

Sounding Romani Sonic-Subjectivity: Counterhistory, Identity and Affect in Romanian-Roma Music, 1941-1989

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Research Abstract

Romani people have endured a long history of slavery, deportations during the Holocaust and ongoing discrimination since their arrival in Europe over 1,000 years ago. Yet, a significant aporia exists in the representation of Roma in hegemonic history. During the twentieth-century, Romanian-Romani musicians developed a rich and previously unexamined oral repertoire from which a counterhistory of the Roma emerges. My dissertation traces the role of sound in shaping a markedly Romani *sonic*-subjectivity through the transcription of trauma, suffering and sorrow into musical expression. From Holocaust songs to communist-era popular music, I demonstrate how Romani music doesn't just refrain history, but through embodied practice and the affective dimensions of performance, Romani history becomes a lived social fact which shapes, cultivates and informs Romani identity. Broadening multidisciplinary debates about the role of affect in the creation of cohesive collectives, I use my work with Romanian-Roma musicians and listeners to show how sound becomes an affective process that is deeply imbricated in the project of cultural healing. In exploring questions of how precisely music operates on a semiotic and affective level to form a Romani identity —or sonic subjectivity— my research opens up more accurate and nuanced understandings of the power music wields in social collectivities more broadly. My dissertation decodes the counterhistories, silences, and unheard resistances woven into Romania-Romani songs while also examining the role of music and orality in forging and negotiating minoritarian identity formation in publics.

Research Goals:

I arrived in Romania at the end of May 2019 to begin 3-months of ethnographic and archival work in Bucharest regarding the Romani minority in Romania. My research focus in particular is on the role of music in enlivening and preserving Romani history through collective memory, hidden transcripts as well as through the sociality of music and community building it entails. I proposed to look at the way in which *muzica lautareasca*—a Romani genre of music that was popular during the communist era—contains knowledge about what it meant to be Roma during the 20th century in Romania. This research involves both close readings of the musical repertoire itself as well as ethnographic research, which entails interviews with elderly musicians who were the initiators and practitioners of this minority musico-oral tradition. Additionally, one chapter of my dissertation discusses Romani suffering during the Holocaust.

More specifically during my 3-month research period I sought to consult the archives at the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore (IEF) and at the Museum of the Romania Peasant (MTR). I wanted to find recordings of Romani language songs, photographs of Romani musicians, programs, and other documents pertaining to Romani music making. My research goals also consisted of conducting interviews with elderly Romani musicians who are the keepers of this Romani musical tradition. I conducted participant observation by attending concerts, rehearsals, jam sessions, as well as taking violin lessons with Nicu Ciotoi, a celebrated Romani violinist.

I consulted the National Archives and the National Council for the Study of the Secret Police Archives (CNSAS) in search of Holocaust era documents, documents pertaining to censorship during communism, or other aspects of Romani musicians lives such as work permits, travel visas for playing abroad, etc.

For my chapter on Holocaust songs, I searched for songs which commemorate the deportations to investigate the extent to which they function as living practices of memory. I sought to understand the greater context of Holocaust collective memory and Holocaust education in Romania. But I am also interested in speaking to Romani *lautari* to understand the extent to which they integrate this history of persecution into their own understanding of their ethnic identity. I also wanted to consult textbooks in schools and speak to school aged children to determine current state of Holocaust education in the education system. For the same reason I wanted to interview the Minister of Education about Holocaust education.

Research Activities:

An invaluable resource for my ethnography has been the violin lessons I take with Nicu Ciotoi, who is one of the last remaining preservers of *lautareasca* violin playing. Through my bi-weekly lessons with *lautar* Nicu, I have been able to gain a greater understanding of how musical details—ornamentations, gestures—constitute a markedly Romani sonic/musical identity. Through my conversations with Roma in Bucharest who are well-connected to the various Romani communities in this region, I have gained a picture of the various neighborhoods in which large communities of Roma musicians historically resided. This corresponds to the spatial picture painted in the lyrics to *lautareasca* melodies, which often make reference to particular streets, neighborhoods, or regions. The salience of geographical delimitations both in the lyrics to songs and in the world-view of my interlocutors points to how important the delimitation of space in the city in the lives of Roma. In many cases, these segregated communities still persist, but even in places where development and gentrification has broken up communities of Roma, the memory of these neighborhoods as Romani spaces persists in the memory of Romani citizens.

On June 1, 1942, under orders from Romania's fascist dictator General Ion Antonescu, gendarmes began deporting Romanian nationals of Romani origin to Transnistria along with those of Jewish descent. Between 1942 and the end of the Second World War, more than 25,000 Romanian Roma were taken from their homes to Transnistria. Those deported were blatantly deceived—told that they would be given land in a fertile and unoccupied region where their economic prospects would broaden. In reality, they were discarded: taken to a wasteland to die. Of those Roma deported only around half survived. If they didn't die at the hands of SS officers—beaten to death or shot—they died of starvation. Antonescu, an ally and sympathizer of Nazi Germany, explained that his aim was: "the policy of purification of the Romanian race," insisting that he "[would] not give way before any obstacle in achieving this historical goal of our nation. If we do not take advantage of the situation which presents itself today [...] we shall miss the last chance that history offers to us. And I do not wish to miss it, because if I do so further generations will blame me."¹ After the war, Antonescu was tried and convicted of war crimes for which he was executed in 1946. I give all of this background information in this write-up because the Roma Holocaust generally and the Roma Holocaust in Romani specifically, are widely unknown historical events. There are very few survivors of the Holocaust still alive, so I consider myself fortunate to have interviewed survivors of the deportations during my grant period; one of whom brought back a song about the suffering Roma endured in Transnistria.

One of the main research methods and activities I engaged in during my grant period was to conduct ethnographic interviews with Romani musicians. I had the distinct privilege to include in my list of interlocutors a few of the most important Romani musicians from Romania. I'll summarize two such relationships I formed. Mioara Lincan was born into a family of *lautari*

¹ Deletant, Dennis. *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940-44*. Houndmills England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 155.

(Roma musicians) and began singing at life-cycle events from a young age. She developed her vocal technique alongside legendary musicians such as Toni Iordache, cultivating a unique style which epitomizes the affective power of muzica lautareasca. I have been fortunate enough to become close with Mioara and her family, spending days at her family home in the Rahova neighborhood of Bucharest, as well as accompanying Mioara to concerts where I conducted participant observation.

I also had the honor of meeting Costel “Trompetistu” Vasilescu. Costel is one of only two musicians of this genre who chose to play the trumpet in lieu of the violin, accordion, bass or tambal, which are the more common instruments of muzica lautareasca. Costel, with the help of his grandson, is the only *lutar* who has written a memoir recalling his life as a musician during the communist regimes. During my interview with him at his home on the outskirts of Bucharest, Costel was warm, loquacious and generous with his stories. Costel was born in 1940 in Bucharest. He was truly at the nucleus of the activity surrounding muzica lautareasca as this style of playing became recognizable as a distinct genre and become popular on television and radio. He is one of the main practitioners of muzica lautareasca, whose playing came to define the very genre itself.

In addition to the data I’ve collected through ethnographic interviews with a range of musicians, I scoured the Institute of Folklore and Ethnography’s catalogue for songs which pertain to Romani experience in the 20th century. I’ve found a song which mentions Transnistria (the location of the deportations) very briefly. The wonderful folks at the Museum of the Romanian Peasant have provided me with songs and interview data which also shed light on some aspects of my research. I was able to view folders of important Romani musicians from the Securitate (Secret Police) archives as well.



Ioanida Costache (r) and Mioara Lincan (l) With Costel Vasilescu at his home in Bucharest at a restaurant in Bucharest, Romania



Taraful Bucurestilor, MTR, concert, from left: Nicu Ciotoi, Nelu Raducanu, Ghita Coadă, Gicu Petrache, Cinoi de la Bobesti.

In my first bout of fieldwork in Bucharest in 2013-2014, I, a person of Roma ethnicity, first learned of the deportations of Roma to Transnistria during WWII and also learned for the first time that Roma were held as slaves in the Romanian principalities for over 500 years. It was startling to learn of this history, from which I had been completely cut-off from until then. When interviewing *lautari* five years ago, it would never have occurred to me to ask them about their tangents with these forgotten aspects of history. However, this time around I have made a point to ask my interlocutors if they are aware of these historical events that are both part of history but also of our shared ethnic heritage. To my surprise, most of the musicians I speak to are, indeed, aware of these historical events. Yet, there exists a shared quietness around them. One of my interlocutors described to me the mechanisms at play in this lack of open dialogue surrounding the oppressive history of Roma in Romania. In their experience, the generation who experienced the tragedies of the Romani Holocaust felt unsafe discussing these things during the tyrannical communist regime, thus history in many cases was not passed down in families. At the same time, it doesn't seem that collective memory surrounding Roma persecution is lost; it is known but unspoken. Despite the salience, and importance of these historical events both in terms of memorialization but also in terms of understanding Romani people's current standing in Romanian society, it doesn't play enough of an important role in Roma collective identity. Fear of repeated persecution, of victimization, of further discrimination and simply the priority of survival, doesn't provide the Romani community with the luxury of commemorating the past. Lack of political power from the Romani community in Romania leads to problematic exclusions.

A major issue in Europe and beyond is the issue of memory and history. We have to come to terms with that history in terms of the Holocaust, and what we might not know is that

there is a long history of Sinti and Roma asking to be represented in mainstream commemorations of the Holocaust and being denied. Even this year in Bucharest on Holocaust Remembrance Day in January, Roma survivors were not decorated alongside survivors or Jewish descent, nor were they invited to the event. Roma struggle to be seen in institutionalized settings of commemoration, events such as the decoration ceremony in Bucharest. They also struggle for inclusion in Holocaust museums and memorials across the world. It is within this context that I ask my Romani interlocutors about their knowledge of the persecution of Roma. Mioara Lincan provided me with information about a song which recounts Roma enslavement, which demonstrates the way in which Roma trauma through hidden transcripts can be embedded in the Roma musico-oral tradition.

Important Research Findings:

One surprising discovery I have made in these early stages of my fieldwork is that Roma from Bucharest have stories and memories passed down in their families regarding Roma who were deported from Bucharest. In large part, the deportations of Roma occurred outside the capital. However, I have spoken to many Romani descendants of survivors and survivors themselves who were deported from Bucharest to Transnistria. In a few of the interviews I have conducted with Romani *lautari* I have received answers such as “Oh, we don’t know songs about that, our grandparents did, but not us.” This fascinating inter-generational knowing, but un-knowing, points to the way in which memory can persist but in fragmentation.

In my interview with Costel Vasilescu, I learned that he, as a four-year-old child, alongside his family, experienced persecution during WWII because of their ethnicity. Though Costel’s immediate family was not deported to Transnistria, Costel explained how they were rounded up by German soldiers twice a week and taken to fields where they were forced to pick

corn for no wages. Costel's family were recognized as victims of forced labor and compensated by the German government.

Romania is in a revolutionary and difficult moment politically speaking. The population has become increasingly disillusioned with the incumbent political party PSD the Social-Democratic Party due to widespread corruption and infractions committed by politicians. Former Prime Minister Liviu Dragnea, considered Romania's most powerful politician was condemned to a 3-year prison sentence for abuse of power for corruption. This only after a referendum blocked the PSD from passing a law that would have granted amnesty to politicians. During the European Parliamentary elections which included the aforementioned referendum, Romanian-Roma musical artists were co-opted into this political tension quite directly when the Social-Democratic party commissioned famous *manele* artist Nicolae Guta to compose a song called "Victorie PSD" or Victory PSD.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

After spending three months on a Title VIII research grant in addition to 13 months of previous fieldwork in Romania, I have a nuanced understanding of the experience of Romani citizens of Romania. The 2018 Integrated Country Strategy for Romania, a report issued by the U.S. government, states that "the Roma community still faces many obstacles to overcoming discrimination, especially in education, employment, health care, and housing."² This is but a gloss on the numerous studies, policy memos, and research initiatives that have been devoted to addressing the stark disparity between the majority population in Romania and its largest ethnic minority: the Roma. A 2002 study found that "the Roma minority from Romania is the most exposed to the risks of social exclusion, is discriminated and has an unequal access to education,

² Integrated Country Strategy—Romania: Approved August 9th 2018
<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/285055.pdf>

to the labor market, to decent housing conditions, to social and health services.”³ The same was true for Roma in many European countries, which is why from 2005-2015, twelve European countries partook in an initiative called “The Decade of Roma Inclusion,” which sought to minimize the gap between majority and Roma populations in Europe. Despite these efforts little has changed for Roma across Europe, including Romania, and in some countries the situation of Roma has been shown to be statically worst after the decade-long initiative.

A 2007 policy recommendation by REF Romania (Roma Education Fund) proposed a series of objectives related to increasing access to education for Roma in Romania. One of the principle policy recommendations made by REF Romania addresses curriculum reform to include Romani history, language and culture, stating that efforts should be put forth to “contribute to the amendment of the national curricula in general education by seeking to introduce topics related to Roma culture and history.”⁴ Similarly, a report from PAIRS National found that one of the most successful policy “best practices” was the implementation of professors for Romani language and history in educational settings.⁵

I have learned from conversations with students, Romani activists, teachers as well as journalists that Romani language has indeed been integrated into curriculum, to some extent. However, as is true of the Romanian school system more broadly, teachers are unprepared to teach the language and the courses aren’t taken seriously by students and teachers alike. One of the largest lacunae in Romanian education continues to be the lack of representation of Roma

³ (Zamfir, Zamfir 1993, Zamfir, Preda, (coord.) 2002, Fleck, and Rughiniş, 2008, ICCV, 2010, FRA, UNDP and CE 2012, World Bank and CE, 2012).

<http://www.anr.gov.ro/docs/Site2014/ProiectePrograme/ProiecteInCurs/140616%20PAIRS%20EN%20final.pdf>

⁴ *Advancing Education of Roma in Romania: Country Assessment and the Roma Education Fund’s Strategic Directions*, Roma Education Fund, 2007, ISBN: 978-963-87398-6-5, p. 11.

⁵ Ionescu, Mariea and Simona Maria Stănescu, *Public Policies for Roma: Assessment report of national programs financed by European Union for Roma inclusion*, Bucureşti: Pro Universitaria, 2014 ISBN 978-606-26-0022-8

persecution during the Holocaust. It is virtually unknown to the vast majority of Romanian citizens that Romani people were enslaved in the Romanian Principalities for over 500 years. I spoke to many people about their knowledge of the Holocaust. Many said they learned of the Holocaust in early adulthood, from the family or after pursuing secondary education abroad. One of the folks I spoke to who went to a more elite high school in Bucharest shared with me that she participated in an elective course on the Holocaust during high school, but that this was uncommon and prior to this her teachers would either not mention the Holocaust at all or treat it very superficially, preferring to spend time on nationalist Romanian narratives of history. The American Councils office in Bucharest, in an attempt to fill in this grave oversight in the education system in Romania, offers a summer course on the Holocaust, where high school students dive more deeply into the Holocaust and visit historical landmarks pertaining to the Holocaust, including visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum. This initiative is funded by the Israeli embassy and does not include sessions or information on the Romani Holocaust. I wanted to work with the program director to integrate Romani Holocaust material into the curriculum, however, the turnaround was too short, and we weren't able to organize ourselves for this year, but we hope to collaborate for the 2020 edition of the educative summer program. Building a body of knowledge that addresses these gaps in the historiography will facilitate cultural healing and acceptance for the Romani people. Romani history—the genocide and slavery—needs to become part of Romanian society's collective memory if we are ever to foster true acceptance and understanding of this persecuted people. Despite many policy recommendations over the last decades that suggest the importance of historical knowledge, namely Holocaust education to be integrated in schools, what we see in practice, on the ground, is a lack of implementations of these suggestions.

Co-Curricular Activity:

As a member of the Romani community, I have also found time for volunteer work during my fieldwork. I collaborate closely with the NGO E-Romnja, Romania's only Romani feminist organization. I serve as a mentor in the mentorship program which matches young Roma women with female middle and high school students from underserved Romani communities. I collaborated with E-Romnja to launch a crowd-funding campaign for a Romani woman who was beaten by a bus driver after he refused to let her board the bus due to her ethnicity. I also participated in workshops, trainings, meetings held by a newly launched civic-organizing platform, called ARESEL. ARESEL aims to mobilize communities of Roma with the objective of combating racism and social, political and economic inequalities. I gave a conference paper at the University of Bucharest for Music on Romani Holocaust songs. During my tenure as a grantee, I met with scholars including ethnomusicologists Marin Marian-Balasa and Speranta Radulescu, and historians Viorel Achim, Petre Matei and Adrian Furtuna.

Conclusions:

My three-month tenure as a grantee of the American Councils Title VIII research grant in Romania provided me with invaluable research opportunities. I was able to advance my study of the way in which music refracts, reflects and transmits Romani history by speaking to Romani musicians and studying their music. The work I was able to do with Romani activists organizations provided deep insight about the Romani movement in Romania and the challenges the Romani community face in contemporary Romania. My main take-aways from my time spent in Romania are as follows: 1) Romani history especially related to the Romani Holocaust and Romani Slavery is still widely unknown despite many policy efforts to change this, and perhaps it would be prudent to look towards alternative avenues of pursuing Holocaust education

in Romania (such as the program American Councils runs already, however with a focus on Roma also integrated) given the unreliability of the Romania school system 2) Roma people are often co-opted by political parties, especially in rural areas where vote buying is not uncommon, nor is blackmailing voters with threats of cutting them off from basic resources like running water or electricity; 3) in order to combat these issues there needs to be greater efforts to actually implement policy recommendations or some way to monitor accountability on the ground; 4) there need to be more efforts to combat corruption, which affects vulnerable Romani communities who are denied basic infrastructure (e.g. water, roads, electricity) access to safe housing, which lessens their chances at having access to education and socio-economic mobility; 5) initiatives to stimulate economic opportunity for predominantly Roma communities; 6) Romani cultural initiatives could help foster greater acceptance of Romani people if coupled with educative components

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:

I am currently writing up my fieldnotes, interview transcriptions and participant observation data into my dissertation which I plan to defend in June 2020. I will present a conference paper based on my findings at the 2019 annual meeting of the Society of Ethnomusicology in November. I also will present my work at a campus presentation at Stanford in November. In January 2020 I will be a resident scholar at the USC Shoah Foundation Center for Genocide Research, where I will add to my research data by consulting their archive of oral testimony of Romani survivors, and give a public lecture at the end of my tenure. During the next academic year, I will begin to transform my dissertation into publishable articles and a monograph.

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