

The Roma Collective Memory and the Epistemological Limits of Western Historiography

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From this cell of history this mute grave, we birth our rage.

Janice Mirikitani, “Prisons of Silence”

Introduction

From the emergence of the first generation of Roma scholars to the current debates, confronting the hegemonic conception of “Roma history” has been a constant struggle. History, together with linguistics, is one of the fields to which Roma authors have contributed the most and have devoted more effort to challenging the hegemonic narrative created about us, without us. This is, in fact, understandable, given that looking for answers in history is never a neutral process for us, but something embedded in us. In one way or another we are looking for ourselves within this history, for links with our ancestors and, through them, with the very foundations of the identity that defines us as individuals and as a human collective. However, this drive is always frustrated, since what we find in this history is not our history, but a white creation about us and our ancestors, a Gadji¹ view of us that amounts to nothing more than an ontological search for white identity and legitimation.

Different authors have dealt with this imbalance in different ways, ranging from Ian Hancock’s (1987) approach in his masterful “*The pariah syndrome*” which attempts to shed some light on one of the darkest periods hidden in the prevailing historiography on the Roma, namely the enslavement of Roma in Moldavia and Wallachia until 1856, to Marcel Courthiade’s (2016) critique of the biased and prejudiced argument for the historical origins of the Roma, or Sarah Carmona’s (2013) efforts, based on archival research, to produce reliable data to support statements made by other Roma scholars. This list of efforts by Roma intellectuals could certainly be enlarged: an entire trend of thought is attempting to confront the hegemonic framing of “Roma history” by “re-writing”, or somehow striving to “re-right” history, either by producing knowledge on the hidden aspects of our collective memories or criticizing certain methodologies. This approach assumes that this is actually a possibility, as if the

aporia within this discipline is just a minor technical problem that needs to be located, isolated and fixed.

Since the value, relevance and commitment of these contributions are downplayed, when these critical approaches emerge in academia they seem destined to experience the same frustrations previously noted or, at best, are consigned to the margins of academic debates and considered secondary literature, as has been the case since the very foundation of the so-called Romani Studies.

This highlights a prior, deeper problematic: the question of the limitations of the epistemological foundations of history as a discipline traversed by a system of racist domination based on European modernity and its civilizing pretensions. It is a debate which should address the issue of a “Roma history” produced by such a deep-rooted and partisan perspective on the fluctuating alterity embedded in the memory of our ancestors, and the credibility—or even the possibility—of continuing to struggle to rectify “Roma history” without questioning the epistemological grounds of this discipline or, alternatively, whether these efforts should be redirected towards developing a “counter-history” which displaces the modern logic that claims self-legitimation by turning us into the inner barbarian within European societies. It should also examine how this depiction of the Roma-other configured by history is affecting the present power relations that condition the materiality of our life in contemporary Europe and the political implications this has for the Roma as a collective subject.

How Important Should History Be for Us?

Before moving on to discuss the limitations and conflicts that “Roma history” as a modern discipline presents, it is worth reflecting on the importance for us of facing this issue as Roma. Hence, it is necessary to pay attention firstly to our own collective experience of this matter, but also to the experience of other peoples who, like us, have been historically, politically and spatially placed below the line of humanity denounced by Frantz Fanon (1952 [1986], 1961 [1983]). In the late 1990s, the Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith had already raised the key question: “Is history in its modernist construction important or not important for indigenous peoples?” (L. Smith, 1999: 34). It is a relevant question for the Roma as well, since there is a kind of veiled hope of justice which is very strong in some cases and easily detected in many pages written by Roma authors on our history, together with the will to overcome the atrocities suffered by our people by identifying them, shedding light on the darkest corners of history and, as a result, achieving some justice. However, no matter how frustrating this is, we must accept the reality described by Linda Smith, that this entire idea of transforming history into justice is not just a matter of will or moral commitment, but a question of power:

It is because of this relationship with power that we have been excluded, marginalized and “Othered”. In this sense history is not important for

indigenous peoples because a thousand accounts of the “truth” will not alter the “fact” that indigenous peoples are still marginal and do not possess the power to transform history into justice.

(L. Smith, 1999: 34)

We must agree with the author that history, as a discipline, is embedded in power. “In fact, history is mostly about power” she states, meaning that what should be stressed in relations between two racialized peoples such as the Roma and the Gadge is the urgent need to re-read and re-codify “Roma history” in terms of the status attributed to it by the power relations in which these narratives are rooted and which sustain them. It is important to foreground the system that upholds this unequal power relationship, based on the racial differentiation between the Roma and non-Roma populations, which began with the arrival of our ancestors in Early Modern Europe and has been fuelled and maintained up to the present day. In other words, we need to identify the “anti-gypsyism” embedded in the very essence of “Roma history”, since both anti-gypsyism and the discipline of history derive from the same source: the civilizing project of European modernity.

Understood in this way, “Roma history” as a discipline clearly became a weapon of domination, a code used to manage our collective memory and usurp our own identity with a plot that plays against us. Moreover, for exactly the same reasons, this discipline is also a key field in which to identify and analyze the silences, resistances and tensions that accompany the creation of the “Roma-Other”, as an operational narrative that still has a powerful presence in both academic and political spheres.

The Modern Roots of an Old History

This section will discuss the main points of contention that collapse when the dominant approaches used in Western historiography attempt to address the history of the Roma. This confrontation is mainly an expression of the epistemological limitations that create the frustrating situation whereby we, as Roma, cannot find ourselves within “Roma history”.

The first issue that needs to be addressed is the methodological problem concerning the definition of the “object of Roma history”. Like any other discipline, “Roma history” should be required to define its object of study. However, as S. Seth (2011) claims, one of the key factors that characterizes the particularity of history as a “Western code” is the creation of the illusion that history, unlike other disciplines, “has no need to think its object, because its object simply is. History-as-facts simply happens, and history-as-discipline is an attempt to recreate that happening to the degree that documents allow us to do so” (Seth, 2011: 3), stressing that this is an expression of “epistemological naïveté”. The issue has a deeper epistemological dimension when it intersects with the forces that contextualize this process and therefore, due to

the importance of this concern, it will be discussed separately in the next section. For the moment, what is essential to note is the fact that when it comes to “Roma history”, the structural ingenuousness identified by Seth is, as in the entire field of Romani Studies, anything but innocent, precisely because there is a direct connection between the production of “Roma history”, supposedly based on “facts” alone, and the mainstream understanding of Gadge Western academia with regard to “objectivism” as a scientific criterion. The constant, resounding claim for “objectivism” in Romani Studies debates in recent years can only be understood as the reaction of white privilege and its obsession with hermetically sealing off academia from the questions and kind of research which we, as Roma, feel the need to address, and the questioning of where our interests lie. This mainstream interpretation of “objectivism” in “Roma history” is understood as a pure, neutral approach to our collective past with no ideological and/or epistemological conditioning of the hermeneutics required to recall the events and protagonists of this past. The real meaning for us of this regulatory insulation of scholarship only becomes clear when it is seen as a product of the coloniality of power and knowledge. The sacred criterion of “objectivism” is then unveiled as a weapon of domination deployed to legitimize certain kinds of knowledge and categorically exclude others. As Maldonado-Torres states:

Driven by anxiety and fear, “objectivity,” along with other presumably lofty ideals such as excellence, are used to keep or increase the boundaries between those who claim to be in the zone of being human and those condemned to the zone of dehumanization.

(Maldonado-Torres, 2016: 14)

At this point it is sufficiently clear that the issue addressed by well-known scholars in Romani Studies, such as Yaron Matras (2016) or Michael Stewarts (2017) among others, regarding the supposed lack of “objectivity” of critical Roma contributions to Romani Studies is indeed a major political matter masked by the appearance of scholarship deliberately designed to justify and legitimize the particular kind of governance and supervision directed towards the Roma on an academic level.²

One of the particular forms adopted by this “disinterested objectivity” to discredit Roma scholars’ contributions to academia is the accusation that they are “intoxicated” by the activist approach of the Roma movement. This critique has sometimes been voiced explicitly but is often implicit or veiled in subtle ways. It has mainly been associated with “Roma history” as a discipline, although it can be found in other fields as well. One of the most explicit examples concerns the influential and respected linguist Yaron Matras (2004) who—when discussing our ancestors’ connections with certain wars, armies and military affairs prior to their arrival in Europe in his paper *The role of language in mystifying and demystifying Gypsy identity*—makes the following statement:

The warrior origin theory is gaining ground because Romani activists and others sympathetic to their cause wish to see the Rom they sympathize with in a consistent, smooth and indisputable victim role throughout history. They want, in a sense, a package-Gypsies which will sell better on the human rights market. [...] Having accepted this viewpoint, the only way they can protect themselves from the supposedly shameful image is to replace it by a proud ancestry: to postulate, namely, that they have been turned into what they are reluctantly, having held a prestigious and honourable social position before being victimized.

(Matras, 2004: 73)

What Matras is directly attacking is the theory of the military connections associated with the origins of the Roma people, first presented by Ian Hancock (2000, 2010), one of the pioneer Roma intellectuals in academia, and subsequently supported by other Roma scholars. However, what is of interest for the subject under discussion here is an analysis of the discourse and the implications of his reaction. Matras's criticism is based on the dubious assumption that the contribution made by Roma scholars to their own history is a kind of activist manipulation whose main intention is to produce knowledge that will "sell better on the human rights market". This is just one example, among many others, which reveals the stigma that every Roma willing to engage critically in the academic debate on so-called Romani Studies has to be prepared to deal with. In one way or another, both Western academia and "Roma history" as a discipline "read" us as an impurity that has invaded their domain, a stain caused by militant ethnic commitment that manipulates and interferes in "*their*" business.

In the Western historiographical approach in general, and in the discipline of "Roma history" as a by-product of the same epistemological orientation, the issue of "purity" is heavily stressed: it feels like a stronghold built to avoid any "alien" contributions based on our political or activist experiences. This is why the theoretical framework of the decolonial approach and the concept of scholar-activism and "situated knowledge" are becoming vital to the struggle for Roma scholarship nowadays (Brooks, 2015; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2015; Fernández, 2016). Ultimately, the ideological justification which Sanjay Seth refers to as the "assumed epistemological superiority of historiography" lies in this concept of the purity of history (Seth, 2011: 71): it has been present from the very moment that the discipline was formalized and institutionalized in the nineteenth century. In the case of "Roma history" as the enforced administration of our collective memories, the assumed superiority of Gadge historiography takes many forms, ranging from the privileged, dominant role attributed to the white view of us and its legitimation as universal science, to the Gadjo-centrism that pervades the entire field of Romani Studies and even there usurps our role, excluding our oral memory as unworthy material that is not considered legitimate knowledge. In fact, the constant marginalization of

the oral history of the Roma, as is the case with many other peoples, is a permanent feature of the dominant Western scientific approach, since it is a way of emphasizing our imposed “sub-humanization”, “lack of civilization” and “inability” to produce proper knowledge.

Writing has been viewed as the mark of a superior civilization and other societies have been judged, by this view, to be incapable of thinking critically and objectively, or having distance from ideas and emotions. Writing is part of theorizing and writing is part of history.

(L. Smith, 1999: 29)

This hierarchical assumption denounced by Linda Smith essentially provides the same support for the prevailing “Roma history”, which privileges a particular fictitious white perspective on the Roma whilst belittling any other methods used by the Roma to relate to our past, such as the collective connection with our ancestral memory, which is mainly preserved orally. The entire notion of written history is nothing more than an imposition of the Western discipline of history which limits any full understanding of the non-West past (Seth, 2011). It is also evidence of an inability to understand its own European history, since the epistemological imperialism of the modern historiographical approach is unable to represent and rememorize the Roma past as part of European history, whilst also failing to tell the history of the Gadje.

The Historiographical Construction of an Anti-Modern Object

At this point in the discussion it is relevant to reflect on the epistemological implications of the construction of the “object” of “Roma history”. Questioning an “object” of history necessarily takes us to the other side of the question, the crucial issue of entitlement to be considered a “subject” of history. In this regard, Linda Smith refers to the philosopher who established the modern concept of history: “Hegel conceived of the fully human subject as someone capable of ‘creating (his) own history’” (L. Smith, 1999: 32). The obvious consequence of this rigid statement is that history, in its modern sense, can be only understood as a narrative related to those conceived of as “fully human”. This epistemological assumption is evidently not unconnected with the “zeitgeist” underlying this historical momentum and gives rise to what Nelson Maldonado-Torres defines as a “metaphysical catastrophe”, referring to “the production of zones of being human and zones of not-being human or not being human enough” (Maldonado-Torres, 2016: 14). As Enrique Dussel (1994) and Anibal Quijano (2000), among others, have pointed out, this sequence of events corresponds to the modern model for power and knowledge in which the Western invention of “race” is rooted.

Elaborating on these notions in terms of their relationship to “Roma history” and the ways in which our presence, bodies, ancestry and memories are, and have been, read—from an academic and political point of view—clearly brings all the tensions, domination and resistance present in the very epistemological foundations of this discipline to the surface. Consequently, the violence that breaks through the entire construction of a European white identity from the “Roma-Otherness” cannot be disregarded if the nature and far-ranging implications of this semantic process of resignification are to be understood. In this sense, this is when history becomes significant and meaningful for us. Thus, Tuhiwai’s observations on the implications of the categories functioning at the bottom of this sense of history are highly significant:

It should also be self-evident that many of these ideas are predicated on a sense of Otherness. They are views which invite a comparison with “something/ someone else” which exists on the outside, such as the oriental, the “Negro”, the “Jew”, the “Indian”, the “Aborigine”. Views about the Other had already existed for centuries in Europe, but during the Enlightenment these views became more formalized through science, philosophy and imperialism, into explicit systems of classification and “regimes of truth”.

(Tuhiwai, 1999: 32)

Reflecting on the discourse produced in the specific legislation against Roma in Spain from early modernity up to the current constitution, adopted in 1978, the Roma scholar Isaac Motos (2009) proposes a conceptual distinction between what he calls “lo gitano” and “los gitanos”:

“Lo gitano” no lo identifico sin más con “los gitanos” porque ambos términos tienen contenidos distintos. Con este segundo término hago referencia al modo en que los propios gitanos se miran y ven a sí mismos y a los mecanismos sociales que sustentan tal cosmovisión, mientras que con el primer término quiero señalar, no ya tanto el modo en que han sido interpretados, sino más bien el entramado de condiciones epistemológicas, técnicas y morales que han posibilitado una determinada recepción del hecho gitano. O si se prefiere, con “lo gitano” quiero indicar el horizonte semántico que hace que una determinada interpretación del hecho gitano sea inteligible.

(Motos, 2009: 62)

Due to the fact that the word “gitano” is itself an exonym (González, 2009), a white creation to define us and thus exercise power over us, I consider it more appropriate and coherent to define the two approaches as the dissimilarity between being “Roma” and being defined as “Gypsy”³. Leaving nomenclature aside, this epistemological distinction between, on the one hand, the meaning

of “Roma” or “Kale” or any other endo-ethnonym used by us and by our ancestors to define ourselves, our heritage and our cosmivision and, on the other hand, the meaning of “Gypsy” as a fictitious white concept is vital to constructing an accurate framework for the semantic content of the “object” of “Roma history”.

The structural division between the Roma people and “the Gypsy” is constitutive of European modernity and it entraps us in its own logic, notably when it comes to confronting academic discourses constructed about (and against) us and political rhetoric and practice since, to some extent, they both share the same epistemological ground. Moreover, as Helios F. Garcés (2016) points out, this dichotomy is the key to understanding the process of building the modern European nation state. The division can also be understood in the light of the concept of “abyssal thinking” proposed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007) in the framework for the *Epistemologies of the South*:

The same abyssal cartography is constitutive of modern knowledge. Again, the colonial zone is, par excellence, the realm of incomprehensible beliefs and behaviours which in no way can be considered knowledge, whether true or false. The other side of the line harbours only incomprehensible magical or idolatrous practices. The utter strangeness of such practices led to denying the very human nature of the agents of such practices. On the basis of their refined conceptions of humanity and human dignity, the humanists reached the conclusion that the savages were sub-human. Do the Indians have a soul? was the question.

(Santos, 2007: 48)

One expression of this “abyssal line” referred to by Santos in the process of building and universalizing modern Western knowledge of the Roma is, in essence, rooted in the very separation between the Roma and “the Gypsy”. Given that our culture, social practices and beliefs cannot be encapsulated within, or are not even compatible with, the logic of modernity, we were not allowed to be considered human. For the Roma, the event corresponding to the discussion between Bartolomé de las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda cited by Boaventura de Sousa took place in Germany when the philosopher, jurist and theologian Jacobus Thomasius (1622–1684) came to the conclusion that “these black-looking heathen foreigners speaking a strange tongue, were not fully human” (cited by Lewy, 2000: 2).

bell hooks (1989) draws on the Afro-American experience to develop the political/academic exercise of “*talking back*”, reflecting on the objectification of “the Other” practised in the field of history. She defines the relational distinction between “subjects” and “objects” in the sense that the former “have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history” (hooks, 1989: 42), and hence the history of the “Other”, our history, is merely defined in relation to the white identity, the Gadge identity. This is why

it is imperative for us to distance ourselves from the logics violently imposed by the civilizing project of modernity in order to write a history of the Roma in which we, our ancestors and our collective memories are not a footnote to the white Western history of Europe, but a history that looks in the other direction, essentially a history that “*talks back*” in our own name.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, George Borrow, one of the fathers of the so-called Romani Studies, was already claiming that “the Romas have no history” (Borrow, 1841: 159), based both on the assumption that there is no history of oral-based memories and on his exoticizing approach to depicting the Roma as a nomadic people with no territorial roots. From the outset, “Roma History” became a mechanism for managing and controlling the collective memory of our people: from the moment it was established as a discipline to the recent historiographical studies on the Roma, we find an exclusionary machinery being deployed, created to justify the racial system of domination which confronts Roma people. This was made possible by eliminating our ancestry from history, eradicating Roma agency and subjectivity and replacing it with an imaginary “object” and extreme “other” that embedded all the frustrations, fears and anguish of white/Gadje society. The creation of an “enemy within” in European society was based on the semantic creation of “the Gypsy” as the perfect incarnation of barbarism, immorality, maladjustment and inhumanity that enabled the Gadje to see themselves and be seen as the inverse image of what they had created.

Following this modern operation, the words “gypsy”, “*gitano*”, “*zigani*”, “*cigano*”, “*zigeuner*”, “Egyptian” and many other names we have been called became very ambiguous words whose meanings fluctuate between ethnic, social, moral or even legal terms, according to the needs of the dominant identity (Fernández and Cortés, 2015: 509–514). The ultimate objective of this conceptual operation was to create a narrative about the Roma as an anti-modern collective, a people anchored in tradition, uninterested in the gifts of modernity, isolated from progress and incapable of achieving such glories by themselves: in essence, a people trapped in their pre-modern status. The next step in this semantic operation would be the reverse manoeuvre of closing the circle with the notion of the need to save these “barbarians” for their own good: it marks the beginning of the current ideology of integration.

Conclusion

In these pages I have discussed the relevance of questions about how the object of “Roma history” has been constructed and the epistemological background from which this process has been built up, as well as the semantic implications of why and for whom this past is evoked. As shown above, in order not to fall into the trap of the ingenuousness highlighted by Seth, it is necessary to ask these questions within the context of the power relations in which knowledge of “Roma history” is produced. In effect, the specific power relations defined

as anti-gypsyism or romanophobia, a system of racist domination historically grounded in the enshrinement and universalization of modern European values, are still very much alive and widespread today. Moreover, the knowledge produced within the field of “Roma history”, like any other academic product about us, is not immune to this phenomenon. As the Maori scholar Cherry Smith claims, “colonialism, racism and cultural imperialism do not occur only in society, outside of the gates of universities” (C. Smith, 1994: 13) or, as I have stated in a previous work with regard to the knowledge produced in the field of so-called Romani Studies:

Beneath its veneer of neutrality, we often find that scholars and experts harbor familiar prejudices against Roma. Moreover, scholars researching Roma often see them as an object to be studied, rather than a collective living, breathing subject.

(Fernández, 2016)

I argue that this is not just a methodological problematic that can be solved by redirecting the perspective to the “object”, but rather that, as a direct consequence of the combined forces embedded in the nature of this discipline itself, such projections and tensions between Gadje and Roma, and between researcher and “object” are inevitable in a discipline such as “Roma history”, given that this discipline is not only created by the epistemological principles of Western modernity but is also an indispensable weapon in the civilizing project that accompanies this ideology at every step. However, what is specific to the case of “Roma history” is that the discipline does not identify the collective and engage in research in order to narrate its past, but this “object” is instead semantically created independently of the reality faced by the human collective that is supposed to the central figure in this history.

Moreover, I have argued for the need to create a Roma history that takes us into account as the subject and agent of our own history. This not only implies “talking back”, in the sense that bell hooks (1989) uses the expression, but also the need to examine the tensions and violence produced in the historical events in which our ancestors played a leading role, as well as in the historical production of the modern construction of the concept of anti-gypsyism, as a semantic framework of interpretation. Such history, namely a Roma-centred history, is needed, above all, to serve as a counter-history, an answer to modern Western mythology. Furthermore, such history cannot disregard the material and conceptual formation of the reality faced by our people nowadays: by examining the tensions, violence, and biases in our past it should represent an exercise in historical reparation. It is an exercise that will entail the need to redirect our view to the past to provide us with specific answers to challenge the current political role that has been allocated to us. In short, Roma history becomes meaningful when it escapes the enforced depoliticization imposed by the criteria of white scholarship to become a conceptual weapon committed

to our interests and, by analyzing the processes that have led from the past to the present faced by our people, challenges them and thus envisages the future roadmap that can overcome this reality.

As previously detailed, it is crucial to understand the implications of the epistemological construction of the “Gypsy object” within the current political understanding of the Roma in Europe. The process defined here is not unconnected with the pogroms and episodes of anti-gypsyism that all too often break out in Europe, and with the high level of tolerance towards this form of structural racism, frequently practiced and orchestrated by the “civilized” European states themselves. Furthermore, in deeper and more subtle ways, this epistemological construction of the Roma as “Gypsy” extends to the very essence of public policies for the Roma and their implementation. All of these policies, from local to international level, are conceptualized by a vast mechanism constructed from what may be termed the “ideology of integration”. The aims of this ideology are basically inspired by a notion of “integration” understood as a forced process of transformation involving a “barbarian anti-modern community that needs to be saved from itself”. The reasons underlying this ideology aim to control and discipline the “Gypsy other” and the kind of problematic they might create for Gadje society as the dominant social body: this is the real meaning of the words “development”, “implementation”, “empowerment” and other similar terms often used in the policies that target Roma people. This ideological agenda, hidden in the very core of the “ideology of integration”, has dominated and perverted every possible notion of “Roma integration” and all the ways in which is implemented on a political and social level. Therefore, for us “integration” represents nothing other than a constant reminder of the power exerted over us, whose only achievement has been to depoliticize the Roma struggle for self-emancipation, resulting in a complicit lack of interest in the impact of white privilege and a Gadje-centred interest in the construction of such policies, as well as the persistent rejection of the policy we need most urgently, namely a policy for the historical reparation of the Roma people.

Notes

- 1 “*Gadje*” in the plural, and “*gadjo*” and “*gadji*” as the masculine and feminine forms, are Romani words which refer to non-Roma or white people.
- 2 In the past years this debate has become increasingly relevant as Roma voices and institutions have been contributing greatly to the controversy. One clear example of what I call “white privilege in Romani Studies” can be seen in Matras (2016) and Stewart (2017), among others. For a detailed analysis of this issue, see my article “Our voices matter. A Roma decolonial approach to the white trauma in Romani Studies” presented at the Conference “*Critical Approaches to Romani Studies*” in 24–25th May, 2018 at Central European University of Budapest (Hungary).
- 3 The word “gypsy” and its translation in other languages derives from the word “Egyptian” because when the Roma first arrived in Europe, the Gadje population believed they had come from Egypt. This fact was proved as incorrect but the white terminology used to define us was maintained by the power relations established in

Europe between the Roma and non-Roma populations. However, our ancestors never identified themselves with this term. A detailed explanation of the historical “misunderstanding” can be found in Fraser (1995).

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