Reclaiming Romani-ness: Identity Politics, Universality and Otherness Or, Towards a (New) Romani Subjectivity

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Critical
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Abstract

Drawing on theories of identity postulated by cultural theorists, scholars of gender identity, and critical race theorists, I explore issues of identity politics and "Otherness" as they pertain to Romani identity, history and activism. By critiquing the latent bifurcation of identity and subjectivity in Judith Butler's theory of performativity as well as her explicit adherence to universalism, I begin to outline a (post-Hegelian) hermeneutic in which narratives of self enable political processes of self-determination against symbolic and epistemic systems of racialization and minoritization.[1] Roma identity both serves as an oppressive social category while at the same time empowering people for whom a shared ethnic group provides a sense of solidarity and community. In re-conceptualizing, reimagining and re-claiming Romani-ness, we can make movements towards outlining a new *Romani* subjectivity – a subjectivity that is firmly rooted in *counterhistories* of Roma, with porous boundaries that both celebrate our diversity and foster solidarity. I come to the subject of Romani identity from an understanding that our racialized and gendered identities are both performed and embodied – forming part of the horizon from which we make meaning of the world. I wish to recast the discourse surrounding Romani identity as hybridized and multicultural, as well as, following Glissant, embedded into a pluritopic notion of history.

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1. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer of this journal for the eloquent wording of this phrase (Feburary 2018).

1. The Bifurcation of Identity and Subjectivity

One of the major problems underpinning the field of Romani Studies to date is one that, in my opinion, has also plagued discourses and knowledge production across manifold academic disciplines. Namely, the problem lies in the lack of recognition that the category of the "subject" has been cast from a wholly hegemonic, Eurocentric and universalizing perspective. This has led, inevitably, to the relegation of discourses of minoritized, subaltern subjects to the realm of "identity" or "identity politics", which has in turn fueled an interminable debate on the validity of identity to inform our understanding of political or social life, and ontology, more broadly.

In what follows I argue that "identity" plays a critical role in the ongoing struggle for Romani rights. I will also highlight the importance of Romani knowledge and cultural production as a means of increasing recognition of and respect for Romani peoples across the world. More specifically, I demonstrate in this paper one way in which Roma can work towards decolonizing Romani studies – a discipline which has almost exclusively consisted of non-Roma writing about Roma from the dominant perspective, but is on the precipice of important change. I also seek to reclaim the cultural, musical, and artistic spaces which, in some instances, have been co-opted as realms in which majority society promulgates stereotypes of Roma. In re-claiming identity as a salient category and also the creative spaces in which identity is forged, I hope to generate a discourse on how Roma are interpellated as subjects, and in doing so, forge a markedly *Romani* subjectivity.

Alexander Weheliye traces the aforementioned problem – that of the inception of the "subject" as a white being – back to what he calls the bifurcation of identity and subjectivity (Weheliye, 2005: 65). Weheliye's work presents many rich avenues of exploration regarding identity and subject formation. Crucial for my purposes here is Weheliye's critique of Stuart Hall for rending asunder the categories of identification and subjectivization in his seminal essay "Who Needs Identity?" In that text, Hall contends that:

> 'identity' …refer[s] to the meeting point, the point of *suture,* between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions, which discursive practices construct for us… Identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always 'knowing' (the language of consciousness here betrays us) that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a 'lack', across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate – identical – to the subject processes which are invested in them (Hall, 1996: 5-6).

Weheliye argues that Hall's conceptualization of these terms – identity and subject – as necessarily separate, actually calls into question the entire academic discourse on "identity". Identity – which Weheliye labels "I be" – corresponds to the empirical man, that is, "the real human agent" who is shaped within a particular spatio-temporal horizon, whereas the subject, "I am" is an unmarked, abstract

concept. Weheliye's critique of this bifurcation stems from the problematic nature of the subject as a universal category.

Sylvia Wynter's notion of the Figure of Man conceives of the Western subject precisely along the same lines as Weheliye (Wynter, 1987). In *On Disenchanting Discourse: "Minority" Literary Criticism and Beyond*, she calls for a radical epistemological shift in our understanding of the systemic structures within which we act out our minority/majority identities. In her schema, the Figure of Man (read: white man) is foiled by the Ontological Other (non-white). Herein lies, most precisely, the crux of both her and Weheliye's arguments: the "subject" or Figure of Man as it has been thought of throughout centuries of philosophical musings on subject interpellation, have invariably taken white, Western man as its default subject. According to Wynter, The Figure of Man, a concept constituted by the discourse of biological idealism, is embodied in the "Indo-European [and] incarnated [as] the ideal prototype of the secular human" (Wynter, 1987: 236). The figure of "the Negro", or more generally the Ontological Other, is the latter's "imperative antithesis". Wynter argues that "our present organization of knowledge… was put in place to replicate", encode, and maintain the systemic existence of the Figure of Man (234). For this reason, Wynter impels Minority Discourse to "bring closure to our present order of discourse", which will necessarily bring about the erasure of the Figure of Man (209). The problem that Wynter and Weheliye describe is two-fold. Together their work poignantly demonstrates, first, how the Figure of Man – or, the Eurocentric white man – has persisted as the central (exclusive) focus of philosophical and political imaginaries through to the present day. This installation of the subject as a heterosexual, white male has led to a second problem: the development of "identity" as a catch-all for subjects who lie outside the boundaries of The Figure of Man, which has in turn forced minority discourses to the margins of academia.

Weheliye's academic agenda is emphatically de-colonial, as made evident in his rallying call to "wield… the category of the subject from the position of black studies" (Weheliye, 2005: 68). To enact this kind of decolonization would begin to undo the epistemological frameworks which shape scholarly discourses in many fields, Romani Studies included. What would it mean to wield the category of the subject from the position of Romani Studies? How might we, as scholars, begin to do scholarship that consistently challenges systems of thought that are both eminently oppressive, and, simultaneously, deeply embedded in the fabric of the spaces in which we operate? One answer, perhaps, lies in the conclusion to Weheliye's book in which he compels us to challenge the presumptions we've inherited regarding the bifurcation of identity and subjectivity, which serve to further minoritize marginalized voices. He melds identity and subjectivity in a single phrase "I am I be" (the title of a song by the hip hop group De La Soul) to demonstrate that "being" – both in terms of identification and in terms of subject interpellation – is one and the same thing, and that rending them asunder only serves to promulgate the false notion that blackness and brownness act as predicates to the noun "Man" by which we mean White man. Conceiving of the category of subject not as a blank (read: white) canvas upon which identities are composed would thus serve as an important corrective to the discipline of Romani Studies. We, Roma, are not (unmarked, universal) human first and Roma second; rather, we are both at once. Undoing this deleterious universalism is the first step towards intermeshing identity and subjectivity, which in turn will force us to take seriously the power of identity.

2. Critiques of Identity

The driving question of this essay is: *how* are Roma interpellated as subjects and what meaningful conclusions can we derive from asking this question as it pertains to the ongoing Romani struggle for political and social representation? In order to re-claim Romani identity as a powerful category of social organization, we must first understand and dismantle critiques of identity. Below, I summarize the political and philosophical critiques of identity, followed by a reconceptualization and re-claiming of (Romani) identity, while proposing a way to alter the present discourse of Romani studies.

The most salient critique of identity is perhaps best summarized by Paula Moya when she states that: "the postmodernist critique of identity… should be understood in part as a corrective to a prior social and intellectual tendency toward 'essentialism'", in which essentialism refers to the "notion that individuals or groups have an immutable and discoverable 'essence' – a basic unvariable [sic], and presocial nature" (Moya, 2003: 7). Postmodernists, then, in an effort to rescue racially-marked bodies from bio-essentialist arguments and scientific racism (Acton, 2011), reject identity outright. As it pertains to Romani identity, the impetus to eschew the biological determinism inherent in early nineteenth and twentieth century conceptions of race is particularly pertinent given the rampant essentialization[2] and commodification of Roma culture.

Yet, with the complete rejection of identity, postmodernists et al. have thrown the baby out with the bathwater, wholly eliminating the power identity can yield as an important analytic category that structures sociality and subjectification. In the effort to avoid essentialization, they have, ironically, effectively attempted to eliminate "difference" in broad, universalizing brushstrokes of homogenization.

Beyond simply this post-modernist critique of identity, Identity or "identity politics" continue to be contentious topic of debate. There exist two main strains of anti-identitarian rhetoric – the political and the philosophical critiques of identity, which Linda Alcoff neatly summarizes as follows:

> The political critics worry that differences will be emphasized at the expense of commonalities, divisiveness will increase, and an irrational tribalism will grow. The philosophical critics worry that movements 'in the name of' social identities reinscribe their importance and reinforce the harmful illusion of their substantial reality (Alcoff, 2006: 80).

In line with both the philosophical and political critiques outlined by Alcoff, Judith Butler has consistently argued against the reliance on categories of identity as a way of organizing ourselves as a society. Butler conceives of identity categories as "inaccurate and oppressive" (Alcoff, 2006: 71) or put differently, that they serve as imprecise caricatures. I will here argue that at the root of Butler's critique of identity is precisely the same bifurcation of identity and subjectivity that Weheliye brings to the fore.

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2. Spivak coined the term strategic essentialism to describe the forging of a unified identity by the subaltern to aid in the struggle for equality (Spivak, 1988). Though related to my argumentation, what I offer here is quite different to Spivak's concept. The shared identity built from *counterhistories* of Roma, as I propose, eschews the need for any essentialism whatsoever, even on the part of the subaltern.

Expanding upon Derrida's conception of the citational or (re)-iterable, Butler has argued that identity is performatively constituted (Butler, 1990).[3] I couldn't agree more. However, where Butler goes astray is when the word "performative", as she uses it, transforms the meaning to denote something almost derogatory. Identity, for Butler, amounts to a performative constellation of "*fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler, 1990: 185, emphasis added). She contends that this outward facing performance *does not* coincide in a one-to-one relationship with one's interior understanding of self, that is, to one's subjectivity. This disintegration of identity and subjectivity leads Butler to argue that identity, therefore, "has no ontological status" apart from the performance (Ibid.). Yet, the performative nature of identity she describes does not necessarily deny it ontological significance. As Linda Alcoff has argued, "[r]acial and gendered identities are socially produced, and yet they are fundamental to our selves as knowing, feeling, and acting subjects. Raced and gendered identities operate as epistemological perspectives or horizons from which certain aspects or layers are made visible" (Alcoff, 2006: 126).

The flaw in Butler's position is not her theory of performativity per se, but, rather, the normative conclusions Butler draws from the fact that our raced, sexed, etc. identities are performatively constituted. Dismissal of identity categories as performances with no ontological status not only undermines the manner in which they contribute to subjectivization, but more importantly, this slippage between identity as performatively constituted versus identity as fictitious fabrications buttresses Butler's adherence to universalism. It allows her to bypass identity as a hurdle to overcome toward universal humanism. Yet, as we learned from Weheliye and Wynter, the universal, unmarked subject is the true fiction.

Butler's seeming understanding of this epistemological fallacy, which is evident in her reading of Simone de Beauvoir, makes this adherence to universality all the more perplexing. Summarizing de Beauvoir, Butler underlines that, "the 'subject' within the existential analytic of misogyny is always already masculine, conflated with the universal, differentiating itself from a feminine 'Other' outside the universalizing norms of personhood…" (Butler, 1990/1997: 16). Rather than initiating a movement towards particularizing and thereby dissolving the universal (hegemonic) category of the Subject, Butler seeks to bring marginal, marked subjects into the fold of the universal, and essentially subsume them. She makes this quite explicit: "[T]he rights for which we struggle are plural rights, and that plurality is not circumscribed in advance by identity, that is, it is not a struggle to which only some identities can belong, and it is surely a struggle that seeks to *expand what we mean when we say 'we'*" (Butler, 2015: 66, emphasis added). Butler's political project – of expanding the hegemonic "we" to include the Other – is nothing short of Sisyphean, given that "the Other *as other* is radically inaccessible; the outside is a radical outside – precisely because it is constitutive for the inside" (Critchley and Marchart, 2004: 62).

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3. Other scholars have taken issue with Butler's theory of performativity of gender (for example, Schep, 2012), arguing that it is applied hegemonically and fails to account for an individual, lived experience of gender identity. Ironically, Boucher has critiqued Butler's argument for what he sees as "methodological individualism", as she fails to expand her theory of performative beyond the limits of the individual to structural and systemic facets of subjectivization, conflating self-formation with Althusserian interpellation (Boucher, 2006: 112). I agree with Boucher, with the added caveat that Butler at times over-emphasizes the role of institutions and power in the subjectivization of the individual and this over-emphasis allows her to argue for the inaccuracy of these identity conferrals (Butler, 1990/1997: 28).

As a "constitutive outside" the margins remain ever-alienated from the hegemonic center, as the latter's existence is contingent upon the former's existence *as outside*.[4]

Butler further claims that identity politics "fails to furnish a broader conception of what it means, politically, to live together, across differences, sometimes in modes of unchosen proximity, especially when living together, however difficult it may be, remains an ethical and political imperative" (Butler, 2015: 27). Following a post-modernist view of identity, she appeals to a human universality that erases difference. As George Ciccariello-Maher explains Butler is not alone in this reactionary recourse to universality. Maher explains how, in arguing against "poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques of the universal", Alain Badiou, like Butler, "has assailed an 'ethics of difference' [...opting instead for] the unalloyed universalism of a 'generic humanity' that is fundamentally 'indifferent to differences'" (Ciccariello-Maher, 2017: 3). In a recent interview, Butler reinforces the same argument. When asked about the capacity for empathy for the suffering of others at a distance, Butler responds by critiquing identity as an impediment to some larger, nobler notion of humanity:

> What worries me is that many of us form our sense of obligation toward another on the basis of feelings of identification. If someone else is like us, and that likeness is readily recognizable, then we are more inclined to respond in the way that we would have others respond to us. *The harder task is to maintain an obligation to those by whom we feel ourselves to have been injured, to those we fear, or to those whose difference from us seems to be quite severe.* This is why I do not think that global obligations can rest on identification, even expanded or expanding identifications; they have to claim us quite regardless of whether or not we feel love or sympathy, for the simple reason that the world is given to us in common and that without each other the world is not given. If the self is the basis of sympathy, our sympathy will be restricted to those who are like us. *The real challenge occurs when that extrapolation of the self is thwarted by alterity* (Butler and Berbec, 2017, emphasis added).

Butler ignores power, positionality and social location in making a grandiose and prescriptive claim such as this one – imploring mankind to transcend identity in order to overcome difference and live peacefully with one another. She argues for a transcendence of the intense individuality that has, unfortunately, dominated post-Enlightenment ontology. As philosophically sound and altruistic that such a position claims to be, it recklessly bypasses the importance of history and the ways in which a history of marginalization and subjugation affect the subaltern's ability to engage in such an "extrapolation of the self", given the exclusion and erasure minorities have already been forced to endure from time immemorial.

Here, Butler contradicts herself, as she has elsewhere written quite succinctly, on why universalization is an act of violence in the name of hegemony:

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4. Butler implies that a politics based on identitarianism fails to recognize the nature of rights as "plural rights", by which I understand her to mean universal human rights. Outside the scope of this article, yet important to note nonetheless, is that Butler fails to address the role of imperialism, neoliberalism and capitalism in maintaining a system whose very existence is contingent upon exploitation and oppression (see Kóczé, 2017).

The point would not be to extend a violent regime to include the subaltern as one of its members: she is, indeed, already included there, and it is precisely the means of her inclusion that effects the violence of her effacement. *There is no one 'other' there, at the site of the subaltern, but an array of peoples who cannot be homogenized, or whose homogenization is the effect of the epistemic violence itself* (Butler, 2000: 36).

In spite of Butler's awareness of the problems involved in any discourse surrounding the universal, she still clings to the term, while failing to offer any viable solution to remedy – or at the very least, palliate – the normative, hegemonic understanding of "the universal". Instead of enacting a different understanding of the term as is promised by the title of her essay "Restaging the Universal", Butler ends, simply, by asking: "What ought universality to be? How do we understand what it means to be a 'human'?" ((Butler et al., 2000: 41). In asking this question, Butler inadvertently demonstrates Weheliye's point: The adherence to universality – and thereby the insistence on a default category of the "human" – bifurcates subjectivity and identity, which demonstrates, as Weheliye has shown, an epistemological shortcoming in our ability to conceive of the Subject as an intersectional being. As Laclau poignantly states, "there is no universality which is not a hegemonic universality" (Butler et al., 2000: 193).

The self-effacing language – of "maintain[ing] an obligation to those by whom we feel ourselves to have been injured" – amounts to a dangerously submissive rhetoric that calls the subaltern to simply "turn the other cheek". Butler seems to imply that both the oppressed and the oppressors are on a level playing field, and should therefore be able to see beyond identification and towards a more inclusive *human* identity. But how can we expect racially-marked individuals to shed their histories in the name of humanism, especially when the ripples of those histories are still being felt today? How can we expect brown and black people around the world to give up one of the only things that has given them pride, social location, a feeling of belonging in a world that has otherwise been, at best, unmoved by their existence, and at worst, deeply cruel to them? Liberation remains in the realm of dreams, and until it has been realized, we cannot impose post-liberatory agendas such as this on the marginalized and the subjected.

In the *Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler makes a different critique of identity, when she posits that subjects are both oppressed by their subjugation, but also constituted by such oppression. Drawing on Althusserian interpellation and Foucault's notion of discursive productivity, she concludes that, "subjection signifies [both] the process of becoming *subordinated* by power as well as the process of becoming a subject" (Butler, 1997b: 2). Butler wants to argue that identities are unilaterally imposed upon individuals. She goes on to critique the manner in which subjectivization is conferred in many cases through violence, exclusion and injury:

If…we understand certain kinds of interpellations to confer identity, those *injurious* interpellations will constitute identity through injury. This is not the same as saying that such an identity will remain always and forever rooted in its injury as long as it remains an identity, but it does imply that the possibilities of signification will rework and unsettle the passionate attachment to subjection without which subject formation – and re-formation – cannot succeed (104-105).

However, to cast away identity solely due to the injurious nature of interpellations is to effectively interdict those who have no say in *how* they are interpellated as subjects – as these processes are dictated by dominant forces in society – from the opportunity to move beyond the shame incurred upon injury. I turn to the example of hate speech to demonstrate the fallacious logic inherent in such a dismissal of identity. So long as we cannot end hate speech or stop all forms of bigotry – structural and individual – we also cannot bar its victims from exercising control over these discursive formations. Identity – the comfort and solidarity it provides – is one of the most important arenas in which subjects can reclaim stereotypes and harmful exonyms, and castrate them of their injurious power through communal subversion. Even Butler, in her piece "On Linguistic Vulnerability" describes the potential for "counter-appropriation" or the "restaging of offensive" speech to serve as correctives to injurious speech acts (Butler, 1997a: 14-15). Even more importantly, identity plays an imperative role in the project of cultural healing, serving as a tool for dealing with historical trauma. As Himani Bannerji states, for some, it "affirm[s] them… through the creative strength that comes from finding missing parts of one's self in experiences and histories similar to others" (cited in Alcoff, 2006: 115). Thus, identity can legitimize and validate the social, political and philosophical survival of marginalized peoples.

I have shown above that the Butlerian critique of identity falls short, in many ways, of corresponding to a realist account of identity. Moreover, it suffers from precisely the unsound logic for which Weheliye critiques Hall. Namely, Butler sets the terms of her critique of identity within the false framework that subjecthood and identity can be bifurcated, instead of understanding that to even discuss these processes as separate is in and of itself hegemonic in its denigration of identity as an obstacle necessary to overcome on the path towards transcendent humanism.

It is easy to critique this kind of rhetoric, yet, the difficulty lies in the task of responding to Wynter and Weheliye's call to truly decolonize hundreds of years of discourse that relegates minorities to the ancillary space that is "identity". It requires a complete undoing of our post-Enlightenment epistemological framework. I turn now to a hermeneutic and methodological way forward – put simply, it is a call to do the kind of scholarship that constantly challenges hegemonic narratives. The defense of identity that I have thus far laid out in this essay serves to demonstrate that the term identity should be retained in the vocabulary of our emerging discourse of Critical Romani Studies.

3. The Postpositivist Turn in Identity Discourse

The thrust of the argument made by recent scholars who defend identity as a powerful and ineluctable social construction and means of self-definition, lies in the re-understanding and reconceptualizing of identity. In post-Hegelian thought, the Other begins to be understood (by Ricœur, Code, Merleau-Ponty and Brison, among others) as a necessary player on the stage of social interactions, spaces in which the self can self-narrativize and therefore constitute a notion of selfhood (Alcoff, 2006: 60-64, 112). This important shift persists today as scholars tend to accept, along with Butler, that identity categories are constituted performatively (Butler, 1990/1997; Markus and Moya, 2010), which means that race, ethnicity, class, gender, etc., are things we *do* rather than things we inherently *are*, thereby eschewing bio-essentialist conceptions of identity. This distinction is important as it underlines the agency and

self-determination involved in identity conferral, refuting the critique of identity as oppressive labels that others impose upon us.

As mentioned above, the solution to the problems of identity raised by its critics – that is, essentialization and the potential constricting nature of identification and subjectivization – is not to deny identity its validity altogether. The claim that identity has on contemporary society is an influence too profound to ignore. It is undeniable that we are hailed as subjects in ways that can sometimes feel oppressive, but identity, in many cases, has the potential to act as a means of liberation. In either case, it is not something that individuals necessarily have the power to reject or accept. To argue that identity ceases to exist if we simply ignore it is to fall victim to the false-consciousness of "colorblind" or "post-race" rhetoric. As Moya states: "the solution to essentialism is not the rejection of identity but a more robust formulation of identity such as that offered by a postpositivist realist theory" (Moya, 2003: 22). Identity indisputably exists in our present order of reality; Racial and gendered identities manifest themselves in our lived experiences. Social identities form part of the horizon from which we construct meaning in the world and are thus so embedded in our conceptions of self that they are rendered embodied. Thus, we mustn't shy away from contending with the implications of their existence. Instead, what is required is to reconceive of identity. Moya explains that,

> A postpositivist realist theory of identity, in contrast to a postmodernist one […] insists that we acknowledge and interrogate the consequences – social, political, economic, and epistemic – of social location. To do this, we must first acknowledge the reality of those social categories (race, class, gender, and sexuality) that together make up an individual's social location. We do not need to see these categories as uncontestable or absolutely fixed to acknowledge their ontological status. We do, however, need to recognize that they have real material effects and that their effects are systematic rather than accidental. A realist theory of identity understands that while identities are not fixed, neither are they random (Moya, 2003: 87).

A postpositivist realist theory of Romani identity, then, should correspond to the multi-valenced, intersectional lived experiences of Romani subjects. If we agree with Weheliye that there is no productive difference between identity and subjectivity, meaning identity and subjectivity are one and the same, then the Romani subjectivity conferred on Roma subjects must be one that corresponds to the reality of the plethora of Romani social locations. The Romani subjectivity that will prove the most valuable in altering the heretofore colonial discourse on Romani should be recast as hybridized and multicultural, as well as, following Glissant, embedded into a pluritopic notion of history. A founder of post-colonial theory, Glissant points to the importance of conceiving of histor*ies* (in the plural) instead of a false-diachronic, single History: "One of the most disturbing consequences of colonization could well be this notion of a single History… The struggle against a single History for the cross-fertilization of histories means repossessing… a true sense of one's time and identity" (cited in Alcoff, 2006: 124).

The Romani identity that we must repossess or reclaim should be, following Glissant, porous – it should be as multifarious diverse, and inclusive of an identity as possible in order to take into account the multifarious, plural and diverse *histories* of the subjects it represents. This looser notion of Romani

identity takes stock of the plurality of ways Roma have been interpellated/hailed as subjects and as Romani subjects. As Stuart Hall states: "identities are names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past" (Hall, 1990: 225). Therefore, rather than pointing towards a monolithic history of the Roma, we should work to promote a historical canon as diverse as the constituents of that history.

Foucault wanted to interrogate the epistemological underpinnings of our conceptions of how history is written. In so doing, he ostensibly upends the illusion that our history has been a product of a just system of representation. He calls for a different kind of historical analysis, presumably of a plethora of historical material, including that which has heretofore not been taken into consideration in the composing of History, and therefore in the allocation of power (Foucault, 1976).

We can lay a framework for overcoming epistemic injustice through a radical restructuring of the social imagination. Key to attaining a polyphonic and kaleidoscopic society is the process of *generating* histories of marginalized peoples, like the Roma, which counteract the epistemological shortcomings of our hegemonic historical narrative. José Medina calls for a "radical transformation of the social imagination by opening it up to multiple forms of contestation and making it answerable to oppressed and previously excluded perspectives" (Medina, 2012: 279). Following Foucault, he offers "genealogical investigations and insurrectionary practice of counter-memory [as a means to] produce [the] epistemic friction", that is central to his epistemological project.

In his 1970s lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault develops the concept of *countermemory* and *counterhistory*:

> [T]he history or counterhistory that is born of the story of the race struggle will of course speak from the side that is in darkness, from within the shadows. It will be the discourse of those who have no glory, or of those who have lost it and who now find themselves, perhaps for a time – but probably for a long time – in darkness and silence. Which means that this discourse – unlike the uninterrupted ode in which power perpetuated itself, and grew stronger by displaying its antiquity and its genealogy – will be a disruptive speech, an appeal: "We do not have any continuity behind us; we do not have behind us the great and glorious genealogy in which the law and power flaunt themselves in their power and their glory. We came out of the shadows, we had no glory and we had no rights, and that is why we are beginning to speak and to tell of our history" (Foucault, 1997: 70).

Countermemories and *counterhistories* generate epistemic friction, contest "normatively structured knowledges… [by] interrogating epistemic exclusions, disqualification, and hegemonies" (Medina, 2012: 281). In so doing, *counterhistories* produce an insurrection of subjugated knowledges, thus giving voice to a heretofore silenced people, like the Roma, and to their suffering, struggles, and exclusion. Foucauldian genealogies not only recover lost histories but bring them to the fore. Thus, for Foucault, like for Gramsci, *countermemories* exist "for the sake of reactivating struggles and energizing forms of resistance" (Ibid.). There exists a lack of presence of Roma histories in *the* (singular) diachronic historical narrative. Composing *counterhistories* works in tandem with the forging of a new Romani subjectivity

– one that doesn't fall prey to minoritization and marginalization by current hegemonic powers, which structure dominant narratives. As Geoff Boucher states:

> Alternatives to power are constituted… in marginal practices and identities that exploit the paradoxical 'constitutive outside' of the hegemonic norm. These excluded practical identities permanently threaten the hegemonic norm; permanently, because they assist in its constitution and are therefore everywhere implied as an *absence* supporting its presence; threaten, because they expose the arbitrariness as a diacritical *construction* (Boucher, 2006: 117).

The "constitutive outside" of European whiteness is Romani identity. Following Said, Roma are the internal "Other" against which European identity crystallized. Boucher argues that "subversive repetition of gender norms in unprecedented contexts […] displaces and denaturalizes the hegemonic universality of heterosexuality, constituting a practical deconstruction of the politics of gender normalization" (Ibid.). By the same logic, the subversion of normativity outlines how a re-claiming of Romani-ness can challenge the hegemonic universality of whiteness, effecting an undoing of the Figure of Man (Wynter, 1987). This process of "resignification" of citational/performative utterances of identity reveal the fictitious nature of dominant norms, in demonstrating their constructed ontology. This claim should not be misunderstood to mean that identity has, as Butler has claimed, "no ontological status" (Butler, 1990/1997: 173). It is, rather, exactly the opposite. What becomes arbitrary when we take into consideration the performativity of identity is not identity itself, but rather the *power* ascribed to dominant norms versus minoritarian norms. The salience of identity on an individual level remains intact; what is fractured is the hegemony of normative notions of identity.

Conclusion

As Romani Studies as a discipline begins the difficult work of disentangling ourselves as scholars from the destructive colonial episteme – walking in step with scholars such as Acton, who has argued that, "scientific racism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century continues to shape our discourses" (Acton, 2017: 1187) – it will be imperative to re-suture "identity" and "subjectivity", correcting centuries of thought which rend these categories asunder. My intervention into this emerging discourse is the need to ground it epistemologically in an understanding of a particularly socially-located *Romani* identity/ subjectivity. I hope to have made clear that normative, hegemonic, universalizing rhetoric, like Butler's, relies on the silencing of minority/identity discourse. The power of identity as a tool for political and social advocacy is tantamount. Shedding "identity" for the sake of universal humanism slows the larger project of true social economic and political justice for Romani people. It is not by accident that Foucault locates *counterhistories* in the margins, among those who have no rights. Contra to Butler's conception of "plural rights", the struggle for rights belongs, first, but not only, to those who have been denied those rights. It cannot be conceived of from the center, from the locus of the hegemonic; the struggle must come from the margins. The movement of progress is centripetal; it is not a force which originates from the center outwards, as Butler purports "to expand the 'we'" – rather it is an encroachment from the margins on the center, with the ultimate intention of sublating it.

The *counterhistories* of the Roma in whatever medium, transcription or form tell a continuous, heterogeneous history of the Roma. They insurrect hegemonic history and offer a post-positivist conception of Romani identities from which a movement towards increased political and social representation may spring. The Romani struggle for social justice will move forward when we are able to build solidarity among ourselves with an understanding of Romani identity that is broad enough to include all of us and re-claim Romani-ness in all its intersectional permutations (Crenshaw, 1991). This questioning of what it means to be interpellated as Roma in the twenty-first century and the shift toward an answer that affirms all Romani identities and histories not only combats the myth of restrictive identity, it also paves a path toward even more widening circles of solidarity with other marginalized groups in a shared struggle for liberation.

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