

From Reflexivity to Collaboration: Changing Roles of a Non-Romani Scholar, Activist, and Performer

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Carol Silverman, Professor of Anthropology, University of Oregon, has been involved with Romani culture for over 35 years as a researcher, teacher, activist, and performer. Focusing on Bulgaria and Macedonia and the American and West European Romani diasporas, her research explores the intersection of politics, music, human rights, gender, and state policy with a focus on representation. Her book *Romani Routes: Cultural Politics and Balkan Music in Diaspora* won the 2013 book prize from the Society for Ethnomusicology.



Abstract

Recently scholars have begun to investigate who produces knowledge about Roma and with what agendas. I extend this inquiry to ask how reflexivity by a non-Romani ally and researcher contributes to analyzing the production and use of knowledge in Romani Studies. I examine various roles I have inhabited and forms of scholarship I have produced, both successful and unsuccessful, during my long involvement in Romani studies to reveal how and why I represented Roma, and what uses this scholarship served. Calling for a “reflexive turn” in Romani Studies, I note that while self-examination of knowledge production is useful for all researchers, for non-Roma it is mandatory because historically non-Roma have held more authority. Embracing “critical whiteness” theory, I examine my privileged roles and my attempts at collaborative advocacy. Tracing a historical trajectory of shifting subjectivities, I narrate several crises, such as balancing essentialism with advocacy, respectfully presenting Romani music, and combining diplomacy with activism to illustrate dilemmas of representation that I have faced and the responses I crafted. These issues all underline the responsibility that non-Romani allies have in accounting for their words and actions.

Keywords

- Reflexivity
- Representation
- Collaboration
- Activism
- Advocacy
- Critical whiteness

Introduction

In the last few years, scholars have begun to investigate who produces knowledge about Roma and with what agendas (Ryder et al. 2015; Matache 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Surdu 2016). I extend this inquiry to ask how reflexivity by a non-Romani ally and researcher contributes to analyzing the production and use of knowledge in Romani Studies. To this end, I examine various roles I have inhabited and forms of scholarship I have produced, both successful and unsuccessful, during my 35-year involvement in Romani studies to reveal how and why I represented Roma, and what uses this scholarship served. This reflexive analysis of my shifting positionalities illuminates representational quandaries and claims of truth and effective advocacy.^[1]

I believe that good scholarship coupled with robust collaboration and activism can only emerge when researchers honestly account for their positionality. Calling for a “reflexive turn” in Critical Romani Studies, I note that while self-examination of knowledge production is useful for all researchers, for non-Roma it is mandatory because historically non-Roma have not only produced most of the scholarship about Roma but also positioned themselves as the authorities, the experts, “on” Roma; the structure of the system has bolstered this hierarchy, such that Romani voices have rarely been heard. As the editors of this journal wrote: “Romani activist-scholars [...] share the plight of other racialized scholars who are unconsciously perceived as ‘incompetent’ and who are accused of ‘dilut[ing] academic rigorousness’ [...] The position of any colored, racialized person is repeatedly undermined as a result of persistent structural inequality and the myths of meritocracy” (Bogdan et al. 2018, 4). I specifically take up Matache’s plea to non-Romani scholars to “employ genuine scholarly reflexivity” and to “involve Roma as equal partners in Roma-related research” (2017). Analyzing my attempts at collaboration and advocacy thus inherently involves examining my own privileged scholarly claims to truth and authority.

I trace my trajectory from a naïve student documenting gender, work, and belief among 1970s American Kalderash through politicization in 1980s socialist Bulgaria to involvement in transnational migration to working with U.S. Roma-led NGO Voice of Roma to serving as a witness in legal cases. Throughout I examine several crises in my positionality, such as balancing essentialism with advocacy, respectfully presenting Romani music, and combining diplomacy with activism. These “revelatory moments” (Trigger et al. 2012) open up new understandings of society and culture through the researcher’s probing evaluation of her place in and her effect on the research. By charting my changing positionalities, I illustrate dilemmas of representation that I have faced and the responses I crafted.

1. Reflexivity and Romani Studies

In this section I trace the rise of reflexivity in anthropology and then investigate its applicability to Romani Studies. The reflexive turn can be traced to the second wave of feminist demands in the 1960s to examine

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference Critical Approaches to Romani Studies at the Central European University, May 2017. I would like to thank the peer reviewers for their helpful suggestions for revision.

critically various power dimensions inherent in research; soon after, anthropologists finally began to confront their own legacy in colonialism and racist history. Simultaneously, feminists underlined the dictum that the person doing the research affects the research, and further, that males have been the main narrators and the main subjects of culture. In addition to questioning anthropological “truths,” scholars questioned the very process of producing knowledge and inscribing it in writing. They not only reread and reinterpreted the classic texts but also interrogated fundamental enlightenment/scientific concepts of objectivity, positivism, and replicability by a “neutral” observer, all leading to a “crisis of representation.”^[2] I hold that what emerged from this period was a more robust form of scholarship that takes account of the researcher as an active producer of knowledge in a field of unequal power relationships.

All of this is relevant to the present moment in Romani Studies when Romani scholars are demanding discursive space under the rubric of “Nothing about us without us” (Ryder et al. 2015). They chronicle the power that non-Romani academics have wielded over Romani subjects, in the pursuit of “knowledge.” Similar to pioneer feminists, postcolonial scholars, and 1970s anthropologists, Roma are questioning the production of accepted knowledge, pointing out that powerful people create truth paradigms while marginal people are not heard. Bringing the margin to the center can transform both the products and the methods of scholarship. This paradigm change can extend even further in questioning the center/margin binary itself. For example, Roma are far from monolithic; some subgroups such as Vlach Romani speakers are historically overrepresented in scholarship and tend to stand in for the whole, with unfair results. We also need to take account the multiple locations that non-Roma occupy, as I illustrate below when unveiling my shifting positionalities.

Criticisms of reflexivity surfaced quite early within anthropology: critics claim reflexive writers focus too much on themselves – the anthropologists – rather than those being studied and descend into narcissism and autobiography. This is true in some cases, but rigor and responsibility can mitigate against excess (Pillow 2010). More fundamentally, critics ask what happens to objectivity when all we have are multiple positions from which to proclaim truth. I myself am not afraid that knowledge will suffer when we reveal our subject positions. To the contrary, I believe that ethnographic empiricism is still a valid mode of inquiry; if it is coupled with a deep and honest assessment of positionality, it leads to better scholarship and more reliable results.

Michael Stewart (2017) takes up precisely the issue of “who speaks for whom” in his recent criticism of the “Nothing about us without us” stance. He interprets this as a “closed-society research paradigm”, in other words, a demand for exclusivity by Roma: “a wave of reaction among activist Romani intellectuals that demand ‘Roma studies’ taught by Roma, that suggests research agendas should be controlled by ‘the Roma’ or whoever claims to represent them...” (127). To the contrary, I see Roma scholars eschewing exclusivity while simultaneously demanding legitimacy. For example, Mirga-Kruszelnicka (2015) claims: “Romani scholars cannot claim greater legitimacy over the knowledge they produce on Roma, but

2 Notable early works of this period include Ruby, *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology* (1982); Clifford and Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986); and Behar and Gordon, eds., *Women Writing Culture* (1996).

neither can their non-Romani colleagues. This artificial dichotomy should be overcome as both Romani and non-Romani scholars are, in fact, legitimate voices” (45). I thus read the movement as a healthy and necessary claim to discursive visibility by Romani intellectuals, coupled with a call for reflexivity for all researchers. Brooks (2015) precisely underlines this “commitment to reflexivity, to understanding our own investments in truth production and in scholarly output, and in a deep critique of our own positionality vis à-vis the subject(s) of our research” (58).

Stewart (2017) furthermore defends “scientism and objectivity, claiming they are not a means by which ‘Roma have been de facto excluded from knowledge production’ but the very foundation of any universal reason and the research agenda of any university worthy of the name” (143). Questioning his valorization of “universals” and “science,” I underline that “objective truths” need to be investigated precisely because they have been delivered by those in power; this is the foundation of the very critique of anthropological history that I outlined above, and that is now being developed by Romani scholars. Ryder (2015) terms this split in Romani Studies “scientism vs. critical research” (13). Aligning himself with the latter, he writes: “Critical researchers influenced by postcolonial theory have challenged the notion that developing theory should be solely based on the thoughts of academics but instead incorporate the voices and experiences of those experiencing racism and oppression” (14–15).

As Roma begin to question “The White Norm in Gypsy and Romani Studies” (Matache 2016a, 2016b, 2017), non-Roma are obliged to examine how their privileged access to authority has affected their methods, their scholarly output, and the uses of their scholarship in policy. Mirga-Kruszelnicka (2015) points to models from indigenous, post-colonial, and feminist scholarship in the shift to legitimize Romani voices. Non-Romani allies can turn to these fields for models of self-reflection. As Viswersawan (1988) writes, “If we have learned anything about anthropology’s encounter with colonialism, the question is not really whether anthropologists can represent people better, but whether we can be accountable to people’s struggles for self-representation and self-determinism” (39).

The concept of “critical whiteness” underlines my reflexive motives as a non-Romani scholar. Growing out of critical race theory, critical whiteness theory demands that white people take account of their structural role in maintaining privilege. This squarely applies to Romani Studies – not only have Roma have been historically racialized but also non-Roma can fruitfully expose the structures that maintain inequality. Vajda (2015) similarly points to critical whiteness as a necessary reflexive step in the development of Romani Studies: “[...] until such time that non-Romani people are willing and able to examine their own racialised identity, even those non-Roma who are committed to dismantling the discrimination experienced by Romani communities will be unable to play a powerful role in this process” (48).

Some critical whiteness scholars recommend that the final methodological move after analyzing white privilege, should be proactive – toward anti-racist advocacy; this means action that is collaborative, participatory, and useful. Alcoff (1998), for example, writes about “the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an inclusive human community” (25). In asking “What should white people do?” Alcoff suggests white people should move beyond acknowledging their oppressive roles to providing anti-racist models, thereby avoiding the trap of inaction that arises when one is mired in guilt. Below I explore this action component.

2. From Reflexivity to Collaboration to Advocacy

Today, I strongly feel that collaboration with and advocacy for Roma are essential to my work. But during my graduate training in the early 1970s neither collaboration nor advocacy were on my radar. The two concepts, collaboration and advocacy, need to be distinguished and may or may not be paired. Collaboration can mean something as non-threatening (to the establishment) as two scholars co-writing esoteric academic literature that has nothing to do with advocacy. In contrast, I support the type of collaboration that wields epistemological weight – that systematically interrogates the power that non-Romani academics have wielded over Romani “subjects” to produce knowledge.

Harraway’s concept of “situated knowledge” (1988) argues that knowledge emerges from particular positionalities that are informed by hierarchies. People in dominant positions shape “truths” and thereby relegate the experiences of women and minorities to invisibility and inaudibility. This has been the situation of Roma until recently, both in scholarship and in representations in discourse and image. One reason is that few Roma have been allowed to occupy intellectual seats of power; there have certainly been grassroots intellectuals and community leaders, but they rarely were permitted to climb the official structures of authority. Now more Roma who are well educated with official degrees and certificates are claiming visibility and audibility. Re-centering scholarship with Romani voices as primary is a necessary paradigm shift.

Historically, Roma have certainly “spoken” but their utterances have not been “legible” to dominant powers; they have been excluded from scholarship about and representations of themselves. Spivak (1988) refers to the same dilemma of post-colonial people speaking but not being heard. Scholarship thus needs to be deconstructed as the site of epistemic struggles between the interests of the powerful and the disempowered. Brooks (2015) provocatively asks, “What happens when we reconsider Romani Studies by taking seriously Romani expertise and Romani knowledge production?” Part of the answer lies in rethinking the traditional methods of doing research; in the older model, the discipline’s history (which was determined by established scholars) determined viable topics and methods, and the scholar tested them on subjects. Like Vajda (2015), I argue that collaborative methods such as participatory action research can help open new topics to inquiry and simultaneously interrogate the historical authority of non-Roma (48). Non-Roma can help to dismantle structural exclusion first by realizing they are part of the structure of privilege, and then by helping to dismantle it via emancipatory methods of research.

For anthropologists, collaboration can happen at every stage – planning, fieldwork, analysis, as well as writing.^[3] In Romani Studies, there are a few good collaborative models of fieldwork, such as work in the United Kingdom by Greenfields and Ryder (2012) and in Spain by Gay y Blasco (2017) and Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz (2012). Tremblett and McGarry (2013) point out that, unfortunately, current policy work does not favor collaboration; rather it “often subscribes to a notion of ‘scientific’ research which does not

3 See Lassiter (2005). Some have argued that anthropology by its very nature is collaborative because we seek to represent others’ experiences. Sanjek introduced the idea of “mutuality” to express the value anthropologists place on their positive connection to people with whom they work; this leads to investment in their social and public worlds (2015). This is idealistic, and it is often absent.

traditionally encompass research carried out by stakeholders (i.e. Roma people themselves) as worthy or important” (5). Tremblett and McGarry advocate for the “participation of Roma minorities [...] in a non-tokenistic fashion in research and policy making processes” (5). Many scholars advocate this view, but it has still not become standard practice.

3. Challenges in Engaged Research

This brings us to the second concept, advocacy or activist anthropology, which is a form of engaged scholarship that aims to “use theory and method to benefit the people we study by partnering with them to move towards a just world” (Beck and Maida 2013, 1). Public anthropologists deliberately pair the idea of critique with collaboration: “acting as experts and advocates, critiquing the oversimplified assertions of politicians, government officials, and the media...” (Beck and Maida 2015, 1–2). In Romani Studies, many scholars have done the work of critique but have not necessarily embraced collaboration. I hold that collaboration provides more insightful critiques that better resonate with communities. For example, in my music work which seeks to dismantle stereotypes, my Romani collaborators have pointed out that the stereotype of the genetically endowed Romani musician often works in their favor. They do not really want to “uphold” this stereotype, but they feel that they have no choice – their profession depends on it (Silverman 2012a). Yet musicians would all agree that not all Roma are musical. Thus, when I do collaborative public educational music programs with Roma, we point out these ironies, highlighting their specific musical talents and hard work, within the context of a historical and economic view of Romani professions.

Activist scholarship underlines that both the goals and the methods of research will be mutually developed by scholars and communities, thus supporting collaboration (Hale 2008). Furthermore, Participatory Action Research (PAR) emphasizes that methods are in service to activist goals, determined by the affected people; thus community members constitute the local public that scholarship serves, and knowledge is “co-constructed” (Schensul 2015).^[4] In Romani Studies, Ryder (2015) has advocated for this approach at the same time that he has noted its absence in much United Kingdom policy work. He writes that “inclusive research needs to be promoted which ‘goes beyond’ the academy” and “is centred on participatory and community based research as a tool for furthering social justice”; he provides the Roma Research and Empowerment Network based in Budapest as an example (20).

Weiss (2016) reminds us that these inclusive frames “have precedents in feminist and women of color ethnography, which have long cultivated reciprocal, dialogic, and horizontal relationships between researcher and researched...” Postcolonial scholars articulate a similar argument. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, indigenous scholar Linda Smith (1999) asks, “whose research is it? [...] Whose interest does it serve?” (10). Thus, we must ask what “knowledge for whom and for what purpose” (Maida and Beck 2015, 5). As non-Roma accept hospitality and knowledge from Roma, we need to continually ask ourselves: what is our relationship to our hosts/teachers? What are we doing for those who so generously taught us?

⁴ Hale (2008) terms this co-theorization.

Embracing engaged scholarship and activism is not easy – there are myriad challenges and contradictions in goals, methods, and products. Osterweil (2016) writes that goals are often messy: “while the intention is certainly to move toward justice,” we cannot “presume that social movements and communities are clear-cut entities with common goals with which we, anthropologists, can easily name and align.” This is paramount in Romani Studies where there are multiple subject positions within the large categories “Roma” and “non-Roma.” Humility and sensitivity are sorely needed. Weiss (2016) states: “when we take for ourselves the arrogant role of assisting others who may not want our help or when we assume that they have much to learn from us, but we have nothing transformative to learn from them, we reproduce the divisions between anthropologist/informant or expert/object that collaboration is intended to undermine.”

How do we guide our work in a collaborative direction that is accountable to communities? Davis (2016) tentatively answers that we: “need to approach our collaborations with awareness and humility, acknowledging that our ways of knowing might not always be what others are looking for.” One common pitfall is assuming the role of an “academic superhero” who can solve all problems. Checker (2014) underscores the real-life limitations of activist projects when she sarcastically claims that she can “scale vast configurations of power with a single e-mail. [...] More generally, as anthropologists celebrate and promote a disciplinary shift toward public and engaged scholarship, are we glossing over our own limitations and overestimating or overstating the kinds of change we can effect, especially at this political-economic moment?” (416). The savior complex is just as damaging as a lack of advocacy because it shuts down communication and often ends in failure. Later in this article I will explicate an example of my own overestimation of efficacy in my quest to abolish the term “Gypsy” in music marketing.

Another important factor that academic activists must confront is the omnipresent role of the university in our lives; we cannot deny that we build careers from our collaborations, which in turn creates more privilege. Moreover, universities in the neoliberal era gain the legitimacy of social justice from our work despite the fact that these same institutions often undermine social justice and equality. In building our careers, activist scholars are caught in the bind of implicitly upholding the values of their universities. Although academics have more privileges than community activists, “we also operate within – and are subject to – the same political and economic trends and demands that increasingly circumscribe activists’ efforts” (Checker 2014, 416). Checker further argues that engaged research is “better served if we acknowledge the contexts in which we operate, along with our own powerlessness and vulnerability” (*ibid.*).

For example, my university does not classify advocacy work as scholarship; rather, it is classified as “service.” Thus legal consulting, organizing festivals, booking tours for musicians, and writing program notes and grants for arts projects with Roma do not count as research outputs and do not advance my academic career. In contrast, scholarly articles advance my career, but ironically do not reach the general public and may do little to actively help Romani communities. As a senior scholar who is less vulnerable than my junior colleagues, I have strongly lobbied for recognition of multiple forms of public scholarship; this is another form of academic activism.

4. Shifts in Research

My career trajectory mirrors the theoretical shifts of the last 40 years and the ironies of the formative years.⁵ In the 1970s, no activist or feminist ethnographies existed; yet we were on the streets protesting against the Vietnam War and for Black Studies and Women's Studies. Today, anthropology embraces critical thinking, and I teach classes in post-colonial and feminist theory and activist research methods. The following list summarizes my projects by time, theme, and location. Unlike some anthropologists, I have worked with numerous subgroups of Roma in multiple locations. This has made me extremely hesitant to generalize about all Roma; in fact, I am almost fanatical about explaining the historical and cultural specificities of each group. On the other hand, I note that all Romani groups, regardless of class and region, have faced discrimination, which often takes a racial dimension; however, the details of hierarchy vary considerably.

1970s	Work, ritual, belief, gender – American Kalderash
1980–89	State repression of Romani music, culture as resistance – Bulgaria
1980s–present	Migration, gender, ritual and music – New York Macedonian Muslim Roma
1990s–present	Voice of Roma: public education through music – U.S. Roma
1990s–present	Politicization, Europeanization, and emerging human rights framework – Macedonia
1990s–present	Legal aid with U.S. Kalderash and asylum cases with Balkan Roma
1990s–present	Appropriation, race, and representation of “Gypsy” culture – U.S., Western Europe
2011–present	Migration, state policy, gender, and ritual – Kosovo Roma in Germany

My Romani research started in the United States in 1975 when I became a volunteer teacher in a Romani alternative school in Philadelphia. My dissertation research (1976–79) with the largest Romani groups in the United States, Kalderash and Machwaya, dealt with ethnic identity, gender, and the pollution and taboo systems (Silverman 1981, 1982, 1988). Having migrated to the United States from various parts of Eastern Europe about a hundred years ago, many Kalderash knew very little about other Romani groups in Europe and the United States. Among the few tangible things I was able to give to Kalderash Roma were historical information and cassette tapes of East European Romani music. In this period, I considered myself a documenter and analyst, and in no way an activist; there were few published works about Roma to consult and few models of engaged research to follow.

One symptom of my lack of awareness in this period was my uncritical use of the word “Gypsy.” When speaking Romanes, Kalderash community members referred to themselves as Roma, but in English they used Gypsy, and so I used the term in my early writing. I did not yet comprehend the inherent contradictions in my role as ethnographer and did not consciously get involved in activism, although I constantly pointed out stereotypes and discrimination that Roma faced. I observed daily prejudice against these Roma, and they confided many instances of humiliation to me; for example, when we were traveling

5 I have written about my fieldwork in Silverman 1981, 1982, 1988, 1996b, 2008, 2012a, and in press.

to visit relatives in Florida in 1977, several restaurants refused to serve us. But I did not problematize my terminology, and I wrote about culture in a detached manner that I later regretted (see below).

After immersing myself in American Kalderash culture, travelling with families, and gaining some fluency in their Vlach dialects of the Romani language, I was anxious to pursue Romani fieldwork in Bulgaria, a country I had visited regularly since 1972. I first worked with Roma in Bulgaria in the 1980s in the context of research on wedding music, a fusion genre that was prohibited by the government. Here, I became politicized because Romani music was politicized – Muslim Romani musicians were forced to change their names, were fined, and even sent to jail for playing their music. Working with Roma in socialist Bulgaria was challenging because by 1984 they did not officially exist. Despite government policy I circumvented prohibitions and spent considerable time in Romani settlements studying cultural resistance to state policy. I was critical of the government in my writing (1988), risking future entrance into Bulgaria, but was determined to bring these human rights violations and this music to wider acclaim; this was my first activist move. But I was operating solo – at the time no Romani culture NGOs existed there, and resisters operated locally and kept a low profile.

Since the fall of socialism, I have become an advocate for these and other Balkan musicians by arranging numerous tours and albums. I helped Bulgarian Romani saxophonist Yuri Yunakov prepare his successful asylum case and became a booking agent, tour manager, and vocalist for his ensemble. I also introduced Romani musicians to American audiences via lectures and performances at camps and festivals. In all of these venues, I am committed to collaboration, specifically ensuring that Romani voices are heard center stage via educational panels and program notes about artists life histories and the contexts of music.

I also became politicized in 1990 while I resided in Šuto Orizari (Šutka), a settlement of 40,000 Roma outside of Skopje, Macedonia, as I witnessed the formation of the first Romani political parties. The idea of my working with Roma in Macedonia emerged collaboratively via a suggestion by a Romani woman whom I met in New York in 1988 when she was visiting her brother. They lived in the neighborhood in the Bronx where I was born. From the beginning of my research then, I approached Macedonian Roma from multiple locations with the guidance of community members who sent me to visit kin. I have continued to work with Muslim Roma in Macedonia and New York until the present, with trips to Macedonia and to Macedonian Romani communities in Western Europe, Australia, and Toronto (Silverman 1996a, 2012a). In New York City I am involved in mentoring the second and third generation of Roma as they enter higher education and professional life.

Migration emerged as a theme in my work as early as the 1970s, with American Kalderash, then later with Macedonian and Bulgarian Roma in the U.S., and most recently with Kosovo Roma in Germany. The latter are refugees from a very brutal phase of Yugoslav wars who still, after 20 years, have *Duldung* (tolerated) status in Germany and are being deported back to Kosovo in significant numbers. Through ties to a large extended family I am documenting their precarious situation in Germany in the context of their work, family, and ritual life. I plan to publish about this with the goal of advocating for a more tolerant German migration policy.

As the Romani human rights movement emerged in the 1990s, I struggled to combine activism and scholarship and was alternately accused of neglecting one for the other. Whereas Ian Hancock advised

me to concentrate on activism regarding human rights abuses and to forget about analyzing music, some of my colleagues in academia said I was spending too much time on activism. Many Macedonian Roma in New York agreed with Hancock's sentiment and advised me to forgo a music focus because it promotes stereotypes; they suggested that I focus on middle-class educated Roma to counteract the ubiquitousness of "Gypsies" as poor beggars playing music. I have taken their advice and have published on education, work, and gender (2012b) with new collaborative projects planned.

A "reciprocal ethnography" that I attempted with Macedonian Roma in New York was only partially successful. Lawless (1992) introduced the concept of reciprocal ethnography regarding the collaborative writing of texts, whereby: "The scholar presents her interpretations, the native responds to that interpretation; the scholar, then, has to adjust her lens and determine why the interpretations are so different and in what ways they are and are not compatible" (310). This can be an open-ended process, with many "rounds".^[6] Thus, I sent large portions of my book manuscript to many Romani collaborators but only two or three responded due to time constraints. One musician gave me very helpful feedback, and today his daughter is working towards becoming an activist. I also had fruitful discussions about gender roles with a middle-aged Romani woman who disagreed about how much financial power I was attributing to women in her community.^[7]

My vision of a collaborative writing project on gender with women in this community, however, has not yet materialized. Older and middle generation women are extremely busy working and supporting their families in the precarious American economy; many are the major earners in their families. They do not have the luxury to devote time to ethnography: here my privilege as a non-Romani, university-paid ethnographer is crystal clear. This also illustrates how the pipeline to scholarly roles is hindered by economic constraints. Some younger generation women, however, have reached the middle class and are better educated. I am hoping to work with them to document their own culture and to co-author with them. They are hungry for information about Roma, and many are seeking to read materials about their parents' generation (including my book). I have mentored several young Roma in college admissions, and I hope to help them produce their own scholarship. For example, the daughter of a musician is producing an exhibit about her father for the RomArchive Balkan music section where I am the curator; she also has plans to open a Roma culture center.

In comparing my earlier work with current work, I note the paradigmatic shift from outsider/observer/documenter to co-producer of collaborative knowledge. Today, it is inconceivable for me to think of writing about Macedonian Roma in New York without consulting them about topics and interpretations. Moreover, my work is now always framed in political terms, noting hierarchies and challenges of access. As I have witnessed a generation grow up and marry, both my thinking and their thinking about their own identities have become more activist and more engaged in advocacy. For these reasons, I hope to collaborate on a project about their changing roles, centering on gender.

6 Lawless (1992) ended up prioritizing her own analysis (after she revealed that she did not agree with her collaborators' interpretation) because she believed her collaborator was in denial about (or refused to confront) male domination.

7 I documented our disagreements in the online text supplement to Silverman 2012a.

Turning now to a reflexive analysis of specific challenges in my research, I underline that examining conflicts can help us learn from experience. Osterweil (2016) writes: “Frictional or conflictual moments can become important sites of collaborative knowledge production, even if, at the time, that collaboration feels more like conflict than co-laboring.” Thus, below I focus on uncomfortable moments and dilemmas I faced that taught me how to bridge difference with respect. We need to “recognize that knowledge and theory production are key sites of political practice and struggle [...]” (Osterweil 2016). We also need to resist “sidelining the uncertainties, limitations, and anxieties that often accompany activist scholarship” (Checker 2014, 416). Davis (2016) asks: “what are the limits of collaboration? Are there pressure points impelling us to replicate power dynamics and hierarchies, however inadvertently? [...] Ultimately, divisiveness can reproduce some of the dissonances between researchers and participants that collaboration seeks to diminish.” The examples below empirically illustrate dilemmas regarding my roles as a non-Romani ally.

5. Contradiction: A Legal Example

A 2013 court case in Portland, Oregon, involving Kalderash Roma encapsulated contradictions in my positionality in two ways: first, it exposed my role as an outsider who has more power than insiders but is needed to “defend” them; and second, my early naïve writing came back to haunt me. To provide the context: Oregon is home to a large Kalderash population faced long-term racial profiling (Silverman 2017). I have done advocacy work with local families for several decades, and I have tried to explain Kalderash culture without essentializing it. My goal in my work, both scholarly and activist, has been to represent Roma as just as “normal” as any other ethnic group. For example, in consulting with Oregon hospitals about cultural sensitivity with Romani patients, I have described Kalderash beliefs and taboos as part of their folk religion, just like any other ethnic group. However, this case challenged these assumptions.^[8]

An elderly Romani widow was going to lose her house because her daughter was convicted of elder fraud, and the house was registered in the daughter’s name. The daughter had admitted to the fraud, served a jail sentence, and repaid the money in question, plus penalties. But the non-Roma who were defrauded filed a civil case to obtain all the daughter’s assets. The house had been signed over to the daughter many years ago when she was fourteen years old. My task as an “expert cultural witness” was to prove that the family did not believe or understand that the daughter actually owned the house because of their culture.

Ironically, my outsider non-Romani “professor” status legitimated my “objectivity.” The contradictions in this legal “cultural expert” role were apparent: I had to show that I was insider enough to be an expert on Romani culture but outsider enough not to be biased. I had more power than any Romani person in the proceedings, but I was needed to legitimate what the Romani family said. In addition, precisely how I was obliged to frame the defense was problematic to me as a scholar!

8 *Hughes v. Ephrem*, Case No. 1200-25302E. See also <http://caselaw.findlaw.com/or-court-of-appeals/1721070.html> and <https://law.justia.com/cases/oregon/court-of-appeals/2015/a153439.html>.

According to legal scholar Renteln (2004), a “cultural defense” promotes fairness in the legal system by allowing judges to “consider the cultural background of litigants in the disposition of cases” (2004, 5). It is usually but not exclusively used in criminal defenses. The lawyer’s strategy was to use me to prove that culture trumped the legality of the document of house ownership. My testimony depended on portraying Roma as different as possible from “mainstream majority Americans.” This type of essentialism is something I have fought against my whole life. But in the court room it was our legal strategy to make Roma into a bounded exotic subculture (Silverman, submitted).

I needed to underline “difference” via inheritance patterns that would explain why parents would sign over their large house to their youngest daughter when she was only fourteen years old. I explained that Romani culture was patrilocal, patrilineal, and elders were respected. Because the family only had female children, the youngest daughter was obliged to respect her parents by ensuring their care as they aged; the house would be “hers” for the purpose of their security, so they could live in it until they died. I also emphasized that the parents were illiterate and could not read the document they signed, so they did not realize what “transferring ownership” meant.

I couched all of this in how “different” “Roma” were from “Americans,” something I do not usually promote. My evidence was the significance of the extended family, retention of Romani language, lack of intermarriage with non-Roma, and vitality of the taboo system. The *marhime* (taboo) system was especially intriguing to the judge, who asked many questions about it; I explained the gender division, the bodily division into clean upper and “polluted” lower halves, and that Roma do not eat in non-Romani homes, do not sit on tables, and bring their own pillow to hotels and hospitals. As I was explaining how Roma sort clothing into upper and lower for washing, necessitating two washing machines (if a family can afford them), the elderly Romani defendant interrupted that she had four washing machines (for male and female, upper and lower)!

This revelation cinched the case for the judge in terms of insularity, exoticism, and cultural difference. He ruled in favor of allowing the defendant to keep her house via “an equitable remedy.” In 2015 the case was appealed, and again the judge ruled in favor of the Romani family, stating: “These relatively unsophisticated people managed their lives very differently from those in modern American culture. They lived by different codes. But their codes clearly included honor.” Thus, by my constructing Kalderash as “all Roma,” and Roma as bounded, insular, exotic, and traditional, in contrast to modern, I was able to win legal ground for Roma.

Even more troubling was a long and grueling cross-examination of me by the prosecuting attorney where she first tried to discredit me as an expert by saying I only write about Romani music in Bulgaria. She then tried to use an article that I wrote in 1982 to argue that Roma routinely commit fraud. The attorney quoted from my article “Everyday Drama: Impression Management of Urban Gypsies” where I claimed that a performance theory framework would help us understand the various “roles” of Roma as an “afflicted minority” for welfare workers, truant officers, and so on. The prosecutor claimed that if Roma are so expert at performing, then right now in the courtroom, “isn’t Mrs. Ephrem posturing and performing as innocent whereas she committed insurance fraud and also protected her daughter who was a felon?”

I did write about roles – but back in 1982 I was a different person – I was “discovering” performance theory, was still using the disrespectful term “Gypsy,” and had no idea that my theoretical framework would be used against Roma thirty years later. I was sweating profusely when the prosecutor read aloud from my 1982 article, but I was able to turn the interrogation around. I explained that performance theory means we are all performing at every moment in our lives – not just Roma. For example, the judge in the court room wears long black robes, sits behind a wooden barrier; and we sit lower than him in special sections and must address him as “your honor”; these legal behaviors are very ritualized and performative.

Luckily, the judge was very curious about his own performance roles, even asking me for references about the courtroom as a “stage,” and eventually the prosecutor’s argument fizzled. However, this case taught me that our inscribed words last forever and directly affect the lives of Roma. I would never write an article like that now; but as a junior scholar I was naïve about terminology, advocacy, and politics. In this case, the contradictions in my positionality did not have a negative impact and we won the case, but I learned important lessons about texts and the responsibility of an author. I also underline the conundrum that in legal cases, the institutional structures are not controlled by Roma, and non-Roma are often given the primary advocacy roles.

Although essentialism has suffered a healthy critique, it is often required for identity politics and advocacy (Silverman, submitted). On the other hand, I hold that a cultural defense can sometimes be damaging. In Europe, controversial cases have arisen where lawyers have defended Romani beggars on the basis of culture, and Romani activists and anthropologists have countered that begging is not a historic cultural practice but rather an economic adaptation (Reggiu 2016). In the last twenty years, begging has emerged as a practice by which non-Roma culturally define, criminalize, and regulate Roma. Negative images and discourse about begging Roma (especially migrant Roma) are abundant in the media. In a 2008 Italian case, “Several Italian judges, including the members of the Supreme Court, have defined begging with children as a ‘Roma cultural practice.’ In response, the Italian Parliament enacted law no. 94/2009, which severely represses the practice” (Ruggiu 2016, 31). In 2013 in France lawyers again offered a cultural defense not only of begging but of coerced criminal begging among children. “Rather than focusing on the argument that the Roma are forced to resort to crime because of poverty and discrimination, it claimed that in some cases they were simply following age-old Roma traditions and generally operate outside the norms of society in ‘the style of the Middle Ages’” (Bilefsky 2013). These Italian and French cases illustrate how cultural arguments can have dangerous implications even when employed to defend Roma. The very title of Bilefsky’s article, “Are the Roma Primitive, or Just Poor?” belies how Roma are categorized as uncivilized and even dangerous to their children. Essentialist culture concepts then can be recruited both for pro- and anti-Roma agendas. Note also that non-Roma supply the discourse and are the agents crafting the fate of Roma.

6. Conflict: Listening, Learning

A second example of my applied work illustrates the contradictions in my role as non-Roma scholar of Romani music. In 1999 I was chosen by the World Music Institute to be the Educational Coordinator of their first North American tour of Romani music: *The Gypsy Caravan: A Festival of Roma Music and Dance*. The festival included six groups of Roma: Antonio El Pipa from Spain, Musafir from India, Yuri

Yunakov Ensemble from Bulgaria, Kalyi Jag from Hungary, Taraf de Haidouks from Romania, and Kolpakov Trio from Russia. My duties involved writing extensive program notes, meeting with the press, translating, facilitating panels and question and answer sessions with the artists, and so on. I was not paid for this work, although I was a paid vocalist with the Yuri Yunakov ensemble.

Soon after I accepted this position, I received an angry phone call from a jazz musician (whom I had never met) who was of urban Slovak Romani descent. He yelled that I was not qualified to do this job and complained that I had chosen terrible musicians for the tour; he said: “they are peasants – they don’t even read music – and why isn’t my urban music represented?” I explained to him that I did not choose the musicians, that the World Music Institute had chosen them months ago, and I gave him the telephone number of the director. I explained that, indeed, some of these musicians were rural villagers who learn orally, but their music was of very high quality, and I sent him musical samples to convince him.

Although I certainly did not agree with him, I was very upset and was ready to quit and suggest to the director that he, as a Rom, replace me. Before quitting, however, I decided to seek advice from Ian Hancock, a highly regarded American activist/scholar of Romani descent, who knew me and my work. Hancock was very clear. He advised me not to quit. He said that despite my not being Romani, I was equipped for this job; he also offered to speak to the Rom. I learned several lessons from this. First, that there are wider frameworks of inequality surrounding every decision, and it is best not to assume you know about everything. Second, non-Roma should offer their expertise (knowledge, advocacy) but leave it to Roma as to whether they wish to employ it (and in what form and shape). Third, listening, learning, and reframing is the best response.

Regarding the Gypsy Caravan, there were many other conceptual and terminological conflicts I experienced in my role as Educational Coordinator (Silverman 2007, 2012a). For example, whereas I objected to the use of the term “Gypsy” in marketing and journalism, most of the musicians did not seem to care; they also did not mind that generic “Gypsy” images were used in tour advertising. They seemed to accept that these battles were already lost or not worth waging. However, musicians vocally pushed back against other constraints in the realm of artistry, such as the amount of time each group was given on stage; they actively fought reductions in their performance slots. They also defied some of the producers’ directions about what they should perform on stage. Similarly, Ortner (1995), theorizing resistance, claims that it is often partial and paired with collaboration.

This example illustrates that I, as non-Romani scholar/advocate, inhabited a vastly different positionality from these professional musicians who have faced prejudice for decades and have crafted ways of negotiating their terrain. And unless I continuously checked in with them, I would have made some very bad choices about activism. Along these lines, Vajda (2015) encourages non-Roma to interrogate their own Critical Whiteness: “I argue that for those of us whose identity is non-Romani and who have not been directly targeted by racism, there is no way to understand or affect race oppression unless we process our own (for want of a better term) ‘white non-Romani’ identity” (53). Similarly, Rao (2017), quoting Dana Arviso who worked with northwestern Native Americans, suggests humility:

If you’re going to be a white person working with communities of color you really have to know your role and know your place in the organization [...]. You have to take it pretty seriously and

understand the need for and how to practice cultural protocols. Perhaps most importantly, you have to be willing to hear when you've made a mistake and learn from that (2017).

7. Performer/Organizer: Balancing Advocacy and Diplomacy

My next set of examples are drawn from my roles as a singer and public programmer of Romani music in relationship to my current research on cultural appropriation (Silverman 2011, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). Much of this work has taken a critical stance on the globalization of “Gypsy” culture because it operates increasingly without Romani participation. “Gypsy” culture has become fashionable as a fantasy brand, for example, with the term gypster (gypsy plus hipster) and in foods like Gypsy teas, in fashion with Gypsy chic styles and brands like Gypsy Sport. In the realm of music, many Gypsy festivals have no Romani performers; in addition, DJs in the Balkan Beats scene use names such as *Gypsy Sound System*, *Tsiganization Project*, *Gypsy Jungle*, and so on. I have analyzed how, paradoxically, these ethnicized commodities become valuable at the precise moment when real Roma are demonized, targeted, and expelled; I thus investigate how the romantic and criminal stereotypes operate together.

Yet I sing Balkan Romani music, sometimes professionally, and often with Roma. So does Romani culture belong only to Roma? Am I against non-Roma performing Romani music? Obviously not, but context matters a great deal. I take a political stance about power in this discussion and prioritize Roma. I advocate that non-Romani musicians should always identify themselves in public as non-Roma, give credit to their Romani teachers, present educational materials, and most important, collaborate with Roma. Moreover, I am committed to not only involving but also training Roma for roles as music performers and producers, booking agents, and managers. Along these lines, I have worked with Voice of Roma (VOR) a Romani-led NGO in the U.S. that sponsors music festivals and tours that have a strong educational component.⁹ In this work I uphold the tenets of engaged anthropology “by producing texts, films and exhibits for public consumption, and by actively engaging *with* people on the ground to make change through research, education, and political action based on dialogue” (Beck and Maida 2015, 1–2).

Specifically, VOR seeks to empower Roma to present their arts in their own terms. VOR's collaborative work showcases the co-production of knowledge whereby the viewpoints of Roma are showcased, but non-Romani allies have important roles precisely because they have better access to resources. A contradiction, however, is apparent: although VOR is led by a Rom and tries to attract Romani audiences,

⁹ VOR mission is as follows:

It is the mission of Voice of Roma to promote and present Romani cultural arts and traditions in a way that counters both romanticized and negative “Gypsy” stereotypes, and in so doing, to contribute to the preservation of Romani identity and culture. VOR also works to heighten awareness of human rights issues faced by Roma in today's world, and to support efforts by Roma to (re)build and maintain their communities, improve their lives, and to strengthen the Romani voice both nationally and internationally. Our mission is accomplished through organizing and implementing cultural arts, educational, economic development, and charitable projects for and about Roma (voiceofroma.com).

the overwhelming majority of the audience members for its events are non-Romani Americans. A challenging area is the issue of stereotypes: VOR seeks to dismantle stereotypes but its focus on music could be seen as contributing to stereotypes (see my earlier discussion about music). Gypsies are expected to sing and dance and that is exactly what they do at the VOR festivals. However, VOR has tried to harness the interest in music to inform its captive non-Romani audience about the historical and political contexts of the music and performers.

In panels and question/answer sessions we encourage Romani performers to discuss their life histories in their own words. Musicians thus narrate their experiences of learning music in the context of community life, and issues of discrimination, exclusion, and prejudice inevitably arise. Non-Romani audiences then begin to see Roma as real people facing real challenges, not as fantasy artists. A good example is Bulgarian saxophonist Yuri Yunakov who, like many musicians, prefers to perform rather than talk but quickly learned that audiences can be primed to develop curiosity about his life. When audiences hear him narrate that he was forced to change his name and that he went to jail for performing Romani music in socialist Bulgaria, his music takes on new politicized implications. This educational approach contrasts with most shows of “Gypsy music” that provide an exotic array of stereotypical images and sounds.

Finally, a recent conundrum that I faced exposed the delicate balance between musical advocacy and diplomacy. A New York Macedonian Romani family asked me to help secure visas for *Prilepski Zvezdi* (Prilep Stars), the top wedding band from their hometown, so the band could perform at a family celebration in October 2017. The band had been denied tourist visas, so I tried to find an organization to sponsor them for a cultural exchange visa. VOR was unable to do this because its festivals only happen in spring. I knew that the New York Gypsy Festival (sponsored by the nightclub *Drom*) happens in October. However, this festival has an objectionable name, has hired fewer and fewer Roma over the years, has not supported educational efforts, and in 2016 used a stereotypical graphic of a dark-faced clown with a broad white smile that was reminiscent of African-American minstrelsy.^[10] In fact, in 2016 I helped to initiate a campaign to lobby the festival to change their name and to include more Roma. U.S. Romani activists and allies mounted a protest on a temporary website, “Gypsies don’t like NY Gypsy Festival,” to explain their complaints with this festival.^[11] Note that we did not urge a boycott because this would hurt the musicians who were hired (including two Roma).

10 See <https://www.facebook.com/nygypsyfest>.

11 American Romani activist Ioanida Costache posted this on Facebook on September 9, 2016 (and used these hashtags to create awareness: #nothingaboutuswithoutus #protestthefest):

The ‘New York Gypsy Festival’ capitalizes on the commodification of Romani culture by employing inane stereotypes in its marketing and excluding representatives from the ethnic group it refers to – pejoratively, I might add – in its name. From Silverman: ‘Every year there are fewer Romani artists in this festival and less Romani music. Last year a well known Romani musician was asked to perform for no money. The organizers have refused to allow educational flyers be distributed.’ And as Alexander Markovic points out, even the festival’s logo features a caricature (presumably intended to represent a person of Romani descent) that is reminiscent of the grotesque images associated with minstrelsy. This isn’t about whether there is one token Roma performing at the festival or not. This is about the use of an offensive exonym, the appropriation of culture and the commodification of that culture divorced from the people to whom that culture belongs. The word ‘Gypsy,’ as the promoters of this festival employ it, indexes nothing beyond damaging stereotypes. The festival is NOT interested in educating their attendees about the Roma, rather they are content with profiting financially by exploiting a romanticized, exoticized, orientalized and misrepresentative image of the Roma.

It is worth mentioning that Drom's owners have nourished the career of Macedonian Romani clarinetist Ismail Lumanovski and his band *New York Gypsy All Stars*. Plus, they are one of the only venues in New York that produce Roma music events. So I decided to be diplomatic and practical and ask Drom to sponsor Prilepski Zvezdi for their 2017 festival, thereby using their lawyer to secure visas for them. I reasoned that although I protested this festival just the year before, I could still try to change the festival from the inside to facilitate hiring more Roma with better contracts. I succeeded in getting Prilepski Zvezdi hired for the festival (the visas came through) and secured them a good contract. The family celebration was a huge success, and the festival event was attended by many Roma, despite the objection of one community member who asked everyone to boycott because of Drom's discriminatory attitude. I learned that activism is sometimes paired with behind the scenes diplomacy. For many musicians, securing work is the most important goal for them; advocacy for them entails negotiation and sometimes even compromise with the very objectionable institutions that oppress them.

Conclusion

I still believe what I wrote several years ago: that my observations are only “partial truths” in many senses. “My access to resources, my non-Romani ‘outsider’ status, my gender, and my training have certainly affected my perceptions [...] Hancock reminds us that until recently, all representations of Roma were constructed by non-Roma, and Roma exercised no control over these descriptions and images, whether scientific, artistic, or literary (1997, 39–40). This is finally changing, and the non-Roma ethnographer is either obsolete or must delicately negotiate her place” (Silverman 2012a, 15). A non-Romani person working with Roma highlights issues of ethics, representation, privilege, access, and most important, power differentials. For this reason I support a “reflexive turn” in Romani Studies whereby everyone, but especially non-Roma, examine their own positionality both in research and advocacy. Non-Roma need to question their voice when speaking about a group that is trying to define its own voice, and they need to listen and withdraw when a context requires their exclusion. I believe non-Romani allies do have an important role in scholarship and advocacy. Non-Roma can facilitate, mediate, and provide resources for various academic, cultural, economic, and political projects, but this requires a conscious awareness to eschew paternalistic and colonizing stances.

My selected examples of revelatory moments in fieldwork/advocacy chronicle the changing positions I have inhabited as non-Roma researcher, activist and performer. They clearly illustrate that collaboration and advocacy are necessary but extremely challenging to implement. For this reason, honest disclosure is necessary. Analysis of positionality is a critical move in two senses, the structural and the personal. Structural analysis reveals institutional constraints within which we operate, whether they are in academia, the court room, or the concert stage; it exposes the entrenched hierarchy of knowledge and the biases of authority. Disclosure also brings personal lessons; for me these center around reflexivity as a component of advocacy and a key to better, more engaged ethnographic scholarship.

I began as a naïve apolitical anthropologist and learned about discrimination from my Romani collaborators. Bulgarian musicians, Kalderash fortunetellers, and Macedonian and Kosovo migrants all showed me how they selectively resist oppression from the ground up, when and in what form advocacy

was appropriate, and when to merely adapt to what could not change. My focus on music brought me squarely into the realm of arts advocacy and public culture where representational issues and terminology about Roma are often riddled with conflict. Legal work has amplified my brokering role, a role that non-Roma often occupy but need to regularly interrogate. These issues all underline the profound responsibility that non-Romani allies have to be accountable for their words and actions. Reflexivity is one small but significant step in this direction.

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