

# ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS IN GYPSY, ROMA AND TRAVELLER RESEARCH

Lessons from a Time of Crisis

Edited by  
Martin Fotta and Paloma Gay y Blasco



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1–9 Old Park Hill

Bristol

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UK

t: +44 (0)117 374 6645

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## Notes on Contributors

**Tamsin Cavaliero** is a lecturer in the Department of Social Sciences at the Atlantic Technological University Sligo. Her research interests include creative methodologies, educational inclusion, group work, cultural contexts of childhood and youth, sustainability and Traveller and Roma communities. Prior to taking up her lecturing post she worked in practice in a variety of posts with Traveller youth in formal and informal educational settings and was involved in a number of arts-based projects with Travellers. Tamsin is a trained graphic facilitator regularly involved in graphic facilitation work which focuses on family support, youth participation, inclusive research practices and counselling.

**Ana Chirițoiu** is a social anthropologist working at the intersection of legal, moral and political anthropology. She has worked with Roma communities across Romania for over a decade now, both as an academic and as an engaged researcher. She has written about Romani activism, Romani jurisprudence and vernacular Roma politics. Her doctoral work analysed the relation between the social exclusion of Roma and the inner social order of a Roma group living on the margins of a southern Romanian town, along with the practices and ideologies that maintain this order. Her current research examines the challenges that long-term migration poses for the reproduction of Roma groups' moral community – and whether social media mitigates or compounds these challenges.

**Martin Fotta** is a researcher at the Institute of Ethnology at the Czech Academy of Sciences. His primary research interests are informal economic strategies, mobilities and welfare state transformations. He is a co-author, with Mariya Ivancheva and Raluca Pernes, of a report on precarity and labour conditions within academic anthropology entitled *The Anthropological Career in Europe: A complete report on the EASA membership survey* (EASA, 2020) and a co-editor, with Paloma Gay y Blasco, of *Romani Chronicles of COVID-19: Testimonies of Harm and Resilience* (Berghahn, 2023).

**David Friel** is a researcher and PhD candidate at the Atlantic Technological University Sligo (ATU Sligo). He holds a Master of Arts in Social Care and

Social Justice and a Bachelor of Science in Health and Social Care. He is also an academic tutor at ATU Sligo and a training officer with Think Equality Donegal. Most recently, he has taken up the position of adjunct lecturer at University College Dublin, teaching the Traveller Culture, History and Ethnicity course. Additionally, he has a wealth of experience as a social care practitioner. His research interests include Irish Travellers, human rights, social justice, and participatory action research.

**Paloma Gay y Blasco** teaches social anthropology at the University of St Andrews. She has authored books and articles on ethnographic methods, collaborative anthropology and Romani issues. Recent publications include *Writing Friendship: A Reciprocal Ethnography* (co-authored with Liria Hernández, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and *Romani Chronicles of COVID-19: Testimonies of Harm and Resilience* (co-edited with Martin Fotta, Berghahn, 2023).

**Demetrio Gómez Ávila** has worked for over three decades advocating for social justice and Romani rights through decolonial and intersectional perspectives. A leading Rroma human rights activist, he has, among other things, served as an expert and trainer for the Council of Europe, the European Commission and other organizations and institutions connected to racial justice, antifascism and the fight against xenophobia and discrimination.

**Luxa Leoco** is a Romanian Roma woman who spent most of her youth living in homelessness with her husband and two children in Madrid. In recent years, she has worked as a waitress, an assistant cook and, lately, as a store manager. In 2020, for six months, she joined the Marie Skłodowska-Curie project 'Resilience and Resignation among Transnational Roma and non-Roma Youths' (RETRY) as a research assistant.

**Nathalie Manrique** is an independent social anthropologist. During her extended fieldwork among Andalusian Gitanos, she investigated the place of gifts in the construction of kinship. In 2016–17, thanks to a grant by the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona, she examined Gitano matrimonial practices from the early modern era to the present day. She is also interested in funeral commensality patterns. Her most recent publication is 'Gitanos en España. Un estudio exploratorio a partir de los apellidos' (in *Nombrar y circular, los gitanos entre Europa y las Américas*, edited by Neyra P. Alvarado Solís, Colegio de San Luis de Potosi, 2020).

**Antonio Montañés Jiménez** is a Spanish anthropologist with an interest in the study of Rroma people, Christianity and social movements. He is a Margarita Salas postdoctoral fellow affiliated with the School of

Anthropology and Museum Ethnography at the University of Oxford and member of St Antony's College (Oxford). Previously, he held an ESRC postdoctoral fellowship at the University of St Andrews.

**Stefano Piemontese** is a research fellow at the Institute for Research into Superdiversity of the University of Birmingham. His research interests are primarily in youth, migration and inequality. While using ethnography to explore these topics, he likewise employs audiovisual and collaborative methodologies in his research. Recently he co-edited, with Tina Magazzini, *Constructing Roma Migrants. European Narratives and Local Governance* (IMISCOE-Springer, 2019), and led the Marie Skłodowska-Curie project 'Resilience and Resignation among Transnational Roma and non-Roma Youths' (RETRY, 2019–22).

**Iliana Sarafian** is a researcher at the Centre for Public Authority and International Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the author of *Contesting Moralities: Roma Identities, State and Kinship* (Berghahn, 2023). Her doctoral work focused on the reproduction of social inequalities among Bulgarian Roma in gender, kinship and state relationships. She also conducted research on minority and migrant health and well-being in Italy and the United Kingdom. She is currently leading a British Academy-supported ethnographic project on deservingness and resilience among Ukrainian Roma refugees in Poland.

**Marco Solimene** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Folkloristics of the University of Iceland. His research activities revolve around Roma-related issues in Europe, with a specific focus on Italy and the Balkan area. His research interests and publications include themes such as governmentality and resilience, urban governance and (in)formality, memory and nostalgia, as well as methodological and epistemology issues. He is currently investigating transnational practices and imageries of home-making among Bosnian Muslim Roma families dwelling in an urban shanty in Rome (Italy).

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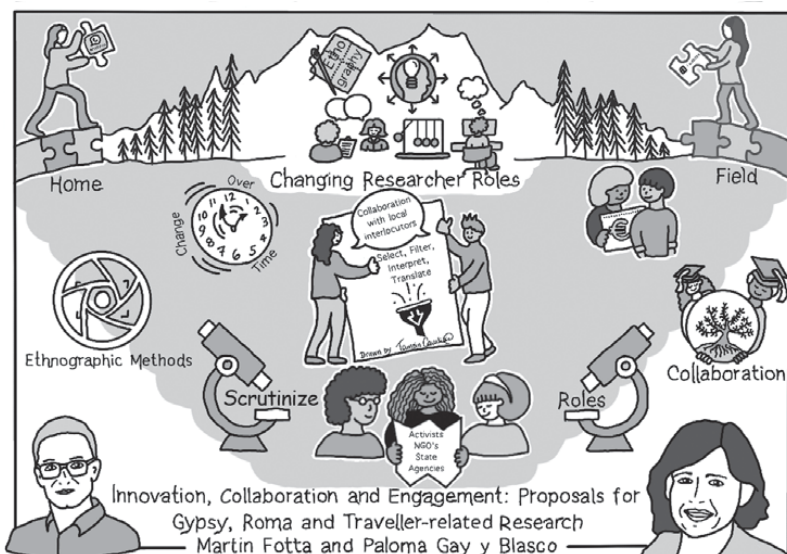
# Innovation, Collaboration and Engagement: Proposals for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller-related Research

*Martin Fotta and Paloma Gay y Blasco*

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## Themes discussed in this chapter

- the transformation of research methods that has been generated or accelerated by the pandemic, and its likely ongoing effects on GRT-related research;
  - the ways researcher roles are changing, and the ethical and political implications of these changes;
  - the ways emerging research methodologies may both challenge and reinforce existing power differentials, hierarchies and inequalities;
  - the advantages of collaborating with local interlocutors (such as research participants, assistants or activists) when planning, implementing and disseminating projects. The problems that may arise from conflicting goals and expectations.
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## Introduction

Throughout March and April 2020, as one country after another passed emergency laws and entered into severe lockdown, researchers who had been working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) groups began to collect media reports such as this one, on 7 March, from the Spanish right-wing broadsheet *ABC*:

### **The coronavirus outbreak in Haro (La Rioja) compels the deployment of police to enforce isolation**

People of Gitano ethnicity attend a non-religious funeral in a fish market in Vitoria and do not comply with the quarantine.

The unprecedented spread of coronavirus in La Rioja ... has forced the deployment of State security forces and bodies to force compliance with isolation ... (Fines of between 3,000 and 600,000 euros are foreseen for those who do not comply with the established measures. ... Fear of further spread of the virus is what has forced the authorities to act. (Lastra, 2020)

It soon became clear to researchers that GRT groups<sup>1</sup> in many locales were being targeted for additional controls, and that they were being portrayed and treated as irresponsible anti-citizens, potential super-spreaders of the new virus. Tracking the depiction of GRT groups by the media was one of the few ways in which, confined to their homes under lockdown and unable to pursue face-to-face research, ethnographers attempted to document the impact of the pandemic and of pandemic control measures upon GRT

communities (for example, [Berta, 2020](#); [Gay y Blasco and Rodriguez Camacho, 2020](#); [Matache and Bhabha, 2020](#); [Berescu et al, 2021](#)).

Researchers also turned to social media platforms like Facebook or WhatsApp, which already before March 2020 were being used by social scientists and research participants to keep in touch and sustain ties of friendship and affection. These platforms became key tools for understanding the new challenges that GRT communities were confronting. Like millions of others, GRT individuals and families transferred online much of their everyday sociability and interaction with the state, and it was online that researchers began documenting the transformation of social life brought on by the pandemic. Some attempted to continue in this way their work on issues that were not directly linked to the crisis, even if unavoidably affected by it – topics as diverse as oral history, gendered violence or Roma Pentecostal missionizing (for example, [Doležalová, 2021](#)).

So, whereas up until March 2020 many social scientists working on GRT issues had used online research tools as, at most, supplementary aids to face-to-face approaches, overnight they became essential: they were not just our only way of accessing information but also, as the very arena where so much of social life was developing, our field-site. This was much more than a practical adaptation: forced to consider what demanded attention, what could and could not be investigated at a distance and how, as researchers, we had to rethink our aims, roles and outputs.

Already before the pandemic ethnographers had been analysing and critiquing the multiple forms of marginalization suffered by GRT communities, and writing about topics as varied as racialized state policies, forced segregation in housing and schooling, or violence against GRT persons within health settings (for example, [Sigona, 2005](#); [Grill, 2012](#); [Stewart, 2012](#); [Gay y Blasco, 2016](#); [Picker, 2017](#); [Ivasiuc, 2021](#); [Spreizer, 2022](#)). We now found ourselves witnessing the rapid intensification of neglect, racism and oppression, and the deployment of necropolicies in new ways or across new arenas ([Gay y Blasco and Fotta 2023a](#)). Given the sense of urgency and danger, and the extent to which anti-pandemic measures were transforming people's lives, researchers confronted new questions about the purposes of their work. At the same time, the spread of online conferencing made collaboration with GRT activists and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to document and denounce these processes possible, and in some cases easier than in the past, even at a distance (for example, [Gonçalves et al, 2023](#)).

Within GRT-related scholarship these dynamics were taking place against the background of other transformations – in particular the growing awareness of the need to reflect on the politics of research and of researcher positionality. Insights, theoretical tools and methodologies developed since at

least the 1970s in connection with the ethics of research with other subaltern groups – especially by feminist ethnographers (for example, Carby, 1982; Spivak, 1988; hooks 1989; Abu-Lughod, 1996) – and with the movement to decolonize the social sciences and to critically engage with race and racialization (for example, Harrison, 1991; Rodríguez et al, 2010) began to be discussed in earnest by GRT and non-GRT scholars working on GRT issues in the years leading up to the pandemic (for example, Tidrick, 2010; Brooks, 2012; Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz, 2012; Brooks; 2015; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2015; Stewart, 2017; Fremlova 2022). Key strands of debate coalesced around the so-called ‘critical Romani studies’ (Bogdan et al, 2018) and around the growing call for and acceptance of collaborative and participatory research (Kazubowki-Houston, 2015; Silverman, 2018; Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021; Piemontese, 2021; Țișteea, and Băncuță, 2023). These debates had already been reflected in our pre-pandemic work, for instance in Paloma’s spearheading the development of collaborative ethnography in social anthropology through her reciprocal body of work with Liria Hernández from 2009 onwards (Gay y Blasco and de la Cruz, 2012; Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020).

Our discussion here is therefore framed not just by the pandemic but by debates about the ethics, morals and politics of social science research with racialized vulnerable groups in general, and with GRT groups in particular. We have chosen to engage with these debates through a specific focus on ethnographic methods: we believe that it is through concrete changes in the ways we work as scholars that pressing concerns around voice, inclusiveness, relevance, impact and ethics must be addressed. These are not just theoretical issues but must be approached as urgent methodological problems that demand careful attending to when planning, implementing and disseminating projects. Calling for changes in the way GRT-related scholarship is carried out is a first step. The next one must be to develop ways of answering these calls through practice – a process which generates additional questions, challenges and dilemmas.

In this chapter, we critically evaluate the ways in which ethnographic research has developed during the pandemic against this specific political-epistemic landscape. We focus on three arenas or topics that we believe provide particularly fruitful ground for reflecting on the future of GRT-related research. We begin by examining changing possibilities for and practices of data collection, go on to discuss how the roles of ethnographers (whether of GRT background or not) and their interlocutors are shifting as a result, and finish by considering some of the key factors that shape the setting up of goals and agendas in this emerging research landscape. Throughout, we examine our own pandemic research trajectories because we hope that our problems and doubts, and the decisions we took to try to

address them, will prove helpful for others as they face their own, whether or not they work with GRT communities.

## **Innovations in research methods**

The arrival of the pandemic and of anti-pandemic measures demanded methodological innovation, as social science researchers found it harder or impossible to gather data through their usual methods, particularly through face-to-face interactions with participants. Some ethnographers were able to keep working by turning to publicly available data repositories, while others analysed their own data sets to produce publications and other outputs. Yet, already in the spring 2020, during the ‘Great Quarantine’ (Boellstorff, 2020), literature appeared exploring research strategies suitable for pandemic conditions and advising on ways of turning in-person approaches into remote ones (for example, Lupton, 2021; IRISS, nd). Among the methods suggested were secondary source analysis, social media data gathering, online interviews, remotely organized focus groups, autoethnography, journaling, video and photo solicitation and the deployment of local field assistants to conduct research that one would normally have done in person. The use of online surveying platforms such as Amazon MTurk and Prolific grew, particularly in some disciplines such as social psychology and sociology.

The methods are by no means new, but the crisis and technological innovation have made them a more widespread, visible and acceptable part of the ethnographic tool set. Within anthropology, they have increasingly been deployed as complement to, or in some cases instead of, long-term fieldwork in a locale geographically or symbolically separated from ‘home’. Günel, Varma and Watanabe (2020) argue that a combination of factors – in particular the neoliberal ethos shaping university employment, the precarization of academic labour and the feminization of the social sciences and humanities – have changed the character of knowledge production and have made anthropology’s idealized reliance on extended participant observation ‘elsewhere’ less sustainable. They use the term ‘patchwork ethnography’ to describe the pragmatic blend of shorter visits and remote methods that was already increasingly deployed pre-COVID, and argue that it provides rich anthropological insights on a par with those achieved through lengthy immersion, although not necessarily of the same sort. In fact, shorter but frequent stints of fieldwork have been central to the methodological tool of ethnographers in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, where scholars commonly work closer to their homes and where financial support for lengthy field trips has rarely been available (see Brković and Hodges, 2015). Recognizing this diversity of ethnographic research practices is significant for us because it points to hierarchies and inequalities to do with nationality, gender, class, ethnicity, age and so on that are embedded in ethnographic

methods and expectations. These inequalities permeate GRT-related research in specific ways.

Thus, while long-term participant observation has the potential to deliver a level of familiarity and understanding that is very difficult to replicate through patchwork approaches, we are very aware of the economic and practical landscapes within which many scholars must operate and innovate. Against this context, methodological adaptations and innovations should not mean doing away with long-term commitments to participants or with the gradual building of trust. Nor should they lead to shallow analysis and quick conclusions. In fact, these new methods and context make even more visible ‘the gaps, constraints, partial knowledge, and diverse commitments that characterize all knowledge production’ (Günel et al, 2020), and demand that we confront and work with them.

A series of intertwined processes, then – the slower, to some extent unrecognized, longer-term growth of patchwork ethnography; the intensive, highly visible, shorter-term pressures of the pandemic; and the accompanying technological innovations – are driving a methodological shift in GRT research that is likely to extend beyond the current moment. This shift, unsurprisingly, involves a decreased reliance on direct observation, participation and the use of personal experience as learning tools alongside an increased emphasis on discourse analysis and reliance on participant depiction of experience. Here first-hand scholarly observation turns into second-hand, mediated access. While this shift is not necessarily or always negative, its implications must be addressed explicitly and reflected upon, and they must be taken into consideration by researchers when planning, implementing and assessing their projects. What are the challenges, advantages and disadvantages of attempting to grasp the complexities of GRT lives at a distance? Answers to this question are complex, and in what follows we address three salient themes.

The first of these themes is the growing emphasis on the use of textual materials produced or accessed online. So, for example, during the spring of 2020, under lockdown at home in Germany, very far from his Brazilian Calon participants, Martin turned to working on the digital archives of the Brazilian National Library. He scrolled through late 19th- and early 20th-century newspapers looking for articles about Ciganos (Romanies) which would help him to characterize their position during this period and provide leads for further archival research. This was a time-consuming process but one which was well suited for the period of home-boundedness. And, because it was easily fragmentable, it combined relatively well with the demands of home-schooling and childcare, and with work on other projects.

Alongside archival research, ‘mining’ online data (including text and video) publicly available on news outlets and social media platforms seems to help ethnographers bridge the distance between ‘home’ and ‘field’. Yet for

researchers working on GRT issues – with groups whose voices have been consistently marginalized and side-lined – there are significant challenges involved here. These platforms amplify some voices, and their arguments and perspectives, while downplaying, stifling or silencing others; indeed, only face-to-face fieldwork might provide access to those who do not participate online for whatever reason. And if we regard these platforms as sources of ready-made data that just needs to be extracted, we lose the possibility for dialogue and debate with participants that so enrich ethnographic research: we quote participants rather than engage in conversation with them.

A second dimension involves the recognition of the increasing relevance of online sociability for GRT communities, and of online arenas for GRT self- and community-creation, leading to the study of online lives through online participant observation, for example through WhatsApp or Facebook groups (Hajská, 2019). A relevant example here is the work produced by a team of GRT and non-GRT Polish scholars (Fiałkowska et al, 2023) to document and analyse the ways in which Polish Roma migrants dispersed across Europe used social media to construct and sustain kinship and community. They argue that the separation caused by migration and lockdown challenged the intensive sociability that permeates Polish Roma life while also leading to the intensification of care and the renewal of waning ties. This team speak of the ‘digitalization of everyday life’ and characterize Polish Roma as ‘pioneers in digital kinning’ (Styrkacz et al, 2023; Szewczyk et al, 2023). Before the pandemic, the team already had very strong connections with their participants, and they were developing in-person and online tools to study the relationship between migration and online sociability. They have avoided one of the potential pitfalls of online-only participant observation: to treat online lives as if they were the only lives. Instead, they problematize the complex intertwining of online and face-to-face relations and research. They have done so by combining data gathered online with other sources of data, including participant observation and their previous experiences.

The third dimension that we want to emphasize relates to the increasing dependence on local GRT interlocutors (including research participants) who become informal or formal, unpaid or paid, research assistants and help with data gathering for researchers who stay ‘at home’ (Stevano and Deane, 2017). Ethnographers have historically often relied on the help of local researchers, although their contribution and importance have not always been adequately acknowledged. The potential advantages that research assistants bring are well known: they facilitate access, mediate between ethnographers and participants and can help much with data gathering. Sometimes, such as during the ‘Great Quarantine’ (when the field was physically inaccessible but the research problematique was both urgent and rapidly evolving), they might be the only medium through which a researcher can reach out to others and navigate an emergent research terrain.



The deployment of assistants, formal and informal, reshapes research projects (Middleton and Cons, 2014): assistants transform the field and the method, and do much more than collect data. They select, filter, interpret and translate, in explicit or implicit ways, and their active role in the construction of ethnographic knowledge must be examined and acknowledged within research plans and in outputs. Recognition and remuneration must be factored in, and later we discuss some of the ethical and practical challenges that may arise as a result of conflicting or unspoken understandings around roles and entitlements, for example with regards to data ownership or co-authorship of publications. While the use of assistants can be beneficial for both parties, it is important to stress that there are ongoing debates about the ways in which it can reproduce power differentials inherent in academic research (Bouka, 2018; Aijazi et al, 2021). Project leaders must be particularly alert to the fact that working arrangements between GRT and non-GRT ethnographers and their GRT assistants will in all likelihood embody and reproduce inequalities of various kinds.

It is also essential for researchers to think through the potential implications of relying on one predominant voice as the filter through which to access and interpret others – here the place of assistants within unequal local social settings must be considered. The boundary between assistance and gatekeeping needs to be examined, and researchers relying on assistants' accounts of events must be particularly careful not to conflate one person's interpretation or analysis with actual facts, or with the experiences and perspectives of others. The positionality of helpers, gatekeepers and assistants, and its impact on the research process, have to be given attention in research planning, implementation and dissemination alongside that of lead researchers or authors.

Finally, in the emerging research landscape, collaboration between researchers (both GRT and non-GRT) and other GRT actors besides research assistants is growing and will continue to grow. Among these actors are activists, NGO workers, state representatives and so on who may influence the formulation of research agendas. We examine these evolving roles and relationships in the following sections.

## **Changing researcher roles**

The pandemic has been a moment of change and continuity with previous concerns and dynamics in the field of GRT-related research. The crisis generated a sudden and often radical worsening of the very precarious conditions that GRT communities faced. Simultaneously, the expansion of remote communication connected the living spaces of researchers and interlocutors, both stuck at home, making even more tangible the differential impacts of the pandemic on their lives and well-being. This



moment demanded from academics specific kinds of work. It asked them to document and explain this new instantiation of GRT marginalization and how it interweaved with other processes such as material dispossession under austerity or ongoing racial segregation in housing. It also required them to confront and sometimes transform their own roles vis-à-vis the GRT communities whose lives they studied, as researchers but also as acquaintances, friends and relatives of people who were suffering great hardships.

As a Latin Americanist, Martin observed these transformations taking place within contemporary Brazilian Romani studies, a very vibrant research community. Here, already before the pandemic, much debate and communication occurred via social media, in particular via WhatsApp groups. When the pandemic hit, social media became one of the key spaces where researchers engaged the moment: they shared their articles and blogposts; organized and publicized webinars about the difficulties facing specific Cigano communities; networked to pressure local authorities; and organized fundraisers for families and individuals using mobile banking tools. From their homes, Cigano and non-Cigano researchers also helped their research participants to register for emergency aid provided by the federal government, organized the delivery of relief to the communities where they worked or assisted municipal or state agencies in developing contingency plans for Cigano communities.<sup>2</sup>

Eliana Barbosa (2020) suggested that this flurry of activities emerged from what she calls ‘academic southernness’ – a grounded research outlook that prioritizes action and solidarity to minimize harm. This Brazilian urbanist argues that there was a distinct difference in ethos between how her colleagues in Latin America and the West responded to the pandemic: while the former did so through engaged action, the latter reacted to the unexpected by looking for its broader meaning through theoretical reflection. Yet in the West too (in the UK, Eastern and Southern Europe where we are based) we witnessed GRT and non-GRT academics attempting to mitigate the impact of the crisis on their GRT participants through action. They did so through very different scales, from making very small contributions such as giving English classes over Zoom or assisting individuals with social services now moved online, to taking on much larger roles such as helping to coordinate or deliver relief or contributing to the development of policies.

Although these activities were not new for all researchers, their form or intensity often changed under pandemic conditions, evidencing the fact that researcher roles are multifaceted and complex, change over time and with context and often lack clear boundaries. The sheer diversity of these roles and activities, and of the motives behind them and of their effects, defy generalization and it must be recognized that they were framed also by specific national and disciplinary histories and by varying levels of trust in

the state.<sup>3</sup> Overall, the pandemic has helped to erode the already-permeable frontier between so-called engaged and non-engaged research.

Researchers working on GRT issues must scrutinize their evolving roles critically and reflexively, paying attention to how different changes shape their place in the field and in the world, their specific relationships with participants, assistants and collaborators, and their outputs. This scrutiny should be incorporated into research plans and also addressed in academic texts and other products. In particular, researchers must examine the hierarchies and inequalities that their shifting roles may mask or reinforce. And here it is particularly important to underline the potential differences between the experiences of GRT academics working with their own communities and family members and those of non-GRT scholars – while not being blind to the many factors that may separate GRT researchers from others in their communities.

These transformations point also to the fact that roles and activities undertaken by researchers intertwine with contrasting understandings of the purpose and value of academic work. On the one hand, like other academics, those working on GRT issues are haunted by the spectre of the ‘endlessly chattering, useless’ scholar (Hage, 2020), by the potential irrelevancy of their research and other activities. On the other hand, identifying usefulness is not easy, if only because the priorities or ideas of relevance held by different stakeholders often do not align – for example, communities and funders may have opposing perspectives, and local communities are themselves highly diverse so that people within them may hold contrasting views regarding what needs attention, scholarly or otherwise. Criticisms of uselessness can also easily feed into the neoliberal ethos of academia which evaluates scholarly outputs according to their immediate impact, measured primarily in terms of economic growth. For these reasons, addressing explicitly the purposes, uses and potential benefits and harms of each research project – and particularly confronting the difficulties involved in defining these benefits and harms clearly – has become a methodological imperative in pandemic and post-pandemic work on GRT issues.

Examining our own work in this light demonstrates this imperative, as well as some of its accompanying challenges and tensions. In April 2020 we embarked on a large collaborative project that brought together 23 Romani and 14 non-Romani authors, from many walks of life, in an attempt to chronicle the impact that COVID-19 was having on Romani communities in five countries in Europe and Latin America. *Romani Chronicles of COVID-19* (Gay y Blasco and Fotta, 2023b) emerged in response to twin realizations. The first was that the effects of the pandemic on GRT communities were severe but were also likely to be disregarded, in particular by those in positions of authority, as unfortunate side-effects of their poverty, marginality and assumed inability to behave as proper citizens. The second was that, to

challenge these prejudices, it was necessary to make these effects visible but also to create arenas where GRT voices, non-academic as much as academic, are listened to. Aware of the need to get to work as fast as possible to document GRT experiences during lockdown, we asked colleagues, friends and acquaintances to contribute with their accounts about their life during the crisis. The result was a collection of texts originally written in different languages through a wide variety of collaborative methods by activists, street sellers, academics, community mediators, NGO workers, policy advisers and so on who described the pandemic through their own stories and those of their families and friends. Working primarily during 2020 and 2021, when travel and face-to-face communication were impossible, the group relied on Zoom and social media to collaborate.

As non-GRT academics in secure jobs, we conceived our role as that of initiators and encouragers, and acted as coordinators, transcribers, translators, editors and facilitators of the work of others: we attempted to assist the group as a whole to bear collective witness to the pandemic moment. We believed that there was value in propelling this task of documentation – a task without which analysis, critique and change are not possible.

Yet the fact remains that, without our intervention as established academics, the volume would not have been possible, and this fact makes clear the deep inequalities onto which the project was built. These inequalities had many practical ramifications: for example, many of the contributors to the volume will not be able to read the work of their co-authors, since the book as a whole is in English and we do not have the resources for translating every paper into the languages of the contributors. Published by an academic press and at academic prices, the book is unlikely to reach a very wide audience or have easily discernible effects. Finally, we, rather than any of the GRT contributors, had final editorial control over the volume and its contents.

## **Setting and implementing collaborative research agendas**

The shifts in the roles and activities of researchers have not taken place in isolation: they are now beginning to be accompanied by parallel changes in the roles played within research projects by GRT interlocutors, including but not only research participants. Already before the pandemic, calls had been made to acknowledge the role of GRT participants – in particular those without formal education – in the production of academic knowledge (Silverman, 2018; Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020; Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021), and for them to play more prominent and visible parts in the planning, implementation and dissemination of projects. In 2018, Silverman argued that ‘collaboration provides more insightful critiques that better resonate with communities’, but she also observed that ‘[i]n Romani Studies, many

scholars have done the work of critique but have not necessarily embraced collaboration' (2018, 83).<sup>4</sup> Post-pandemic, the number of publications co-authored by academics and interlocutors is slowly beginning to grow (Campos and Caldas, 2023; Flores Torres et al, 2023; Montañés Jiménez and Carmona, 2023; Peter and Hrustič, 2023; Țișteea, and Băncuță, 2023; Montañés Jiménez and Gómez Ávila, Chapter 4 this volume; Piemontese and Leoco, Chapter 8 this volume). These transformations are still in their infancy and here the work of Paloma and her collaborator Liria Hernández (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020) has demonstrated potential avenues for others to consider. But of course, collaborative projects (with scholars and locals jointly designing, implementing and disseminating projects) are not always possible or desirable: not all research participants or local interlocutors can or wish to produce research, and many would instead cooperate with researchers in other ways.

The evolution of Paloma's research during the pandemic demonstrates some of the tensions and challenges involved in the setting up of collaborative agendas. The start of lockdown in March 2020 found her carrying out interviews with Gitana (Spanish Romani) women in Madrid, asking them about the diverse forms of gendered violence that shape their lives. At the core of this project were collaborations of various kinds between Paloma and Spanish Romani women from different backgrounds who played diverse roles in the research – from interviewees keen to see the topic of gendered violence receive attention, to fieldworkers and partners in project design.

To begin with, there was the long-term collaboration with Liria, first as Paloma's friend and her informant between 1992 and 2009, then as co-author between 2009 and 2020 and lastly as co-project designer and fieldworker from 2019 onwards. Together, Liria and Paloma had recently published *Writing Friendship* (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020), where they reflected on their intertwined trajectories as Gitana and non-Gitana Spanish women. Gendered forms of violence of different kinds were a central theme in *Writing Friendship* and, once the book was finished, Liria and Paloma decided to examine how violence figures in the lives of Gitana women in Spain more widely. Paloma got a small grant to carry out this work, with Liria employed as fieldworker.

Secondly, the project involved collaboration with Gitana professionals working at NGOs who were themselves already involved in intervention projects designed to tackle gendered violence, and for whom research evidence is an important resource when designing interventions and applying for funding. Paloma and Liria had presented to them their initial research plans before the pandemic, and these were then refined through joint discussion before being implemented with their help. Without this early input of the NGO professionals, the project would have been

impossible. Data gathering was paused during 2020 when mitigating the effects of the pandemic on Gitano families became an urgent priority for the NGOs and when documenting these effects became Paloma's primary task (Gay y Blasco and Rodriguez Camacho, 2020). Then, in 2021, when Liria became very unwell with long COVID and with Paloma stuck in the UK because of bans on travel, a number of interviews had to be carried out online.

Collaborations of these kinds, aimed at the joint production of knowledge rather than merely at data extraction (Rios and Sands, 2000; Lassiter, 2005; Rappaport, 2007; Field et al, 2008; Heffernan et al, 2020), are increasingly important within social science research generally. Yet, it is not always easy to reconcile academic and local agendas, expectations and working methods, and it is essential for researchers and their collaborators to be attentive to this fact (Helbig, 2007; Kazubowski-Houston, 2015; Silverman, 2018). For instance, the academic emphasis on observation and the NGO emphasis on intervention can stand in tension, particularly when research findings are presented to project participants for input and critique. Contrasting expectations around roles and uses of data also need careful attending to.

Anna Tsing (2004, 264) has spoken of 'collaboration with friction at its heart' as a complex productive process in social science research, one where parties 'may or may not be similar and may or may not have common understandings of the problem and the product', or even truly grasp each other's hopes, positions and agendas. In GRT-related research, like in any social science research, collaborations between researchers of any ethnicity and local partners are often also moments of friction which demand clarity, flexibility, determination and openness. This friction, as Tsing argues, does 'make new objects and agents possible' (Tsing, 2004, 264) but can also be difficult to manage and always risks reinforcing power differentials or, indeed, producing new ones.

A key point to remember is that competing demands and expectations, and hierarchies and inequalities of multiple kinds, will always permeate GRT research. While some of these may be clearly visible to researchers, collaborators and participants, others may be harder to discern, have different implications when looked at from different vantage points or change through time. Often, they cross-cut each other. As well as inequalities between parties of GRT and non-GRT background, there are inequalities within and across both of these categories – for example between project leaders, other researchers and research assistants; between those with and without a formal education; or between those who occupy positions of authority within GRT associations or NGOs and those who do not. By way of an example, gendered inequalities are particularly relevant for some of the Gitano women collaborating with Paloma, who have argued that GRT activism

is sometimes dominated by male agendas in ways that may obscure the subordination of women within their communities and that make certain kinds of research and advocacy more difficult.

These inequalities complicate the easily-taken-for-granted boundary between so-called ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ researchers, and between researchers and subjects, and make it necessary to always deploy these categories with care (Narayan, 1993; Zavella, 1993; Bakalaki, 1997). Researchers and interlocutors attempting collaborative work must be prepared for problems, discrepancies and tensions to emerge or become more salient as projects develop. While it is possible to anticipate some of these, other cannot be planned away and the emotional impact on all involved can be significant. Lastly, solidarity and joint work are indeed possible and can be fruitful, even if they are shaped by the kinds of friction of which Tsing speaks.

It is important to keep in mind that interlocutors and researchers are not the only agents involved in the setting up of research agendas. Funders, universities and sometimes authorities at various levels from the local to the national and beyond have enormous power over what is considered worth investigating or not, and over the methods that can be employed, and they make particular kinds of research easier or harder to accomplish. In our experience, they do not always value the positive contributions of projects involving GRT collaborators without formal university education.

The key role of funders in shaping the direction of GRT-related research became particularly visible during the early months of the pandemic when funding bodies created new schemes funding research on the crisis and its aftermaths. The open access fees of this book are paid from one such scheme (see Acknowledgements, this volume), but we are aware of many others, and several scholars who had been working in GRT issues became involved in projects of these kinds. To mention only two with whom we have collaborated intensively, Brazilian anthropologist Edilma do Nascimento Souza worked on a fast-response project funded by Wenner Gren exploring pandemic governance in Brazil through intersectional methods, while Iliana Sarafian’s work on vaccine hesitancy among Roma in Italy was funded by the British Academy COVID-19 Recovery fund (Sarafian, 2022; Souza, 2023).

It is clear to us that it is important to fund projects on urgent issues like the pandemic. However, we should be conscious of how funding priorities favour specific forms of knowledge and undermine other forms of scholarship, especially those not considered directly or visibly impactful, those based on methods that do not easily adjust to entrenched disciplinary expectations, and those that include collaborators whose qualifications are not considered standard or acceptable. Within large, funded projects, intra-project hierarchies of the kinds we have discussed can often become particularly important – in particular between Principal Investigators, who are still more likely to be non-GRT academics, and contracted researchers, some of whom might

be younger GRT scholars.<sup>5</sup> Finally, demands by funders for specific kinds of outputs and not others will unavoidably shape relationships between researchers and research participants, and among researchers themselves. Once again, these dynamics must be made explicit and reflected on in research outputs if we want the practice of GRT-related research itself to be an arena where positive social change can take place.

## Conclusion

The pandemic has intensified trends that were already transforming ethnographic research on GRT issues before March 2020: here we have discussed the growing reliance on mediated data and on the help of research assistants, and how the primacy of extended fieldwork in anthropology is increasingly being questioned. These trends do not mean that research on GRT issues is becoming less rigorous or generative, but they do mean that ethnographers must consciously labour to sustain ‘long-term commitments [to research participants and their communities], language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking’ while simultaneously attending ‘to how changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production’ (Günel et al, 2020). In this chapter we have examined how commitment, responsibility and accountability intersect with technological changes, problems of access and power differentials. We have focused on three arenas where this nexus becomes materialized: in dilemmas about method choice; in tensions surrounding the shifting roles researchers play as academics, interlocutors or allies; and in the diversification of researcher–participant relationships and forms of collaboration.

As ethnographers increasingly combine various sources of data or shift between face-to-face and remote research, it is important to remember that if we treat methods as unproblematic or readily interchangeable tools, we risk obviating power differentials and reproducing structural and racialized inequalities (Briggs, 2021). Take the online interviews to which many ethnographers turned during the pandemic: not only do they foreground narrative knowledge at the expense of other knowledge modalities, but they presuppose research participants who have internet access and time, and who are willing and able to sit down and be interviewed in front of a screen. There are social and cultural determinants which shape who can narrate, and what, and who can answer questions in ways that correspond to an ethnographer’s mode of inquiry (Briggs, 1986). Under normal circumstances, ethnographic sensibility to these issues would be gained through long-term participation in community life, or at least through face-to-face contact. How can this sensibility be developed in the current, changing research landscape that we have delineated in this chapter? This is a question which each researcher must explore in depth in connection with their specific project.



At the beginning of the pandemic many ethnographers imagined turning to remote methods as a second-best substitute for 'being there'. Yet, social scientists always enter social worlds through specific social nodes and work through particular sets of relationships (Strathern, 2005, vii). To produce ethnographic knowledge, we then make connections across various contexts, patterns and processes: our depictions are always partial and situated (Strathern, 2005, vii). Each set of relationships (whether face to face or remote, mediated through research assistants or not, and so on) scales the social world distinctly. The inability to 'be there', then, is not necessarily always a drawback but it does demand that we engage productively with the frames and boundaries that shape each ethnographic investigation, probing and testing them, and making them as visible as possible in our outputs. This means reflecting on the complexities of the social and human relations that underpin research, and on the ignorance and doubt that are produced hand in hand with knowledge and understanding.

Whatever methods we adopt, we must remain attentive to their affordances, limitations and biases, and to their effects in and out of the research itself, and in particular on our GRT participants. It is essential that researchers working on GRT issues cultivate awareness of their position and roles, and of how their research terrain is being constructed and mediated at each specific moment. And we must do this whether we conduct online, face-to-face or other forms of research. When planning and carrying out projects, we must also examine critically the kinds of claims to knowledge that different parties make – whether those be ourselves, our participants, collaborators or assistants.

Likewise, we must acknowledge the unavoidable failures and compromises that are always an integral part of the research process. During the pandemic we have witnessed how some researchers were able to make more or less successful changes to original research plans, and we have seen some of them being led where they might not have gone otherwise. Yet for others the transition was not so easy. Some were not able to work while caring for children or other dependants during lockdown, revealing how deeply the personal shapes the professional. And some lost part or all of their funding because their projects required travel and face-to-face interactions. Adapting projects was especially challenging for those at the start of their research journeys who could not rely on pre-existing contacts or data, such as doctoral students; without face-to-face interactions, trust, rapport and commitment between researchers and research participants are even more difficult to achieve. Lastly, some research could simply not be undertaken remotely.

The pandemic has demanded that researchers working on GRT issues question how we do our work, and that we consider what we can and



should do differently, while challenging entrenched expectations about social science research. By making visible in new ways the inequalities that separate researchers and participants, the pandemic has strengthened calls to acknowledge the many inequalities that shape GRT-related research (not just between GRT and non-GRT actors, but within these two categories). By making so blatant how difficult and complex it is to learn about others, the crisis has made it clear that all ethnographic understanding must always be partial, always in the making and provisional. By making failure and compromise visible and acknowledged parts of research, it has reminded us that dead ends are essential to the production of ethnographic knowledge as a material and relational praxis – even though they have been traditionally hidden and downplayed. In sum, the adaptations and innovations that we have discussed earlier should not be thought of as substandard substitutes for ‘real’ fieldwork, nor better or even as equally valid, but as invitations to engage more fully, rigorously and openly with the practical, ethical and moral nuances of GRT-related research.

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### Lessons and recommendations

- Debates around the ethics and politics of GRT-related research must be addressed through concrete methodological changes.
  - As researchers, we must examine whether and how our changing roles and methods may contribute to the marginalization of our participants and collaborators. We must reflect on these issues in our outputs.
  - If working collaboratively with local interlocutors (such as participants, research assistants or activists), we must realize that their aims and expectations may be very different from ours. It is important to discuss these aims and expectations early on in research projects.
  - We must acknowledge failure, compromise, doubt and ignorance in our work since these are essential parts of the research process.
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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For problems with categorizing Roma, Gypsy and Travellers as a single community see James (2022).
- <sup>2</sup> Some of these varied activities are captured in ‘Part II: Brazilian Chronicles’ in *Romani Chronicles of COVID-19* (Gay y Blasco and Fotta 2023b).
- <sup>3</sup> For instance, the development of contemporary Romani studies in Latin America has been since the beginning shaped by scholars of Romani descent who raised questions related to researchers’ engagement and accountability (Fotta and Sabino Salazar, 2023). Latin American Romani studies is responsive to Latin American decolonial thought and embedded in the tradition of academic involvement in social struggles.

- <sup>4</sup> Even more exceptional are long-term collaborations over several years and even decades, such as those between Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria Hernández, or Juan Gamella and a Romanian Roma informant-co-author-co-analyst Vasile Muntean.
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example ‘Collaborative research and authorship in anthropology: EASA good practice guidelines’ (<https://easaonline.org/newsletter/79-1021/guidelines.shtml>), written explicitly in response to the increasing importance of large international and interdisciplinary projects as a consequence of EU funding schemes.

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