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Romani American history: Historical absences and their consequences

ANN OSTENDORF

American historians have created a historical absence by ignoring Romani people's presence in evidence from the past. The origins of this "absence-ing" are multifaceted and interrelated, but fundamentally stem from the continued influence of out-of-date and unprofessional ways of thinking and knowing. Examining and understanding "absence-ing" requires a consideration of the nature of the discipline of history as well as a history of the missing historicization of Romani Americans. The consequences of the "absence-ing" of Romani people from American histories have negatively and distinctively influenced four different groups of people: historians of the Americas; historians of Romani people in Europe; Romani studies scholars of the Americas who are not historians; and Romani Americans. The harm that each of these four groups experiences builds upon and influences the others. Epistemic injustice is thus perpetuated in linked ways.

Keywords: Romani Americans, history, historiography, North America, South America, United States, Atlantic World, trans-Atlantic, absence, silence, epistemic injustice

Introduction

Silences. Silences haunt us as scholars. We instinctively move to fill spaces from which no sounds, no voices, resonate. This aural metaphor has inspired and continues to motivate many Romani studies scholars. Whether by "giving voice to the voiceless," "making space for more voices," or "voicing our own experience," silence orients action. But what happens when the lack of resonance comes not from a lack of sound emanating, but from the orientation of the instruments used to capture sound? If there have been voices all along but no one has been listening, is silence the best metaphor?

Absence, a much less inspiring word than silence, better expresses professional historians of the Americas' engagement with Romani people.¹ Yet

1. See also Adrian Marsh's reflection on similar causes and consequences of the absence of Romani history but situated in a European rather than American context (Marsh 2007: 22–6) and Jodi Matthews for Britain (Matthews 2015). I use the term "Romani people" when writing in my own voice since it has become the most standardized English language

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Romani Studies 5, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2024), 13–38

ISSN 1757-2274 (online)

doi: <https://doi.org/10.3828/rost.2024.2>

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absence implies potential presence (Simon 2019: 69; Brooks 2018; Fowles 2010: 25–6) similar to the way silence suggests expectant sound because, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, “absences ... are neither neutral or natural. They are created” (2015: 48; Richter 2023: 158). And as he and other historians have shown, it is much easier to hear the unheard than to conjure the unmade (Fuentes 2016). In her work on British Romani people, Jodie Matthews’s “insistence on ‘absent presence’ as opposed to just ‘absence’” emphasizes the quiet existence of those made out to be missing from national narratives (2015: 80). Similarly, American historians have created an historical absence by ignoring Romani people’s presence in evidence from the past.

Romani people have been made absent from the scholarship written by historians of the Americas.² Although there have been Romani people present in the Americas since 1498 (Gómez Alfaro, Costa, and Floate 1999: 10), and although traces of Romani peoples’ lives exist in records from diverse times and places, professional historians have not included Romani people in the histories they tell. Historians have created this historical absence despite Romani peoples’ presence in the American past. This “absence-ing,” thus, requires an explanation. If Romani people have lived in the Americas for centuries, why have professional historians so rarely included them in the histories they write? And, more importantly, especially in this issue devoted to epistemic virtue and vice (considered here as a knowledge system’s relative impact on the flourishing of its subjects), what are the consequences of this negligence on the part of historians of the Americas?

The origins of the “absence-ing” of Romani people from American histories are multifaceted but interrelated. They involve the continued influence of out-of-date and unprofessional ways of thinking and knowing on the work of contemporary scholars. As Kate Trumpener convincingly argued over two decades ago, Romani people have been placed “outside of historical record and outside of historical time.” They have been made into a people “without” history, in both senses of the word, “anchored in an eternal present” by western scholars over the past several centuries (1992: 860). Adrian Marsh continues, “The idea that Gypsies have little history has been extremely influential and is behind some of the misapprehension of non-Gypsy peoples about them”

scholarly expression, despite there being no universally accepted term and despite descendent communities having different preferences. I have retained the historical term when describing historical actors, for example as *Ciganos*, *Gitana/os* or *Bohémiens*. All quoted text is left as in the original.

2. Although this article deals exclusively with the work of professional scholars, it is important to note that “a diversity of memory agents, including memory activists who obey no protocol and are free of the blinders of academic knowledge,” are required for the fullest possible knowledge of the past. As Fahoum and Dubnov succinctly put it, “The past is too precious to be left in the hands of historians” (2023: 382).

(2007: 23). Epistemic injustice will continue to influence Romani Americans unless scholars break free from these origins. Examining and understanding this requires a consideration of the nature of the discipline of history as well as a history of the missing historicization of Romani Americans.

The consequences of the “absence-ing” of Romani people from American histories have negatively influenced four different groups of people in different kinds of ways. First, it has limited *historians of the Americas* and hence an understanding of the American past in its fullness and complexity. This in turn limits the knowledge all Americans hold of their own pasts and Romani peoples’ places within them. Second, it has limited *historians of Romani people in Europe*. These historians could have benefited methodologically, contextually, comparatively, and collaboratively from an engagement with American historiographies inclusive of Romani people. Third, it has limited *Romani studies scholars of the Americas who are not historians*. Most scholars of contemporary phenomena tether their work to past realities. When professional historians fail to provide meaningful histories, non-historians default to knowledge about the past from other available sources. And fourth, it has been, and remains, harmful to *Romani Americans*, who have been relegated to the realm of fictional characters because they lack a legitimate place in the available historical narratives (Trumpener 1992: 860–1, 884; Ferrari and Fotta 2014: 113). The harm that each of these four groups experiences builds upon and influences the others. Epistemic injustice is thus perpetuated in linked ways.

The nature of history

Historians study the past. We might do this for different reasons and using various techniques, but a study of the past – or, more precisely, a study of the traces of the past accessible to us in the present – fundamentally undergirds all historical scholarship (Donnelly and Norton 2021: 6). While there is debate within the historical profession about the role of contemporary considerations in framing our questions, few professional historians would question the centrality of the past as the focus of our inquiry (Sweet 2022; Wilson 2022; Carr and Lipscomb 2021). Though historians write in the present and for the present, those who came before us remain our primary concern.

This temporal orientation might be seen as limiting, but only if the work of historians remains in isolation. If doing history is nothing more than the accumulation of more knowledge about the past, the discipline remains moribund. However, when done in partnership with other disciplines, history adds a dimension to those epistemologies in which the past is a peripheral concern. The historical method gently tugs at those working in other

disciplines to privilege temporal circumstances over autonomous objects of inquiry. Looking for Romani Americans *in* history rather than looking for a history *of* Romani Americans pivots away from an essentializing orientation. For example, including Romani people in American histories of race, colonization, and modernity (just to name a few areas) can allow Romani people to be considered in ongoing and more comprehensive conversations about race, colonization, and modernity in the present. Then, scholarship more directly addressing contemporary concerns has greater depth, is made more vibrant, and can do less harm.

Only a few things are required to do history well. Historians need traces from the past in the present that can be contextualized; this is often called an archive, which can, but does not have to, be a physical collection of documents. They also need a substantive collection of other historians' scholarship that can be built upon and engaged with in conversation; this is usually referred to as an historiography. Finally, historians need an audience for the narratives they construct; while the immediate audience is typically other historians (or at least other academics), the ultimate audiences are the publics with which their works eventually find resonance. Historians buttress journalism, jurisprudence, public policy, art, cultural criticism, activism, and more.

The missing historicization of Romani American history

Just as some claims and stories about the past can be “ahistorical” (that is, “verifiably untrue”), what I am calling an “ahistoriography” can develop when a scholarly tradition exists about the past that has not been built using accepted historical methodologies. “Ahistoriographies” can come into existence when the absence of an actual historiography is so strongly felt that it pulls others to fill the void. My creation of this term is reminiscent of Lia Brozgal’s “anarchive” in which “the prefix an- can mean both ‘without’ or ‘not’” and which describes a “rogue collection of cultural texts” that spill into empty space and “do history” differently (2020: 5, 26). An “ahistoriography” is a rogue collection of the histories themselves that has developed through a process of “surrogation” and through “attempts to fit satisfactory alternatives” into “actual or perceived vacancies” (Roach 1996: 2). That historians of the Americas have not considered Romani people in the histories they produce (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 6) has fundamentally caused this “ahistoriography.”

The first works written about Romani people in the Americas were made by a group of aficionados, commonly referred to today as “gypsylorists” (Mayall 2004: 162–79). Probing late-nineteenth and early twentieth century questions with all the assumptions of their time and socio-cultural positions, they

originated and spread much of the information about Romani Americans consumed by curious experts and amateurs alike.³ Though scholars might find their linguistic and ethnological commentary useful, their attempts at history are largely unusable by contemporary historians. These “gypsylogists” rarely referenced their sources related to Romani American history making verification of even their factual claims impossible.

That few historians of the Americas have attempted a critical analysis of “gypsylogist” claims within more recent historiographical concerns of the profession – concerns such as labor and class relations; immigration, race, and civil rights; feminist critiques; transnational Atlantic and Pacific connections; postcolonialism and indigeneity; and the critical cultural turn – has isolated Romani history from the American historical profession’s developments. The stories of Romani Americans remain stranded in the past, as yet unrecovered by historians of the Americas. That most attempts at developing a systematic Romani American history are nearly a century old impede easy inclusion of Romani people into contemporary American historical scholarship. Thus, the failure to transcend the “gypsylogist” legacy is both a cause and effect of Romani people’s absence from contemporary American histories and the resulting “ahistoriography.” This cycle has proven difficult to break.

Beyond the failure to transcend “gypsylogist” writings, historians’ reticence to write Romani people into their histories stems from multiple interdependent factors. Some of these are quite legitimate, others less so. The scattered, sparse, and uneven sources available can prevent historians from attempting research related to Romani Americans. Pressure to publish orients work (of young scholars especially) and leads to historical questions being asked with certain archives in mind. Many archives were created for reasons and remain organized in ways, though this is gradually changing, that hide certain experiences and thus naturalize and perpetuate state violence. Romani Americans, if they are even identified as such in records, are often found in collections related to criminalized behaviors precisely because such regulatory records were abundantly created and preserved. The most obvious reading of Romani Americans in archival sources would continue

3. For an non-exhaustive list of those “gypsylogists” who mentioned Romani North Americans specifically, see Lockwood and Salo’s bibliography (1994) for the following entries: Black (1916), Brown (1929), Crofton (1910), Groome (1890), Leland (1883), Pennell (1882), Prince (1907), Shoemaker (1926; 1929), Simson (1866), Sinclair (1917), Thompson (1911), Wright (1938). For some early writing on Brazil, see, Moraes Filho (1886) and Coelho (1892), especially Appendix II. Most of their work was ethnological or linguistic in nature – that is they described or documented what they observed or heard. When they ventured to describe the past beyond their direct experiences, they rarely documented the sources of their information. The exception to this is when they reprinted extractions from historical documents. These extractions, however, were rarely contextualized historically.

this concealment or violence without a critical understanding of why such archives were created in the first place (Lee 2022; Putnam 2016: 389–94; Stoler 2010). Though sources exist to write Romani American histories, systemic issues hamper such efforts.

In addition, the assumptions American historians have held (and often still hold) about Romani people prevent their consideration as a people able to be historicized or deserving of historical treatment. In their bibliography titled, “Gypsies and Travelers of North America,” William Lockwood and Sheila Salo noted that, “trained historians have ignored the daunting task of studying the history of Gypsy groups in North America. The history of these groups has been left to authors of general works with less than successful results” (1994: 6). Little has changed in the decades since their compilation. Without professional historical scholarship to draw on, historians – like others – are undoubtedly influenced by popular histories about Romani people. Much of this is riddled with factual inaccuracies; little of it historicizes Romani Americans; virtually none of it is written by professional historians.⁴ The popular history of Romani Americans concerns itself with questions of origins, culture, and ethnic group boundaries. As Martin Fotta explores elsewhere in this issue, there is then a “formulaic repetition” that creates a “certain disembodied ‘truth’” and a “forgetting” of the immediacy, complexity, and contingency of all lives lived in the past.

This “ahistoriography” has also occurred because of American historians’ lack of engagement with other disciplines and the histories of other places. Through an engagement with other disciplines, American historians could have exposed themselves to scholarship about present day Romani Americans (some of which is detailed below) and thus envisioned a need to trace the “before now” of these other studies and stories. In addition, if historians of the Americas framed the scope of their inquiry with a less nationalistic orientation, they may have learned about Romani people from histories of Europe and beyond (again, more on this below). Historians of the United States in particular are notoriously insulated from scholarship on the larger Americas; historians of either American continent rarely consider their scholarship in relation to Europe or Asia (Lowe 2015: 37).

An example from British history might serve as a helpful comparative to fully illuminate the absence of Romani people from American historiographies. Recently, Becky Taylor and Jim Hinks published an article titled, “What field? Where? Bringing Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History into

4. For just two popular examples, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romani_Americans; <https://www.everyculture.com/multi/Du-Ha/Gypsy-Americans.html>. For a recent non-academic history, see Bloomfield (2019).

View.” This piece offers a historiography of these populations, with the goal of giving the “non-specialist an understanding of the key pieces of scholarship and debates within the field.” It also argues that “it is not sufficient for these histories to remain only a concern of ‘Romani’ scholars, and so exist largely separate from both mainstream histories and histories of Britain’s other minority populations” (Taylor and Hinks 2021: 629). These goals are laudatory but ones that could not be reproduced for the Americas, much less for any distinct American nation.

While there have been scattered references to and a few article-length studies on Romani people in American historical scholarship, there is nothing remotely approaching a historiography of Romani Americans. There are no “key pieces of scholarship.” There are no “debates.” There certainly is no “field.” American historians, when they have encountered Romani people in the archives seem either to ignore their identification as Romani people or doubt what to make of it. Had historians of race, labor, immigration, or civil rights (just to name a few) considered Romani people within the scope of their inquiry, as yet to be imagined nuances to each field of the American past would no doubt have emerged. While historians of Romani people outside the Americas also regularly lament a scholarly lacuna for some historical periods (Pym 2022: 553; Steiner 2023: 91, 104), the size and scope of the American historical profession reveals the extent of this absence writ large.

The limitations to historians of the Americas

What follows is a survey of historical references related to Romani Americans, with nods to ways histories of the Americas could be made more robust with examples from my own research. Undoubtedly, these examples illustrate merely a sliver of the historical “absence-ing” but they touch upon lines of inquiry that historians are currently exploring and show how placing Romani people into these frames could significantly enhance our understanding of Romani lives in the past. While not nearly enough to constitute a historiography of Romani Americans – the studies are too isolated and disconnected from each other – what does exist proves that Romani American history can be written. The previously named challenges can be overcome.

Virtually all full-length historical studies published in English (and they are all article-length studies) related to Romani people in the Americas do so in a trans-Atlantic context. This is logical because of the mobility of Romani people throughout the Atlantic world, the richness of the field of Atlantic history, and because historians can supplement limited American-centered sources with those from elsewhere. Examples include Bill Donovan’s work on “Gypsies in Early Modern Portugal and Brazil” in the *Journal of*

Social History (1992), Martin Fotta's article on *Ciganos* in Brazil (2020), Rafael Buhigas Jiménez's examination of Argentine immigration (2021b), and Adèle Sutre's study of the early twentieth-century transnational movements (especially in the United States and Canada) of the extended Toshoron family (2014). Dalen Wakeley-Smith's recent dissertation and article (2022; 2023) suggests the possible growth of this scholarly trickle. Beyond my articles on colonial North American Romani people in Louisiana (2020; 2021a; 2021b), Maryland (2018), and Virginia (2017; 2019), there are no other academic histories of Romani Americans published in English.

In Spanish, scholarship by Manuel Martínez Martínez (2004; 2010) considers colonial-era Spanish *Gitana/os*, although his work is more about Spanish attempts to keep them out of the Americas rather than Romani experiences within the Americas. Along similar lines, a compilation of primary sources dealing with Romani deportations to the Spanish, Portuguese, and British colonies by Antonio Gómez Alfaro, Elisa Maria Lopes da Costa, and Sharon Sillers Floate (1999) includes numerous examples of deported individuals and the laws that led to their exile. However, it provides little historical context to explain these pieces of evidence. Gómez Alfaro (e.g. 1982) and Costa (e.g. 2001; 2005) have written other works related to the Americas as well. Two brief accounts (Martins Torres 2017; Ortiz 2021) and a thesis (Baroco Gálvez 2014: 71–142) drawn from inquisitorial records of New Spain hint at the possibility of studying *Gitanas* historically.⁵ One more nationally focused history, that of Carlos Pardo-Figueroa Thays (2013) on Romani people in Peru, is mostly a summary of references to that country from other published secondary sources. A published conference paper by Péter Torbágyi (2003) on the Latin American use of the word *húngaros* rounds out the historical scholarship.

These few publications led Fernanda Baroco and David Lagunas, anthropologists who survey the minimal writing on Roma in the Mexican past, to come to the depressing conclusion that “in spite of their presence throughout Mexican history, the Roma do not represent either an academic or a political topic of relevance.... There are virtually no works on this matter” (2014: 97–8). “Archival work is virtually non-existent” on “Roma in the Americas,” echo the linguists Cristian Padure, Stefano de Pascale, and Evangelia Adamou, who also study Mexican topics (2018: 265). In a very recent article surveying the state of the field of Romani studies in Latin America (Fotta and Sabino Salazar 2023), the authors report that, “despite increased interest in Romanies in recent years, rigorous research was still rare rather than a rule. One

5. For a transcription of the 1668 inquisitorial case against María de la Concepción, see Flores and Masera (2010: 133–6).

historian observed that one of the biggest challenges has been the lack of ‘solid archival research.’”⁶

Such a limited Romani American historiography hampers American historians who are not primarily interested in Romani people but who encounter them in the archives. A recent email to me from the president of the foremost US historical society on immigration and ethnicity sums up the degree of this problem (email message to author, 8 June 2022). During the process of writing a book (then heading into production) on nineteenth-century US immigration policy, this established and successful historian of immigration and ethnic history first considered a reading of the US Congressional debates on the fourteenth amendment to the US Constitution for what they included – a racist, antigypsy rant (*Congressional Globe* 1866: 2,890–2).⁷ Previously, this historian seems to have considered the “gypsies” of this well-known, commonly studied, and easily accessible public document merely a euphemism for some other group of people. This historian suggested that one senator’s remarks during the debates “invoked the ‘Gypsy’ mainly because of concerns that the children of Chinese immigrants would be citizens. [But] I have to assume that he was also referring to some tangible reality in his own state.” Could there be “some transient migrant (possibly or probably non-Roma)” who lived in the US in the mid-nineteenth century, he wondered? That this particular historian can still ask such a question reveals the scale of the consequences this historical absence has produced.

Even those American historians who do document the Romani people they encounter in their research usually seem uncertain about what to make of them. For example, Cecile Vidal’s (2019: 300) important study of colonial Louisiana includes a brief mention of the experiences of a *Bohémien* family, but with no analysis related to this label attached to them in the records, despite the fact that she translated *Bohémien* as “gypsy” in a prior study (2005: 96). Another scholar of the Louisiana colony, Kimberly Hanger (1997a: 15, 93; 1997b: 222), describes a case of interracial marriage, uniquely of a “white” woman who married a “black” man. Although Hanger notes that this woman was labeled *Gitana* in the record, she does nothing to analyze that label further. Both of these highly regarded historians recognize that these Romani labels mattered, but without scholarship to draw on seem

6. Fotta and Sabino Salazar (2023) identify many of the same concerns as I do in this article, such as the isolation of scholars working within a single national or imperial tradition, the need to connect European and American scholarship, the heavy lean towards anthropological or ethnographical (rather than historical) questions and methodologies, and fragmented research agendas not in conversation with each other.

7. The fourteenth amendment was to decide terms of federal citizenship in the context of the recently freed slaves immediately following the nation’s civil war. For more on this history, see Ostendorf (2019: 54–5).

unsure of what to do with this information. Yet even documenting references to Romani people in the archives as these two scholars have done is rare by American historians.⁸

Other historians of the Americas who have encountered Romani people in the archives have written about them, although without documenting their Romani identity. For example, there is a well-studied case (Ingersoll 1999: 138–42; Aubert 2004: 473–5; Spear 2003: 92–3; Spear 2009: 79–80; Vidal 2013: 128–30) from 1720 of a young French woman considered part of the first interracial marriage in the Louisiana colony. An entire scholarly debate has developed around this young woman's marriage related to what can be learned about racialization at this time and place. Yet, none of the several scholars who consider her ever note her and her family's labeling in the records as *Bohémien*. In another well-studied event, during which members of the Native American Natchez nation resisted French encroachment into their territory in 1729, several people labeled *Bohémien* were included among those killed. Supplementary records made just prior to the violence by a French traveler in the region also described *Bohémien* families farming in the area. However, without a Romani American historiography from which to draw that would clarify the usage of the term *Bohémien* in early French America, historians of these events (Sayre 2012: 209; Milne 2015: 142) have assumed these individuals were immigrants from the region of Bohemia and translate them variably as German and Czech. There are also instances of modern transcribers and translators of historical census and ship records not transcribing the *Bohémien* marker attached to certain individuals in the original records, even though they transcribe other racial, national, and ethnic designators. This effectively eliminates these people as *Bohémien* within published sources. As this evidence suggests, the barriers to constructing Romani American history are diverse, interconnected, and debilitating.

This “ahistoriography” of Romani Americans, both a cause and consequence of the limitations of American historians, negatively impacts our understanding of the American past. Questions remain unasked, interpretations remain unconsidered, methodologies remain unpursued, and accepted assumptions remain unchallenged. Evidence proves Romani American presence in a wide variety of times and places, but these stories are not known, even by the historians who should know them. Thus, Romani Americans remain “without” American history (Trumpener 1992). This limits our understanding of Romani Americans and American history as a whole.

8. Similarly, in their scholarship on English, Scottish, and Irish deportations, Gwenda Morgan and Peter Rushton (2004: 68–70; 2013) note a number of individuals as “Gypsies” and consider their experiences within that broader context.

The limitations to historians of Europe

Such a limited historiography related to Romani Americans has limited the histories written about Romani people in Europe as well. This is because the transimperial and transnational movements of Romani people between Europe and the Americas cannot be fully considered when historians of Europe lack partner scholarship with which to connect their work. Maria Helena Sánchez Ortega (1977), Bernard Leblon (1985), Richard Pym (2007), and Tamar Herzog (2012) writing on Spain, Laurinda Abreau (2007) writing on Portugal, David Cressy (2018) writing on England, William O'Reilly (2003) writing on the Hapsburg Empire, Francois Vaux de Foletier (e.g. 1961; 1968) and Henriette Asséo (1974; 2000) writing on France, Jennifer Illuzzi (2019) writing on Germany and Italy, Ari Joskowitz (2023) writing on the Holocaust, and even Becky Taylor (2014) in her general survey of Europe (just to name a few), could have significantly benefited from an American historiography to supplement the Romani histories they uncover. Instead, strands of the stories they tell are left unfinished when trying to tie in American connections.

As a result, they mostly are left to uncritically regurgitate the handful of well-known American examples, if an American connection is drawn out at all, although each historian would no doubt prefer to do more. Each scholar could have benefited from a complementary Romani American historiography from which they might have drawn, but these histories do not exist. It is impossible to delineate with precision how their scholarship might have differed had equivalently detailed histories of Romani Americans existed for them to converse with and connect to. However, one speculative possibility can serve to illustrate.

Tamar Herzog's work (2012) on early modern imperial Spanish thinking about race and exclusion includes a section on Romani people as well as sections on indigenous and African Americans. Had there been a body of scholarship dealing with racial formation inclusive of Romani people in the Spanish *Americas* that she had been able to draw from, as there is for indigenous and African Americans, her analysis would have been more expansive. As a result, a deeper understanding of the history of Romani Americans remained undeveloped. Lacking this work from which to draw impeded her scholarship in ways that cannot be known precisely, but that no doubt reverberates through unexplored fields of inquiry. Specifically, my own work that considers Romani people in the context of racial formation in the Americas would certainly have benefited had she been able to integrate her scholarship on Europe with scholarship from an American context. This absence reverberates unknown lost possibilities.

The point is not to shame these scholars or discount their very important work. A historian cannot be at fault for not drawing on other scholarship that does not exist. I empathize, sympathize, and include myself among them. On the contrary, our methodology asks us to consult other historians when we encounter evidence outside our expertise or immediate inquiry. When there are no other historians to consult, the methodology breaks down. When the methodology breaks down for historians, other scholars step in to determine the answers about the past that they need.

This “ahistoriography” of Romani Americans thus limits historians of Romani people working on Europe and other places. Historians could learn from each other through comparative or entangled scholarship. We could knit our stories together, especially where they meet, often within the Atlantic rim. Though there is much to be said for producing local, regional, and national narratives, the exchange and movements of people and ideas (especially between Europe and the Americas) has been fundamental to the lives of people in both places for the past five hundred years. Stories remain half told, domains less richly intertwined, methodologies less meaningfully developed, absences unfilled. European Romani history is thus diminished without access to this American dimension so significant to the lives of those in the past.

The limitations to Romani studies scholars who are not historians

The neglect by historians of the American pasts to consider the lives of Romani people has led to many problematic results in the present. Scholars in other disciplines in need of a historical grounding on which to contextualize their findings have written (or implied) the histories they needed. These histories often lack an engagement with accepted historical methodologies – such as extensive and systematic grounding in time and place – or rely on outdated and/or ahistorical scholarship – such as a heavy reliance on “gypsylorist” information and orientation. The quality of the histories they create themselves or repeat from prior sources varies tremendously.

While it is admirable to pursue absent knowledge that could prove useful to one’s work, the disciplinary gap (like a cultural gap or generation gap) can hinder the development of communication and relationships. Scholarship ignorant of contemporary historiographical concerns or ambivalent about accepted historical methodologies is usually ignored by historians (Marsh 2007: 25–6, 27); this disciplinary boundary work is a habit common in other disciplines as well (Gieryn 1983; 1999). This can be illustrated with a hypothetical example. If historians had only become seriously interested in telling Native American or African American histories today (as opposed

to decades or generations ago), considering the current state of accepted historical practice these hypothetical modern historians would not find it acceptable to use scholarship from the 1890s or 1910s upon which to base their work. This is because the epistemological assumptions from these older eras (such as taking race and civilization as fixed biological and cultural categories) would be impossible to integrate with twenty-first century knowledge. These hypothetical historians would also not find it acceptable to use the scholarship of contemporary sociologists, ethnologists, and anthropologists (no matter how plentiful and quality the work produced) to explain *the past*. They would instead engage directly with primary source evidence and look to histories being written on related topics, into which they would nestle their new lines of inquiry. This hypothetical illustration describes the actual state of Romani American history today.

The absence of contemporary historical scholarship inclusive of Romani American people results in Romani studies scholars who are not trained historians to lean heavily on the century-plus old “gypsylorist” scholarship. At times this reliance is done knowingly, at other times it is inadvertent. This is done either by directly citing this body of work or, as is increasingly common, citing someone who cites someone who cites someone who does. This long lineage, without any direct engagement with the primary sources, without any contextualization of these sources within contemporary historical conversations, and without consideration of modern historical conventions, results in the stagnation of Romani American history and its seeming irrelevance to significant contemporary historical questions. Though this is also a problem in histories of Romani people in Europe, in which “numerous mystifications are accepted as irrefutable historical facts, often without any attempts at verification,” (Marushiakova and Popov 2021: introduction) the dearth of scholarship related to Romani Americans significantly compounds the issue.

This could be illustrated with many different examples, however I’ve chosen just a few. Marlene Sway (1988: 37–9) and Brian Belton (2005: chapter 4) come to mind here as important links in this genealogy.⁹ Neither Sway nor Belton are historians, yet both wanted to ground their studies in a history that had not been written and so did their best with what they could find. Sway’s sociological study, *Familiar Strangers: Gypsy Life in America*, describes Gypsies as an ethnic group and is based on fieldwork primarily from Los Angeles in the 1970s. In her brief section describing Romani

9. The anthropologist Rena Gropper (1975: 18, 20) could also be included here, although she is rarely cited for historical content. This could be because the history she relates reads as much less scholarly (there are no citations for instance), however it could also be because the history she tells came directly from her informants. If so, that makes her historical recounting an important source that should be given much more attention by historians.

American history, she cites “gypsyologist” studies from the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, scholars contemporary to her who are not historians, and two pieces of primary source evidence from Britain. Belton’s *Questing Gypsy Identity: Ethnic Narratives in Britain and America*, includes a chapter titled “Historical Genesis of Gypsies in America.” He almost exclusively uses information from nineteenth-century “gypsyologist” studies from which to build his Romani American history, although he cites Sway’s and Ian Hancock’s (1987) narratives as well. The significance of Sway and Belton within their respective disciplines has led to constant re-citing of the American Romani histories they tell. In just one example, one full paragraph related to Romani Americans in Becky Taylor’s general Romani history survey (2014: 92) is taken almost verbatim from Belton’s text. None of these scholars engage with the historical scholarship which could have helped them contextualize the historical experiences of the Romani subjects whose lives they consider.

One of the more problematic, though possibly most cited, examples of an attempt to write Romani American history that does not engage with accepted historical methodologies and is built upon “gypsyologist” tellings of the past, is seen in the linguist Ian Hancock’s *The Pariah Syndrome* (1987: 86–99). In the segments related to Romani American history, most pieces of evidence are merely restatements from “gypsyologist” works and remain uncontextualized and isolated from contemporary historical conversations. In just one example, Hancock merely reprints text from Henry Shoemaker’s “Origins of the Pennsylvania German Gypsies” without considering any histories of immigration to the region or even noting the era when these immigrants arrived. (Shoemaker likewise provides no sources to suggest how he knows the when, where, how, or why these individuals came to North America, despite narrating extensively on their “origins”). Hancock does not consider the works of American historians who study the topics he describes which leads to ahistorical interpretations of primary source evidence.

In another example, his conclusion that Romani people were enslaved and raped (Hancock 1987: 92, 95) in British North America cannot be verified in any contextualized reading of any known piece of archival evidence (which is not to say it didn’t happen, just that there is just no known evidence that it did). Evidence does prove Romani people to have been present in various parts of eighteenth-century North America but with the status of indentured servants or free people, the same as other colonists (Ostendorf 2018). He expands the claim of Romani enslavement in *We are the Romani People* (2002: 27) to include eighteenth-century Louisiana – a place home to many Romani families, but who in every documented case lived as an indentured, enlisted, or free person (Ostendorf 2020: 142; 2021a). The claim of rape is

based on evidence describing only an unmarried mother being taken to court, a very common occurrence at the time, and reveals nothing about the circumstances of this woman's pregnancy (Ostendorf 2017; 2019). The scholarly gap created by an absent Romani American history may have been filled in for good reason if, unfortunately, through bad practice.

It is understandable why Hancock made the claims he did, even while historians cannot. By the late 1980s, historians of the African American past and those concerned with the experiences of American women had begun producing key pieces of historical scholarship, defining historical debates, and even delineating these respective areas as legitimate historical fields. No such scholarly significance existed for Romani Americans. Romani Americans remained absent from the radically new American history that had been consciously expanded to include previously excluded voices. An absence of Romani Americans in this new American history begged the question: was it just that no one was listening or had no one ever been there at all? Hancock ensured that future scholars knew that Romani Americans had lived in the American past and he did so by mapping Romani Americans onto the histories of others. Making legible through comparison can be an appropriate academic exercise, but this was an exercise he – a non-historian – should not have had to perform. The nuance, diversity, and accuracy of the lived experiences of past Romani Americans did not need to be mapped onto or inserted into the stories of other people. Romani Americans have their own past stories. They speak through the sources; historians have not been listening.

Other scholars' heavy reliance on the legitimacy of Hancock's expertise has significantly contributed to the repetition of his claims. The strength of his claims about Romani American history draws in more Romani studies scholars whose further citations increase the weight of the claims. At the same time historians, whose demands for documentary evidence cannot be satisfied in this instance, distance themselves further from intervening in such conversations, thus allowing the "ahistoriography" to develop uncontested. This is problematic because historians serve a specific purpose. They pull evidence from archives and construct "foundation stories" so other scholars don't have to but can build on these footings with their own work related to questions about contemporary concerns. Without a well-built historical foundation, the intellectual houses raised on them are significantly less secure.

And so, due to a lack of historical methodological rigor, claims about Romani American history become accepted without evidence, nuance, or a consideration of the already extant robust related scholarship. The absence of one scholar can become the error of another. This precipitates "ahistory"

as well as “ahistoriography.” It opens space for a critique of Romani studies if the history it tethers itself to is easily dismissed by historians. With the increase in the critical cultural turn, and the accompanying critique of it, a solid historical grounding could help defend this methodological approach (which is used in a wide variety of disciplines) by securing its often highly theoretical scope into more solid real-life stories from the past that are more difficult to dismiss.

This “ahistoriography” thus also limits scholars in disciplines other than history researching Romani Americans. Though Romani studies scholars who are not historians produce significant historical contributions as parts of larger projects in ethnography, folklore, sociology, ethnomusicology, and anthropology, they do so as part of attempts to find in the past answers to their questions about the present, or in a consideration of the past merely as a prologue to the present, rather than as considerations of the past on its own terms. This means that knowledge about Romani Americans who lived *in the past* remains underdeveloped even in these studies.

Brian Belton’s work falls into this category, with his frame of “describing the historical background from which the American Gypsy population emerges,” as he surveys the literature on “the progenitors of the current Gypsy population” (2005: 91). In her award-winning ethnomusicological study, *Romani Routes* (2012), Carol Silverman interviewed Macedonian Roma in the United States whose personal histories she described. However, her study’s purpose is not to analyze these histories, but rather to explain Romani music and life in the present. More recent examples include the work of anthropologists like Martin Fotta (2020), Patricia Galletti (2021), and Esteban Acuña Cabanzo (2019), who have each uncovered new archival sources or reinterpreted familiar ones to address relevant historical questions. A recent edited collection by ethnographer Neyra Patricia Alvarado Solís (2020), includes some selections that make significant contributions to Romani histories of the Spanish-speaking Americas. The earlier ethnographic work of Matt Salo (1982; 1986), Shiela Salo (1992), and Carol Silverman (2017) have provided documentation for more recent US histories, even if usually to foreground their more ethnographic aims. There are similar cases from Spanish and Portuguese American places, most recently David Lagunas’s *American Gitanos in Mexico City* (2023) that pulls an assortment of historical details from published scholarship to ground his ethnography. James Deutsch (2022) contributes a biography of the Romani American Steve Kaslov to a collection of “portraits” of elite Romani activists around the world, while Cynthia Levine-Rasky (2016) describes late twentieth century immigration to Canada to ground her sociological concerns. Each of these scholars appears only to have turned to writing history once they noticed the consequences of

its absence to the contemporary stories they told. These scholars firstly want to understand Romani Americans and only secondly want to understand Romani American history.

When scholarship lacks primary source evidence that can be corroborated, appropriate historical contextualization, and peer review by others in the discipline, it is likely to be dismissed as unusable knowledge by historians (even if it might be true). Much of the work related to Romani American history falls into one of these three categories. Thus, American history as created by professionals remains diminished as a result of their disengagement with stories from the past that do not appear to adhere to the historical method. This absence has lasting effects on Romani studies scholars and Romani Americans alike.

The harmful consequences to Romani Americans

Contextualizing the lives of Romani people in the American past within an accurate historical context will allow those working in all disciplines and sectors, including human rights (Meyer and Uyehara 2017), a firmer foundation on which to do their work.¹⁰ This more solid historical foundation should allow new questions to be asked and new lines of inquiry to be followed to better explain and understand Romani American lives in the present.

When these absences, silences, and “ahistories” become normative they reverberate into the lives of contemporary Romani people and activists whose energies are (rightly) focused elsewhere, but who nonetheless look to history to make sense of their lives and the work that they do. This work often involves fighting against erasure and utilizing facts of history to legitimize their claims for the present and hopes for the future. The theme of Roma Week 2023 – “Reveal our Past to Reclaim our Future” – suggests the significance of history to activist agendas (Roma Week: 2023). This lack of Romani American history also has implications in other participatory democracies like the United States. Carol Silverman, writing in 2017, noted that “No Oregon Roma are currently activists ... [but] ... I believe if more Roma knew their history, they would be more activist; however, it is neither taught in schools nor discussed at home.” (2017: 545) This legacy of American historians’ “absence-ing” has real-world implications.

Placing Romani people from diverse times and places into their accurate historical context exposes the specificity of their lived experiences. The

10. These authors only draw historical information from an unattributed museum website for the collection of Carlos de Wendler-Funaro: <https://smithsonianeducation.org/migrations/gyp/gypstart.html>.

resultant diversity of experience belies any essentializing frameworks or conclusions that extend across time and place universally. The ramifications of essentializing, fictionalizing, and “ahistoricizing” Romani people who lived in the past extend into the daily lives of diverse Romani Americans today. Such damages can be addressed for Romani people, as have begun to be for others, but only with accurate histories. Movements for reparations, for example, involve addressing historical injustices. But successful reparations movements virtually always require documented injustices from the past (Immler 2021: 153–4; Matache and Bhabha 2021: 263–4). The discipline of history, then, is central in these efforts even if how history might be used and created for such efforts remains contested.

This is most clearly seen in some of the recent findings from the Harvard University Health and Human Rights and Voice of Roma study from 2020. The study’s authors wanted to understand how “the approximately 1 million or so Romani people in the U.S ... experience their minority status.” They found that:

the responses are worrying indeed. Nearly all respondents felt that most Americans know little or nothing about the Romani Americans, but nonetheless, by far the majority had experienced anti-Romani sentiments, citing prevailing stereotypes of Romani people as criminals, liars, and thieves. As a consequence, most respondents both valued and hid their Romani identity. Being Roma was widely observed to hurt chances at schooling, housing, and work. These findings add yet more evidence of the pervasiveness of racism in the United States. (Matache et al. 2020: 4)

The authors concluded by stating, “We hope that the study will stimulate a greater interest in and understanding of this unique heritage and strengthen collective determination to defend American Romani people” (Matache et al. 2020: 4).

Although understanding the history of Romani people won’t by itself eliminate anti-Romani racism (Matache and Bhabha 2021: 261), there is little hope of addressing anti-Romani sentiments in the United States and throughout the Americas without an understanding of where it has come from, how it has changed over time, and how it has been grounded in time and place. To do so requires a historical orientation; this understanding should start with histories of Romani people. The lived experience of Romani Americans in all its vast diversity, including the racism and other forms of discrimination they have faced, would go a long way to removing fictional assumptions held about them, as histories of other American people has already shown possible (Deloria 1999; Deloria 2004).

Romani people need to be involved in building this history. As a non-Romani scholar, I can perform the historical method in a way my professional peers

find acceptable, but I cannot step outside of my own subjectivities. The stories I choose to tell with the evidence I uncover could always be framed otherwise. Were I writing histories with a different connection to the evidence, my stories would no doubt be different. For a sample of how this impacts historiography, the historian Rafael Buhigas Jiménez's (2021a) musings about "the exercise of making history 'being a Gypsy historian,'" describe a Spanish "historiographical problem that has not finished germinating." He "intertwine(s) the autobiographical and the intellectual in an attempt to approach the debate from the *egohistorie*, confronting the situation face to face." Buhigas Jiménez touches on many of the same problems and concerns that I consider in this essay, but importantly does so from a different subjectivity. In doing so he reveals additional limitations to a robust contemporary Romani American historiography; he also reveals the potential that new approaches might provide. If histories that are constructed about the Romani American past are more about the historian's discovery rather than about the useful lessons of the past for the present or the future, Romani American history seems unlikely to be appealing to Romani Americans.

Romani Americans of the past and the present deserve more than what historians have given them. They deserve to have their true past stories told in contexts that would have made sense to them, not just in ways that make sense to us. Since American history is still largely understood by the public as an additive multicultural story that is used to defend and promote a more inclusive present, historical absence can justify, explain, and even cause the fictive presence of Romani Americans in many people's consciousnesses today. If historians are not obligated to tell true past stories about Romani Americans, we should demand to know why when they are required for everyone else. If Romani Americans have no place in this history – a story that links past and present – then Romani Americans have no place in modern American nations beyond their presence in degrading and damaging fictions.

History for the Future

Breaking this cycle remains difficult since initiating new routes requires more energy and greater faith than furthering or steering already extent trajectories. Many of the issues – structural, methodological, and personal – that prevent American historians from writing Romani history exist because no one has written this history before. However, many other people previously absent from American history now find a growing and even substantial presence within it (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2015). Women, racialized groups, and queer people most obviously come to mind. But this did not occur naturally; people

made choices that allowed new histories to be written. Advisors encouraged students to listen to the silences; they welcomed (or at least tolerated) new approaches and methodologies that resonated with a new generation. Editors generously published work that didn't quite fit with what had come before. Historians learned from other scholarship about the absences they had not yet felt. Encouraging a colleague, a student, or an editor towards Romani American history is an option for each of us.

Historians are obliged to privilege past lives over those in the present in the knowledge they produce. This is unique to the discipline and its resultant methodology. That Romani American history has not been written is due to conscious choices made by historians. Historians have shown time and time again that “the subaltern can speak,” has spoken, does speak (Morris 2010). So while creating a documentable past remains the domain of professional historians, when historians evade their responsibility, others make the past stories that they need. To move beyond denying fictions requires replacing them with true stories – stories from the past that can be linked with stories from the present. The sources exist to tell these true past stories. Romani people were present. Romani people were speaking. It remains to be seen if historians will start listening.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Russell Patrick Brown, Martin Fotta, Ari Joskowicz and the participants at the Prague Forum for Romani History for their helpful comments on prior iterations of this article.

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