Revisiting Tools for Change: Reflections on Methodologies and Desire-based Approaches in Roma-related Research

Sanni Matleena Lindroos

sanni.lindroos@utu.fi

PhD student at School of History, Culture and Arts Studies University of Turku, Finland

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3445-3811

Sanni Lindroos is a first-year PhD student in Gender Studies at the University of Turku. Her dissertation investigates the creative modes of storytelling and identity construction utilised by Finnish Romani creators across new media platforms. She has a master's degree in Theatre and Performance Studies from Stockholm University.

CRS Critical Romani Studies

Abstract

In this article, I revisit some of the main critiques, questions and suggestions in relation to methodological approaches emerging alongside the discipline of Critical Romani Studies. Drawing from Indigenous Studies scholar Eve Tuck's notion of desire-based research, I apply the three goals that Tuck set to foster emancipatory methodologies as a framework to reflect on the strengths and limitations of previously proposed methodologies in Romani-related research. By establishing counterhistories of Roma, Romani scholarship, a reconfiguration of the archive, and reflections on critical whiteness as the main topics in the epistemological paradigm shift unfolding over the past decade, I suggest some further points for methodological consideration that could advance the discipline. In particular, I discuss the possibility of co-researching as a mode of participatory knowledge production and propose digital platforms as a potential site of research, as well as call for further reflections on how to make research results more accessible to wider audiences.

Introduction

The academic canon of Romani-related research has historically been dominated by non-Romani scholarly voices and institutions, resulting in a dynamic where Roma themselves are reduced to research subjects with limited agency over the production of knowledge (Acton 2015; Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2015; Costache 2018; Selling 2018; Mate 2024). The growing academic discipline of Critical Romani Studies has functioned as an intervention in the hegemonic canon of Romani-related research by advocating for theoretical and methodological approaches which resist and render visible the antigypsyist legacy of previous scholarship. The origins of the paradigm shift can be traced back to the early 2010s, when a group of Budapest-based activist scholars started gathering to discuss what kind of collective action should be taken to establish scholarship that centres on Romani voices. The informal meetings expanded into workshops and conferences, which fostered collaboration and discussions on a wider scale (Bogdan et al. 2018, 3).

The topic of Romani-related knowledge production was among the main themes of a 2014 workshop held at Corvinus University in Budapest, which resulted in the publication of a pivotal issue of *Roma Rights, the Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre,* entitled "Nothing about Us without Us? Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production" and edited by a group of activist researchers that included Mária Bogdán, Jekatyerina Dunajeva, Tímea Junghaus, Angéla Kóczé, Márton Rövid, Iulius Rostas, Andrew Ryder, Marek Szilvási, and Marius Taba. The establishment of the *Critical Romani Studies* journal in 2018 officially introduced the discipline in the canon of Romani-related research, providing a platform for peer-review knowledge production which fosters new approaches in Romani Studies. In this article, I will revisit some of the main critiques, questions, and suggestions on methodological approaches in these publications which laid the foundations for the discipline of Critical Romani Studies through the framework of desire-based research, coined by Indigenous Studies scholar Eve Tuck. In an effort to reflect on how the methodological tools proposed in the "early" contributions to Critical Romani Studies have been applied and could continue to be applied in future academic knowledge production, my discussion is arranged around the three separate but overlapping goals that Tuck has set for fostering research which is beneficial to communities being researched.

1. Establishing Tools for Change: Centering Romani Identities in Knowledge Production

In the first volume of *Critical Romani Studies,* Ioanida Costache problematises academic discourse which understands 'subjectivity' from an exclusively "hegemonic, Eurocentric and universalizing perspective" and the category of 'identity' as only pertaining to minority groups and debating its ontological validity (Costache 2018, 32). Rejecting the idea that 'subjectivity' has a stable essence which can remain unmarked by external factors such as social location, Costache states: "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" (*Ibid.,* 33). To combat hegemonic canons which silence the voices of Roma and other

marginalised people, Costache proposes a shift in academic knowledge production which utilises Michel Foucault's concept of counterhistories and countermemories to "tell a continuous, heterogeneous history of the Roma" which acknowledges Romani identities as intersectional, plural and diverse (*Ibid.,* 42).

Costache's call to centre on Romani identities in the quest to decolonise Roma-related research resonates with of Eve Tuck's concept of desire-based research, defined as frameworks "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck 2009, 416). In their "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," Tuck discusses how some communities, such as Native Americans, have historically been portrayed in academic discourse as "defeated and broken," hence defined merely through a framework of oppression (*Ibid.*). They appeal to researchers, educators, and marginalised communities to adopt desire-based approaches to resist damage-centered research, which "operates, even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (Tuck 2009, 413).

The first goal Tuck sets for dismantling the tradition of damage-centered research is to *"re-vision our theories of change"* by asking "What can research really do to improve this situation?" (Tuck 2009, 423). Tuck notes that rather than the research itself, what might matter more is "who participates in the research, who poses the questions, how data are gathered, and who conducts the analysis" (*Ibid.*). Similar questions around the relationship between agency and authorship are among the main topics discussed in the articles included in the *Roma Rights* issue on policymaking and knowledge production. One of the journal's subjects of criticism is academic discourse rooted in scientism, defined by Mária Bogdán, Andrew Ryder, and Marius Taba as "claims of expertise and objectivity, and a corresponding disparagement of getting too close to the researched" (Bogdán et al. 2015, 34). Supporting Romani scholarship is recognised as especially important in resisting the idea of scientific objectivity, which has contributed to the dominance of non-Romani scholarly voices in the field.

Drawing from a critical feminist understanding of knowledge as "never detached, but rather embedded in a specific social, political and historical context," Angela Kóczé discusses how Romani scholars must often navigate within epistemological hierarchies which delegitimise their knowledge (Kóczé 2015, 83). In order to critically assess how scientific racism and power relations play into how knowledge about Roma is validated, Kóczé points to the distinction between epistemic authority and privilege. Drawing from Maria Janack, they elaborate that while epistemic authority is related to whose knowledge is perceived as 'objective' and reliable within academic institutions and discourses, epistemic privilege pertains to opportunities related to one's "gender, race, class, sexuality, citizenship, social network, even institutional belonging, and so on" (*Ibid.,* 84). Kóczé argues that the process of claiming epistemic authority can be enhanced by Romani scholars utilising their epistemic privilege within Romani-led institutions to establish new collaborative models between Roma and non-Roma (*Ibid.,* 86).

Similar arguments are proposed by Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka, who discusses how post-colonialist and feminist approaches to knowledge production could contribute to developing the discipline of Critical Romani Studies. Mirga-Kruszelnicka argues that while Romani scholars must navigate the paradox of simultaneously being an insider and an outsider both in academia and their local communities, their "outsider within" status can be beneficial to foster cultural sensitivity and might grant them easier access

to first-hand information and an ability to recognise patterns, dynamics, and phenomena which may go unnoticed by non-Romani researchers (Mirga-Kruszelnicka's 2015, 44). To envision new approaches to research which foster Romani knowledge, they suggest drawing from disciplines such as Indigenous scholarship, which has provided alternatives to Western canons of research by centering 'subaltern' perspectives and challenged scholars to "turn inwards, exploring their own ways of knowing" (*Ibid.,* 43).

In their articles, both Kóczé and Mirga-Kruszelnicka advocate for collaboration between Romani and non-Romani researchers through respectful dialogue that aims to resist epistemic hierarchies while acknowledging the value of lived experiences (Kóczé 2015, 86; Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2015, 45). Mirga-Kruszelnicka extends the call for collaboration to include relationships between the researcher and the researched, noting that in the lack of meaningful partnerships, "Roma participation in the academic production process becomes tokenistic and symbolic ('rituals of participation') and in the best case, is expressed in paternalism" (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2015, 43). However, while the benefits of Romani scholarship and collaboration for Roma-related research have been established, what is less specified is how the proposed epistemological shift should be utilised through research methods. Furthermore, another question remains: which efforts could be taken by non-Romani researchers to avoid producing participatory approaches where the role of Romani participants remains tokenistic, and contribute to elevating Romani counternarratives instead?

Some possible solutions are offered by Violeta Vadja in her 2015 *Roma Rights* article, which calls for a better understanding of "what non-Romani identities mean" in the context of Roma-related research, politics, and development projects (Vadja 2015, 48). Vadja invites non-Romani scholars to engage with critical race theory to "make sense of our racial experience," suggesting drawing from academic discourse on whiteness as a product of racialization (*Ibid.,* 53). Scholars have addressed how hegemonic whiteness operates by rendering white identities as existing outside of race (for example, Lewis 2004), resulting in problematic ideas such as colour-blindness being adopted to avoid discussions on racism (for example, Robertson 2015). Pointing to similar issues, Vadja proposes a framework of philosophical hermeneutics, critical race theory, and critical whiteness pedagogy to be applied in unpacking how historical processes of racialization affect interactions between Roma and non-Roma in the present. They refer to Hans Georg Gadamer's concept of *Bildung*, which underlines the role of one's effective history, being described as "not only our individual personal history, but the history that has brought each of us to where we are now, e.g., our family history, the history of our people, our class or ethnic group or our nation" (*Ibid.,* 49). A so-called 'provocation of the Other,' "a situation or experience that we cannot make sense of within our reality," then becomes an opportunity to expand one's understanding of the world (*Ibid.,* 50). Vajda, therefore, proposes research based on hermeneutic dialogue as a platform to reflect on different experiences of racialization and to "question where that difference originated, how it developed and where it has left each of us" (*Ibid.,* 51).

I agree that hermeneutic dialogue, as proposed by Vadja, can function as an efficient framework for participatory research as it resists the scientist approach where the researcher acts as an objective authority. However, I do think that further methodological considerations must be made to ensure that the research is beneficial to all parties involved. Even if the non-Romani researchers have educated themselves on how structural racism has contributed to the construction of whiteness, participatory

modes of knowledge production can reproduce the power inequalities it aims to resist by applying a damage-centred approach in the research. So, in reference to Tuck's question, "What can research really do to improve this situation?" I suggest that more attention to research planning itself, rather than its execution, is needed (Tuck 2009, 423).

2. From Tokenism to Collaboration: Participatory Research and Desire-based Frameworks

The second goal Tuck has established for resisting damage-centred research is to "*[e]stablish tribal and community human research ethics guidelines"* in order to "protect cultural, intellectual, and sacred knowledges from being stolen, appropriated, or handled in ways that are disrespectful" (Tuck 2009, 423). Tuck notes that the framing of research should also be considered in the process, so that the communities being researched can demand "desire-based inquiries" to replace damage-centred frameworks (*Ibid.*). The second proposition therefore emphasises that agency over research topics and approaches belongs to the communities about which the knowledge is being produced. This challenges the normative processes of research planning, where the person or institutions holding academic authority plan the research and apply the element of participation through interviews conducted within readily established research aims and questions.

A methodological approach which is still less utilised but which I believe holds a lot of potential in Roma-related academic research, is the idea of co-researching. The emerging methodological approach fosters collective knowledge production by acknowledging the participants as equal co-researchers and experts of their own lived realities, rather than positioning the researcher as an authority. The co-researching model resists tokenism by inviting co-researchers to participate in the early stages of research planning, including the framing of research questions and aims (Kulmala et al. 2023, 11). I argue that the co-researching approach could prevent situations where a non-Romani researcher benefits from the epistemological labour of Romani participants while claiming authorship over research outcomes. By fostering critical reflection and dialogue *before,* and not only *during,* research, a methodological frame of co-researching can foster Romani agency in knowledge production by allowing Roma to evaluate which kind of projects would – or would not – be beneficial. An example of co-researching in Roma-related research is the recent and ongoing work of Ioana Țîștea who, together with Romani women, has researched Roma's experiences with precarious work and migration in the Nordic context. Țîștea has pointed out that, even in projects that apply co-researching as a method, an issue which persists is that academic language can be inaccessible and alienating to people outside of academia (Țîștea 2025, 226). In collaboration with Romani co-researchers, Țîștea has attempted transparency, for example, by translating each section of the final research product for the co-researchers (*Ibid.*). Such considerations form part of the practicalities of developing methodologies which resist tokenism and foster equality.

Tuck's proposition to demand desire-based approaches that resist narratives where communities are only defined through their struggle is also relevant to scholarship on Roma. Without referring to Tuck specifically, Mirga-Kruszelnicka has addressed how narratives of poverty and marginalisation

have dominated Roma-related research, noting that "producing and reproducing such images of a socially-deprived ethnic group rarely works towards diminishing prejudice or raising acceptance on the receiving end – that is, the majority society" (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2015, 41). They call for research that focuses on how Roma have contributed to their local and national cultures and participated in national independence struggles – both topics which have later been explored by Critical Romani Studies scholars, including Mirga-Kruszelnicka. Some examples are 2020's *Re-thinking Roma Resistance throughout History: Recounting Stories of Strength and Bravery,* edited by Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka and Jekatyerina Dunajeva, and Jan Selling's 2022 *Romani Liberation: A Northern Perspective on Emancipatory Struggles and Progress.* Such publications, by adopting frameworks of bravery and liberation, provide new points of departure to produce counternarratives which position Romani people as active agents in social change rather than passive victims of oppression.

While desire-based research can foster counternarratives to struggle and shed light on Romani resistance, solidarity, and societal contributions across cultural and geographical contexts, it is important to ensure that exploring alternatives to problem-focused research does not become synonymous with overlooking past and current hardships faced by Roma. Especially in the current political climate, where far-right mobilisations and anti-intellectualism are on the rise, it remains crucial to acknowledge and address how structuralised antigypsyism influences the lived realities of Romani individuals and communities. I believe that the practice of co-researching, especially in the early stages of research planning, could also be useful in configuring which research gaps in this context are worth addressing in a way that benefits Roma themselves.

3. Expanding the Archive: Alternative Sites and Modes of Knowledge Production

The third and final goal Tuck calls for is to "*[c]reate mutually beneficial roles for academic researchers in community research*" by reassessing the relationships between academic research and a community's self-knowledge (Tuck 2009, 424). Tuck notes that it should be up to the people being researched to evaluate the necessity of academic inquiries, and that such reflections allow recognition of community self-knowledge as an equally valuable form of knowledge production (*Ibid.*). I suggest that, in the context of Critical Romani Studies, this goal could be a useful framework for discussing questions regarding the archive and alternative modes of knowledge production outside academic discourse.

In her contribution to the 2015 volume of *Roma Rights,* Ethel Brooks discusses the insider/outsider dynamic which marks discourse on Romani subjects, communities, and knowledge production, problematising how previous knowledge production on Roma has imposed an "inexpert status" on Roma and rendered their knowledge invisible (Brooks 2015, 57). Brooks suggests that dismantling the Gypsylorist canon requires new approaches to the archive, drawing from Thomas Acton to argue that the anthropological understanding of culture has led to Romani Studies assuming "an archive that is without individual authors; tradition, folklore or the primitive stand in for the author, the knowledge producer or the cultural agent" (*Ibid.,* 59). They propose that expanding the archive in a way that elevates

Romani authorship is to consider community- and family-based practices of producing culture and knowledge. As an example of knowledge production which operates across generations, kin networks, and communities, Brooks mentions the UK-based Romani family Le Bas, whose extensive arts careers manifest both through individual and collaborative family practices (*Ibid.,* 59). Brooks notes that such family-oriented practices resist tokenism and the concept of "anomaly – the community member who 'escapes' or succeeds despite the community, or against the community" (*Ibid.,* 60). The kind of Critical Romani Studies scholarship that separates itself from hegemonic and dismissive modes of knowledge production should reposition communities as significant loci of knowledge rather than as limitations to individual expression.

An example of scholarship which pushes the limits of the archive is Arman Heljic's 2021 *Critical Romani Studies* article "Staging the Romani Queer Revolution: New Approaches to the Study of Romani Queerness." Heljic's analysis of *Roma Armee,* an ensemble-based theatre production by the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin, applies a methodology which combines (auto)ethnographic field notes with interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from queer-, feminist-, post-colonial, and Critical Romani Studies. The article explores how the production "as a space to deconstruct and rearticulate the lived experiences of Romani queer subjectivities" contributes to understanding the diversity of Romani populations, especially elevating the specific challenges faced by queer Roma (Heljic 2021, 41). Heljic's choice to merge autoethnography with an analysis of the performance renders visible the intersectionality and complexity of Romani queer experiences. Furthermore, by focusing on knowledge production at sites which, in Heljic's words, "are not traditionally considered of value for academic knowledge production or real theatrical or artistic engagement," the article can be seen as an example of scholarship which contributes to reimagining the archive of Romani knowledge (*Ibid.,* 41).

Arguing that Heljic's proposal to redefine what is "of value" for researching is integral for Critical Romani Studies, I propose that alongside community- and family-based practices and non-mainstream arts and culture, more attention should be given to digital spaces, especially the realm of social media. Digital platforms foster new modes of community-building and knowledge production, enabling Romani individuals to (counter)narrate and share experiences beyond their local communities. While social media can foster anti-Romani sentiments in the form of hate speech, it also provides a platform to fight prejudice by allowing non-Romani populations to have access to Romani narratives outside of the often problem-focused and stereotypical Romani representations in mainstream media. I believe these digital interactions are worth consideration for academic inquiry for both Romani and non-Romani scholars, as both positionalities can provide beneficial situated knowledge in exploring how digital discourse and community-building contribute to new forms of knowledge production across cultural and geographical contexts.

Reconfiguring the archive should also extend to how the knowledge produced through research is preserved and presented. I believe that initiatives to make the archive more accessible for people outside of academia would be a beneficial step towards elevating Romani counternarratives. Among examples of archival projects that are easily accessible online is *RomArchive,* a digital archive initiated by Franziska Sauerbrey and Isabel Raabe in collaboration with Romani activists, academics, artists, and curators across Europe. Additionally, while scholars are often limited by copyright and institutional policies, practices such as ensuring interview records are accessible in their original language should be considered when reconfiguring the archive and

envisioning mutually beneficial methodologies. Considering that the Romani diaspora extends across a variety of linguistic and cultural contexts, I believe that both Romani and non-Romani scholars can utilise their local knowledge in ways which do not only contribute to their personal academic merits. Especially in locations where Romani scholarship is still less established, non-Romani scholars might have the benefit of shared language and cultural knowledge to produce research on topics that would otherwise remain unexplored. The focus, then, should be on figuring out the ways in which location-specific knowledge could be utilised to benefit Romani communities in the specific location.

Furthermore, in reference to Tuck's point about recognising knowledge production outside of academia, I propose that in addition to reflecting on what is *worth* researching, even more attention should be given to what is considered *as* research. Brooks and Heljic both have addressed the latter by framing artistic practices as important sites of alternative knowledge production, and more examples can be found in other cultural contexts. Among them is the work of Finnish Romani singer Hilja Grönfors, who since the 1990s has travelled around Finland collecting melodies and lyrics of Finnish Romani songs. By transcribing and performing the songs which historically have only been passed orally from generation to generation, Grönfors has made a significant contribution to preserving Finnish Romani musical heritage. In doing so, they have also challenged traditional gender roles by performing songs which traditionally are only sung by men (Hatinen 2024). In 2024, the University of Arts Helsinki awarded Grönfors with an honorary doctorate. While such symbolic gestures from authoritative academic institutions alone are not enough to recognise the value in Romani-produced knowledge, the acknowledgement of Grönfors' extensive career is one step towards bringing awareness of alternative modes of knowledge production on Roma *by* Roma.

Conclusion

In this article, I have utilised Eve Tuck's notion of desire-based research to revisit and reflect on methodological frameworks which have been proposed as tools to resist the hegemonic modes of knowledge production on Roma. While a short-format discourse analysis cannot capture all the epistemological considerations related to the paradigm shift which the emergence of Critical Romani Studies has fostered, I have aimed to outline some central suggestions which scholars have made over the past decade. The discourse was approached through Tuck's three proposed goals for resisting damage-centred research, which call for researchers and the communities being researched to "*Re-vision our theories of change;*" "*Establish tribal and community human research ethics guidelines;*" and "*Create mutually beneficial roles for academic researchers in community research*" (Tuck 2009, 423–424). The resulting discussion established counterhistories of Roma (Costache 2018), Romani scholarship (Kóczé 2015; Mirga-Kruzlenicka 2015), reconfiguration of the archive (Brooks 2015; Heljic 2021), and reflections on critical whiteness (Vadja 2015) as foundational elements in envisioning new methodologies for Romani-related research.

In dialogue with the abovementioned scholars, I provided examples of how the methodologies they have proposed have later been applied in Romani-related research through publications which centre on emancipatory narratives (Mirga-Kruszlenicka and Dunajeva 2020; Selling 2022) and draw attention to non-mainstream sites of artistic Romani counternarratives (Heljic 2021). While hoping, through

my discussion of the selected texts, to illuminate the significant shift that the field has already made towards more critical and emancipatory knowledge production, I proposed some further methodological considerations which have been less focused on to date.

As I suggested through the discussion on participatory research and the role of non-Romani scholars, I believe that the methodological framework of co-researching could open up new possibilities for envisioning projects "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck 2009, 416). As pointed out by Ioana Țîștea, applying innovative methodologies such as co-researching sets new challenges, such as reflecting on the accessibility of academic language in knowledge production (Țîștea 2025, 226). I believe that such challenges should not only be seen as potential pitfalls or obstacles, but as exciting opportunities for new collaborative efforts between Roma and non-Roma to further develop the field. As suggested, such collaborations could be used to study contexts which are still little explored, such as social media and other digital realms.

In the introductory chapter of "Nothing about Us without Us? Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production," it states that the sense of idealism and optimism which the publication and the preceding conference fostered are an "invaluable resource, for without a 'pedagogy of hope' the Romani Movement would stagnate" (Bógdan et. al. 2015, 3). It is no exaggeration to declare that now, a decade later, this pedagogy of hope has successfully begun to materialise through a remarkable shift in the academic discourse on Roma. To conclude, then, I believe that concepts such as desire-based research can function as useful frameworks to envision and utilise methodologies to further advance this positive change.

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