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## Dear Gadge (non-Romani) Scholars...

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*This is the third of a three-part blog series, “The White Norm in Gypsy and Romani Studies,” about the racialization and othering of Romani people against a white norm in standard Gypsy and Romani studies. The first segment explored the [contribution of Gypsy studies to the perception of the Roma as inferior](#) to their white European counterparts. The second segment showed how the [legacy of such thinking manifests itself in modern Romani scholarship](#). Finally, the third segment discusses identity as a privilege and suggests Romani representation and reflectivity as ways forward in the field of Romani studies.*

For a long time, we have embraced most anybody as “expert” or “objective” interpreters of Roma realities, except for Romani researchers, who have often been perceived by their non-Romani [fellows as political and overly tied to NGOs, emotional, or subjective](#). Their scientific objectivity has also been called into question more frequently than that of Gadge scholars.

Also, the paternalistic intent to “help” or “rescue” Roma still hinders researchers’ understanding and reflexivity on the negative or false representations they perpetuate. But as the field of Romani scholarship grows, so does the exploration of biases and assumptions that lead to the misrepresentation of the Roma people. White normativity and [gadjo-ness](#) are being examined in a more critical manner. Thus, the [ongoing scholarly conversation](#) on “decolonizing” Romani Studies is imperative.

But in what concrete ways has the Romani scholarship been colonized? Throughout this piece, I discuss three types of colonization - terminology, content, and representation - which I have encountered in academia, including at the 2017 Convention of [the Association for the Study of Nationalities \(ASN\)](#), where I was invited to be a participant in the [Stereotypes, Exclusions, and Ethnic Categories in the Roma Experience](#) panel.



discrimination against Roma. The advancement of unbiased research on Roma identity is only possible if all scholars start deconstructing the elements of the “colonization” of Romani studies in regards to terminology, contents, hierarchies, and representation. Thus, a more thoroughly concerted effort to minimize bias, misconduct, misrepresentation or ethical issues in Roma-related research is needed. Many non-Roma scholars have been reliable allies, contributing substantially to the field of Romani Studies, so I hope they join the critique and encourage others to question preconceptions and biases.

### *On Terminology*

In Roma scholarship, some contrasts and asymmetries have arisen from the dichotomy between “insider” and “outsider” power dynamics, views, and interpretations.

If we are to start with the right of the Roma, or of any other ethnic group, to have and define their own ethnic identity, we must acknowledge non-Roma scholars’ role in influencing Romani identity markers. And along with other objective and subjective characteristics, etc., the ethnonym we use to define the Roma constitutes a fundamental determinant in the construction of their identity, too. Yet, part of the Gadjó scholarship is still suggesting the use of fixed, racialized, harmful signifiers like *Tsigan* (I will use the example of Romania, but there are similar debates in other countries) and *Gypsy* (globally), knowing that the Gadjé imposed them on false and rigid symbols and markers.

Some Gadjé scholars suggest that Tsigan (T-word) identity and Gypsy as an umbrella term are more accurate and inclusive ethnonyms than Roma. They argue that the term Roma is a recently employed political term used by Roma NGOs and the European Commission. For instance, Maria Timeea Elena explains that “the term ‘Gypsy’ avoids the strong political connotation the term ‘Roma’ implies, because it has been used as a tool for nation-building by Roma elites.”

Yet, the T-word holds heavy historical weight, along with its illegal and offensive nature. The *Tsigan* category connoted “slave” for 500 years. There has been evidence that Romani leaders have demanded to replace the name *Tsigani* with Roma since 1919, and there have been political efforts to officially recognize Roma as the umbrella term of for Romani groups across the world since 1971 and even prior to that.

Furthermore, the use of *Gypsy* as the umbrella term for Roma aims to be inclusive of all



oppression through their steady representations as thieves, uneducated, nomads, and uncivilized. This approach institutionalizes “the traditional image of a fictional ‘Gypsy’ by taking it as the basis for a political category of a minority people in Europe.” Gadge academia contributed to the construction of the *Gypsy* identity and continues to do so: “it can be assumed that by behaving in ‘anti-social’ way, as perceived by the Gadge, every person can be turned into a Gypsy - regardless of their ethnic membership.” And so, the Gypsy identity is an outside view, and the boundaries between “us”(Gadge) and “them” (Roma) reflect essentially a superior-inferior hierarchy.

Thus, while rejecting the political, cultural, and historical processes that led to Roma identity formation as well as the ambiguities and the dynamics of the Roma identity, these scholars embrace a fixed Gypsy identity constructed and controlled by external agents who held symbolic and material power. But *Gypsy* stands as a symbol for Romani historical oppression and gadjo-ness.

Scholars also argue that the *Gypsy* terminology is more inclusive of individuals who do not identify as Roma but are seen as *Gypsy* by others. “We hope that use of this term can highlight ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity, referring both to the Roma that originated in India specifically as well as other peripatetic communities from various geographical areas, such as Jenische, Sinti, Lom, Dom, Irish Travellers, and others,” explained the editors of the Journal of Gypsy Studies in 2015. And so, they choose to preserve a false racial designation, based on no common objective or subjective characteristics, including a sense of “we-ness” or ethnic consciousness. Moreover, they neglect that there are groups who not only reject the *Gypsy* identity but feel no bond with the Roma one either. Take the example of the Egyptians in Albania or Kosovo. They claim no shared history, language, *groupness* with the Roma or *Gypsies*, yet they have been pushed through discourse, policies, and measures into the same social category. They reject this categorization, but they too lack the social and political power required to strengthen the pillars of their identity.

Romani identity has been constructed and strengthened by Roma on some agreed upon “inside boundaries” or markers in relation to other groups on the basis of descent. Various political and historical contexts have built the ambiguity and the diversity of Romani identity, separating them in subgroups, names, dialects, or customs. Yet, if we were to follow a constructivist approach, instability, ambiguity, and fluidity constitute essential attributes of any identity. And in fact, such diversity also exists among other groups, including dominant



north of Romania speak a different dialect from those in the south and have different customs, traditions, food, and clothes. They may display obvious similarities with some neighboring nations. The construction of the Romanian identity was recent, too. Yet, they are granted an undeniable right to their own identity.

I am not arguing that researchers must all use the term Roma when they conduct studies with specific communities and sub-groups who prefer to maintain the *Tsigan*, *Gitano*, *Gypsy* or other terminology—this applies to some groups in Hungary, Spain, or the UK. Those are specific cases and should be treated as such. But using them to advance a global *Gypsy* identity that is involuntary, reactive, and imposed seems opportunistic. Or more precisely, imposing a negative, racialized and derogatory identity on a global country-less people — and including in that category, groups that reject *Gypsy*-ness, etc. — is a symbol of social power and white control over minority identities.

Scholars also argue that *Tsigan* or *Gypsy* represent the views of their “subjects” or “informants” as oppose to the “political agendas” of the Roma “elites.” For example, in 2010, the [Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities](#) (ISPMN) published [a paper by Maria Timeea Elena](#), who interviewed 21 people (10 Gadge and 11 Roma) in a village in Brasov, Romania and concluded that the Roma wanted to be called *Gypsies*. [“My research demonstrates that most of these struggles have failed – Gypsies do not consider themselves one single homogenous group; more than that, they do not consider themselves Roma, as the results of my research indicates,”](#) she concluded. Yet, when making this conclusion, along with methodological and sampling concerns, one should not overlook simple facts. Gadge predecessor scholars used their white privilege and their established position in the social hierarchy to impose in the literature *Tsigan* and *Gypsy* as signifiers of Romani identity. Furthermore, Gadge have generally enjoyed control over research, public discourse, and more recently the media, and have advanced the terminology they wished. At the same time, Romani narratives have been suppressed, starting with basic disregard in school programs across Europe to teach Romani and non-Romani children about Roma history, including developments regarding the historical weight of the T-word and the derogatory nature of *Gypsy*. There have been not many available public avenues to advance Romani narratives. And therefore, scholars suggest a fixed, boxed Gypsy identity, over a self-transforming, multiple, ambiguous Romani identity.

Some Gadge scholars also advance the T-word as a neutral ethnonym used by Roma and



wish, research ethics training would be an effective way to prepare scholars not to engage in racial slurs and offensive terminology. As a Black artist told comedian Bill Maher recently, referring to the use of the N-word, [“that’s our word now, and you can’t have it back.”](#) And indeed, the history of the T-word is similar to the one of the N-word in the US regarding its historical load and offensive nature. The difference, though, is that while some African-Americans may choose to refer to themselves using the N-word, it’s socially unacceptable for others to use the N-word in the US. For example, Bill Maher’s recent use of the N-word on public television was largely met with [criticism in the public forum](#). Even Senator Ben Sasse, Maher’s guest, revisited his inopportune reaction on the show and stated that [“The history of the N-word is an attack on universal human dignity.”](#)

Following these debates, I keep wondering why we have not managed to advance to that level of understanding about the weight of *Tsigan* (the T-word) and *Gypsy* in Europe and beyond. And I think that in the case of the Roma, all these historical and political facts do not make their way into the fabric of society because of a general dismissal of Roma voices, their history and sufferings, leaders, and scholarship. Also, in a way, in the absence of a nation-state instituting the symbols of the political Roma identity, scholars fail to recognize the distinctive nature and the fluidity of *Roma*-ness and all of its objective and subjective markers. Essentially, in the case of the Roma, identity building and transformation suffer from authorial privilege, facing an asymmetric balance of power as an obstacle to control over Romani consciousness, history, and symbols.

### *On Contents and Methodology*

There is not much inquiry into producing content that portrays Roma as criminals, uncivilized, and uneducated, yet that pattern prevails undetected. As I discussed in [the second segment of this blog series](#), it is often acceptable for academics to claim high criminality rates in the Roma community, despite a lack of hard data on the subject. Also, the preference in some papers for “illegal” over “informal” in descriptions of informal trading goes unnoticed. Likewise, the uncritical use of expressions such as “famous Gypsy palaces” is deemed acceptable. In academic papers and talks, these word choices often remain unattributed or without quotation marks to signal that the authors recognized or disagreed with the popular, pejorative image of Roma as exotic or criminal.



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Much scholarship has not managed to move beyond the biased mode of thoughts that advance education as somehow opposed to Romani cultural patterns. For example, when concluding, rather uncritically, that teachers do their best to teach Romani children basic reading and writing skills solely, scholars proliferate low expectations and a “let’s civilize the Romani children” sentiment, reinforcing the widespread belief in Roma inferiority. They fail to recognize that in fact there is a need for teachers to do much more to teach Romani children to comparable standards with Gadje, especially needing to increase the 1% of Roma youths who make to college. Accepting the arguments about Roma inferiority and their anti-education cultural pattern contributes to further racialization of Roma. Also, through emphasizing Roma education as a “civilizing measure,” researchers send the message to policy makers and teachers that it is acceptable to teach Roma at inferior levels and aim solely for lower levels of education.

There is not much inquiry into the biases in data collection and the use of corrupt research instruments in studies related to Roma identity either. Such practices have gone unnoticed for many decades, and scholars do not think critically about their methodologies, how they decide to write about Roma, and the consequences their choices have on Roma communities.

A few papers I have come across have been conducted by scholars at ISPMN in Romania. Other Romani voices in Romania have questioned the work of the ISPMN, but here I will mainly address some methodological concerns about the way that Romani people are identified and consequently racialized by ISPMN.

For instance, in one study presented at the ASN Convention, to count the Roma, an employee of the municipality, who was defined as an “external expert,” classified each household from Cadastral Registers as Roma, non-Roma or mixed. Based on this classification, the research team applied a questionnaire to all the households the “expert” had perceived as Roma. The study repeatedly referred to the households that were



Also, in the [SocioRoMap study](#), ISPMN used several research instruments to address various research areas, including a full [community census](#) of Roma households. The count of Roma was also based on questionnaires completed by “[a designated employee of the local municipality, preferably a social worker](#).” And although this project included questionnaires that applied to health and school mediators, NGOs, etc., the expert who identified people as Roma was again someone assigned by a local municipality.

So, one simple question regarding ISPMN counting tools is the following: if after using this research tool to measure identity and count Roma, would they consider applying the same methodology to count all other minority groups in Romania?

Let's try a thought experiment. Imagine I am conducting a study in a mixed Romanian-Hungarian village in Romania, and I try to identify the Hungarians there by asking a Romanian “external expert” to classify them as such. Wouldn't that affect the policy measures we could potentially propose, based on the (small) numbers the expert suggested? Wouldn't that rightfully lead to questions from the Hungarian elites as to why members of the community were involved in the count? Look again at the Roma: some scholars seem not to be concerned with the consequences of their numbers and research on Romani populations, as the Roma critique still occupies an incredibly weak and subaltern position in the social hierarchy.

We have more reasons for doubting this approach: the study teams took for granted that these “external experts” were some sort of authority in identifying the Roma. The so-called external experts could have used biased criteria and markers to identify the Roma (e.g. identifying them based on their skin color and “lifestyle”). Some of those perceived as Roma, based on racialized criteria, may not be Roma at all. Or, the “external expert” may have cause to manipulate numbers, given that municipalities often benefit from declaring a lower number of local Roma to avoid claims for cultural rights associated with the Roma percentage. Finally, listing of Romani people in a local Cadastral Register could potentially cause harm to the targeted community. This exercise may cause the “external expert” to spread or use the same information, and eventually, some of these interviewees could find out about the listing exercise.

ISPMP could have simply instructed the municipalities to use the expertise of the Roma experts to identify the Roma household. But instead, the ISPMN only used the County Roma



Implicit biases against Roma inform these methodologies. Researchers trust the Gadge local leaders, who are seen as neutral, objective voices, but do not apply the same authority to the views of local Romani leaders, who end up being mistrusted, minimized, and dismissed as “NGO-style actors” with political agendas.

Thus, rethinking and reimagining research methodologies and employing reflexivity in research are a must in Romani studies.

### *On Representation*

Imagine a panel where only male panelists deliver presentations on discrimination against women. It would be considered outrageous by feminist scholars and beyond. Yet, events on the Roma people continuously ignore Romani representation. At the ASN’s [Stereotypes, Exclusions, and Ethnic Categories in the Roma Experience](#) panel, there was not a single Romani panelist. I joined as a discussant to ensure that the Romani perspective was represented. Also, as [Mirga points out](#), at the [Gypsy Lore Society](#) annual conference in 2014, “out of all 100 plus speakers, fewer than 10 were of Romani background.”

One might think that Romani scholars lack representation at events because of their small numbers (only 1% of the Roma make it to higher education in most European countries) or because their scientific work is not competitive with that of a *Gadge*’s. That is not accurate. For instance, at the ASN panel on Roma, two presentations involved questionable methodologies and anti-Romani biases, and the third presentation included a short comment about the Roma of 2 to 3 minutes at the end of a presentation about a different subject, with no slides about the Roma in the Powerpoint presentation. But the scholarship does not question the trivialization of Romani issues or the lack of honesty of scholars who fail to address them appropriately and thoroughly.

Many conference organizers encourage a lack of responsibility and genuine interest in Romani studies among scholars by accepting not only poor quality papers but also papers only vaguely related to Roma. Other conference organizers fail to identify and target networks, listserves, and organizations of which Romani scholars are members. Also, many Romani scholars are not members or employees of academic centers that could financially support their participation or facilitate fundraising. And although there is a massive amount of research on Roma conducted in many universities in Europe, Romani representation on research teams has yet to become a standard practice.



Romani representation is missing from the editorial boards of journals, too. The recently set up Journal of Gypsy Studies includes no Romani scholar on [its editorial board](#). Neither does the Gypsy Lore Society's journal, [Romani Studies](#). The same approach was taken by the [European Academic Network of Romani Studies](#) (EANRS) in the initial election of its scientific committee: "[no Romani scholar has been elected, resulting in the resignation of Professor Thomas Acton](#)." Finally, ISPMN in Romania pays little attention to Romani representation, too, including on its [scientific board](#).

Romani language is often left behind in instances when representation seems opportune. For example, the ISPMN is a governmental body under the authority of the Romanian Government, which covers research for all "[national minorities and of other ethnic communities living in Romania](#)." So, if research is published in Romanian, Hungarian, and English, it would be appropriate to also publish, at least some Roma related studies, in Romani, too. It is not. This is just another way the Roma identity is conveyed as insignificant.

A joint Roma and Gadge effort to advance more accurate Roma representations, through unbiased research and cultural work, is needed. At the ASN Convention, toward the end of the panel, someone in the audience asked me how Gadge scholars could help.

Here are ten things Gadge scholars can do:

1. Employ genuine scholarly reflexivity and unbiased inquiry in research related to the Roma. Critically explore the nexus between three key areas: academic biases informed by previous work and common knowledge, scholars' positions in the social hierarchy, and theoretical approaches on the Roma.
2. Consider shifting the framework you use to consider Roma, from social issues and lifestyle to white privilege/*gadjo*-ness and long-lasting racist *doxa*.
3. Include Roma people in events related to them. We must move beyond the time when Roma people sit in the audience and have their culture explained back to them. Romani representation at Roma-related events contributes to the disassembling of the hierarchical relations of power.
4. Involve Roma as equal partners in Roma-related research, not only to validate findings but also to participate equally and substantively in all stages of studies.



5. Employ participatory action research methodologies to produce unbiased, community-driven data by inviting Roma people to propose and lead research and to formulate conclusions and policy recommendations.
6. Use training and mentoring in working with Roma and non-Roma youth and emerging scholars to build up their skills in conducting participatory research that is ethical, professional, unbiased, and culturally sensitive.
7. Aim not simply to produce scholarship and gain academic recognition, but use your own Roma research and presence at Roma events to produce relevant data for the communities and inform the audience correctly and substantively about the Roma.
8. Do not reinforce the T-word or the *Gypsy* terminology and similar racial slurs when generally talking about the global Roma diaspora or about the Roma in a particular country where those slurs carry historical weight (e.g. Romania).
9. Be aware of the struggles and gains of other communities of scholars. As [Matthew Clair](#) [argued](#) in a 2016 piece, “[f]or Du Bois and his colleagues, their racial identity as black delegitimized their scientific scholarship on race, rather than serving as proof of its authenticity,” Things have slowly progressed in African American Studies, and so should in Romani Studies as well. Do recognize the value of insider (Roma) knowledge in decolonizing Romani Studies.
10. The appropriation of our identity negates the positive movements Gadge have contributed to Romani communities. We respect and value you as allies. We understand that after years of dedication to Roma communities, you may feel you share a bit in that identity, but dishonest Roma self-designation seems rather opportunistic.

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## MOST SHARED

‘Late Show’

12 Undocumented

Meghan McCain

British Paper To

Nancy Pelosi:



**Stephen Colbert  
Calls In Sick**

**Golf Course Fired,  
Lawyer Says**

**‘It Scares Me A  
Lot’**

**Damages For  
Erroneous Story**

**Remains  
Uncertain**

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Suspected Gunman  
Underway**

**NY Middle School  
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Parents Claim 4 Black  
Girls Were Strip-  
Searched**

**‘Frozen’ Alligators Ride  
Out Frigid  
Temperatures Beneath  
The Ice**

**Nixon Foundation  
Scrambles To Distance  
Late President From  
Roger Stone**

**‘Honey Boy’ Is Where  
Shia LaBeouf Went To  
Sort Out His Demons**

**Police Officer Allegedly  
Killed His Colleague In  
Game Of Russian  
Roulette**

**James McAvoy Spoofs  
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