# Romani Epistemic Resistance beyond White Fragility: Decolonial Refusal in a Workshop on Romani Genocide


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## Abstract

This article critically engages with racialized epistemic structures that pretend to "include" Romani voices while simultaneously colonise, extract, and discipline them. Based on my lived experience in 2025 as co-trainer in a workshop on Romani genocide, I delve into the attitude of a "White" historian who perpetrated epistemic violence (Spivak 1988) by controlling the narrative, essentialising and Orientalising Romaniness, silencing Romani epistemologies, ignoring first-hand Romani family histories, and ignoring ongoing systemic biopolitical violence against Roma in Europe.

This article has three aims: (1) to show that Romani epistemic sovereignty acts as a refusal to the colonial "neutrality" of academia; (2) to show that so-called institutional "inclusion" is, more often than not, containment through Orientalism, neo-colonial forms of knowledge production (Trehan and Kóczé 2011), and White fragility (DiAngelo 2018); and (3) to show that acts of refusal by Romani people constitute decolonial resistance.

Therefore, intertwining my lived experience with critical theory, I suggest that Romani knowledge is a theory, a method, and a decolonial intervention in and of itself. This is a call for epistemic justice and, at the same time, an assertion that Romani subalterns have spoken.



## Keywords

- Critical pedagogy
- Decolonial resistance
- Epistemic violence
- Romani epistemology
- White fragility

# Introduction

Romani epistemic sovereignty is studied within the domain of colonial epistemic structures in the field of academia and activism. I illustrate this by referring to a workshop on Romani genocide, in which I was supposed to participate as a co-trainer. Although the event aimed to honour Romani lives and memories, it, unfortunately, honoured the same epistemic hierarchies that have historically rendered Romani knowledge stagnant. A "White" [1] historian took "charge" of defining Romani identity, dismissing contemporary anti-Roma violence, and "controlling" the legitimacy of Romani knowledge. This was not just a case of an unhinged disagreement but a ritualised display of epistemic violence and "White" fragility. The ethical reason for not citing the workshop is to highlight that I do not intend to name actors within colonial structures. I am writing this article to reorient the analysis from individuals to the systems in which they operate, at the same time signalling that the behaviours and practices in this paper are structural and not aberrant or random.

This article has three objectives. First, to discuss the way Romani epistemic sovereignty refutes colonial academia's "neutrality." Second, to show how institutional inclusion can still function as containment through Orientalism, the neo-colonial governance of Romani knowledge (Trehan and Kóczé 2011), and "White" fragility. And third, to demonstrate how Romani refusal, such as reclaiming the anthem *Gelem, Gelem*, prioritising family history, and rejecting essentialism, is performed as decolonial resistance and knowledge production.

The argument is built up in three parts. In the next section, Conceptual Framework, I describe the theoretical tools used to approach the analysis of epistemic violence, scholarly colonialism, and refusal. In the next section, Situated Experience, I explain how the dynamics described in the previous section evolved in the Romani genocide workshop. The Conclusion discusses the implications of Romani epistemic resistance as both a theory and a method. In it, I state that Romani subalterns have spoken and can no longer be confined within colonial epistemic frames.

# Theoretical and Conceptual Scope

This article theorises Romani decolonial resistance as an act of epistemic sovereignty – a marginal community's ability to define, legitimise, and disseminate knowledge on its own terms (Simpson 2014). In this case, refusal is not a communication breakdown; it is an intentional intellectual and political act to counter systems that seek to subsume, silence, and exploit Romani epistemologies (Simpson 2017). As Trehan and Kóczé (2011) argue, Romani politics and knowledge production are frequently shaped by neo-colonial relations, where external "expertise" governs what counts as legitimate Romani knowledge

1 In using the term "*White*", I do not refer to corporeal or biological characteristics of a group, but rather to social power relations in which non-Romani people are positioned as superior and the racialized Roma as inferior. This usage draws on the colonial binary frameworks articulated by Edward Said (East–West) and Frantz Fanon (Black–White), as well as the notion of the liminal space between coloniser and colonised developed by Homi K. Bhabha. See also: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

(50–52). Their analysis shows how inclusionary discourse can mask deeper structures of domination. Kóczé (2020) similarly discusses how institutional practices around recognition can reproduce racialized hierarchies even within human-rights frameworks.

For Michel Foucault (1977), the power–knowledge nexus illustrates that knowledge is never neutral. Power structures dictate the vantage points considered and the voices excluded. This dynamic was very visible in the workshop, in the guise of "White" authority's epistemic gatekeeping.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) poses the famous question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" She shows how hegemonic systems mediate and neutralise subaltern speech, a process she refers to as epistemic violence. This helps understand how Romani voices "included" under "White" authority, may be simultaneously disqualified and reshaped.

Spivak's work is complemented by Edward Said's (1994) authority to narrate, in which he highlights the imbalance in who is able to tell what story. In the case of Romani, "White" scholars are the authoritative narrators, whilst their voices are pushed to the margins. In his critique of Orientalism, Said (1978) shows "Whiteness" exoticises and decontextualises Romani identity.

Inspired by Sara Ahmed's (2012) work on non-performatives, I discuss institutional non-commitments to diversity or anti-racism as non-performatives. In reality, these symbolic non-commitments absorb critique and neutralise them, leaving structural hierarchies undisturbed.

Equally important are Robin DiAngelo's (2018) recent theoretical contributions on White fragility and how defensive responses to critiques of racism serve to control and "discipline" dissent. These are not simply irrational emotional responses but serve as a means to re-establish "White" control and authority and subvert subaltern resistance.

These authors, in combination, give my argument conceptual tools with which to understand the workshop as a situated experience, where I was exposed to epistemic violence, scholarly colonialism, Orientalism, non-performatives, and White fragility. They also help me contextualise Romani refusal, not just as a form of resistance, but as a theory and method of decolonial intervention (Smith 2012; Santos 2014).

## Situated Experience: Workshop on Romani Genocide

The Romani genocide workshop was meant to focus on remembrance and honouring Romani past (and present) struggles. Instead, it turned into a concentrated performance of colonial power. My experience as co-trainer reveals how colonial gaze, epistemic violence, and White fragility worked together to bracket Romani knowledge. Here, I refer to several harms caused by the "White" historian and sustained by the institution: gatekeeping of knowledge through essentialist definitions of Roma, dismissal of ongoing genocidal and biopolitical violence, erasure of family history as theory, reduction of our anthem *Gelem, Gelem*, the colonial gaze, the pedagogy of racist stereotypes, the silencing of structural critique, whilst framing it as personal conflicts and the lack of reflexivity in research.

At the beginning, the "White" historian assumed the right to determine "Who are the Roma?" in reductive, oversimplified, and essentialist ways. This is what Michel Foucault (1977) refers to as the power–knowledge nexus. Gadje[2] dominate the scene, wielding authority over the identity of Roma, while muzzling Romani voices to mere footnotes.

When the "White" historian described Roma as "closed communities", it was a sophisticated means to shift responsibility for marginalisation onto us, while obscuring the structural violence and betrayal of our communities. As Trehan and Kóczé (2011) demonstrate, such externally imposed definitions operate within a neo-colonial regime of knowledge, in which non-Romani actors claim epistemic authority over Romani identity and history (52–55). Kóczé (2020) likewise notes how institutional practices often reproduce racialized hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

When, before the workshop began, I tried to describe and name some of the ongoing genocidal and biopolitical violence to the "White" co-trainer – including forced sterilisations of Romani women, police murder of Romani men, segregation, neglect, and abandonment of Romani lives, and removal of Romani children – the historian dismissed my intervention, stressing particularly that "this is in the past". Acting on a denial of lived realities, the historian performed what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) calls "epistemic violence". This dismissal was not simply a disagreement but a silencing of voices in which removal of urgency adds to the systemic injustices and attempts to erase the historical genocide connection, along with the current control of racial violence. In that instance, the power–knowledge constellation acted as a gatekeeping mechanism, seeing "White" voices as legitimate whilst ignoring Romani accounts of the ongoing violence.

There was a similar dynamic when I integrated my family history into my intervention. The historian interjected: "We are not here to listen to your family!" By devaluing family history, they reiterated what Trehan and Kóczé (2011) identify as the marginalization of Romani experiential knowledge within neo-colonial epistemic frameworks, where Romani narratives are devalued unless filtered through non-Romani authority (55–58). Kóczé (2020) similarly critiques the limits of institutional recognition when it fails to center subaltern epistemologies. However, as Audra Simpson (2014, 2017) notes, "refusal" is not silence, but it is a strategy to live under coloniality. My argument that family history is a theory was intended to reject the colonial edict of detached neutrality. It brought to the fore embodied memory and intergenerational trauma as valid epistemology and countered the "White" academic fantasy that objectivity is the sole valid form of knowledge.

*Gelem, Gelem*, the Romani anthem, faced the same Orientalist treatment. The co-trainer folklorised and trivialised it, playing an Orientalised version of the anthem without any explanation. This, as a response to a hymn of genocide and resistance, reproduced what Edward Said (1978) termed Orientalism: the rendering of the "Other" as vivid, consumable, and devoid of any political significance. I objected, and the "White" co-trainer "corrected" the error by playing another version. This one, however, only contributed to anti-Roma stereotypes with the lyrics *"Si man Romni chgivel ma te chorav"* (I have a wife who makes me steal). Even "corrected," the Orientalism and criminalisation of Roma continued. I

2 "*Gadje*" refers to the domestic "White" population in the states where Roma live. It generally means non-Roma.

endeavoured to counter it by playing the official version on my phone. Participants stood up and listened in silence as I translated the lyrics and explained their significance, both historical and political. I drew on what Simpson (2017) describes as a decolonial method: reclaiming narrative authority through embodiment.

Harm also emerged in workshop exercises. Anti-Roma stereotypes were mentioned by the "White" co-trainer without any context or critique. When a Romani participant rebutted this, explaining that it made them feel unsafe, the trainer dismissed it as "necessary pedagogy". This dismissal captures what Sara Ahmed (2012) refers to as a non-performative: an institutional gesture that seems to acknowledge racism but actually reproduces it.

Another Romani participant later confided that the "White" co-trainer had "corrected" their family history. Once again, the trainer decided which Romani knowledge counted and which did not, committing another act of epistemic violence (Spivak 1988). This shows how "educational" spaces can reproduce harm without accountability for the violence they re-enact.

The NGO hosting the event only solidified this containment. When I voiced concerns, representatives pointed to "neutrality" and "professionalism" frameworks, recasting my critique as personal. Protecting institutional reputation over epistemic harm reinforces what Robin DiAngelo (2018) terms as White fragility. Defensive manoeuvres – minimisation of my critique, recentring "White" authority, and delegitimising my refusal – functioned as disciplinary control of Romani voices. "For you," I said to the "White" representative of the NGO who organised the workshop, "this might only be a job, but for me this is about the struggles of my people." The difference in their professional detachment and my embodied investment is a critique of how "neutrality" is wielded as a control mechanism rather than an ethical position.

The term "interesting" was often used by the "White" historian when talking about archival findings on Romani displacement, exile, violence, and genocide. My attempt to problematise the usage of this word was answered by the "White" co-trainer with ignorant defensiveness: "I see no problem in using this word. We all have academic interests; therefore, these findings are interesting to me." In this framing, our struggles became "interesting", our pain reduced to unempathetic academic interest. This reduction exemplifies what Spivak (1988) terms epistemic violence: the re-coding of subaltern suffering into objects of "knowledge" that satisfy dominant academic interests while erasing their ethical and political weight.

In the end, it was again the "White" historian who said nothing about their positionality. Responding to the question on why they studied Roma, their answer was simply that "it just happened". This lack of justification for such a fundamental aspect of their work mirrored, in part, the colonial research practices outlined by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012). Given the historically oppressive frameworks in research about Roma, it is not innocent to suggest such decisions "just happen". In the absence of self-reflection, the historian detached themselves from any positionality attributed to their knowledge production without recognising the power dynamics at play. This illustrates the coloniality of knowledge production.

The colonial epistemic structures that the "White" historian reproduced in the workshop seemed to contain a conflict of personalities. The "White" historian placed themselves in the role of epistemic gatekeeper,

practicing, in varying degrees, Orientalism and neo-colonial epistemic governance (Trehan and Kóczé 2011). The "White" representative of the NGO-organiser folded critique into its bureaucratic "neutrality" and non-performatives, constructing the semblance of critique whilst perpetuating White fragility. As a consequence of these dynamics, familiarity with Roma and their epistemologies was contained. Yet I disrupted the colonial choreography. My decolonial refusals asserted Romani epistemic sovereignty as a method and theory (Santos 2014; Simpson 2017).

## Conclusion: We Are the Theory You Cannot Contain

As difficult as it was to accept, the issues that came up in the workshop were not due to a clash of personalities but rather a performance of the more intricate facets of colonial encounter. The "White" historian silenced ongoing genocidal violence, dismissed family history as theory, and exoticised our anthem. Racist stereotyping by the trainer in the name of pedagogy, and an NGO reframing structural critique as an issue of interpersonal conflict, were all cases of failing to recognise the "Whiteness" of the authority. The performance of all these acts, unrefuted in that space, illustrated the invisible grip of colonial power, defining and disciplining Romani voices while drawing on complex forms of abusive control, proving the disingenuousness of claims of inclusion.

These practices were still challenged in different ways. Romani refusal turned the workshop into a site of decolonial resistance. I reclaimed the anthem *Gelem, Gelem* as a collective act of memory, insisted on family history as epistemology, and refused essentialist definitions of Romani identity. These refusals exemplify what Simpson (2014, 2017) calls refusal as method. These acts, however small, are in the domain of colonial disruption and reclaiming sovereignty over our knowledge. They also show, as Santos (2014) points out, that for epistemic justice, we need more than symbolic inclusion. Santos's work insists on the need for subaltern epistemologies to be recognised as theory, method, and intervention in their own right.

The workshop demonstrated how easily the claim of "neutrality" crumbles in the face of Romani epistemic sovereignty. Professionalism and talk of "diversity," as Ahmed (2012) reminds us, often function as non-performatives – gestures that mask containment under the guise of inclusion. Yet even in the face of silencing, Romani subalterns spoke. Our interventions shattered the colonial structures embedded in academic and activist spaces.

Romani knowledge is not an additional commentary to "White" frameworks; it is theory incarnate, rooted in our histories, memories, and intergenerational survival. It defies control, discipline, and reduction to secondary material for institutional prestige. Romani voices speak for accountability, not to uphold the colonial edifice but to dismantle it. The Romani subalterns have spoken, and our voice is not marginal but constitutive. It is carried through our anthem, sustained in intergenerational memory, and embodied in survival. The Romani body is a living archive, bearing the weight of genocide, displacement, and resistance, and transforming memory into method. The Romani voice is theory, because it produces concepts from lived experience; it is method, because it refuses colonial neutrality and centres refusal as practice; and it is an archive, because it safeguards histories that dominant epistemologies attempt to erase. This voice cannot be domesticated as "interesting" material. It insists on epistemic justice, challenges the authority of colonial knowledge, and asserts Romani epistemic sovereignty as an intervention into structures that have long sought to contain us. The Romani subalterns have spoken! Opre Roma!

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