across the globe. We narrate, for the first time, the role of sociobiology in the development of Roma “race science,” highlighting the ways in which its networks are developed and maintained. These specific mechanisms underlying the production of knowledge and its social and ideological effects may have further applications, such as the spread of mis- and dis-information. Our intent is to examine the attempts to deconstruct sociobiology and its application to Roma, by focusing on the effect of selective awareness among critics of sociobiology, which inevitably leads to the use of epistemic filters and heightens the risk of producing epistemic injustice.

*Keywords:* sociobiology, Romani people, Central Eastern Europe, epistemic bubble, geneticization, critique of race science

## Introduction: Problematizing critical responses to the geneticization of minoritized groups

People create cultures and environments compatible with their genotypes. The Roma remained locked into their own little traditions and kinship groups, where centuries old and successful behaviors in evolutionary terms continued to be applied and transmitted from generation to generation. (Čvorović 2014: 191–2)

The research by Jelena Čvorović on Serbian Roma is one of many striking examples of “geneticization,” or the use of genetic evidence and authority to support the reduction of identity, the future, and culture to genetics, creating a racist ideology and practice.<sup>1</sup> Along with anthropometric

1. Jelena Čvorović is a leading expert at the Institute of Ethnography, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade.

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measurements, geneticization is among the most durable ways of producing spurious knowledge about so-called “differences” between population groups labeled as the “majority” or “minority.” In such an ideology, the majority is the bearer of norms, “culture,” “values,” and “tradition,” and minorities are conceptualized as deviating from those norms, including those categorized as Jews (Reuter 2006; 2016), African Americans (Morning and Maneri 2022), Saami, and Slavs or Central and Eastern Europeans, among others.

In the twentieth century, and especially after the Second World War, geneticization had been rooted in (and continues as) an ongoing reproduction as a network epistemology – with centers and peripheries – analyzable in comparative and global contexts, and dependent upon both transnational genealogy(ies) and reception(s). In her grim inquiry into eugenic and racist legacies and present-day genetics and genomics in social and behavioral research, Rina Bliss highlights the role of the “flat,” root-like structures of genetic research “based on interlocking lateral ties and a smoothy ranged career ladder” (Bliss 2018: 56). Genomics, for Bliss, is, in fact, an autonomizing field, and not just “some flash-in-the-pan intellectual movement, but that is perhaps because autonomization is a different beast in this day and age” (Bliss 2018: 56).

One of the mechanisms behind surviving genetics-informed racialization is keeping its entrepreneurs immunized from critical, or even questioning, anti-racist sentiments. The case of applying social biology to geneticization of Romani people is one of many examples of contemporary race science operating in an echo chamber, “a social epistemic structure in which other relevant voices have been actively discredited” (Nguyen 2020).

The principal goal of sociobiological synthesis, according to its author, Edward O. Wilson (2000: 23) “is an ability to predict features of social organization from a knowledge of [these] population parameters combined with information on the behavioral constraints imposed by the genetic constitution of the species.” The central tenets of sociobiology, such as positing the inheritance of certain behavioral patterns, the interplay of natural selection and adaptation as the engine of human evolution, almost immediately upon publication attracted the attention of racially minded scholars.

For instance, Richard Lynn (2006) and J. Phillippe Rushton (1988) both seek to demonstrate the interrelation between “racial differences” and the core patterns of human behavior developed during evolution as part of a survival strategy. According to Lynn and Rushton, “non-whites” possess a “lower IQ,” invest less energy and time into their children, and, as a consequence, have more children. This stands in contrast to “whites” or “Europeans,” who devote more resources to their offspring, who consequently have higher IQs, and who have fewer children. Such rhetoric harkens back to turn-of-the

twentieth century conspiracy theories about the “replacement” of “whites” by “non-whites,” found in discussions of “race suicide” by the sociologist Edward A. Ross, the U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt, and many others (King and Ruggles 1990; Bracke and Aguilar 2020; Ehsan and Stott 2020).

While racially minded scholars in the United States applied sociobiology to “prove” the genetically determined inferiority of African Americans, Jews, and other marginalized groups, their Central and Eastern European (CEE) colleagues easily transferred these epistemic patterns to Roma. Tamás Bereczkei,<sup>2</sup> Petr Bakalář, and Jelena Čvorović, the main proponents in the CEE region of applying sociobiology to Romani studies, begun collaborating with their US and British counterparts in the late 1990s. The main narrative in the first part of this article outlines the critical historicization of these alliances and their operation as an epistemic bunker for advocates of scientific racism. We focus on this network as an epistemic structure created through the manipulation of trust in Western, “progressive,” science. We explore how it can exist by adding a superstructure of discredit and authority, including those supplied academic journals and publishing houses. Further, we follow how this so-called “epistemic bunkering” promotes a dynamic that evolves over time, namely, that arguments become more radical, as well as more insulated (Furman 2023).

We argue that the deconstruction of scientific racism should include not only the critical historicization of the layering and the interconnection of various approaches to the geneticization of those “minoritized,” but also the analysis of its critical deconstruction. We approach this deconstruction through interpreting the inadequate coverage of sociobiology as something determined by multiple epistemic bubbles that operate in favor of filtering information and reinforcing ideological separation (Nguyen 2020).

Two distinct groups of experts have attacked the geneticization of “minorities” – those who focus on the political implications of scientific racism and those who embrace biologically informed critiques of racism. The former, as a part of social critique, highlight the misuse of genetic evidence to delegitimize various forms of surveillance over minoritized groups, while the biological critique aims to reveal the falsity of arguments by relying on technical, material, and scientific progress in human genetics. Their arguments also trap them within their own epistemic bubbles. The mutual intellectual isolation of these two groups should be seen as one of the preconditions for the ongoing genetics-substantiated racialization of Roma.

2. Tamás Bereczkei is one of the most popular Hungarian psychologists. He possesses degrees in biology and philosophy and leads the Evolutionary Psychological Research group at the University of Pécs.

In the second part of the article, we explore the different pathways for deconstructing the geneticization of Roma, with a particular focus on the lacuna that proponents of either social or biological approaches to criticizing racism face. To recognize the limits and options of existing strategies to deconstruct sociobiology as an engine of reproducing racialized views on Roma, we examine critical approaches through the Bhaskarian division of negation strategies. We intend to demonstrate how the omission of particular knowledge in each of the two streams of critique prevents their proponents from developing consistent radical negation of sociobiology suitable for promoting epistemic justice and acknowledging the variety of cognitive experiences among Roma.

First, we detail specific arguments against sociobiology by those who view race as a social construct. We underscore that the premise of “race” as a social construct, however correct, opens theorists up to the charge that they are denying all differences. With uncritically skeptical views on biology and genetics, this approach is at risk of *wrongful depathologization* (Spencer and Carel 2021), on the verge of reducing the specifics of Romani people or even denying them an identity through trivializing the *longue durée* of their racialization.

We then explore the unprecedented lacunae of critical reactions to sociobiology in the context of the limitations of strategies for debunking the research by Rushton and other representatives of the persistent “racial realism” among biologists and geneticists. We discuss the strategy of *de facto* neutrality – which challenges the idea that a scholar can be “racist or sexist or elitist or anything of the sort” (Silverman 1990: 7) – as a major mechanism for preserving epistemic bubbles among those who use the idea of progress in genetics to legitimize scientific racism. We question the usefulness of conceptualizing geneticization in terms of what we call “anti-science,” in which the work of anti-pseudoscience has the rhetorical and substantive task of “cleansing” evolutionary biology from hypotheses and theorizations that do not meet the criteria of validity and reliability of scientific knowledge, including “Rushtonism” or discussions of “dysgenic fertility.”<sup>3</sup>

The main sources for our analysis are the publications of racially minded scholars and those who seek to deconstruct their arguments.

3. Dysgenic fertility, the belief that declining IQs depend on the number of children in a family and their birth order, remains one of the cornerstones of racialized geneticization.

## The restoration of overt racism in applying a sociobiological lens to Roma

### *Sociobiology: Essentialization through biologization of family life*

In its understanding of social evolution, the most common phenomenon explained by sociobiology, “the outcome of the genetic response of populations to ecological pressure within the constraints imposed by phylogenetic criteria” (Wilson 2000: 32), has led to the opposition between the progressive power of human collectives and individual “backwardness”: “[A]s global culture advanced into the new, technoscientific age, human nature stayed back in the Paleolithic era” (Wilson 2000: 10). This particular view of behavioral patterns among humans as embedded in progressively developed groups while also being carriers of archaic (if not “animal”) behaviors has logically moved towards prioritizing the family as a bridge between group and individual accounts of biological and genetic development. Thus, Wilson notes that “in many groups of organisms, from the social insects to the primates, the most advanced societies appear to have evolved directly from family units” (Wilson 2000: 26). This interpretation of evolution as an internally conflicting process in which family either catapults individuals to progress or fixes their “backwardness” is reflected in what is perhaps the most controversial explanatory scheme developed in sociobiology, the *r/K strategy* of reproduction.

In sociobiology, evolution and fitness are viewed as a series of trade-offs, with different biological and cultural manifestations and feedback mechanisms. According to this sociobiological paradigm, the maximization of reproduction would have specific developmental and intellectual consequences, driving a specific path of evolution in human beings (as it did in animals) and situating them along the traditional scale between “savagery” and “civilization.”

And true to his principle of taking a population as the crucial actor and seeing this population in terms of gene frequencies (Myers 1990: 207), Wilson described different species as more or less aligned with either the *r*-strategy (to produce more offspring) or the *K* strategy, in which investment and maturation over the life-course, as well as survival, is privileged, rather a matter of sheer numbers. This and other explanations regarding evolution have made sociobiology a target of critiques from Marxist biologists (Segerstrale 1986), who underscored the consequences of the misapplication of population genetics, and the uncritical mixture of science and reactionary politics in the epistemologies offered by sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists (many of whom soon adopted sociobiological analogies and explanations). While rejecting sociobiology as an example of vice epistemology, Lewontin, (1975) recognizes the high probability of producing epistemic vice through

applying social biology: “Sociobiology is not a racist doctrine, but any kind of genetic determinism can and does feed other kinds, including the belief that some races are superior to others.”

Wilson as well remains selective in his criticism regarding eugenics. He has argued that sociobiology, by showing altruism to be adaptive, actually refuted Social Darwinism, with its emphasis on individual fitness and social behavior, while also maintaining that no biological doctrine should be viewed as a direct prescription for social policy because of the “naturalistic fallacy” (Myers 1990: 286). Wilson also continued this tradition of disciplinary imperialism by putting biology on the top of the science hierarchy as the main producer of reliable explanations of behavior.

The recent discovery of friendship and outright support among Wilson and racially minded thinkers (Borrello and Sepkoski 2022) is another opportunity for recognizing the epistemic vice of sociobiology, which calls for more consistent examination. The use of  $r/K$  and other theoretical postulates by Rushton and others, and Wilson’s support of Rushton, are among the clearest examples of using major biological and genetic theories for “race science,” making it impossible to differentiate between “good” science and “barbaric,” or pseudoscientific applications.

#### *Sociobiology: The last bulwark of scientific racism?*

Together with the uncertainties about the “problem” of “race” and its theorization, which has inclined racially minded scholars to enthusiastically adopt sociobiology, as significant is its persuasiveness, achieved not through combining compelling facts or developing complex arguments, but through using a specific approach to narrating the history of evolution that appears to answer both social and biological questions with some degree of definitiveness (as well as generality). Sociobiology becomes, in a real sense, a rigorous theory of “everything,” uniting both micro and macro perspectives into a new kind of “synthesis” (Smocovitis 1992). Accordingly, “Sociobiology incorporates and transforms the conventional narrative of natural history texts, with their sense of an immediate encounter with nature, by stripping them of narrative elements and then reconstructing the fragments into a grand narrative of evolutionary adaptation” (Myers 1990: 214, 194). Wilson does not animalize people nor does he anthropomorphize animals. However, Wilson endows certain types of behavior with the function of agency, bringing these patterns into the position of a powerful explanatory scheme (Myers 1990: 211).

For Rushton, an animator of this specific narrative in its most extreme guise, human races and their different “histories,” their different “genes,” and even different biologies, represent the main driving forces behind different patterns of reproductive behavior and levels of civilization. By asserting

significant genetic differences between human “races,” Rushton exaggerated Wilson’s argument regarding the role of populations and their reproductive strategies in human progress. Not only was natural selection used as a proximal mechanism for gauging the speed of progress, but the implied direction of evolution as distinct for different “races” was a kind of “natural law of energy flows” (Rushton 1987: 12).

Rushton’s thinking about “races” reached its culmination in the interpretation of the collision of groups with differing *r/K* strategies:

[G]enotypes (of different races) reproductively compete by allocating energy either to sexual behavior directly and increasing the number of offspring produced, or by diverting some energy to traits such as altruism, and the capacity for family and social organization, thereby increasing the chances of offspring maturing to adulthood. (Rushton and Bogaert 1987: 533)

One of the multiple absurdities promoted by Rushton in his attempts to attribute to “race” the role of a main factor in reproductive behavior included the claim concerning the unproven fact of the higher incidence of dizygotic twins among African Americans as a signifier of *r*-strategy “because they produce more than one egg at a time” (Rushton and Bogaert 1987: 53). Thus, according to Rushton, the reproductive strategies of non-whites reduced the potential for human progress and encompassed all aspects of culture and environment where the “producing patterns of culture [is] maximally compatible with their genotypes” (Rushton and Bogaert 1987: 533).

The issue of “whether the racial differences are based in evolution as well as in culture” (Rushton 1989: 45) was solved by Rushton by admitting multiple discrete spaces between different “races,” with the idea of “genetic distances of various human populations from other primates as well as from each other” (Rushton 1989: 45). Rushton promoted the division of the “races” into more or less (“White,” “Yellow,” “Black”) historically racist and vulgar continental categories, while stressing “a divergence time of about 110,000 years ago for the Negroid–non-Negroid split and about 41,000 years ago for the Caucasoid–Mongoloid split” (Rushton 1989: 50). Accepting “Blacks” as a more “primeval” race offered a way of bridging Rushton’s racialization through applying *r/K* strategies of division with Lynn’s interest in the so-called “racial differences” in IQs (Rushton and Bogaert 1987).

Lynn (1999: 147), apart from Rushton, was obsessed with evidence in favor of “dysgenic fertility” on a global scale, collecting “evidence” in favor of a negative association between the intelligence of adults and number of children, “the most direct and persuasive argument.” Lynn’s account of “genotypic intelligence” among whites and Blacks was interwoven with a

syncretic ideology combining age, education level, and a fundamental and insurmountable division between “races.” In his writing, Lynn heavily relied on the outputs of the research by another famous (albeit not as notorious) psychologist, Robin Dunbar, who actively engaged in bridging sociobiology and evolutionary psychology through researching the supposed interrelation among reproductive strategies, language, and the evolution of the brain. One of the predominant emphases of Dunbar’s research, the relationship between reproductive decisions and parental strategies, was combined with Lynn’s intention to demonstrate that the “racial” origins of differences in intelligence originated from certain reproductive strategies. Namely, researchers underscored that with each additional child, there would be a proportional lessening of parental investment, and consequently, a lowering of IQ. These authors also underscored (mistakenly) the “fact” that certain non-European cultures privileged “fecundity” over intelligence (Vogel and Motolsky 1997). Multiple forms of prejudice against Roma in CEE countries consistently reverberated with this profile of epistemic injustice.

*Roma in the focus of sociobiology: Exaggeration of scientizing prejudice*

Rushton, Lynn, and Dunbar started to cooperate with racially minded scholars from Central and Eastern Europe in applying their approaches to the geneticization of Roma at the moment sociobiology began to lose its authority among Western audiences. From the second half of the 1990s until the middle of 2010s, these collaborations resulted in more than three dozen joint publications, in “race science” publications such as *Mankind Quarterly*, part of a wider network of “race science” journals, such as *Personality and Individual Differences* (Gresson et al. 1997; Schaffer 2007). With the direct support of Richard Lynn in 2014, Čvorović published her most significant work aimed at racializing Roma by applying a genetically informed argument, *The Roma: Balkan Underclass*. The book was affiliated with the Ulster Institute for Social Research, one of Lynn’s institutional “offspring.” The more than twenty-year cooperation can be explained by the multiple “bunkerizations” of those who apply sociobiology as a vehicle for reductive racialized arguments using genetics and genomics.

Among the reasons for the international application of sociobiology to the geneticization of Roma was the increasing delegitimization of “race science” in the West, which nevertheless continued to operate as a kind of “dissenting science” that paradoxically increased the attraction for cooperation with CEE colleagues. The region had continued to function as one of the most significant rare spaces for continuing the practice of “race science” and obtaining new evidence for “understudied populations” in ways that would escape the attention of Western ethicists. This approach articulated the



general understanding, on the part of Western European geneticists, of the post-communist space as a kind of scientific and ethical “Wild West.” Bakalář, Bereczkei, and Čvorović also emphasized the organic continuity between the original theory of E.O. Wilson and their own analyses.

Consequently, sociobiology in the CEE region stands outside of and has benefited from its distance from the more well-known critiques of sociobiology as evidenced in the *New York Review of Books*. In the late 1980s, the reception of sociobiology among socialist experts, psychologists who mostly dedicated their efforts to adapting Attachment Theory (Matějček and Langmeier 1981: 41–42), and medical experts within military studies (Konvička 1988: 194–99), was overwhelmingly positive. It is thus remarkable that a very modest critique primarily stemmed from a prosaic emphasis of late socialist genetics on achieving a balance between social and biological factors. This critique completely ignored the stormy debate which had unfolded in the late 1970s and early 1980s between Wilson and his leftist opponents. While these experts ignored the boundary between “pure” sociobiology and its misuse, in the eyes of CEE academics (and some in Western Europe and the United States) Bereczkei and Čvorović continue to be viewed as respected scholars.

But the story does not end there. Bereczkei and Čvorović are accepted by the international community of Romani studies scholars, which faces multiple complexities in differentiating “proper” and “improper,” spurious and refined, use of biologically and genetically informed arguments regarding Romani identity. One example of such insensitivity is the discussion among these authors of their work as offering “a useful insight into the range of historical questions that might be explored by seeing Roma as co-collaborators in the production of historical evidence” (Taylor and Hinks 2021: 639).

The unusual popularity of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology is most succinctly explained by the contradictory messages of its racist, anti-feminist thinking, while being nonetheless embraced by the educated public (Cassidy 2005). As in the United States, in Central and Eastern Europe the leveraging of sociobiology and genetic evidence by racially minded thinkers has a direct impact on the lay community through various campaigns organized by extreme right-wing movements. Since 2009, the Czech public has had the opportunity to become acquainted with all the “news” in the field of using the sociobiological argumentation in favor of racial discrimination on the website *Dělský potápěč* (translated as “Delian diver,” a reference to efforts needed to understand pre-Socratic philosophers such as Heraclitus).<sup>4</sup> Along with publishing translations of the interviews with the most notorious scholars affiliated with the far right in the United

4. This phrase refers to the ancient Greek metaphor of deepening knowledge about the world.

States, such as Kevin MacDonald, this website provides much space to local experts, including Bakalář (*Dělský potápěč* 2018). The efforts of *Dělský potápěč* have not been ignored by public figures affiliated with traditionalism or various forms of right-wing ideological mobilization. Such influence can be shown in the consistent anti-migration position and “anti-Gypsyism” of such personages as Michal Walter Kraft.<sup>5</sup>

In Western countries, such critical public communication of the sciences has mobilized anti-essentialist, anti-racist voices, and significantly transformed public reception of these sciences, including their direct connection with scientific racism. Such mobilization has not occurred in post-socialist Europe. Petr Bakalář, to take one example, was ostracized by liberal journalists for his two books in Czechia, *Tabu v sociálních vědách* (Taboo in Social Science, 2003) and *Psychologie Romů* (The Psychology of Roma, 2004). He nevertheless maintains his stature among those educators who openly criticize the politics of inclusion regarding Romani people, and not only in Czechia. Through reading the English overview of his Czech book published in *Mankind Quarterly* (Bakalář 2004), racially thinking Greek and Romanian experts (Lervåg et al 2019; Dolean and Tincas 2019) quickly and easily absorbed Bakalář’s “hypothesis” aimed at explaining the “intractable” inferiority of Romani children. Mixing well-known surveys conducted during the 1970s by socialist psychologists of Romani children (Bakalář 2004) with concepts adopted from sociobiology represents one of the tactics that has made Bakalář’s statements so convincing – so much so that his speculative texts continue to be used by the students of educational faculties in Czech universities (Königová 2015).

While those CEE proponents of scientific racism have easily adopted racial realism, with its argument that “race” operates as an agent of either human progress or “backwardness,” its direct application to Roma has been accompanied by methodological difficulties, due to the necessity to which “race” the “Gypsies” belong. Solving this task *per se* has deepened the multiple racial hierarchies in which Roma are already embedded. Thus, in order to bring Roma closer to “blacks,” Rushton and Čvorović have introduced multiple comparisons to differentiate “Gypsies” from “Whites” and “South Asians,” the latter of whom, according to Rushton’s racialized hierarchy, occupied the top of the hierarchy (even in comparison with “Whites”) in terms of their genes and contributions to “Western civilization”:

5. In 2021, Kraft was convicted for “inciting hatred against a group of persons or restricting their rights,” but he continues his public career, including the dissemination of materials prepared by *Dělský potápěč*. The most consistent example is Kraft’s twitter: <https://twitter.com/walterkraft6>.

The Roma have had a very different history in the intervening period than other South Asians. They retain a brown-skinned, East Indian appearance, and their geographic origin has been confirmed by linguistic analysis of their Romani language as well as by genetic sequencing studies. For the most part they have not intermarried with native Europeans and have retained their cultural traditions. (Rushton et al. 2007)

Along with promoting a hypothesis concerning the negative historical role of climate in the development of Roma, who, like African Americans, lived in conditions that (ostensibly) forced them to adopt an r-strategy, Bakalář (2004) touches upon another speculative analogy – that their membership in the lowest caste was what led Roma to become enslaved.

Along with this speculative historicization aimed at pushing Roma closer to African Americans with their “short history of human progress” and their “inferior” genetics, these authors actively transferred their racially informed views to particular reproductive behaviors. This strategy of racialization was reinforced by opposing Romani reproductive and parental strategies to those of the majority, well-known or titular nations, such as Serbians, Czechs, or Hungarians. This opposition was aggravated by the speculative attribution of “animal” strategies explored by sociobiologists to Roma while the “majority” population was not marked by such “animalizing” behavior.

Propelled by research aimed at understanding the evolution of altruism among birds and mammals (Brouwer et al. 2012; Emlen 1982; 1991), Bereczkei and Dunbar (1997) conducted several observations among “rural Roma” for “proving” the essential role of altruistic agents in reproductive strategies aimed at increasing fitness among Roma families. This speculative research should be seen as a replica of the overtly racist study of the same type conducted by Lee Cronk,<sup>6</sup> Dunbar’s colleague, among Kanjar females and the Mundugumor of Papua New Guinea (Cronk 1989). Roma survival, according to Bereczkei and Dunbar (1997), hinged on a daughter being the first-born:

Gypsy mothers of daughters who act as helpers should have (1) shorter inter-birth intervals and (2) longer reproductively active life spans (the period between first and last offspring) than mothers of non- helpers; if (1) and (2) are both true, then it should follow that (3) mothers of helpers will have more children than those having first-born sons, whereas no such differences are expected among ethnic Hungarians.

Regarding the Otherness of Roma, Čvorović reified such an argument in favor of juxtaposing Roma to Serbians by positing Bosnians as falling between Serbians and “Gypsies” and introducing as an added variable the differing

6. Cronk is a well-regarded biological anthropologist working at Rutgers University, one of the leading anthropological departments in the United States. Among his colleagues is Robin Fox, another proponent and supporter of sociobiology.

religious affiliations of Roma, either Christians or Muslims (Čvorović, 2004; Čvorović, 2011; Čvorović and Lynn 2014). Unsurprisingly, the imposition of “descendant-leaving success, measured by numbers of surviving children and grandchildren” as the main unit of analysis underscored “the similarity between Roma and Bosnians as opposed to Serbians.” (Čvorović 2014: 128) Along with this move to tie Roma to other “non-white” and “non-Christian” minorities, Čvorović emphasized the innate indifference of Roma mothers to the loss of children as a kind of epigenetic strategy:

[T]he loss of children is so common in the general Roma population that probably every woman grows up with the certain knowledge that she will lose children. For example, one of the interviewed mothers, a Muslim Roma with several living children and three that have died, could not remember the cause of death of her children, nor could she remember all the names of her living kids or the years of their births. (Čvorović 2014: 144)

Stressing the lesser position of Roma with regard to the degree of civilizational and civil progress and the consequent effects on reproductive strategies reinforces the view of Roma as the “only group that never integrated into European society, despite living in Europe for many centuries ... those on the lowest position among migrants of different ethnic groups” (Čvorović 2014: 159–61). Bakalář has underscored this argument through referencing the speculative survey conducted by Pavel Říčan (1998), another racially minded Czech psychologist, who claimed the “negative assimilation” had relegated Roma to either be melted into the “White” majority or remain “backward.”

Along with viewing Roma as those who “*do not want to integrate*,” (Čvorović 2014: 160, emphasis in original) these proponents of racial realism clashed between attributing to Roma the pressure of isolation and their “primitive” efforts at adaptation, and describing everything as somehow genetic:

Everywhere, the Roma always depended on the needs of, and interaction with, their host populations as a source of their livelihood; many times the Roma adapted to the different requirements of their social and environmental surroundings. The result is the great diversity of Roma tribes. (Čvorović 2014: 126)

This view represents a paradoxical challenge in racializing Roma, either as self-isolating, or as fully assimilated into the host population, while also reintroducing intra-racial hierarchies among Roma.

On the top of this hierarchy, Čvorović and Rushton placed Romani “elites,” or those with the highest cognitive performance, who, because of “several historical waves of fleeing,” had abandoned their racial group (Rushton and

Čvorović 2009: 485). The bottom rung was occupied by the “Muslim Roma,” a hybrid population comprising a genetic mix between European Christians and Turkish Muslims who, like other South Asian/North African populations, according to Ruston, averaged “an IQ of less than 90” (ibid). Religious affiliation was posited for explaining “the most striking behavioral difference between the Roma of Serbia” (Čvorović 2014: 119). Introducing the paranoid collision of “race” and religion, Čvorović highlighted a new threat from a new generation of Roma, i.e. their very plausible connection with Islam that “itself represents a challenge for Europe since Europe’s traditional low birth rate, together with rapid reproduction by both Muslim immigrants and by native European Muslim populations” (Čvorović 2014: 191). This representation echoes precisely the theory of the “great replacement” that has motivated far-right, anti-migrant populism in Europe, as well as inspiring genocidal violence in Europe and the United States (Feola 2022). How then has this reductionism that seeks to reestablish a hierarchical order as “natural” due to genetic differences among “races” been confronted and criticized?

### **In search of the antidote: Epistemic bubbles of anti-racist sentiment in Central and Eastern Europe**

The critique against geneticization in general, and of misusing sociobiology in particular, is embedded in wide-ranging discussions that in one way or another produce boundary work that regulates knowledge regarding heredity and its role in human life. Among the most apparent divisions is the opposition of “true” science to “pseudoscience”. The contest between biology and social science as the most effective measure for attacking the geneticization of Roma is crucial as well.

The historically determined diversity of critical arguments against geneticization can be mapped through applying the Bhaskarian division of three interrelated strategies of negation: real, transformative, and radical (Bhaskar 2015). Among other reasons for differentiating the strategies of dialectic negation, Bhaskar emphasizes the idea of negation as a kind of “geo-history” in ontological terms, with reverberations for scientific progress in epistemological terms. While indicating the double binding of the subject-matter of the social sciences as “both intrinsically historical and structured by relations of internal, as well as external, interdependency,” Bhaskar brings forward “a constraint upon the kinds of permissible theory-construction,” (Bhaskar 1979: 50) such as the racist or anti-racist understandings of heredity. This constraint should be seen as one of the driving forces of epistemic filters that are introduced by the proponents of one or other strategies of negating geneticization.

*Real negation* aims to emancipate those who have previously accepted geneticization (or its successors) because of limited options to reflect upon the acceptance of geneticization as a tool of injustice. In real negation, we encounter the ground for all further forms of deconstructing geneticization. Profiling the approaches for deconstructing geneticization leads to a recognition of the predominance of real negation among social scientists who apply various tools to filter biological knowledge associated with the main sources of racial thinking.

Biologists, or those who affiliate themselves with producing medical and scientific knowledge, primarily introduce *transformative negation*, which stems from accepting the unproductivity of total negation of any hereditary explanations or attempts to research heredity. We see transformative negation as the ongoing process of differentiating the positive outputs of genetic research from their inevitable negative side through misusing genetic arguments. Further, this strategy easily excludes knowledge by labeling it as “pseudoscience,” which paradoxically leads to a missing systematic critique of the interrelation between “real” and “pseudo” science.

Recognition of the inevitability of abusing genetic arguments remains a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the much-desired process of critical reflection on the production of biological knowledge. *Radical negation* is the practice that embodies this process, through sustainable practices of doubt in laws, regularities, and rules, or every construction that shapes the linear, evolutionary, framework of biology, and genetics in particular. The potentiality of radical negation as the most desirable method for anti-racist sentiment is only possible as a consequence of the interdisciplinary interconnection of social and biological arguments against racism based upon the systematic revision of what Bhaskar defined as the *necessarily incomplete status of theory* (1979: 53). In this turn, radical negation is a highly communicative virtue that can be practiced only within a particular type of communication free from hegemony and other forms of dominance, with a minimized level of hegemony or sensitivity to hegemony (Medina 2013: 42).

Immediately after its publication, Wilson’s *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* was attacked by Marxist biologists who recognized the main argument provided by Wilson as a dangerous attempt to reintroduce the reductive core of evolutionary explanations, adaptationist programs, and axiomatic postulates. Lewontin and other scholars in his circle called for the transformation of metaphors and analogies introduced in the early stage of institutionalizing biology (Lewontin 1972). These efforts have had a lasting impact on progress in genetics (Hubálek 2021: 451–3). Lewontin had offered his own set of analogies aimed at freeing biology from reductionist metaphors and from the social implications so easily drawn from them (Kaye

2001: 438). While the radical negation manifested by these biologists left behind a number of contradictions, including a lasting contradiction with their own previous, “pro-race” view on human development, this critique has established a pathway of intensive work and interdisciplinary reflection regarding the dual nature of biology as a science that is neither “pure” and free from the risk of producing the grounds for prejudice, nor “impure” scientific racism. However, this pathway remains blocked within the debates about geneticizing Roma – primarily because of multiple interferences of epistemic filters that shape the critical arguments and leave the different camps of critics apart from each other.

*Social critiques of geneticization: A real negation of biological arguments*

*Real negation*, as the most basic and historically most established form of distancing from “contaminated” knowledge such as “race science,” concentrates on the most visible consequence of its application, the essentialism resulting from the false abstraction that nourishes scientific racism. Real negation relies on opposing racial thinking to the “think[ing] of human groups with the vivid sense that groups consist of individuals and that individuals display the full range of human differences” (Barzun 1965: ix), an idea introduced by liberal critics of scientific racism in the interwar period. This idea persists among many experts who aim at eradicating violence legitimized by genetically informed arguments. Moreover, with the acceptance of the negation of essentialization as the core issue of racial thinking, real negation remains extremely limited in developing systematic alternatives to injustice. This perspective is what furthers the idea that “equality is neither provable nor disprovable,” and that racism equality “is not a scientific but a political idea, and it is valid only when one *assumes* it” (Barzun 1965: xi).

The individualization of the argument against genetically informed perspectives relies on both implicit and explicit negation of biologically based knowledge about humans. One of the most consistent manifestations of rejecting biological causes and explanations has emerged from critical disability studies. Its proponents recognize the importance of the task to explain any attempt to apply genetics to the understanding of “minorities” as “a biological imperialism, [which] would successively eliminate the insights of sociology, psychology, psycho-analysis and other nonbiological sciences, by instituting genes as the first cause of various human experiences and behavior” (Shakespeare 1995: 23). This argument has begun to be reproduced within Romani studies, along with attempts to introduce the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and disability as a part of multifaceted practices of discrimination, including those using sociobiology as a source of legitimacy



for “positioning the Roma as *incurably other*” (Karagianni 2022). This critical reaction against geneticization continues to be a part of the emancipatory movement of educators who, for example, promote the inclusion of Romani children in schools (Tzouriadou et al. 2021). Among the experts in Central and Eastern Europe, the limits of such a view are directly related to the many gaps in the dissemination of leftist critiques of sociobiology by biologists such as Richard Lewontin, Stephan Gould, and the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins.

Opposing biology as potentially discriminating through pathologizing Roma to anti-discriminative social sciences has found many advocates among experts who aim to advance the Romani language, including overcoming its multiple and deeply rooted stigmatizations. While these experts disapprovingly cite Čvorović, Rushton, and Bakalář, and even label their positions as eugenic (Kuo 2020), they do not provide critical analysis and do not touch upon public acceptance of these ideas.

Following the mission to enlighten, experts replace the false, biologized view on Roma with a positive and “true” image (Kyuchukov et al. 2015: 447). Focusing on the implications but not on the arguments emanating from sociobiology makes this critique insufficient for overcoming geneticization, especially in the context of its popularity among many educators. Even the apologists for this approach have convinced others of the desirability to oppose their position with the culture of schooling and the role of society in achieving desirable readiness to approach Romani children with the respect to their cultural and linguistic experience (de Villiers 2017: 322). This practice of avoidance in unpacking the geneticization of Roma reverberates with a more general trend, namely, the resistance to the infiltration of social research by genetics from many social scientific scholars (Burt 2022).

The deeply rooted biologization of the social sciences and, in particular, the use of organicism and the metaphor of the organism as a response to the need to prove the validity of social science can hinder critical recognition of the impact of epistemologies, not particular “pseudo” theories: “[A] train of distinguished scholars has struggled to secure a science of society modeled on the precise practices of the natural sciences” (Levine 1995: 240). While the adaptation of biological concepts aimed “to sanitize rhetoric and cleanse ambiguities of [social sciences],” the inroads made by sociology should be explored as an additional channel for interconnecting academic and public views on human individuals and collectives – especially taking into account the interdisciplinary cooperation between biologists, sociologists, and demographers within the development and practice of reproductive politics.

Along with this uneasy interrelation between biology and social science, the palpable presence of epistemic violence within these knowledge systems calls for systematic revision of methods and research questions produced within anthropology, sociology, and psychology (Guhin and Wyrzten 2013). This task requires moving beyond mere boundaries between biology and social sciences. Such boundaries, we argue, reinforce the most simplistic, neo-liberal approach to solving the dilemma of nature vs. nurture, which, consequently, has been misused in educational and other politics regarding Roma. But can biology really provide social science with its own experience of overcoming epistemic filters in the fight against racism?

*Transformative negation: Genetics in search of justice*

One of the earliest responses from the side of Western biological scientists to racially minded applications of sociobiology stemmed from the mission to protect sociobiology and its particular models, such as the r/K strategy, from non-scientific application and appropriation. The heyday of this critical campaign came at the beginning of the 1990s, when sociobiology began to lose its authority both among scientists and the public, not only as a result of scientific critique, but significant media attention as well as public protest. The main thrust of this critique was the deficiency of “authors” like Rushton and Lynn, but not sociobiology itself, which could indeed be a developing discipline.

Lynn (1989) directly argued that one of texts by Rushton (related to the intersectionality of race and class as factors of reproduction) should not have been published in the *Journal of Research in Personality* because it lacked any sustained evidence. Lynn specifically emphasized the “missing evidence” with regard to one of the central issues of sociobiology, namely, the interrelation between culture and genes: “While it is possible and (if you accept sociobiology) even probable that genes influence culture, the possibility of genetically based cultural differences between the races is just a hypothesis” (Lynn 1989: 5).

Judith L. Anderson (1991), a behavioral ecologist, however, provides two arguments against applying the r/K strategy to human populations, in which sociobiology is an example of anti-scientific usage of theoretical constructions on the interrelation between human “races” and local populations, and the relationship between population dynamics and organismal traits. What is remarkable is that neither argument considers the rejection of the idea of “race”: “[H]uman races are made up of many separate local populations, each of which has occupied a specific habitat and ecological niche and therefore has experienced its own selection pressures. Therefore the r/K model makes no predictions about entire current human races” (Anderson 1991: 52). Anderson

produces this noticeable boundary work in order to explain Rushton's racialization and her own neutrality through the difference in their professional affiliation: "[As] an ecologist by training I do not imagine that psychologists will share my degree of concern over the inappropriate use of ecological theory in this context" (Anderson 1991: 51).

Another argument aligned with deconstructing Rushton's work as pseudoscience involves the use of concepts as such as IQ as "a modern, western contrivance, developed on empirical rather than theoretical grounds, solely to predict classroom success, one of the concepts related more to pragmatic than scientific considerations" (Silverman 1990: 4). But along with this and other critical remarks, Irwin Silverman, a Canadian clinical psychologist, mentions the novelty of sociobiology implemented by Rushton in "pulling together an array of anatomical, physiological, maturational, and behavioral differences among races" (Silverman 1990: 6).

Joseph L. Graves Jr., an African American evolutionary biologist, pushes the boundary between science and pseudoscience even further with his figurative assessment of Rushton as "a spider spinning a pseudoscientific web of incorrectly stated hypotheses supported with dubious evidence" (2002: 131–54). Rushton's master work, *Race, Evolution, and Behavior*, is compared with other works already labeled as overtly racist, such as Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994). These moves are part of the mission to purify evolutionary biology from such unscientific approaches, a move that remains predominant: "[W]e must vigorously oppose Rushtonism due to his blatant distortion of the methods of evolutionary biology in general and life history theory in particular" (Graves 2002: 134). Graves consistently highlights the failure of Rushton, who takes no pains to differentiate between phenotypic correlations and specific patterns of evolutionary selection. He concludes that "Rushton implicitly accepts the socially constructed rule of genetic hypo-descent (the one drop rule) as the basis of a biologically valid racial classification scheme" (Graves 2002: 144).

This manner of critiquing the misuse of biology serves to reproduce epistemic bubbles among biologists and sociologists alike. Recognizing biology as already emancipated from racism, and understanding "race science" as an output of misusing the arguments and evidence provided by "true" natural and biological science resonates with a too-literal understanding of the stance that "race" is a socially constructed concept. Such an assertion charges biologists with the struggle against reproducing scientific racism and of differentiating science from pseudoscience. This position, based on an uncritical belief in the ongoing development of biology, runs the risk of insensitivity to the continuing reproduction of potentially (or even actual) racist views among biologists and medical experts. In CEE countries, this

view has reached an even more extreme position, manifested in an apparent vacuum of critical approaches, either transformative or radical, on the part of biologists.

Ethnographer Adriana Petryna (2003) characterizes the devotion of many post-socialist colleagues to the idea of medical science as ensuring progress (along with ignoring the call for its critical acceptance as a part of institutional violence) as a “nativist” model of science that undercuts its positivism. Taking into account the historically determined interconnection between socialist genetics and the global politics of surveillance over reproduction, including repressive political measures regarding Roma introduced in the mid-1960s, it is reasonable to extend Petryna’s argument to the role of socialist genetics in developing the global order of health security. This extension would then certainly include one of the most blatant manifestations, the transnational network of overtly racially thinking adherents of sociobiology.

## Conclusion

Nurturing manifold prejudices, the geneticization of Roma should be seen as a driving force behind hermeneutical, societal, and economic inequality, one that limits Roma in their own knowledge production. Not only does the misuse of genetically informed arguments attribute inherited inferiority to Roma, but just as importantly, attempts at a critique of such arguments to help to maintain this marginalization, despite the best (albeit sometimes paternalistic) intentions.

If the harm produced by racially minded scholars seems to be self-evident, their operation as an epistemic bunker challenges the effort to question geneticization as a source of epistemic vice. Operating as a network epistemology, geneticization and its influence on racial prejudice ensures the reproduction of a biologized view on Roma. Furthermore, its ongoing acceptance and application by practitioners of the groups most essential for providing either discriminatory or anti-discriminatory social policy, including educators and public health practitioners, persists. An appropriate response to such a well-preserved and widely accepted overt racism can be nothing other than a pluralistic or “kaleidoscopic” approach, based on incorporating multiple perspectives to build an epistemic equilibrium, the “interplay of cognitive forces, without some forces overpowering others, without some cognitive influences becoming unchecked and unbalanced” (Medina 2013: 50).

Such a consciousness obliges those who contribute to the deconstruction of geneticization to practice epistemic virtues such as open-mindedness, epistemic humility, and curiosity. However, these expectations remain

unmet. The critique of geneticization, as of now, comes from social scientists and those experts who present themselves as fonts of biological knowledge. Both camps mostly operate in epistemic bubbles that legitimize their own approach to producing knowledge. Attacking the misuse of genetically informed arguments performs boundary work in their field of expertise, instead of promoting the catalyzation of processes designed to overcome epistemic deficit in producing knowledge about Roma.

Among the most important of these deficits has been a racialized view of family, reproduction, and social life. It is clear that the desired systematic practice of negating scientific racism requires a revision of approaches to the subjectification and scientific objectification of Roma. Interdisciplinary cooperation between social scientists and biologists is one of the first steps to overcoming the hermeneutic inequality of Roma, through practicing interactionism and embracing a social-connection model of responsibility for geneticization, in which responsibility for scientific racism lies not with one discipline, but several.

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## Reviews

**Így muzsikáltunk. Déki Lakatos Sándor cigányprímás élet- és családtörténete** [That's how we made music. The life and family history of the Gypsy first violinist Sándor Déki Lakatos]. Ágnes Szokolszky. Személyes Történelem [Personal History], 2023. 296 pp. ISBN: 978-615-6439-27-7

Reviewed by Tamás Hajnáczy

At the international level, there is a growing emphasis on the “Roma voice” in the historical studies of Gypsies. These research efforts have been brought even more to the fore by the “Roma Interbellum: Roma Civic Emancipation Between the Two World Wars” project<sup>1</sup> – led by Elena Marushiakova – which has explored the topic from the end of the nineteenth century until the outbreak of the Second World War. One of the main strengths of the project, funded by the European Research Council, was that it extended the period of research into the “Roma voices” by almost a century. Although we have recently had more and more material giving us access to “Roma voices,” these are mainly from genocide survivors, people who worked in socialist heavy industry, or members of the emerging Roma movement. A substantial exploration of the personal sources related to Gypsy musicians in Hungary is still awaited. Ágnes Szokolszky’s much needed oral history book is intended to contribute towards filling this gap, as she has interviewed the world-famous Gypsy first violinist Sándor Déki Lakatos about his personal and family history in an insightful and sensitive manner. On the one hand, it gives an insight into the Gypsy music society of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and then of the Horthy era – with a lengthy discussion of the role of Gypsy musician wives – all told through the narrative of a Gypsy first violinist. On the other hand, it introduces us to the world of Gypsy musicians of the Eastern Bloc and the post-socialist transition. The richly illustrated volume is rounded off by a concluding study that reveals the past of Gypsy

1. For more information on the project and publications, see “Roma Interbellum: Roma Civic Emancipation Between the Two World Wars,” *University of St Andrews*, <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/romainterbellum/>.

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musicians through the prism of the history of the Gypsy first violinist Lakatos's dynasty. Ágnes Szokolszky's unique volume is an indispensable addition to the libraries of those concerned with Gypsy history, but will also be of interest to a wider academic audience.

Sándor Déki Lakatos was born in 1945, into a family of Gypsy musicians, and descended from a family of renowned Gypsy musicians on both his mother's and father's side. He can trace his ancestors back to the 1700s, among whom he can only name two who were not involved in Gypsy music; one was a sailor, while the other was a judge at a regional high court. From the moment of his birth, his life was permeated by Gypsy music, as it is today, and one of his children, Sándor Déki Lakatos Jr., also chose this path in life. In the hospital, as soon as he was born, his uncle gave him a violin bow. According to tradition, if the infant holds the bow correctly, he will become a Gypsy first violinist. According to his uncle, the newborn Sándor Déki Lakatos held the violin bow perfectly and was thus destined to become a Gypsy first violinist, which he recalled as follows:

So, I was brought up in this family of first violinists, I had my own violin by the age of two and I toddled about with it day and night. If I remember correctly, it was made of tin, it was a toy violin. And as the old people practiced, so did I, but of course I didn't know anything. I wasn't allowed to play football when I was a child, though I didn't obey because I loved football. But I wasn't allowed to play sports or ride a bicycle, I was only allowed to ride a scooter, nothing else. I was brought up to take care of my hands. Well, I was very careful. That was always a problem for me in gym class. Because I wasn't allowed to do somersaults and jumps and the like.

The socialist system that emerged in Hungary after the end of the Second World War, under the pressure of the Soviet Union, had a profound impact on the Gypsy music society. The stories of Sándor Déki Lakatos give us a first-hand personal insight into this situation. The nationalization that began in the late 1940s and affected many people also affected Gypsy musicians, with several relatives of the Gypsy first violinist having their homes confiscated by the single-party state. The cafés were closed as symbols of the "old nobility," and the expressions "Gypsy music," "Gypsy orchestra," and "Hungarian song," which were reminiscent of times gone by, were stigmatized. Sándor Déki Lakatos summarized the first years of the socialist takeover and its impact on Gypsy musicians, as follows:

At the beginning of the 50s, the cafés were closed down, as they were the settings of the old-world gentry. There was no place to play music anymore. You couldn't play music in restaurants at all for a few years. An awful lot of Gypsy musicians were out of work, they could go to work as labourers, in factories. Dad said, "they threw Gypsy music out of the window with the pool tables." Because you, as a Gypsy

musician, café musician, were a servant of the old nobility. Song as a genre was also stigmatised. You couldn't even say "Gypsy music" or "Gypsy orchestra" because that too was a reminder of the old days. But some big "folk" bands were organised centrally, with Gypsy musicians playing in them. Gypsy music had to be marketed as folk music. (p. 74)

In the early 1950s, the authorities created several folk orchestras for Gypsy musicians: the Hungarian Radio Folk Orchestra, the State Folk Ensemble, the Budapest Folk Orchestra, and the Folk Orchestra of the Ministry of the Interior's Danube Art Ensemble. Gypsy musicians were only allowed to work through the National Centre for Light Music (OSZK). They were obliged to join the trade union, as this was the only way to obtain a contract, and in the absence of a contract, Gypsy musicians were declared public menaces. Sándor Lakatos Déki's father, Sándor Lakatos, was asked to conduct the Hungarian Radio Folk Orchestra, which often led to friction with the ideology of the single-party state and its functionaries. Gypsy music was banned from radio programmes – only folk songs were allowed to be played – and the pre-recorded programmes were scrutinized by the watchful eyes of censors. Sándor's father regularly appeared on live programmes, where he once played a song called "Ezüst tükrös kávéházban" [In the Silver Mirrored Café], after which the artistic director, a communist party member, was furious and said: "I'll break your hand and your leg, what are you playing?" (p. 88) Sándor Lakatos was eventually disciplined for the song about the café, a month's wages were docked, and he was threatened with immediate dismissal if it happened again. He once performed at an event and the communist party leader, Mátyás Rákosi, asked him afterwards if he was a party member because if he was, he would give him the Kossuth Prize – the highest state award in the cultural field. Sándor Lakatos was not a party member, so he was given one day to apply for and receive his party membership. In the end, he did not comply with this "unrefusable" request and was not awarded the prize. Soon afterwards, the Hungarian Radio demanded that Sándor Lakatos and his entire orchestra join the communist party, which the Gypsy first violinist and his musicians again refused to do. They were therefore dismissed from the Hungarian Radio Folk Orchestra because they were classified as "untrustworthy persons."

After the 1956 revolution, the dictatorship in Hungary was somewhat eased, the new party leader János Kádár loosened the grip of the socialist system and the so-called "goulash communism" began. Sándor Lakatos, who had refused to join the party, for his outstanding musical merits was sent to Moscow with his son and the Gypsy orchestra to play at a meeting between János Kádár and the first man of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev. During his days in Moscow, Sándor Déki Lakatos was surprised to realize that they could sell almost any of their clothes on the streets of the city:

Well, you know, it was a very interesting world for me, when I first saw it. Especially the fact that they would grab you on the street and try to take off your shirt, your shoes, everything, and try to buy it. Dad sold all his nylon shirts. The ones we took out for three weeks, no dry cleaning, no nothing, you just had to go down to the street, you had a shirt on, they came and paid. I had a suit that was made from my dad's suit. ... And if you please, I was about 160 cm tall, I was walking around in that suit. A young man came up to me, about 170-175 cm tall and said he would very much like to buy my suit. Well, I say, it's small for you. Never mind, he'll buy it anyway. (p. 116)

In the socialist era, the Mátyás Cellar in downtown Budapest was turned into a protocol locale by the communist state. High-ranking foreign politicians (e.g. Gromyko, Tito), international celebrities, and Western film stars (e.g. Roger Moore, Elizabeth Taylor) dined there. János Kádár, the party leader himself, regularly dined there with his wife. Sándor Lakatos started playing with his Gypsy orchestra in the downtown restaurant in 1964, and his son Sándor Déki Lakatos started in 1967. The younger Gypsy first violinist was under contract with the Mátyás Cellar for almost four decades, from that year onwards, with some interruptions, making his person and his music inseparable from the iconic restaurant. With the consolidation of the socialist system, the situation of Gypsy musicians improved somewhat, as the single-party state needed them. They became an integral part of state representation and had to do their share in entertaining tourists from abroad. Furthermore, the authorities not only allowed, but also decided to send Hungarian Gypsy musicians to Western European countries or distant continents to bring home the stable foreign currencies they earned there. Against this background and with the aim of obtaining more Western currency for Hungary, the Mátyás Cellar was opened in Vienna in 1971. First Sándor Lakatos, then his son, was asked to play with his Gypsy orchestra in the newly opened Hungarian restaurant. Being in Vienna, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, did not mean complete freedom for the Gypsy musicians. In the Viennese restaurant where he performed every night, Sándor Déki Lakatos had to avoid informants:

at least fifty percent of the waiters in the Mátyás Cellar in Vienna were from the Ministry of the Interior. You knew who was and who wasn't. It was kind of a secret, although I had one who said quite openly, "I have to go report now." But they were professionals, the cream of the profession. (p. 142)

His wife did not get a passport after repeated attempts, lest they remain abroad. The manager of the Mátyás Cellar "whispered" to Sándor Déki Lakatos that his fiancée would only get a passport if he bought an apartment in Hungary, because the Ministry of the Interior considered it a guarantee that they would come home. In the end, the Gypsy violinist bought an apartment in Budapest and his wife was allowed to go to Vienna with him.

By the 1980s, the collapse of the Soviet Union, bled dry by the Cold War, became increasingly apparent, and the Kremlin's grip on the countries of the Eastern Bloc, including Hungary, loosened. In 1989, Hungary underwent a regime change that signalled the end of the state socialist system. One of the notorious scandals and abuses in the years following the regime change was privatization, whereby much state property changed hands. This period, and the decline of Gypsy music were described very expressively by Sándor Déki Lakatos. Privatization also affected the catering industry: restaurants and the Mátyás Cellar became private property. One by one, Gypsy bands were dismissed from the restaurants because the new owners did not consider it economically viable to hire them. Or they were hired on the basis of ad hoc contracts and asked for invoices instead of being provided a stable livelihood. At the same time, esteem for Gypsy musicians declined rapidly, as the Gypsy first violinist stated:

When we went in, we were not allowed to use the main entrance. We spent the ten-minute break per hour at the staff entrance. The door opened directly on to the street, in winter the air was minus ten degrees and we sat there sweating from the performance. We were not allowed to use the paid car parking in front of the restaurant, because the guests needed it. ... The manager, a young "genius" who hadn't even been born when I was already playing music in this house [Mátyás Cellar], told me that I wasn't allowed to sit at the customer's table during my break, even if they specifically asked me to. ... I asked him that if I didn't know how to behave in a restaurant, how could I have made music here for forty years?

Due to the humiliating conditions, Sándor Déki Lakatos finally felt he had to resign from the Mátyás Cellar 2011, where he had played for nearly 40 years as the celebrated Gypsy first violinist. Pondering the waning of Gypsy music in Hungary, he was optimistic about the fate of the genre because, as he put it, "the talent is there!"





Ifj. Munczy Béla I. világháborús naplói [Béla Munczy Jr.'s World War I war diaries]. Anita D. Szakács (ed.). Sopron: Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Győr-Moson-Sopron Megye Soproni Levéltára, 2020. 194 pp. ISBN: 978-963-8327-54-3

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In recent years, there has been notable academic interest at the international level in historical sources written by or stemming from Gypsies or Roma organizations from the early twentieth century. The flagship of these research efforts has been the project entitled “Roma Interbellum – Roma Civic Emancipation Between the Two World Wars,” led by Prof. Elena Marushiakova. As a result, numerous publications and studies were published, involving researchers from more than a dozen countries.<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian studies have focused on Gypsy musicians and the associations and newspapers they founded, partly based on contemporary interviews, minutes, and documents from Roma people. One of these sources is the publication by Anita D. Szakács, historian and archivist. It is a war diary written by Béla Munczy Jr., a Gypsy musician, when he was on the front lines during the First World War. It has been preserved for posterity by the Hungarian National Archives of Győr-Moson-Sopron County, Sopron, Hungary. It is a rare treasure as there are hardly any sources about the Great War written by a person of Gypsy origin. In her excellent work, the historian has broken this silence by giving a voice to a Gypsy musician of yore. These are the main virtues and novelties of this publication. At the same time, it must be emphasized that it is not only the battlefields of the World War that are written about, but also the conditions, role, and everyday life of Gypsy musicians and Gypsy bands in the army of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

Anita D. Szakács has done an extremely thorough job in publishing the war diary. In about 70 pages she describes the history of the family of the Gypsy musician who wrote the diary and has richly illustrated the book with contemporary photos. Relying on archival sources and contemporary Austrian and Hungarian newspapers, she presents the reader with a detailed account of the eventful past of the Munczy family. According to surviving documents from the late eighteenth century, they settled in Sopron County as “new serfs” and

1. For more information on the project and publications, see “Roma Interbellum: Roma Civic Emancipation Between the Two World Wars,” *University of St Andrews*, <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/romainterbellum/>.

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worked the land. By the mid-nineteenth century, sources already describe them as earning their living by playing music. Among the more distant relations there were famous Gypsy first violinists who travelled all over the continent and sometimes even performed for monarchs and princes, even amassing considerable fortunes. The historian has added more than 300 explanatory footnotes to the war diary, and the source publication concludes with a list of abbreviations and an index of place and personal names.

The diary of the Gypsy musician takes the reader into the raw, inhuman reality of the Great War, into the trenches reeking of corpses, human excrement, and rubbish, into the endless cries of the wounded, and the sight of mangled corpses. Béla Munczy witnessed all this first hand, as he was repeatedly deployed at the front or had to carry the dead. Among other things, he wrote of an event when,

about five [shells] hit the trenches and had a terrible effect. One stretcher carrier was said to have been cut in two at the waist (I didn't look at him because I can't bear to look at such things), another (I saw involuntarily) had his right hand cut off and flesh hanging from his thigh and another wound on his back. The poor soul was wailing so much! His hand was hanging from a finger's width of skin. How much it must have hurt. By the time they got him to the aid station he had already bled to death. His name was Bors! ... It was a horrible sight to see poor Bors's hand hanging down and the flesh dangling from it, like a pig being slaughtered! A real slaughterhouse!" (pp. 105–6)

He reported on the first use of mustard gas in the Great War and the terror it caused among the soldiers. Because of the gas used in combat, they were trained with gas masks and given special training on how to survive a gas attack. Added to this was the war propaganda, with demoralizing pamphlets being dropped from aircraft by the enemy. The "peaceful" days were punctuated by officers shouting orders, which gave the soldiers not a moment's peace. They had to take part in weapon cleaning and firing practice, bayonet fighting, and grenade throwing exercises. This constant rotation of tasks was often supplemented by the cleaning of quarters, the cleaning of clothing, and the inspection by officers.

Not only were the soldiers subjected to the endless horrors of war, witnessing the wounded and the dead, but they also had to endure inadequate food, a lack of drinking water, and harsh living conditions. In his war diary, Béla Munczy gave daily accounts of the meals they received, once or twice mentioning that they were fed deliciously and abundantly, but mostly with a harsh comment, "For lunch there was goulash with barley. Something for animals!" (p. 102), "Dinner was dishwash-water which they called soup." (p. 133), "It was a very poor lunch, a little slop with a few beans and potatoes thrown in" (p. 111). They were regularly given tinned food and hard toast, but

it was not uncommon for their mess kit to be empty at midday. Sometimes they ate cabbage or barley soup for days or weeks, sometimes they only got mouldy bread. In addition, there was a regular shortage of drinking water, so they often resorted to distilled water or the murky water from cisterns. Exhausted by thirst and hunger, they lay their heads down either in the open air, on hard barrack bunks, or in caverns or burrows in the damp ground.

Through Béla Munczy's war diary, we can gain insight not only into the horrors of the First World War, but also into the sometimes privileged, sometimes despised position of Gypsy musicians in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy's army. When Gypsy musicians were conscripted into the army, they were not necessarily assigned to Gypsy bands and were often given weapons instead of instruments. The luckier ones were organized into bands, under the patronage of a senior officer, which gave them many advantages. In this respect, too, the first violinist was the leader, and as he was given the rations of a non-commissioned officer, had the privilege of liaising with officers, and could sometimes be given a lower military rank. It should be noted that the Gypsy bands were not sent to the front line to fight but were allowed to remain in the relative safety of the defence lines. However, they were often not exempt from camp service, which on good days meant carrying food or helping in the kitchen, and on bad days meant hard physical labour, of which the author of the war diary wrote, 'this work of picking and hoeing is not for musicians, it makes the hands turn to wood!' (p. 88) Or when he had to load sacks and wood on a cart all day long, he remarked that it was work for peasants. While on duty Gypsy musicians were also sometimes subjected to the scornful remarks of officers, of which the short dialogue quoted is a typical example,

I was digging in the morning. I had a bit of a disagreement with the platoon leader on duty. He told me that a bow better fit my hand than a shovel. I replied that it was my job. He replied that it was not an honest profession. I protested, of course, and he said, "Perhaps you don't agree?" Of course, I don't! Then he came at me and shoved me in the chest. (p. 168)

The diarist also recalled an incident in which the captain expressly forbade him to be assigned to field duty, but an aide-de-camp ordered him to do his share of the work. The Gypsy bands also had the advantage over the regular soldiers in that they could earn some money in the army by playing for the officers or non-commissioned officers. With this income, they could buy cigarettes or supplement and diversify their meagre, often monotonous meals. They could never know in advance how much the officers would reward them for their music after a night of revelry, and their pay was usually at the whim of the merry-makers. Often, they would get one or two crowns, or a packet of cigarettes, but it was not uncommon for them to get several tens of crowns,

and sometimes a few pints of beer, a jug of wine, or a plate of food would be added to their pay. More than once, however, they returned to their lodgings empty-handed and were not even offered a drink. Only occasionally did they play music for the soldiers as part of official events. However, officers in the mood for music were known to order them out of their beds in the middle of the night to sing a few tunes.

The Gypsy musician identity and the conflict between Gypsy, or more precisely, Gypsy musician and peasant (*gádzsó/gadžo*) also appears in Béla Munczy's memoirs. The Gypsy musician often expressed his contempt for the peasants, for example, by strongly criticizing their musical taste, "My nature cannot comprehend the peasants' tune, it's in vain. They sing as if they were cattle bellowing at the top of their lungs" (p. 71) Or, indignantly, he criticized the "peasants' lack of culture when he had to sleep with them in a stinking stable: "I almost got sick when I went in. The peasants didn't even notice, they slept there like at home! And anyone who complains is mocked!" (p. 76) A platoon leader, seeing the conditions, found a bed in another lodging area for the Gypsy musician, and Béla Munczy noted in his diary about this person: "this is a good man, not a peasant!" (p. 76) The Gypsy first violinist, who held the rank of sergeant, was often stern with the band members, but Munczy did not mind this, as "one would rather take orders from a Roma than from a peasant." (p. 171) However, some officers' antipathy towards Gypsies also surfaced sometimes as they called Gypsy band members "dirty, stinking Gypsies" (p. 173) and slapped them or made disparaging remarks about their origin during drills, "When I reported to him [company commander], he repeated the drill with me a few times. He said it's obvious you're a Gypsy, you can't even turn round." (p. 172)

In conclusion, Anita D. Szakács's volume is a valuable addition to the libraries of researchers studying Gypsy culture, and it will also be of interest to a broader academic audience. It could serve as a valuable reference book in higher education or as an indispensable reference in the field of popular history.





*Thematic issue of Romani studies 35.1/2025*

***Religion and Roma social inclusion***

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*Call for papers*

In many countries, religion continues to be a significant factor in society. The question of what role religion and religious actors have played and continue to play on the long road to social inclusion of the Roma is therefore important.

This can be a positive or a negative role. In the past, religious actors – together with the majority of society – have often contributed to the marginalization or even exclusion from social life of the Roma. The research on the topic of slavery in the Romanian principalities is just one example, suggestive of one of the first periods when this phenomenon began to be debated and legislated in this part of Europe. There are currently very different trends on approaching this field of research. An important role is played by the fact that a significant part of Roma has chosen a new religious affiliation in recent decades, moving towards various protestant churches. This change has an influence on whether and how social inclusion succeeds. The aim of the planned issue of Romani Studies is to illustrate this range of possible attitudes. Several research projects have already been carried out in this sense, including SIRONA 2010 in Slovakia and PARI (2021–2024) in Romania.

We encourage contributions from different disciplines in social sciences and humanities, like history, sociology, religious studies, social work, anthropology, Romani studies. Submitted papers could touch one of the following issues:

- Relations between religious denominations and Roma in the past;
- Religious actors and their current contribution or lack thereof to the participation of Roma in all aspects of society;

- Participatory approaches in working in/with Roma communities, especially in the context of faith-based actors;
- The religiosity of Roma and the question of its empowering potential;
- The influence and contribution of churches in the process of socio-economic and educational well-being of Roma communities and in Roma social movements;
- The affiliation of Roma to religious institutions between exclusion and inclusion;
- Changes in the religious affiliation of Roma and its influences on social inclusion;
- Socio-economic aspects in Protestant Roma communities;
- The impact of major religious events on the cohesion and identity of Roma communities;
- The role of Roma spiritual leaders in mediating community conflicts and promoting peace.

**Final date for abstracts: 15 April 2024**

Only the authors of accepted abstracts will be invited to submit a full paper. **Please also include a list of the bibliographic references you are working with.** An invitation to submit a full paper does not constitute a commitment for publication; all papers will be subject to anonymous peer review following the submission. The special issue is planned to be published as open access.

**Final date for papers: 15 September 2024**

Feel free to contact the guest editors with any queries regarding the issue. If you would like to contribute, please send the title of your contribution and an abstract of the paper by 15 April 2024 to [stefan.tobler@ev-theol.ro](mailto:stefan.tobler@ev-theol.ro)