

## Writing historiography and entering the anthropological field while being a Roma historian in the times of Covid-19

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### Abstract

The colonial difference within academic institutions and their researchers affects not only the way in which Romani people are analyzed as an object of study but also the legitimacy accorded to Romani researchers working on their own community. Historical research on the recent past through oral sources during the context of the Covid-19 global health crisis has brought to the table the value of Roma historians in examining the Roma themselves. This article aims to establish a relationship between the internal coloniality that affects the academy and the methodological possibilities that the Roma researcher has in relation to the rest. The result is a colonial critique of the narratives of power reflected in the procedures placing and signifying the Roma historian at the core of the issue.

KEYWORDS: Romani people, historians, academy, colonialism, pandemic

### Introduction

The Indian thinker Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak published her “Critique of Postcolonial Reason” in 1999, in which she consolidated the importance of researching with a clean gaze and enunciating knowledge from a colonial critique. However, an episode in the work, one which has a Roma woman as the main character, tends to go unnoticed. The person, Hanife Ali, was part of a project directed by the educator Christiana Lambrinidis (Spivak, 2010). In contrast to other women who saw the leader of the project as a savior, the Roma woman was reluctant. Despite her critical participation, Ali came to be seen as a prisoner of her own barbaric, oppressive, second-class culture that prevented her from

moving towards the emancipation offered by Europe and North America – to such an extent that her trail was disappearing. Thus, Spivak understands that the subaltern voice is not only that which is not picked up but also that which is misrepresented with the intention of discarding it. The struggle of this woman and so many other anonymous figures made it possible for research from the margins of the academy and submission to it to begin to be questioned. The current existence of a “Roma intelligentsia” is helping to enrich decolonial critical approaches and to stop placing the Roma at the back of the queue. However, there are strong problems in academia that usually translate into the degree of legitimacy accorded to Roma researchers. The denial of identity in research processes is a *sine qua non* for finding common approval in academic settings (from courts to publishing houses) where decolonial critique has not yet taken root and is still seen as a mere “methodological option.”

It was in this framework that my research during the global health crisis of Covid-19 took root. Those around me in the university told me that if it was “already difficult” to talk to Roma because they are a “hermetic culture;” they could not imagine how I would talk to them given the situation of confinement. This first tells us how the insertion of a Roma in academic circles normally translates into ignoring the fact that this person is part of the community he or she is studying. Secondly, the boundary between “them” and “us” becomes apparent. However, far from this traditional discussion in most Spanish university offices, the pandemic was not a deterrent for me. When the crisis broke out in Europe, I was on a stay in Argentina, where I was refining my work with oral sources by researching the urban situation of the Roma on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. When the situation worsened, I took a repatriation flight to Madrid and continued my work at a distance, mainly through WhatsApp audio. It was at that moment that I worried about the closure of the files, which was useful for my doctoral thesis. I decided to apply the same dynamics used with the Argentinean Roma to my research in Spain. If it had worked well with people on the other side of the ocean, it should be easier with those who were in the neighborhoods adjacent to mine or directly in nearby buildings. I decided to make the procedure more sophisticated by substituting the WhatsApp audio conversation with calls, or video calls that I recorded with an app and a hand-held recorder.

The interviewees were part of a list organized based on specific themes from my doctoral thesis on the history of Roma in Madrid between 1959 and 1986. They were mainly Romani people of Madrid who lived in shantytowns during that period, but sometimes also Roma people linked to social work or the priesthood who worked in these places.

Generally, the interviews were based on a direct dialogue with the subjects, but in some cases, the intermediation of children or grandchildren was used to overcome the technological barrier. In addition, in the case of interviews on controversial or painful subjects (for example, deaths in fires caused by non-Roma in Roma shantytowns), a questionnaire was provided beforehand as a sign of respect in order to establish a consensus on what to keep silent about. The latter is one of the shocking examples of the research procedure when it is supervised or exposed in academic circles. Silence and mediation can be interpreted as an object of criticism in traditional oral history methodology. It is here that the understanding of the Roma researcher from the border and not from the outside plays an important role in understanding these silences and, in many cases, being able to dig into them thanks to trust and recognition among equals.

The non-existence of Romani studies as a defined and recognized field of research in the Spanish curriculum has had as its main consequence the great void of work in this thematic area. Anthropology and sociology have taken the lead in the face of a reiterative historiographical production that, until relatively recently, was only concerned with contextualizing the origins and relations of the Roma with the state, often based on folklore and paternalism. In this sense, the work with oral sources in historiography has generally been characterized by the instrumentalization of testimonies. The latter can be seen mainly in the selection of informants based on the nature of the content to be defended. In addition, the work with informants was based on a relationship of power in which the informant was subordinated to the directives of the researchers without having the opportunity to be part of the project in a cooperative sense. It is not the case, for example, of Paloma Gay Y Blasco (2019) or Patricia Galletti (2021), who has worked from an equitable idea of cooperative anthropology. Thus, compared to European projects, such as “Roma Stories—Oral History Project” or “Gypsy, Roma and Traveller LGBTQ+ Spoken History Archive,” in Spain, only a few critical publications based on oral history exist (e.g. Perriñez-Bolaño, 2023), and there are not even any such specific archival projects, since in the archives themselves there are hardly any official catalogs that take Roma subjects into account.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note the book by Romani anthropologists, Iván Perriñez-Bolaño, entitled “Cosmosonoridades: Cante-gitano y canción-gyu. Epistemologías del Sentir” (2023), that was published during the publication process of this article. In the books, orality, silence, listening, memories and sounds form part of the analytical, theoretical and methodological substratum: the “epistemologies of feeling”. In this context, the author presents the “ethnographies of feeling” as an alternative proposal to colonial subject-object relations, mediated by ethnographic interviews, which he calls “situated-conversations”. The last section of his book deals with the colonial relations that the author (Roma) and the collaborators suffered during the elaboration of the research. The book is not only a co-participatory and multi-localised book between voices, but also linked to various academic and associative projects carried out on an oral and interpersonal level.

In addition to these problems, there is another problem: the fact of being a “Roma historian” who sets out to do research or who is presenting his or her results is often criticized with the warning that one should avoid making a militant history. This is something that is perhaps not pointed out to historians with other profiles who may also find a justification for their ideology in historiography. This is a phenomenon shared by many universities, especially in Europe.

In this context, the global health crisis caused by Covid-19 has forced us to rethink the value of Roma historians in producing the history of our own community. The pandemic has affected all researchers in different ways. In the field of historiography, it is not only those who use archives and libraries who have been most affected. Those historians whose research is based on oral sources have found their activity more difficult because of confinement and social distance. In particular, the main concern has been with elderly informants, who have been the most at-risk group and have been encouraged to delay or not be able to conduct face-to-face interviews. Although the development of new ways of obtaining oral sources by digital means is a fact, the cultural barrier and the prejudiced relationship between researcher and researched subjects is further complicated by the “coldness” of the telematic connection. In this sense, it is worth noting that, almost for the first time, being a Roma historian becomes a privilege. Nevertheless, Roma historians will still have to face those stereotypes of victimization, militant history, or impartiality that reinforce the colonial divide in the academy. Although the above are methodological errors that may arise from inexperience or deliberate approaches by negligent researchers, they cannot lead to the outright rejection of Romani historians as subjects of enunciation. This article aims to be a first approach to how the value of writing a history of Roma being Roma can contribute to banishing the subalternity of both the object of study and those who research it.

### **Confronting historiography in pandemic times**

One of the philosophical problems behind the historiographical production on the history of the Roma is that the interpretative coordinates from which most academics start “make intelligible a certain interpretation of the Roma fact which culminates in ‘the Roma’” (Motos, 2009). This internal coloniality affecting the theoretical development of the object of study is also transferred to the periods preceding the analysis of the information (Garcés, 2016). This means that the way in which the sources are sought and organized also faces the problem outlined above, and fieldwork with oral sources provides a useful way of understanding it.

To begin, the Roma researcher's accessibility to the object of study is greater on a material level compared to non-Roma. For example, on a geographical level, the Romani historian may live with his or her Romani family, his or her Romani marriage, or frequent Romani socialization spaces due to his or her own life trajectory. Therefore, the Covid-19 quarantine has not hindered access to sources of information that coexist with the researcher in his or her immediate circles. However, beyond what is strictly material, some issues stand out at the symbolic level and are of great value, such as identity recognition, trust, and the pre-existence of solidarity networks. These are all things that a non-Roma researcher can also achieve if he or she lives in close proximity to the Roma community. However, in times of pandemic, the development of new research is not so easy, and perhaps, especially for those whose only thread was the academic bureaucracy, "the non-Roma who comes to do research."

In my case, my interest in carrying out interviews was already well-known in family, friends, and association circles. In many cases, they were already planned, and there was always someone I knew who recommended that I talk to someone else in their circle if I did not know them. In this sense, confinement was beneficial to me for two reasons. On the one hand, the need to stay at home and in the neighborhood created the time that some informants had not previously had to talk to me. Thus came the calls or questions on the subject when we passed each other going out into the street for the everyday things that were allowed, such as taking out the rubbish, taking the dog outside, or going shopping. On the other hand, the need to keep busy led many families, not just Roma, to dust off their photo albums and diaries, which served as a stimulus to obtain more information. The latter is interesting because, in contrast to the experiences of non-Roma colleagues who found it difficult to access certain documents from personal archives, I had the privilege of being able to photocopy or photograph them and then work on them.

Now I am going to give you, as you can give me, my opinion of the time I talked to you; I am telling you as an old Roma to a young Roma. I see you as an orderly person, a person eager for knowledge, interested in knowing details of Roma life. That is why I entrust you with these stories and photographs so that only you can see them.<sup>2</sup>

However, apart from the privilege that this might entail, the barrier of being a researcher was sometimes present when I had testimonies that, out of respect, I could not use, even if I anonymized them. In any case, confronting the history of the recent past on the

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with an old Roma from Madrid, July 19, 2020.

Roma in times of pandemic as a Roma historian showed the value of recognizing authoritative voices within the community itself both inside and outside.

### **A history from us: Identity recognition**

Sharing the meanings and significance of the *Romanipén* (concept referring to the feeling of belonging to the Roma community) is not within the reach of non-Roma researchers, and this is the basic principle for communication to be established outside the modern-colonial frameworks from which the academy works and which many non-Roma researchers apply directly or indirectly. Entering the fieldwork from the enunciation of one's own "cultural ontology" to which one belongs negates the need to establish previous relationships outside the study material and to gain confidence, either by using the language or by understanding the intra-historical references of the community without the need for a prior explanation.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, during the pandemic, I have been able to carry out interviews, explaining only my origin and interest, when potential informants have not directly contacted me "because you are the historian who has to tell our story, otherwise the others will tell the story they have always told."<sup>4</sup>

### **Everything remains between us: trust**

The oral transmission of the historical persecution of the Roma has made trust an indispensable condition for the communication of memories. Likewise, with regard to historical memories, the memory of the Roma is expressed in a traumatic way due to repression and makes us think of information as a bargaining chip, if not directly as a tool that could be used against the Roma themselves<sup>5</sup>. Thus, talking to non-Roma about the genealogy or cultural practices of a particular family is considered dangerous because of the use to which this information could be put. As a result, many non-Roma historians face huge gaps when reconstructing historical trajectories or the insertion of Roma in broader contexts that affect, for example, political participation, employment links, or the relationship with the occupation of public space. This is something that can also oc-

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<sup>3</sup> This whole approach stems from the reading of Romani authors such as Periañez-Bolaño (2016, pp. 29-53) and Ismael Cortés (2021). Furthermore, in his book "Epistemologies of Feeling", Periañez Bolaño uses the term "cultural ontology", which he associates with the concept of Romanipén to distinguish it from the identities constructed within the framework of nation states and social sciences, including nation, culture, territory, people, race, land and modern colonial borders. Another meaning that the author gives to the term "cultural ontology" is related to three other terms that he proposes in his work: *onto-ecological*, *deterritorialised identities* and *territorialised identities*.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with an old Roma from Madrid, November 20, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> This idea stems from the concepts described by Periañez-Bolaño, such as "footprints of Roma-Gypsy colonial trauma", "great colonial traumas", "sound traces of colonial trauma" (2021).

cur independently of the historian's Roma status and has been reinforced by social anxiety due to the pandemic. In my case, therefore, close contact with the Roma family groups in my immediate circle has allowed me to design questionnaires that I have given to the informants' grandchildren, and they have conducted the oral interview themselves. While this breaks somewhat with the methodological orthodoxy of Oral History<sup>6</sup> as advocated by authors such as Ronald Fraser, it has been an adaptation to the pandemic context, which can be incorporated by organizing the results in a systematic way (Fraser, 1990). The climate of trust and respect for the oral transmission of older people can turn the questionnaires carried out by the grandchildren or children of the informants into a more valuable source than the aseptic interview of the historian, Roma or non-Roma, with a tape recorder, a notebook, and a police interrogation attitude.

### **One of our own: the pre-existence of ties of solidarity**

Contrary to how it has traditionally been interpreted, Roma are not passive subjects oblivious to the context in which they live. For this reason, they also face complex historical and social circumstances that have defined them as social beings. Some of these are particularly traceable since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and include self-regulation as a community in terms of justice and organization of power relations, orientation towards forms of subsistence economy, and the existence of strong ties of solidarity of origin among its members. This last factor is related to the previous sections and is significant because of its impact on the search for informants. Unlike other researchers, the Roma historian does not have to resort to associations, organizations, or indirect links with the Roma communities. He or she finds informants as a general rule among his or her own family and local neighbors who, in turn, share direct links with a wider mass of the Roma population in which to find the subjects who fit the research in progress.

Noteworthy from my own experience during the pandemic was the fact that I gained access to new data through those who had already been interviewed: "A *primo* who is a Roma historian is studying the neighborhood—see if you can talk to him."<sup>7</sup> The introduction letter validated by the relatives of the new interviewees is a type of legitimacy difficult to obtain outside the Romanipén, as it is part of the epistemological construction of the memories transmitted (on the importance of Romanipén in memory and identity, see Carmona, 2013).

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<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth discussion on orality see Ong (1982), Olson and Torrance (1995), Rivera Cusicanqui (2015, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Interview conducted by an adult Roma with his father using the author's questionnaires, 28 September 2020.

### **Colonial discourse in the academy: Where are we and where are we going?**

The presence of Romani studies in Spanish research is episodic. First, there is a gap in the historiographical narrative that has only been filled by a philanthropic production linked to romanticism and by approaches based on enlightened colonial reason. Second is the factor of decentralization. For its part, the discussion on whether to speak of Romanology, Roma studies, or Romani studies has drifted towards a controversy that is not sufficiently developed in Spain and which lacks even a resolute vocation from the theoretical point of view (Sierra, 2018)<sup>8</sup>. In the “Languages of resistance: Ian Hancock’s contribution to Romani studies” (2017), coordinated by Hristo Kyuchukov, William New, and Thomas Acton, Roma studies are discussed. The interesting thing is that the volume is dedicated to the contribution of Ian Hancock, a Romani historian, professor, and researcher at the University of Texas, with whom the coordinators of the volume carried out a research stay. The result of this contact is the revision and vindication of Romani studies, especially Ian Hancock, who claims to be part of this movement and directs the “Romani Studies and Archives of the Documentation Centre” program in Texas. Ultimately, the decision is a particular one, but the evidence of decades of discussion leads to great and unknown Romani academics claiming their place within Romani Studies precisely to vindicate the meaning of its existence as a discipline. Indeed, the intellectual autonomy of Romani thinkers allows for the deconstruction of what has hitherto been a colonial treatment of the subject.

As Marushiakova and Popov suggest in the aforementioned publication (Kyuchukov et al., 2017), there is nothing special about Romani studies beyond the subject, which is why they should stop vainly wandering around and be regulated by the same methods and criteria specific to the individual sciences. This does not mean that it should not constitute a field that nominates its existence but that the debate must once and for all overcome the orientalism underlying it, irrespective of the discipline from which it is approached. It is also true to Marushiakova’s comment that one must stop looking at the academic traditions and ethnicity of the writer, as without Orientalism and with proper practices, the epistemological challenges are the same for all. However, in our opinion, this can only be done when there is a recognition of the subaltern, which in the Spanish case has not occurred in the same way as it has in Eastern Europe. In any case, the intersubjectivity of the Roma scholar or any other intellectual makes research a neutral space

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<sup>8</sup>At this point, it should be noted that since 2022 a research line entitled “Romani studies and epistemologies of the South” has been established by the Romani researcher and professor Iván Perriñez-Bolaño at the Master in Anthropology: Interculturality, Heritage and Development, at the University of Seville.



of discussion inconceivable. This is why academic traditions, approaches, and even the intentions behind the use of a concept remain important, both within and outside Romani studies.

Marushiakova says that those who “choose to remain among their own must do so with a clear awareness that they are doomed to be second-class scientists in terms of modern global academic realities” (Kyuchukov, 2017, p. 226). However, perhaps it is not that simple, and like Hanife Ali, the Roma woman rescued from the shadows by Spivak, subalternity must be overcome by other means rather than by buying, in this case, ethnic freedom at the cost of class. Romani studies should be an approach to be taken from the point of view of the researcher’s proposed approach to the subject at hand.

Criticism of the lack of historians linked to Roma studies is a fact. It is also a fact that Roma history has been constructed in a fragmentary way and is more concerned with national histories than with understanding the persecution of the Roma from a transnational perspective (Marsh, 2007). If this is the starting point, with the addition of the colonial issues mentioned in the previous paragraphs, there is still a long way to go, for example, in the methodological development of Roma studies as a specific field of study. Perhaps for this reason, we detect a great void in studies that deal with the analysis of enunciation from the epistemologies of Romani subalterns.<sup>9</sup> However, the theoretical frameworks that would be necessary to place Roma researchers at the center of research on the ethnic communities to which they belong have begun to take shape. For his part, Iván Periañez (2021) states that colonial trauma and the traces it left in the memory of the Roma in the form of oblivion, syncretism, or misrepresentation does not prevent it from also being expressed as resistance and new power of emancipation in the field of knowledge:

According to our experiences, knowledge, and coexistence, we are aware that the inherited marks of modernity are visible in our bodies, knowledge, and practices because they have been and are real, experienced, and transmitted inter-generationally in our families. They are spoken, they are grieved, they are (in-)digested, they are sung and danced, they are written, they are resisted and re-existed. We are aware of the colonial imprint and trauma, and we are so, among other things, because we feel, live, and express the Romanipén (cultural ontology and Roma identity, Romaniness) in its plurality of identities. Both locations allow us to re-know ourselves in Intercultural diversity (Calés, Kalderash, Manush, Travellers,

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<sup>9</sup> I refer to the exercise carried out, for example, in the case of indigenous and black people: Bruce (1984) and Miller (2009).

Sintis, among others), so it is complex to admit that there is a weakened consciousness of our historical and present realities. (pp. 1-19)

Belonging to an ethnic group is precisely what initiates the critical discussion and is indicative of the fact that there is no weakened conscience THAT could hinder research if the appropriate scientific parameters are followed in order to produce history whether one is Roma or non-Roma. In fact, following Cayetano Fernández's readings, the main problem is not the Roma who produce history but those who, without being Roma, make strong value judgments under the umbrella of Roma studies on the basis of epistemological limitations often caused precisely by not being part of the target community (Fernández, 2021). It is at this point that the role of Roma researchers takes on special importance and should make us think about the explanation why research did not stop—and even benefit from it—during the pandemic for Roma historians who study the recent past of their community.

## **Conclusions**

Although all this may seem obvious, the pandemic has reinforced the theoretical argument that the Roma voice is not only important as an object of study but is the master key to understanding the community itself in all its complexity. The pandemic has made it necessary to adapt the ways to do fieldwork or collect historical oral sources, but in many cases, it has been impossible. A non-Roma informant who has worked with Roma for thirty years told me: "If you are not present in person with the poor Roma, all the work done is lost, and the pandemic has encouraged this disconnection in welfare work." To which I ask myself: Were things being done well? Why face-to-face mentoring is needed? Perhaps it is not a question of "being" (spatially) but of "being" (ontologically speaking), and, in this sense, "being a Roma historian" allows us not to lose the work done because "you are already where you are."

Therefore, there are no new dynamics or approaches for the Roma historian, but rather the strengthening of traditional channels of communication, of which oral history is the greatest exponent. All of this highlights the fact that in disciplines such as History or Anthropology, cooperative research must be defended when it is not a Roma who carries out the research. This may open doors to knowledge, possibly restricted to a community that sometimes uses secrecy as a survival mechanism. In this sense, one of the difficulties I encountered during the research was that some potential informants were put off by their distrust of technology to share personal experiences that dealt with important anthropological issues among Roma such as respect and mourning. On the positive side,

however, it should be noted that other informants found the motivation to digitize letters, diaries, or photographs, spontaneously generating the foundations of what could be a future archive of personal stories.

Therefore, research not only generates demands for the decolonization of studies but also brings to the forefront those agents who are able to fight for themselves against the Roma-phobia from which they suffer. In this sense, one of the best ways for the academy and academics is to provide spaces of prominence to Roma academics who have demonstrated outstanding results—especially those working with Roma communities. In this way, the prejudice that a Roma historian or anthropologist will only do “militant and victimizing history” ought to be abandoned. This turns the Roma historian into just another victim and thus reproduces the academic paternalism about the need to guide Roma into the new worlds of research as if we did not know them well. In conclusion, writing history about the community to which the historian himself belongs is a stimulus to research. Moreover, it promotes the idea that Roma voices within the academy are needed as an innovative force to unmask the complexity of issues that have not yet been written about.

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## **Povzetek**

Kolonialna razlika med akademskimi institucijami in njihovimi raziskovalci ne vpliva le na način, kako Rome analizirajo kot predmet preučevanja, temveč tudi na legitimnost romskih raziskovalcev, ki proučujejo svojo skupnost. Zgodovinsko raziskovanje bližnje preteklosti s pomočjo ustnih virov v času pandemije Covid-19 je opozorilo na pomembno vlogo romskih zgodovinarjev pri preučevanju Romov. Namen članka je vzpostaviti odnos do notranjega kolonializma, ki vpliva na raziskovanje in metodološke možnosti, ki jih romski raziskovalec vzpostavlja v odnosu do ostalih. Članek izpostavlja kritiko kolonialne pozicije in z njim povezanih narativov oblasti, ki se odražajo v procesih, ki umeščajo romskega zgodovinarja v središče samega raziskovalnega vprašanja.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Romi, zgodovinarji, akademija, kolonializem, pandemija

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