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From Diaspora to Transcultural Mobilities

Macedonian Romani Music across the Romani Atlantic

Carol Silverman

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, Roma have created a transatlantic community with hubs located in North Macedonia,[1] Western Europe and New York. Their migration patterns depend on kinship, economic and political factors, as well as state and local policies; these, in turn, are embedded in hierarchical structures that have marginalized Roma. This community study explores how the lives and identities of these Romani migrants have changed over the last six decades, particularly in terms of place/space, religion and social and economic relationships. Drawing on Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, I examine how the community intertwines local belonging with diasporic practices through music.[2]

Embedded in elaborate family rituals, performative arts serve as a window into community expression that reveals dilemmas of mobility, work, family, gender and class. Music is not only required but also highly valued during all social and ceremonial occasions and forms a part of the ritual and economic web. In fact, professional musicians are often the most mobile members of their communities. In addition, the lyrics of many songs deal with migration. Today music is digitally transmitted in a wide transatlantic social media network that forms the soundscape of migrant family life. In earlier decades, music traveled back and forth

[1] Macedonia declared independence from Yugoslavia 1991. The name of the country officially changed to North Macedonia in 2019. I use both in this chapter; the official adjective remains Macedonian.

[2] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Verso, 1993).

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across the Atlantic at a slower pace through analog media – cassettes, CDs and videotapes.

I have been working with Kalderash Roma in the US since 1975, with Roma in Bulgaria since 1980[3] and with Macedonian Roma starting in 1988, when I learned about their Belmont community in Bronx, New York, located near the neighborhood in which I grew up and where my parents still lived. Aiše, a Macedonian Romani woman whom I met in Belmont (see below), suggested that I pursue researching her community. I later visited Aiše in Prilep, her natal city, and in Šuto Orizari (Šutka), the largest neighborhood of Roma in Skopje, North Macedonia, where she lived with her husband's family; she arranged my living arrangements in Šutka, where I resided for seven months in 1990. Since then, I have visited North Macedonia dozens of times. Most relevant, I followed many families on their migration routes to Western Europe (especially Germany and Austria) and to New York and have charted their trajectories for over thirty years. From the beginning of my research, then, I approached Macedonian Roma from multiple locations, including communities in Melbourne, Australia and Toronto, Canada. I also have worked with Romani migrants from Bulgaria, Kosovo and Serbia since 2006. Because of the complex routes of these migrants, I have questioned linear models of migration that dominated social science theory until the 1990s.

MIGRATION FRAMEWORKS SINCE THE 1970S

In the 1970s the prevailing American framework for interpreting migration employed the concepts of immigration, assimilation and acculturation. This model was severely flawed because it was unidirectional and ignored multidirectional mobility, creative mixing and revitalization within immigrant cultures. Diaspora, a very old concept referring to religious or national groups living outside a singular homeland via unidirectional migratory spokes, gained renewed currency in the 1980s. William Safran's definition of diaspora[4] fits Roma in terms of historic migration from India, but does not fit in terms of migrants' consciousness of a homeland. Macedonian Roma throughout the Atlantic refer to

[3] Carol Silverman, "Oregon Roma (Gypsies): A Hidden History," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 118, no. 4 (2017): 518–53, https://doi.org/10.5403/oregonhistq.118.4.0518; Carol Silverman, *Ivo Papasov's Balkanology* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

[4] William W. Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83–84, https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.1991.0004.

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Macedonia as "home," although home is also wherever their community is; they are people-oriented more than place-oriented and their community is embedded within multiple locales. Since the 1990s foregrounding of globalization, diaspora studies have significantly overlapped with transnationalism, which emphasises how people's practices, attitudes and identities are linked across nations. Romani migrants are transnational because they "live some or most of the time separated from each other yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely 'familyhood,' even across national borders."[5] In the last decade, the mobilities/immobilities framework has further decentered transnational studies from fixed sites to processes. Mobility and transnational studies, however, have been criticized for deemphasizing the nation-state. Yet states matter, especially considering policies of regulation and exclusion. Policy manifestations of power relations must be highlighted – the granting of visas is particularly significant – because Roma have historically been seen as undesirable migrants, as many chapters in this volume attest.

Insights from diaspora studies as well as transnational and mobility studies can be fruitfully combined via the Macedonian Romani case to ask: "Who travels when, and under what circumstances? What socio-economic, political and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these journeys? What regimes of power inscribe the formation of a specific diaspora?"[6] Underlining historical power inequalities, the Roma case highlights erasures and exclusions. Transnational and border studies reveal how migrants form social relationships in the context of discrimination and how kinship operates across borders. Diasporas are "lived and relived through multiple modalities," as "differentiated, heterogeneous and contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common 'we.'"[7] For example, sometimes community members identify as Roma and sometimes adopt other labels, as I discuss below; these negotiations are informed by historical discrimination and stereotypes.

A mobility framework widens the analysis of the Romani Atlantic as a complex whole.[8] Inspired by Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* we can

[5] Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks* (Berg, 2002), 3.

[6] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (Routledge, 1996), 182.

[7] Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 184.

[8] Esteban Acuña Cabanzo, "A Transatlantic Perspective on Romani Thoughts, Movements, and Presence beyond Europe," *Critical Romani Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 42–60, https://doi.org/10.29098/crs.v2i1.31; Esteban Acuña Cabanzo, "Tracing the Romani Atlantic:

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eschew older linear models in favor of analyzing the multiple modalities of Romani circulation throughout the Atlantic. We can recast binaries such as fixity/rootlessness and origin/destination in favor of processual and strategic approaches. Diaspora emerges as a decentering project that rejects essential identities in favor of pluralities. Gilroy's anti-essentialism helps us understand that New York migrants, for example, are simultaneously Roma, Macedonians and Americans. The Romani Atlantic, thus, highlights transnational "structures of feeling, producing, communicating and remembering."[9] Like the Black Atlantic, the Romani Atlantic underlines the transnational structure of "cultural and political exchange and transformation"[10] among Romani peoples who do not fit strict nationalist and ethnic boundaries.

The politics of identity configured in multiple transnational locations, as well as the integral role of music in the articulation of identity, occupy central roles in Gilroy's analysis. It is no accident that Gilroy devoted much space to performative genres such as music because they articulate a changing diasporic historical identity.[11] Rejecting the essential binary of African versus Western origins, Gilroy insists that music expresses "a changing rather than an unchanging same."[12] He shows that although music is a vital element in the "connectedness" of Black Atlantic communities, it also embraces "borrowing, displacement, transformation and continual inscriptions."[13] What, then, does the Romani Atlantic sound like? What role has music played in shaping, defining, and constructing the Atlantic as a historical space for Macedonian Roma? How can we interpret the spaces, networks and practices of diaspora in terms of performative moments of creativity in relation to processes of adaptation and change?[14]

The enactment of identity via performative genres, especially music, is a visible and audible symbol in the Balkan Romani diaspora. Through performance, identity is conceptualized: "the imagination of diaspora is constituted ... by a compelling sense of moral co-responsibility and

An Ethnography of Translocal Interconnections and Mobilities among Romani Groups," (PhD diss., University of Freiburg, 2020).

[9] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 3. [10] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 15.

[11] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 99–103. [12] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 101.

[13] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 102.

[14] Nando Sigona, Alan Gamlen, Giulia Liberatore and Hélène Neveu Kringelbach, "Introduction," in *Diasporas Reimagined: Spaces, Practices and Belonging*, ed. Nando Sigona, Alan Gamlen, Giulia Liberatore and Hélène Neveu Kringelbach (Oxford University Press, 2015), xxi.

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embodied performance."[15] Some genres of music and dance have become veritable emblems of identity in the diaspora. As Thomas Turino wrote, music (along with other expressive cultural forms) enables a "rich semiotic field that has the capability of producing particularly complex effects,"[16] thus making it especially effective at representing, generating and configuring diasporic identities. "Music is one of the ways in which people recognize their relationship to the larger world. ... Sound, and music, informs our sense of place and our relationship to the past. It also connects us to the present and addresses the cultural dislocation of migration, economic deprivation, structural inequality, and a panoply of histories."[17] For Gilroy, "black music provided me with the means to gain proximity to the sources of feeling from which our local conceptions of blackness were assembled."[18] Similarly, for Macedonian Roma, music is central to the texture of their lives and charts their historical trajectory.

MIGRATORY TRAJECTORIES SINCE THE 1960S

Before addressing the contexts of music, I will illustrate the migratory trajectories and experiences of Macedonian Roma.[19] The center of Macedonian Romani life in the United States is the New York City borough of the Bronx, more specifically, the Belmont/Arthur Avenue neighborhood. I estimate that today over five thousand Macedonian Roma live in the New York region. During the past sixty years Bosnians, Montenegrins and Serbs, as well as Albanians and Hispanics have moved into this historically Italian area. Macedonian Roma began migrating to Belmont in the late 1960s for many reasons, including unemployment and prejudice. At that time, the Yugoslav government sent "guest workers" to Western Europe, the United States and Australia to receive hard currency remittances that bolstered the economy. This

[15] Pnina Werbner, *Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims* (School of American Research, 2002), 11.

[16] Thomas Turino, "Introduction: Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities," in *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities*, ed. Thomas Turino and James Lea (Harmonie Park, 2004), 17.

[17] Alisha Hines, "Exploring the Black Atlantic through Sound," Duke University, accessed June 12, 2025, https://sites.duke.edu/blackatlantic/sample-page/exploring-the-black-atlantic-through-sound/.

[18] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 109.

[19] Some materials in this and the following two sections are revised from Carol Silverman, *Romani Routes: Cultural Politics and Balkan Music in Diaspora* (Oxford University Press, 2012), ch. 4.

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process, termed *gurbet*, meaning working abroad, found its way into many song texts in all Yugoslav languages.[20] When these work programs ended, many Yugoslavs stayed, and the sponsorship of relatives continued. The wars in Yugoslavia (1991–2001) brought economic crisis to the entire region, causing another wave of emigration. Since the 1990s Roma have sought asylum in Western Europe based on claims of persecution, including police brutality, health disparities and institutional violence.[21] These claims have had varied success, dependent upon changing policies. (Macedonian Roma have very rarely sought asylum in the US.) Because North Macedonia is not in the European Union, current rules allow only a ninety-day visit of Macedonians to the Schengen area (Germany, France, etc.), although many people ignore these rules and work illegally.

The trajectory of one family between the 1980s and 1990s illustrates some transnational patterns from this era.[22] In 1988 I met Osman in Belmont; his natal family consisted of a brother who lived with their aging mother in their hometown, Prilep, a brother in Germany, and a sister, Aiše (see above) who had married Ali and lived in Skopje. Osman invited me to meet his wife Jasmin and his sister Aiše who was visiting Belmont to attend Osman's sons' circumcision party and to earn some money. Short visits were common in the 1980s whereby migrants (mostly undocumented) often worked in a Belmont wallet factory. After Aiše returned to Macedonia, one of her brothers came to Belmont to briefly visit and work. His son also came to visit and later emigrated (he was eventually deported after living in the US for decades). Another brother emigrated from Germany with his wife and children. In 1992 Aiše's oldest son Ramo arrived in Belmont via Mexico, and then Aiše came again in 1994. During all these extended visits, Osman and Jasmin were generous hosts, housing and feeding family members in their small two-bedroom apartment and helping them find work and social connections.

[20] Silverman, *Romani Routes*, 59–60.

[21] "Macedonia: Country Profile 2011–12," European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), accessed July 2, 2025, www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/macedonia-country-profile-2011-2012.pdf; "Fourth Romani Prisoner Dies in Macedonian Prisons," ERRC, January 18, 2018, www.errc.org/press-releases/fourth-romani-prisoner-dies-in-macedonian-prisons; "Justice Denied: Roma in the Criminal Justice System of North Macedonia," ERRC, February 14, 2023, www.errc.org/reports–submissions/justice-denied-roma-in-the-criminal-justice-system-of-north-macedonia.

[22] Silverman, *Romani Routes*, ch. 4.

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During numerous telephone calls, family members talked and cried, concerned about loved ones in the diaspora. Kinship means everything, and so people feel deeply when family members disperse as they must. Aiše and Ali had two sons of marriageable age. In 1995, Ramo planned to marry a woman born in Prilep who lived in Belmont. Meanwhile, Rifat (still in Skopje) became engaged to a Romani woman born in Toronto whose parents were from Prilep; she was visiting Macedonia for the summer. Aiše and Ali wanted to make a double wedding for their two sons in Belmont, but the celebration couldn't take place because Ali could not get a visa for the United States. Rifat easily received a visa for Canada and could travel freely to the US because of his wife's legal Canadian status. Aiše and Ramo, however, could not leave the US because they were undocumented; thus, they couldn't go to Toronto to see Rifat and his new bride. The only solution was to wait and keep applying for a US visa for Ali. After over a year, Ali finally received a visa in 1996 and the wedding was held.

Examining this situation from both American and Macedonian viewpoints helped me understand how Roma negotiated across the Atlantic during these decades. Members of the Bronx family frequently spoke with kin in the diaspora via telephone, gave me gifts to bring to Skopje and instructed me to take copious photographs and videos. Whereas Aiše hadn't seen her husband in over a year, other relatives who traveled saw him, brought gifts and shared photos and videotapes (some of which I had filmed). I was recruited as part of a large communication network consisting of relatives traveling back and forth, visiting, working temporarily and looking for spouses. In the 2000s the family's transnational ties multiplied significantly. Almost all of the children of Ali's brothers and sisters in Šutka have married Macedonian Roma in Western Europe. Rifat and Ramo now have cousins in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, France, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands. Today, social media plays a major role in supporting communication across the huge network of diasporic Macedonian Roma. YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and so on are employed daily to communicate and exchange information, photos, music and videos, and to find spouses.

FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND MARRIAGE

Belmont is a family-oriented, multigenerational community where kinship is extremely significant; the community's kinship network is increasingly transnational, with many nodes. Similarities can be drawn with other

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transnational Balkan Romani communities, such as the Romanian Roma studied by Juan Gamella and Vasile Muntean.[23] Elders occupy venerated positions; younger family members kiss their hands and bow as a sign of respect. Female elders sometimes work, but they also care for the children. In the early decades, a typical Belmont household was multigenerational; ideally, in one apartment lived a son, his parents (and perhaps his grandparents), his wife and his children. Girls still live at home until they marry, when they move in with their husbands; a few young couples are now insisting on their own apartments.

The community is still extremely close-knit; everyone knows each other by sight, sees each other often at music-filled celebrations (see below), and socializes almost exclusively within the community. What defines the field of social relations for these diasporic families is a "very high level of interpersonal and intercommunal investment and trust – economic, social, emotional and moral."[24] Community members "define their subjectivities as moral individuals through long-term relations of sociality such as marriage, family, and community."[25] As Leila, a respected middle-aged community member, explained, "Family values ... are very important. My family was everything to me .... This was always the main issue growing up." She saw family as defense against a world hostile to Roma:

> I could not imagine going against the family and the tradition and being out there on my own and being ostracized from everything .... Your family is who you are, and it is there forever. The family is a positive thing, and it is our only defense. We have no choice, especially in Europe. If you go and you try to become a part of somebody else's community as a Rom, they don't want you. So, you have to make the best of it. The family is so strong because we are not accepted anywhere. It has become almost an obsession.[26]

Kin orientation, then, is an adaptive mechanism in a world filled with threats against Roma. Relying on one's own family has been a way to ensure trust to counter the threats from a mistrustful environment.

Marriage in this community is expected because it underscores the significance of the family. In addition, because visa regimes are so strict, currently the most realistic path of migrating out of North Macedonia is

[23] Juan Gamella and Vasile Muntean, "Marriage and the Reproductive Regime of a Digitally Connected Roma Diaspora," *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 31, no. 3 (2023): 533–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2023.2277078.
[24] Werbner, *Imagined Diasporas*, 272. [25] Werbner, *Imagined Diasporas*, 272–73.
[26] All quotes without citations come from my fieldwork.

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through marriage. Traditionally, the elders looked for appropriate spouses within the local community and the children acquiesced. Today, children are more assertive and intermarriage occasionally occurs. Parents still investigate the reputation of the prospective spouse's entire family, including their economic standing, level of respectability and how the family has treated its brides in the past. Women, more than men, cultivate this "people knowledge." Thus, although men may be the public face of the patriarchal family in marriage negotiations, they rely on women for the information that makes marriage negotiations possible.[27]

Because the local Belmont community is relatively small, and because parents and children prefer spouses who are Macedonian Roma, transnational ties are often activated. If a young man or woman cannot find a suitable spouse in New York, usually the family takes a trip to Macedonia to "look around." Of course, only people who have legal status and sizeable income can travel abroad. Word goes out "back home," in Prilep, for example, or in a diasporic location such as Vienna, and relatives network to arrange meetings with prospective spouses. These trips can be very stressful, considering the condensed time spent in any one locale. Leila, who met her husband on a three-month trip to Prilep, commented:

> I met my husband through relatives ... I hadn't met anybody that I felt would be somebody I could work with ... When I met my husband, he presented himself really well, and I thought this is someone I can work with ... I was honest with him about who I am ... I told him: "I'm not going to be a typical Romani wife. I go to school, I have a mind of my own ... I'll be working with men ... You may have to pitch in and be an equal partner, and if you can deal with that, fine. If not, it's not going to work." We kind of agreed. And here we are, still married seventeen and a half years later.

Leila is somewhat of an exception because she was twenty-five years old and in college when she married. Despite her family's insistence on education, she knew she needed to find a spouse. She had an aura of self-confidence and honesty that were rare for young women of the 1980s. Her philosophy has carried through for her children:

> I won't force my daughter to go back home for a husband. It's so stressful especially if you don't have the support from home. Everybody is telling you what you should do. They don't approve of anybody, and you don't know anybody. How are you supposed to make a decision? One relative says – you can't pick this one – his family did something 250 years ago! I hope my daughter finds someone

[27] Silverman, *Romani Routes*, chs. 4 and 5.

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here in the community that she will be happy with. If not, if she chooses to go home, she'll have my support.

When I organized a focus group in 2009 on the topic of marriage with Leila's 18-year-old daughter and her friends, they agreed that these stressful trips should be avoided. Yet all these young women ended up marrying Romani men, some local and some from Macedonia. Parents warn that because Macedonia is so poor, everyone wants to leave – they all "line up" when a prospective match arrives from abroad, making it difficult to trust anyone. Leila said that "I would not let a girl child go back there alone, especially when she's of marriage age, because they will play with her . . . I'll go with her." Nurija, a 19-year-old, commented: "It's the same for the boys . . . They don't want to go back home and just marry anyone, because they're marrying you just . . . for the money and to come to America. It's like we have a passport written on our backs. It's their way out."

In the last thirty years, with cell phones and through social media such as Facebook, young people are prolonging transnational marriage negotiations and becoming more cautious. Nurija explained:

> You don't have to get married right away, you can keep in contact with the person, and visit a couple of times. One of my friends visited . . . and found some guy, and after speaking with him for almost six, seven months, she found out he really was using her for her money . . . So she broke up with him, she went back again, she found somebody else . . . she spoke with him for a while and she went back two or three times over two or three years, and she married him, and she's OK.

Bringing grooms to America is more complicated in cultural terms than bringing brides because it contradicts the expectation of patrilocal residence; nevertheless, it regularly occurs out of necessity, as with the case of Rifat above. Moving in with the bride's family is awkward for a man who must depend on them for language, employment and legal status. Leila explained: "When he's a *zet* (groom) in the house, they are made aware of it from the moment the marriage is announced. They'll get the comments . . . Your wife will command you . . . And, they'll get that cruel stare." The stigma, however, is often balanced out by the opportunity to emigrate. One recent case involved a middle-aged, divorced woman who met her future husband through relatives via social media and trips to Macedonia; she brought him to the US after waiting a year for a visa, but there was little stigma because of her mature age and financial independence. This case also underlines how visa delays often prolong marriage negotiations.

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Visas also determine the circulation of musicians, who are crucial to family ceremonies. When a Belmont family asked me in 2016 to help bring over a band from their hometown of Prilep for their son's circumcision celebration, securing visas was the main challenge. We opted for a Q cultural exchange visa and programmed a public show with the New York club Drom, perhaps the first time a Balkan Romani wedding band performed in a public site.[28] Voice of Roma, the nongovernmental organization that I work with, has been successful with P3 visas sponsoring many Macedonian Romani musicians for its annual Herdeljezi (spring renewal ritual) festivals. Today the migratory flow of all Roma, including musicians, is totally dependent on visas.

TRANSNATIONAL MUSIC AND DANCE

Multiday ritual celebrations featuring music and dance are the glue that binds transnational Romani families together.[29] In an insecure world filled with prejudice, life-cycle ceremonies and calendrical events serve as markers of identity – a space where they can display and perform being Roma; they also provide a secure space to evoke memory. Moreover, in the diaspora, ritual accomplishes identity work by demonstrating core community values, such as respect for elders and women's ritual knowledge. At work, a Romani migrant may need to pass as Mexican American or Serbian German to avoid discrimination, but at a wedding, Romani ethnicity is proudly on display.

[28] Carol Silverman, "From Reflexivity to Collaboration: Changing Roles of a Non-Romani Scholar/Activist/Performer," *Critical Romani Studies* 1, no. 2 (2018): 43–63, https://doi.org/10.29098/crs.v1i2.16.

[29] This section draws from and expands on the following publications: Carol Silverman, "Migration and Balkan Romani Wedding Music and Dance: Transnational Trends 1990–2021," in *Life Dedicated to Roma Folklore and Ethnology: Festschrift for Trajko Petrovski*, ed. Hristo Kyuchukov, Ian Hancock and İlber Ortaylı (Lincom, forthcoming); Carol Silverman, "Negotiating Gender, Community, and Ethnicity: Balkan Romani Transnational Weddings," in *Music in the American Diasporic Wedding*, ed. Inna Naroditskaya (Indiana University Press, 2019), 44–69; Carol Silverman, "Community beyond Locality: Circuits of Transnational Macedonian Romani Music," in *Routledge Companion to the Study of Local Musicking*, ed. Katherine Brucher and Suzel A. Reily (Routledge, 2018), 67–77; Carol Silverman, "Diasporic Ethnicity, Gender and Dance: Muslim Macedonian Roma in New York," in *Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*, ed. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young (Oxford University Press, 2016), 160–81; Carol Silverman, "Education, Agency, and Power among Macedonian Muslim Romani Women in New York City," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Comparative Perspectives Symposium: Romani Feminisms) 38, no. 1 (2012): 30–36, https://doi.org/10.1086/665803.

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Weddings, in particular, bring into focus gender and kin relationships. With live music, multiple days of dancing and elaborate ritual symbolism, weddings performatively enact the significance of family in diasporic locations via gender, status, age and class roles. Many dramatic moments are highlighted, reputations are established, conflicts and alliances emerge and individual and family status are negotiated. Weddings have a long symbolic life: Community members save money for years to pay for them, plan them well ahead of time, watch their videos over and over and discuss them long afterwards. They figure clearly in how Roma performatively conceive of their identity and how they distinguish themselves from both non-Roma and other Romani subgroups.

Celebrations, moreover, are motivations for and manifestations of migration. For example, if they have the means and documents, Belmont families travel to Germany or Macedonia (and vice versa) to attend weddings. Furthermore, guests from the diaspora are honored during weddings with public announcements and by being called up to lead dance lines. Conversely, diasporic guests are expected to give expensive gifts to the sponsoring family and to pay for part of the ceremony, such as the music or decorations. Several Belmont families have held their family celebrations in Prilep because of its affordability.

In addition to weddings, Roma celebrate other life-cycle rituals such as circumcisions, which are structured much like weddings and now take place in banquet halls. In Macedonia, calendrical events such as large New Year's Balls have taken place for approximately twenty years, sometimes sponsored by Romani politicians. In the last thirty years, Belmont Roma have added more celebrations with music and dance, such as anniversaries, graduations, baby showers, March 8 (International Women's Day) parties, sweet sixteen parties, elders' birthday parties and New Year's Eve. Girls or women are often the focus of these newer celebrations; thus, traditional ritual forms are molded to new settings in the service of newer values, such as honoring girls' birthdays or valuing female education and accomplishment.[30]

Celebrations are meticulously documented and continuously replayed via media channels. In a contemporary home anywhere in the diaspora, a large screen displays a wedding, and people of all ages watch and evaluate. In the 1980s, I was often the only person filming but by the 1990s families began acquiring camcorders or hiring professional videographers; the

[30] Silverman, "Negotiating Gender, Community, and Ethnicity," 61.

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resulting videos (sometimes containing personal greetings to relatives) were carried by hand to relatives in the diaspora. In this manner, people saw and learned about their relatives in transnational locations. YouTube, which began in 2005, dramatically increased the ease of accessibility of music, dance and ritual, as clips could be posted immediately. Hundreds of Romani wedding videos appeared, and Roma started viewing the events of distant relatives plus those of unrelated Balkan Roma. Hiring a videographer is now ubiquitous and clips made by both guests and professionals are shared via Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. Some Belmont Roma own successful wedding videography businesses. Thus, mediated ritual celebrations with music and dance serve as the background to daily life.

In addition, Macedonian Roma across the diaspora constantly listen to Romani music in their cars and homes; they inhabit a media soundscape that is saturated with music. The newest hits released in Macedonia or Western Europe by Romani musicians are instantly performed everywhere in the diaspora. Musicians must remain current in this pan-diasporic repertoire, plus know hundreds of older songs and melodies. The transmission of music is facilitated by both social media and the migration of musicians, who are often the most mobile members of their communities. The best wedding bands in Macedonia often travel to perform in Western Europe, and (if they can get visas) in New York. Some bands maintain apartments in Germany for the winter season, and many musicians have migrated to Western Europe. Macedonian Romani musicians who legally live in Germany regularly travel to Belmont to perform on tourist visas. A typical wedding lineup in Belmont might include a guest melody player and singer from Europe paired with local backup musicians who come from diverse Balkan regions. These locals sometimes come from musical families and sometimes perform for other non-Romani Balkan groups. Often Belmont musicians have second jobs.[31]

CLASS, WORK AND RELIGION

There is a strong work ethic in the Macedonian Romani community; having a job is the norm and laziness is condemned. Everyone believes there is work to be had, even if it is unskilled or menial. Unlike in Western Europe, few Macedonian American Roma are officially refugees, so they

[31] Silverman, "Community beyond Locality"; Silverman, "Negotiating Gender, Community, and Ethnicity."

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are not entitled to social services. They view welfare as somewhat of a stigma and prefer to support themselves. Work was coded by gender in the early decades, as in Macedonia. Some common male occupations, such as electrician, construction worker, car mechanic and tailor, transferred well to America. Other occupations, such as metalworking, did not transfer as readily. Ali (see above), born in 1948 to a family of blacksmiths had a home workshop plus a stall in the Skopje city market where he sold his metalware and traded clothing, employing five languages. After emigrating to Belmont, he crafted fences and ornamental wrought iron for private homes, but his earnings declined, and he did not want his sons to continue his profession. Many electricians, on the other hand, have successfully trained their American-born sons to take over the family business.

Men of the older generation sometimes combined and switched jobs, such as factory and janitorial work, security guarding and delivery driving. A creative combination of trades is very characteristic of Balkan Roma. Ali's well-educated son worked his way up from a meat deliveryman to a manager of a meat distribution company. He also trained as an insurance agent, opened a restaurant and became a real estate agent. Several professional musicians combine music with day jobs such as driving or delivering. No woman is a professional musician because of the stigma of performing in public.[32] Several Roma have invested in real estate and made substantial profits.

Female employment is a necessity in almost all families, although the ideal is a sole male breadwinner. If there are small children and no older women to care for them, mothers stay home; day care centers are rarely utilized. The middle generation of women worked as cleaning ladies in office buildings, as cutters in the clothing industry, as salesclerks in neighborhood shops, as caretakers for the elderly in their homes, as food managers in nursing homes, and as hair stylists and cosmeticians. These US jobs were like those in Macedonia, although in the latter case, they were often government positions that offered stable pensions and vacation benefits. The US provides little employment security and few benefits and much depends on one's legal status. Those who are undocumented remain extremely limited in their job prospects. In the 1980s, for example, Roma worked in a neighborhood plastics factory for $4.00 per hour. Undocumented workers have no job security, no

[32] Silverman, *Romani Routes*, chs. 6 and 10.

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vacations, no pension plans and no medical insurance; they are constantly afraid their employers will report them.

Yet, during the last two decades, most families have attained middle-class status; and with the increase in demand for celebrations, local musicians are doing well. Many Roma have moved into private homes in the suburbs. This means that face-to-face street socializing in Belmont has declined and social media contact has replaced it. Because suburban dwellers do not see each other regularly, they value celebrations with music even more. With higher incomes, regular vacations and legal documentation, some families travel frequently to North Macedonia and to other sites in the diaspora. When they visit, they are expected to bring gifts, attend weddings and tip musicians generously; this is a huge financial responsibility that informs decisions about whether and when to travel.

Educational gains are notable in the younger generation. Women, even more than men, are attending college and entering professions such as nursing, teaching, computing and accounting.[33] Some men still do manual labor, but there are many business owners, musicians and videographers for weddings. Only a few parents have allowed their children to attend college out of town and live in dormitories. Elders monitor girls' mobility more than boys', emphasizing female honor and modesty, although many girls now drive and socialize unchaperoned. The marriage age is increasing, and women are waiting longer to have children and having fewer children, which increases their independence. As thirty-year-old Suzana explained to me, "We want to be modern but keep certain values"; when I asked her what she meant by modern, she explained: "We're more lenient – there are fewer rules; for example, our daughter and sons will be treated equally."

Language change is notable; multilingualism was the norm in Macedonia – the older generation often spoke Romani, Turkish, Macedonian and Serbo-Croatian. The Romani language is, however, on the decline in Belmont; the trend is to retain Macedonian/English bilingualism, but even Macedonian is on the decline. Belmont Roma are relatively isolated from other Roma and thus have little need to speak Romani. The texts of songs, however, keep the Romani language alive. For example, even though Bronx Roma may not speak Romani, they are familiar with the lyrics and meanings of Romani songs and sing along with them.

[33] Silverman, "Education, Agency, and Power," 33–34.

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The Muslim religion has historically been a cultural identification point but the level of practice has increased dramatically. Until the 1990s, Roma were not very observant; even today, some eat pork, and many drink alcohol and do not pray. In the 1990s, conservative forms of Islam began to spread in the Balkans and the diaspora, and mosques proliferated. In Belmont, both the Muza Mosque and the Islamic Center became vital community foci. Some women are covered, and many men pray at the mosque; quite a few have made the hajj to Mecca. Increasing Islamization has directly affected ritual and musical life both in the Balkans and in the diaspora. Some *hodzas* (Islamic teachers) instruct Roma to stop celebrating "non-Muslim holidays" such as the spring Herdeljezi celebration of renewal and fertility. Most Belmont Roma no longer celebrate Herdeljezi, although in 2023 and 2024 there were small gatherings with music. In addition, some circumcision ceremonies, especially if they are funded by mosques, are now celebrated without music and dance. Quite a few weddings happen without alcohol and most weddings feature a ceremony in the mosque. On the other hand, many covered women dance regularly. But for some Roma, Islam has become their most important public identity factor.

NEGOTIATING IDENTITY

Most Belmont Roma feel different not only from the majority of Americans but also from other Muslim Balkan ethnicities and from other Roma. Identity issues arise because of several intertwined issues: prejudice against Roma, the pressure to "be more American" and pride in Romani culture. These Roma experience the tension between American individualistic values and the collective family values of their community. Living, working and going to school alongside non-Roma makes them aware of what they claim distinguishes Roma from others: their family orientation, respect for elders, ties to Macedonia, Muslim religion and culture, including languages, customs, rituals and especially music and dance. Most relate to Macedonia as their home. This, however, is a discursive trope, a reference point. Many community members have rarely traveled home, and some younger members have never been to Macedonia. Home is wherever their community is because they are more people-oriented than place-oriented. For example, when people speak of travel to Macedonia, it is often to see specific people, and experience the music, but rarely "to be there." I was surprised to hear how often people said they did not need to visit Macedonia because "everyone was here [in the US]."

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Community members not only identify as but also are proud to be Roma, but exactly what that means is variable. For the older generations, it may be language and customs and for the second generation, it may be finding appropriate spouses for their children. Second- and third-generation Roma, who were born in the US, always mention music and dance to define their culture. One unmarried girl told me she does not really know what or who she is: "I've never been to Macedonia, so am I Macedonian?" On the other hand, another who had "never been home" said she is anxiously awaiting the opportunity to go there to attend parties and be immersed in the music. How one constructs one's identity for others is often a different issue than how one feels within one's own community. Certainly, this is true for musicians who are forced to deal with marketing images that are usually created by non-Roma.[34] But all Roma are forced to deal with their public identity whether they want to or not, because of the stigma associated with it. In the Balkans, non-Roma readily stigmatize Roma by where they live, what language they speak, how they dress or the color of their skin.

Because of discrimination, Roma exhibit a diversity of attitudes about revealing their ethnicity to non-Roma. In contrast to the Balkans, in the United States Roma can hide their family history; they do not live in an exclusively Romani neighborhood, few Americans can pinpoint their foreign language, and there are other dark-skinned people around. In the United States, stereotypes about "Gypsies" center on the dichotomous poles of romantic fantasy and criminality. On the one hand, Gypsies are supposedly nomadic, passionate, talented, magical, artistic and musical, and on the other hand, they are shifty, cannot be trusted and will "gyp" you.[35] There have been many television programs about Gypsy criminality and police forces in several cities have divisions specializing in "Gypsy crime." Because of these pervasive stereotypes, American Roma from all subgroups often hide their ethnicity.[36] Leila told me in 2014: "We have to teach our kids to not be ashamed to admit

[34] Silverman, *Romani Routes*.

[35] Petra Gelbart and Carol Silverman, "Lifting the Curtain on the Gypsy Robe: As Actors' Equity Prepares to Announce a New Name for Its Beloved Broadway Ceremony," *American Theatre,* July 13, 2018, www.americantheatre.org/2018/07/13/lifting-the-curtain-on-the-gypsy-robe/; Silverman, "Oregon Roma (Gypsies)," 518–53.

[36] "Roma Realities in the United States: Breaking the Silence, Challenging the Stereotypes," FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University, November 2020, https://content.sph.harvard.edu/wwwhsph/sites/2464/2020/11/Romani-realities-report-final-11.30.2020.pdf.

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they are Roma so that people . . . can see we are 'normal.'" She said that her parents often claimed, "we're Turkish, to avoid not being able to find an apartment, a job, to avoid the whole issue." In Belmont, Roma are sometimes mistaken for other people of color in their neighborhood; they are racialized even if they consider themselves "white." A Belmont Roma worried: "We are very cautious. If you say you're a Gypsy people begin to look at you. They think you steal, you can't be trusted. We would lose our jobs."

One woman explained:

> Gypsies are considered the lowest level of person by Americans. Blacks, they've come up, but we are still down. I don't tell people I'm Romani. . . . Once at work I told my co-workers I was a Gypsy and they didn't believe me. They said, "but you've been at this job for over three years – you don't live in a tent!" My husband – he tells everyone, but not me.

A college-educated married woman living in Toronto explained: "Whether we say we are Roma depends on whom you talk to. You really have to pick carefully who you tell because they can throw it back at you. Some of my friends and co-workers know and some don't." Similarly, Ramo told me, "I'm proud that I'm a Rom, but others hide, they say they're Turkish, whatever. I hate that. A lot of people think that we steal, that we don't work. Where I used to work, I told them I am Gypsy and they didn't believe it – they said that is impossible, you can't be Gypsy. Most people think we live in tents."

In the 1990s, several musicians refused to play in a prestigious concert for non-Roma when they learned that they were identified as Roma in the program notes. These same Roma are extremely proud of and involved in their music when it occurs in all-Romani contexts, but they shy away from the Gypsy label in mainstream American contexts because of the stigma.

Community members claim that non-Romani Eastern Europeans are often the most prejudiced Americans. In 2010, a young mother said "I don't tell anyone I'm Romani. I am afraid of the stereotypes – they would think I steal, I travel, I tell fortunes. I told my son not to tell his teachers, but he did and now his Polish teacher looks at us differently." One Romani teacher hid her ethnicity and stayed off Facebook because she worked in a school where East European American teachers told "Gypsy jokes" in the lunchroom. In 2012, a controversy arose when some Roma joined a pan-Balkan New York City association run by Turks, but other Roma saw their Romani ethnicity being ignored by this same association.

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A young woman explained that we "feel excluded as a group and a race … we feel inferior … Shouldn't Romani issues be addressed? … The world and the Balkans don't like Roma … therefore Roma need to do what we need to do on our own and represent our own." Another young woman responded to her: "Thank you … for waking up all our people – finally realizing they can't run from who they are. … A lot of people that are now finally calling themselves Roma who would die before ever saying so. … Everyone was Turkish for a good minute … they don't have to be ashamed anymore …"

Those Roma who experienced racism in Macedonia or other diasporic locations were the most afraid to admit their ethnicity in America. Leila narrated: "In the 1970s, I was afraid because my parents were afraid; I would say I'm Macedonian or Yugoslavian. If someone would ask how come you're so dark, I'd say we're Turkish. While we were in Vienna … the people we were living with advised us, 'don't speak the Romani language because if people find out we're Gypsies, they'll deport us.'" After a while, however, Leila realized that she could not reject her ethnicity:

> I can't deny what I am. … You may tell everybody you're Yugoslavian, or Macedonian, or Turkish but I know you're Gypsy. You carry your shadow everywhere you go, so that's the main reason why … I'm not going to deny it. I never really felt racism here … in the States. Once I started school and became unafraid, I would tell my teachers, I would tell my friends what I am. And I didn't feel the rejection and the racism like we do in Europe. So, once I started working … my manager … would make a comment like, "Oh, but Yugoslavians are so light-skinned – you're so dark." "Well, that's because I'm a Gypsy."

The comments expressed above evoke Paul Gilroy's use of the concept of "double consciousness," which he referenced from W. E. B. Du Bois, who articulated in 1903: "this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others."[37] Although specific to African Americans forced to see themselves through the lens of majority white Americans in a racist society, the concept also resonates with Roma. They display internal struggles to reconcile the outsider pejorative label "Gypsy" with being Roma; they thus must situationally negotiate identity disclosure. Migration also figures into this issue – Roma often pass as more acceptable migrants to avoid discrimination, something rarely available for transatlantic Blacks. Gilroy underlines the tension between Afro-diasporic

[37] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 3.

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and American positionalities and the emergent possibility of resistance and creativity. Similarly, Romani musicians sometimes creatively enact, adopt and exploit the Gypsy stereotype as a marketing tool for non-Roma, because racialized "Gypsy music" sells. On the other hand, as noted above, other musicians, who are proud to be Roma, reject the Gypsy label in mainstream American contexts because of the attached stigma. There are, then, a range of responses among Belmont Roma regarding revealing their identity: while some hide, others boast, some strategically pass and others harness stereotypes. Inside their own community, however, pride is strong and often centers on music and dance.

CONCLUSION

Gilroy's analysis of the Black Atlantic as a "rhizomorphic" formation highlighting the circulation of ideas, people, and sounds helps to elucidate the transmission of music across and within the Romani Atlantic.[38] Macedonian Romani American music, like African American music, is inherently hybrid, informed by the cosmopolitan trajectory of migrants. Gilroy approaches

> music as a *changing* rather than an unchanging same. Today, this approach involves the difficult task of striving to comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions not in the unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence through time but in the breaks and interruptions that suggest that the invocation of tradition may itself be a distinct, though covert, response to the destabilizing flux of the post-contemporary world. New "traditions" are invented in the jaws of modern experience, and new conceptions of modernity are produced in the long shadow of our enduring traditions.[39]

Like African Americans, Macedonian Roma in diaspora combine elements of older traditions with newer innovations that do not dilute but rather reinforce and even create their identity.

The lived experiences of migrant Macedonian Roma have changed since the 1960s as they have responded to varying socioeconomic contexts. Macedonian Roma in New York are now well integrated into institutions such as schools and regular employment, and many have reached the middle class. They have become more religious than in earlier decades, more mobile and more gender egalitarian. But all migrant Roma are aware of exclusions and stereotypes. They cultivate strong ties to

[38] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4. [39] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 101.

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relatives in North Macedonia and other diasporic sites, such as Germany, and they regularly visit if funds and documents permit. These Roma maintain dynamic transnational communication not only via travel, but also through social media, often related to musically rich ritual celebrations. Their identity as Roma stems in part from shared exclusion and in part from shared culture, specifically transatlantic music.

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