

Words that don't come easy.  
Intersectional and post-colonial feminist understandings  
about Roma in East-European societies

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**Abstract**

As an anthropologist, during the last two decades, I conducted fieldwork among Romanian Roma dwellers and/or migrants in various national contexts. As a feminist, I paid much attention to gender relations and to intersectional issues. I often focused my attention on women's agency. I can paraphrase Gayatri Spivak's question by saying that I was and I am interested on how, when and in which political conditions the Roma women can speak... or be silent/silenced. My fieldwork experience as well as the postcolonial and critical theory readings I have done<sup>1</sup> led me to ask questions about racism and sexism which embrace all my women and gender relations centered research on Roma. This text is a personal epistemological *manifesto* emerged from this interrogation. In its lines, I examine how a *Gadji* (non-Roma) feminist anthropologist, like me, could discuss the race and racism issues in contemporary societies that Roma are part of? Its writing is also produced by a certain frustration of not being heard enough among European peers when stating orally the following arguments.

**Keywords:** intersectionality, post-colonial feminism, Roma women, Eastern Europe

**The anthropologist and the Roma**

Many of the last 25 years scientific reports on Roma deprivation (World Bank, CoE, UNDP cross-country researches, myriads of national surveys etc.) can appear as simply using different definitions and categories like "Roma women", in order to consider gender and ethnicity as radically different from "ours". Here are two examples of these typical assumptions we can read in this kind of research reports:

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<sup>1</sup>I express here my gratitude to *PostCit* – « *Penser la différencieraciale et postcoloniale* », the research group in University of Geneva, who gave me the opportunity to encounter inspiring people and readings since 2011 <http://www.unige.ch/sciences-societe/incite/bienvenue/groupe-de-rech/postcit/>. My thanks go equally to my friend and colleague Julien Debonneville, with whom I had many passionate discussions about anthropology and postcolonial studies during all these years and who had revised an early version of this text with a critical eye.

- "the precarious health of Roma women who give birth and raise numerous children can influence their health state and medical care access" <sup>2</sup>

- "the low education level and lack of professional qualification of Roma women get lower their chances to enter the labor market and implicitly lead to the traditional life continuum"<sup>3</sup>.

Feminist or not, most of the anthropologists do not feel comfortable with this type of scientific discourse because it generalizes, homogenizes and reifies sharp divisions and categories, it uncritically uses notions like 'tradition', 'Roma', 'women', 'health' or 'education' and disregard the specific local economics and political contexts and the complexity of concrete daily social relations. Its logics in terms of averages, clusters and typologies seems to obscure significant insiders' stratifications of social status, experiences, micro/level ties and resources - which conflicts, in a more general approach, with an epistemological and methodological *credo* of the social and cultural anthropology. In addition, these statements don't consider the "embedded agency" - the ways people act within cultural contexts to change the contexts they live in:

*"looking at and listening to real people doing real things in a given historical moment, past or present, and trying to figure out what they are doing or have done will or will not reconfigure the world they live in"* (Ortner, 1996: 2).

According to British anthropologist Michael Stewart, who intensively studied by ethnographical fieldwork a Roma group in the 80's Hungary (Stewart, 1997), the "under-class" term (to be found in Anglo-American sociology and sometimes equivalent to "out-caste", then recuperated by Hungarian sociologists Ladanyi and Szelenyi) is not appropriate for describing the post-socialist deprivation pattern of Roma groups. He considers it as " *problematic because it exaggerates the reality of separation and in so doing it reproduces the very ideology by which the exclusion of 'the Gypsies' tends to be justified*" (Stewart, 2001: 133). Inspired by Antony W. Marx's book (1996) about the differences between US, South Africa and Brazil racisms, Stewart is very skeptical about the racist discrimination experienced by Roma - in his view, these groups' deprivation, exclusion and marginality in East European countries are to be considered by what he calls *renewed paradigms* (my underlining). According to Stewart, race is a modern, scientist distinction born within the wide European colonial context and not the one that Roma and non-Roma people use in their daily interactions. He points out that racial definition of the excluded is not fixed but a movement, a historical process, a construction depending on state, on racial regime, on the broader context where poverty appears as an issue, etc. Like most of the anthropologists and other social scientist (see for example, the ongoing MIGROM European multi-national team project<sup>4</sup>), Stewart suggests that we should mostly consider different researches, if possible based on ethnographic fieldwork, showing that Roma people not only survive but successfully organize their activities, by coming up with "original solutions to unexpected problems", and in doing so, creating culture in different ways.

Echoing Stewart's argument, most of the anthropologists with a deep knowledge of Eastern European contexts (e.g. Kligman, 2001 or Olivera, 2009) are very skeptical about the way in that Roma are defined as a racial minority. They also criticize the way that top-down so-called "integration" or "inclusive" European and/or national policies participate to the marginalization of Roma in those nationalist oriented societies.

<sup>2</sup>Cace, Preoteasa, Tomescu, Stanescu, *Legal si egalpepiatamunciipentrucomunitatile de romi*, 2010

<sup>3</sup>*EU inclusive data and exchange of good practices regarding the inclusion of Roma population- between Romania, Bulgaria, Italy and Spain*, Soros Foundation Romania, 2012

<sup>4</sup><http://migrom.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/>

However, it seems to me that the social inequalities characteristic of the late modern and global societies, cannot leave any social anthropologist indifferent. If one is careful not to essentialize the ethnicization of poverty, as Gail Kligman (2001) calls for, one can try to understand how ethnicity tends to essentialize and move into “race” in poverty contexts, how gender, age, class and race intersect and create new and deeper discriminations. Thus, in my view, in that 2001 article, Stewart seems to avoid and obscure the power problem. In my opinion, power related questions like the following must imperatively be raised and challenged by anthropology. Who has the right to speak (create definitions, categories, clusters, statements and researches) and who is silent? How State and supra-state governing societies affects people?<sup>5</sup>

Another aspect, which seems to be forgotten in Stewart’s view about racism, refers to emotions: being hurt, suffering, feeling humiliated. Of course, first thought goes to Roma WW2 deportation survivors and their memories. If much work was done to reconstruct the collective memories of deportation (*porajmos* and/or *samudaripenin romanilanguages*) anthropologists and other social scientists don’t seem to give a knowledge status to the emotions associated to those memories. And still I’d like to ask: if an ordinary Roma woman watching TV finds out that the president of the state she lives in insulted a journalist by yelling to her ‘*igancă împușită*’ [stinky gypsy<sup>6</sup>] and feels hurt and racially stigmatized, if a poor Roma woman begging in Geneva feels awkwardness and disrespect when large photos of her miserable Romanian home are exposed in city open spaces as anti-racist politically engaged art<sup>7</sup>, do these feelings interest the anthropologist<sup>8</sup>? I think they should.

These limits of our science led to a simple insight: most anthropologists are privileged white, non-Roma (*Gadje*), middle class and men, they don’t experience power - in terms of race, class and gender - and emotions like being hurt and humiliated in the same ways that their Roma informants. In my opinion, this social distance has to be realistically criticized and ceaselessly challenged.

### **Global colonization and racism in the era of digital media**

If Roma manage to deal with scarce means in complex social situations, if they are not (only) victims of the post-socialist economy but often successfully agents of it, there is also evidence that in the present age of multimedia and global village (Appadurai, 1996) politics - and their effects - cannot be only a limited community matter anymore (at the village or the neighborhood level). Precisely, the categories - here Roma /Gadje - are multilevel produced. This is the very product of the contemporary global forces: the crisis of social recognition of the work force; the popular success of the paradigm of cleavages between the ‘white us’ and ‘colored them’ after the 9/11/2001; and consequently, the pressure to point out new/old scapegoats. Researchers like K. Verdery and G. Kligman consider that the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe is

<sup>5</sup> Largely inspired by Michel Foucault’s works, contemporary scholars well known by feminists, like Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, ask these questions. In parallel, two decades before Foucault’s main publications, in an existentialist vein and screaming of racial injustice, Frantz Fanon’s writings express identical questions (see for example Butler, 2004 and Fanon 1975/1952)

<sup>6</sup>The incident took place in 2007, in Bucharest. It was largely covered by the mainstream media, not because of its racism but in order to politically delegitimize its author, president Basescu.

<sup>7</sup> I particularly refer here to Eric Rosset, Photographic exhibition *Roms*, Geneva, 2015 [http://www.ville-geneve.ch/fileadmin/public/Departement\\_3/Documents\\_d\\_actualite/Roms-mairie-flyer-2015-ville-geneve.pdf](http://www.ville-geneve.ch/fileadmin/public/Departement_3/Documents_d_actualite/Roms-mairie-flyer-2015-ville-geneve.pdf)

<sup>8</sup>In anthropology, emotions are not a mainstream object of interest. The reflexive turn, the feminist ideas and the cognitive anthropology challenged partially this position of marginality of emotions, see for example Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990.

characterized by a new cleavage which recuperates old enemies and transforms them into new "dichotomies of the self against other" (Verdery, 1996: 95). In this context the process of "othering Roma" (Kligman, 2001) is a form of racialization as it materializes in various discriminatory practices.

Thus, the "race" appears not only as an issue of the 19th century scientific evolutionary classification (rooted in Darwin's theory and applied in Imperial colonialism), as Stewart puts it, but as an on-going product of this multi/level circulation of representations, moral categories and discourse.

Post-colonial and subaltern studies have developed since the end of '70s. They were meaningfully inaugurated by the work of the US Palestinian intellectual Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978). Rooted in the classical authors like Marx, Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida, and promoted in Western universities mainly by Black American feminists and Indian scholars, post-colonial studies are both fruitful and contested – yet important for the contemporary humanities and social sciences (Child and Williams, 1997). They aim to criticize the mainstream history made by colonizers, the hegemonic epistemologies creating categories, definitions and knowledge paths, to give a voice to silent colonized subjects, to produce alternative stories and understandings, to reread collective memories, cultures and representations. As already affirmed, giving a voice to silent subjects particularly concerns women.

In addition, (post) - colonial not only refers to people once colonized by military forces and administration within territorial conquest and slavery. It equally refers to on-going othering marginal people through a colonial-like movement: expanding capitalism, civilizing the 'savage' poor, assimilating the difference, underlining social hierarchy and dividing classes, stigmatizing alternative collective beliefs and behaviors, ethnicizing poverty and delinquency, punishing the poor etc. (see Wacquant, 2010). Furthermore, one can say that, in a myriad of forms, a huge number of people are colonized by the new public management, by the individualist and competition values, by the power of finance, by the numerous and sophisticated means of control and repression of the states towards bodies, intimacies or private lives, etc. As the same Gayatri Spivak puts it "we live in a post-colonial neo-colonized world" (Spivak, 1986). Numerous contemporary situations fit into this scheme and need to be analyzed in their contexts and particular forms in terms of experience, timing, memory and definitions of colonized subjects.

Nevertheless, not all colonization processes are equivalent to each other. Roma and non-Roma, in Eastern European societies, do not share the same degree of colonization. Besides, the colonization acquires sophisticated means in particular historical moments when representations circulate faster and influence deeper the construction of the reality. Thus, if the Hungarian Roma in the 80's, studied by Stewart, had very little chances to face a discriminatory discourse towards them by occasionally watching TV, things are significantly different 30years later<sup>9</sup>.

For example, in Romanian cultural and political weekly journals of the 90's and the beginning of 2000, the discourse focused on criticizing the "weak state" unable to control and assimilate "problematic" minorities; problematic because too different in their native cultures. In this discourse, anti-terrorist struggle, islamophobia, racialization of migrants (from all around Europe and the world) and Roma condition in Romania are strongly connected. This mainstream discourse, echoing the government

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<sup>9</sup> The British-Jamaican Black sociologist Stuart Hall is the pioneer scholar examining how, in television era, the racial discrimination is embedded in public discourse.

position, declined in simple or more complicated forms, is very powerful by its pervasiveness. It shapes the view of journalists, media producers and cultural industry managers and authors; it is largely diffused through on-line forums and social networks like Facebook and Twitter. Since the middle of 2000, soap operas, pop music and dancing shows reset and retransmit this essentialist dual view about the Roma/Gadje distinction. This is a perfect example of the elite discourse meeting popular traditional categories, shaping the othering Roma and then, (re)producing new forms of racism.

Moreover, I suspect, nowadays, its mechanism transgresses any regional, linguistic or national borders: the media contamination makes the police in Ireland arrest brown skin Roma parents of whiter skin and green eyes child two days after the same incident happens in Greece; the discourse about the Roma in Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria or Greece collides the one about Muslims in France, African-American in the US or about other indigenous people and ethnic minorities elsewhere (like Canada, Australia, Brazil, Russia or China).

### **Intersectional and post-colonial feminism: bringing power and emotion into equation**

If you're Roma, woman, young and poor, living in a rural poverty pocket of one of the numerous post-industrial areas of Eastern European countries, you're more likely to be subject to such multiple intersected types of colonization. But are Roma women really 'vulnerable' subjects within this colonization process?

In my perspective, gender is more than a difference between sexes, or the social form taken by what scientists consider biological sexes; it is a hierarchical division producing different kinds of inequalities within a given society. From an anthropological point of view, gender concretely materializes in the vast majority of human societies (including Roma and non-Roma in Eastern European countries) as characterized by various forms of masculine domination: religious and political institutions, economical organization and values are held by men, while the women's domain is characterized by limited access to property, lower political and economic status, external control of fertility and reproduction or amounts of domestic and care work considered 'natural'. Gender is a fundamental power relation, not a part but a principle of social organization (like age, class etc.). In addition, by recapturing the "agency" issue already defined, shouldn't we use the word 'subaltern' instead of 'vulnerable'?

Moreover, subalternity is not one single domination issue. As Ortner(1996) puts it "gender is a serious game but not the only game in town", which means that an individual simultaneously lives many power relations, mainly race, class and gender ones but also age, sexuality, etc. These relations can't be separate or simply added one to another, they are embedded, cross-cut, co-extensive, integrated, intersected (Crenshaw, 1991). Defined by Black American and Third World feminist scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Chandra Mohanty Talpade, Audrey Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, intersectionality is since the 90's a heuristic concept in feminist and cultural studies, as well as in ethnic, racial and migration studies etc. Its interesting facets (even if difficult to transpose into research methods) make me think that I cannot be feminist without being anti-racist. In this respect, I am convinced that we, *Gadjia* women in academia, tend to see Roma women "under Western eyes" (Mohanty, 1984), meaning poor and uneducated (like the research reports quoted previously) and this perspective must be urgently deconstructed.

If power issues are recaptured by the post-colonial and intersectional feminist approach, what about emotions, or maybe, in other words, “experience”? Feminist notions like “stand-point theory”, “situated knowledge”, “assuming a vision”, “being affected by”, “embodiment of truth” are very useful to integrate experience and emotion into knowledge. They argue for an empathic and ethical account of *different* subjectivities and points of view, for a human relational approach within science. Like the feminist philosopher of sciences, Donna Haraway puts it “*feminists have stakes in a successor science project that offers a more adequate, richer, better account of a world*” (Haraway, 1986). The majority of texts written by those Black American and Third World feminists speak explicitly about emotion, experience and subjectivity. I include the feminist Roma scholars’ writings recently published (e.g. Oprea, 2012 and Bitu, Vincze, 2012).

### **Then, what about a feminist anthropology?**

In my view, anthropology must be committed to un-veil hierarchies and power relations inside, between groups and within different parts of society. Anthropology might allow us to decode the work done by societies to pretend natural what is social – like gender, race and class which are so often naturalized. For me as an anthropologist, the postcolonial studies, and particularly the notion of intersectionality, are useful in three respects. Firstly - to understand the articulation of ethnicity and gender in local contexts. Secondly - to understand how homogenizing categories and the centre-periphery dynamics affects groups of populations who are systematically very low in the social classifications. Thirdly - to understand their embeddedness with superstructures of states and capitalism.

Instead of thinking that between anthropology and feminism there might be an “awkward relationship” (Strathern, 1986) I do share Lila Abu-Lughod vision:

*« From its experience with this crisis of selfhood or subjecthood, feminist theory can offer anthropology two useful reminders. First, the self is always a construction, never a natural or found entity, even if it has that appearance. Second, the process of creating a self through opposition to an other always entails the violence of repressing or ignoring other forms of difference. Feminist theorists have been forced to explore the implications for the formation of identity and the possibilities for political action of the ways in which gender as a system of difference is intersected by other systems of difference, including, in the modern capitalist world, race and class » (Abu-Lughod, 1991 :140)*

Many anthropologists claim neutrality of their descriptions and analysis and pretend to be objective and relativist when speaking about men’s violence in wars, genital mutilation, domestic violence or prostitution. I do not. However, my wish is to keep in mind the comparative perspective dear to anthropologists. Thus, I consider concepts like “sexual democracy”(Fassin, 2006) and “sexual clash of civilizations” (Fernando, 2013) to help one to disclose these phenomena from their apparent ethnical determination and think about white hegemony. In this respect, the argument presented by the French sociologist Eric Fassin is that

*« if sexual democracy is about sexual freedom and equality between sexes, its application to the exclusion of « others », that is its racialisation, can eventually transform these lofty ideals into a practice that hinders sexual liberty by racialising sexual discrimination » (Fassin, 2010:523)*

Thus, as a feminist anthropologist, I became as interested in *Gageness* (adaptation from 'whiteness') as in Roma studies. An equal attention to *Gadge* as particular producers of hegemonic visions allowed me to identify that, for example, the moments when women's rights appear in governmental discourse are those when early marriages in Roma communities are stigmatized. It is exactly what Fassin understands by the selectiveness of the "sexual democracy".

In addition to these aspects, I also have to confess here that anthropology provides me with critical tools against some tendencies of postcolonial approach to the re-traditionalisation and fundamentalization of the Roma – which can reify them as a homogenous group. This is the reason why I tend to be critical towards Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism". My distance can be read as a *gagikano* point of view and I fully accept this critique. Nevertheless, I try to defend an ethnographical sensitivity to variability and diversity of particular situations as well as a care for different subjectivities and forms of empowerment.

As a conclusion, I would like to sum up my answer to the question asked in the very beginning of this article – how a *Gadji* feminist anthropologist, like me, could discuss the race and racism issues in contemporary societies Roma are part of? First, being equally interested by agency and by structures, by feelings and by logics. Second, putting power(s) in the middle of the figure: criticizing the top-down European politics of anti-racist integration, through the ethnographic lens and practices, like Stewart and other scholars do, without missing to better understand how individuals and groups are part of complex power relations from multiple supra-community levels. Third: being interested in the new media circulation of representations. Forth: using the understandings from the postcolonial and intersectional turn in social sciences, while developing new meanings and directions of feminism in anthropology. And, last but not least, being more silent, humbler, more listening, leaving space for Roma feminist scholars and/or anthropologists to discuss race and racism and being curious about their experience and findings. Especially this last point is a strong emotional thought that could seem contradictory with the very writing up of this article - that's why words don't come easy.

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