

Who Are Our Gypsy Neighbors? A Metamodern Reassessment

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ABSTRACT

This essay revisits and substantially expands the author's 1972 pamphlet "Who Are Our Gypsy Neighbors?" originally prepared for the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations. Adopting a metamodern scholarly stance — one that oscillates between modernist sincerity and postmodern self-awareness — the reassessment situates more than half a century of Romani-American scholarship within evolving frameworks of methodology, ethics, and self-representation. It offers a comparative intellectual portrait of four foundational scholars — David J. Nemeth, Matt and Sheila Salo, Anne Sutherland, and Marlene Sway — whose fieldwork-based monographs defined the contours of American Romani studies between the 1970s and 1990s. It then integrates Carol Miller's memoir-ethnography *Lola's Luck* (2009) as a bridge toward more reflexive and intimate modes of ethnographic practice. The essay concludes by arguing for a metamodern Romani studies that centers Romani voices, holds sincerity and critique in productive tension, and treats scholarly engagement as an ongoing conversation rather than a settled description.

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Returning to a Question

In 1972, I wrote a brief pamphlet titled "Who Are Our Gypsy Neighbors?" for the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations. The document was modest in scope and intention: it sought to introduce mainstream American readers — social workers, municipal officials, schoolteachers, curious citizens — to the Rom (Romani people, commonly called "Gypsies") living in Southern California. The pamphlet described, in plainspoken terms, where the Rom lived, how they made their livings, what their family structures looked like, and why they remained largely invisible to the non-Romani population that surrounded them. It was, by the standards of its day, a sympathetic and informative piece of public education. It was also, by any honest reckoning, limited.

The limitations were partly contextual and partly epistemological. Contextually, the pamphlet was written for a government commission concerned with interethnic harmony in a sprawling, diversifying metropolis. Its audience expected — and the genre demanded — clear answers, practical information, and an optimistic tone. The Rom were to be rendered legible to the bureaucratic gaze, made comprehensible as neighbors who, despite their apparent strangeness, belonged within the civic fabric of Los Angeles County. This was well-intentioned work, but it carried assumptions that deserve scrutiny: that legibility is always desirable, that comprehension flows naturally from description, and that a non-Romani scholar speaking about Romani life to a non-Romani audience constitutes an unproblematic form of knowledge production.

Epistemologically, the 1972 pamphlet reflected the modernist ethnographic sensibility of its era. It assumed a stable observer,

a describable object of study, and a straightforward relationship between observation and truth. The Rom were presented as an ethnic group with identifiable customs, social structures, and economic practices — a cultural system that could be mapped, catalogued, and explained. This approach was not wrong, exactly, but it was incomplete in ways that subsequent decades of scholarship, activism, and self-reflection have made visible. It underplayed Romani agency. It treated culture as a thing to be described rather than a process to be negotiated. And it relied, without sufficient acknowledgment, on the authority of an outsider voice.

This reassessment neither disavows the 1972 essay nor uncritically repeats it. To disavow it would be dishonest — it represented genuine engagement, imperfect but sincere, with a community I have spent decades studying and, in my own limited way, caring about. To repeat it uncritically would be irresponsible — the intellectual landscape has shifted too dramatically, the ethical stakes have become too clear, and the Romani community itself has changed in ways that render a simple update inadequate. Instead, this essay adopts what I will call a metamodern stance: it oscillates between the sincerity of committed scholarship and the self-awareness demanded by postcolonial, postmodern, and decolonial critiques. It earnestly engages with Romani culture and the scholarly tradition that has attempted to document it, while acknowledging positionality, the limits of outsider representation, and the colonial legacies embedded in ethnographic practice — including my own.

The word "metamodern" requires a brief gloss. As theorized by Timotheus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker, and others, metamodernism describes a cultural sensibility that moves beyond

the ironic detachment of postmodernism without retreating into the naive certainties of modernism. It is characterized by “informed naivety,” by a willingness to pursue meaning and truth while remaining aware that meaning is constructed and truth is partial. Applied to ethnographic writing, a metamodern sensibility means taking one’s subjects seriously — not as specimens, not as projections of the scholarly imagination, but as people living complex lives — while simultaneously taking seriously the power dynamics, representational politics, and epistemological uncertainties that attend any act of cross-cultural description. It means, in short, writing with both warmth and discipline, reflexivity and conviction.

To situate the present essay, a brief historical sketch is necessary. The Romani people originated in the Indian subcontinent — most likely in the regions of present-day Rajasthan and Punjab — and began a westward migration roughly a millennium ago. Linguistic evidence, particularly the structure and vocabulary of the Romani language, confirms this South Asian origin beyond reasonable dispute. By the fourteenth century, Romani groups had dispersed across Europe, where they encountered varying degrees of tolerance, exploitation, and persecution. The history of European treatment of the Rom is, in large part, a history of sustained hostility: enslavement in the Romanian principalities lasting until the mid-nineteenth century; expulsion edicts across Western Europe; forced settlement campaigns; and, most catastrophically, the Porajmos — the Romani Holocaust — in which Nazi Germany and its collaborators murdered an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 Roma and Sinti, a genocide that was systematically forgotten and marginalized in post-war memory for decades.

Romani migration to North America occurred in several waves. Small numbers arrived in the colonial period, but the major influx began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, driven by the abolition of Romani slavery in Romania, economic upheaval in Eastern Europe, and the same push-pull dynamics that propelled millions of other immigrants across the Atlantic. These immigrants included multiple Romani subgroups — Kalderaš (Coppersmith Roma), Machwaya, Lowara, Churara, and others — each with distinct dialects, occupational specializations, and internal social structures. By the mid-twentieth century, American Rom had largely transitioned from nomadic or semi-nomadic patterns to urban settlement, concentrating in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Houston, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Yet even as they settled, they maintained economic practices — fortune-telling, auto body work, metalwork, used car sales, roofing, paving — that preserved a degree of spatial mobility and economic autonomy.

How many Romani Americans are there? The honest answer is that nobody knows with precision. Estimates have ranged from 100,000 to over one million, a range so wide as to be almost meaningless. The uncertainty is itself significant. The Rom have historically practiced what scholars have called “strategic invisibility” — a deliberate avoidance of census enumeration, institutional record-keeping, and public visibility. This is not paranoia but survival strategy, honed by centuries of persecution. A community that has learned, through bitter experience, that visibility invites scrutiny, and scrutiny invites control, has powerful reasons to remain uncounted. The consequence, however, is that the Romani-American population lacks the statistical infrastructure — the demographic data, the electoral weight, the institutional visibility — that other minority groups have leveraged for political recognition and resource allocation.

It is within this complex historical and demographic landscape that American Romani studies emerged as a scholarly subfield in the 1970s and matured through the 1990s. What follows is a comparative intellectual portrait of four scholars — myself included, in the interest of transparency — whose fieldwork-based monographs defined the contours of that subfield, followed by a consideration of Carol Miller’s more recent work and its implications for the future of the field.

Four Scholars, Four Lenses

The emergence of serious, sustained scholarly attention to Romani Americans in the 1970s was not accidental. It coincided with broader transformations in the social sciences: the rise of ethnic studies, the proliferation of community-based research, the growing influence of interpretive anthropology, and a general scholarly turn toward populations that had been overlooked or exoticized. The four scholars examined here — David J. Nemeth, Matt and Sheila Salo, Anne Sutherland, and Marlene Sway — entered Romani-American studies from different disciplinary doorways, brought different theoretical toolkits, and produced different kinds of knowledge. Together, their work constitutes a remarkably coherent body of literature, one that illuminates the Rom from multiple angles while also revealing the shared assumptions and blind spots of a particular scholarly generation.

David J Nemeth: The Ethnogeography Lens

It is an awkward exercise to assess one’s own work with scholarly detachment, but a metamodern stance demands transparency rather than false modesty. My approach to Romani-American life has been fundamentally geographic — concerned with space, territory, movement, and the ways in which cultural identity is inscribed onto, and negotiated through, the built environment. The 1972 pamphlet was an early expression of this orientation, and my subsequent monograph, *The Gypsy-American: An Ethnogeographic Study* (2002), developed it into a full-scale ethnogeography.

The ethnogeographic lens revealed dimensions of Romani-American life that purely anthropological or sociological approaches tended to overlook. I documented how Rom communities organized themselves spatially — claiming storefronts for fortune-telling parlors in precise territorial arrangements, negotiating boundaries between family-based economic zones, and maintaining flexible but real territorial chiefdoms that governed who could operate where. The spatial logic of Romani settlement was not random; it reflected an intricate system of rights, obligations, and negotiations administered, in part, through the *kris* — the Romani court of law. A *kris* could adjudicate not only personal disputes but territorial claims, determining which family had the right to operate in a given neighborhood or city. I witnessed and documented one such proceeding in the early 1970s, and the experience profoundly shaped my understanding of Romani legal culture as a sophisticated, functioning system of governance rather than a quaint vestige of an earlier era.

My work also attended to the economic ecology of Romani adaptation: how the Rom identified and exploited niches in the informal economy, how seasonal migration patterns tracked economic opportunity, and how the cultural concept of *marimé* — ritual pollution — functioned not only as a system of hygiene and social control but as a mechanism for maintaining cultural boundaries in the midst of a dominant non-Romani society. The geography of *marimé* was particularly revealing: the spatial organization of a Romani household, the separation of “clean” and “unclean” zones, the rules governing interaction with *gadje*

(non-Romani people) — all of this inscribed cultural identity into physical space in ways that a purely discursive analysis might miss.

The strengths of my approach were also its limitations. An ethnogeographic methodology excels at revealing patterns — of movement, of settlement, of economic organization — but it can, if not carefully managed, reduce living people to dots on a map, flows in a system, occupants of a niche. My earlier work, and especially the 1972 pamphlet, reflected a modernist, objectivist stance that treated Romani culture as a phenomenon to be charted and explained rather than a lived experience to be engaged with on its own terms. The Rom in my early writings were resourceful, adaptive, and strategically brilliant — but they were also, too often, objects of analysis rather than subjects of their own narratives. The monograph of 2002 attempted to address this limitation, particularly through its focus on Thomas Nicholas and his family, but it remained fundamentally a geographer's book, shaped by a geographer's priorities.

In recent years, I have found an unexpected intellectual ally in the work of Arran Gare, the Australian process philosopher at Swinburne University whose writings on culture, ecology, and the metaphysics of dynamic systems offer a philosophical vocabulary for precisely the limitations I have been describing. Gare's process metaphysics — rooted in the Whitehead-Schelling tradition and developed across works including *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis* (1995) and *The Philosophical Foundations of Ecological Civilization* (2017) — insists that cultures are not static objects to be mapped but self-organizing processes, emergent and relational, continually constituted through the creative activity of their participants. Applied to Romani studies, this reframing is quietly revolutionary: it suggests that the ethnogeographic patterns I documented — territorial chiefdoms, economic niches, the spatial logic of *marimé* — are not merely structural features of a cultural system but expressions of an ongoing process of collective self-creation, one that cannot be fully comprehended from outside the process itself. Gare's own intellectual biography deepens the resonance. His mother, Nene Gare, wrote *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961), a novel depicting Aboriginal Australians navigating the margins of urban Australian life under the pressures of assimilation policy — a narrative of strategic invisibility, cultural persistence, and the human cost of being rendered legible to a bureaucratic state that parallels, in striking ways, the Romani-American experience I have spent my career trying to understand. That a philosopher of process and ecology should emerge from a family intimately acquainted with the dynamics of marginalized communities and institutional power is not merely biographical coincidence; it is an intellectual genealogy that lends Gare's theoretical work a lived dimension often absent from abstract metaphysics. His framework has helped me see that the metamodern stance I adopt in this essay — the oscillation between sincere engagement and critical self-awareness — is not merely a rhetorical posture but a philosophical commitment: a recognition that the cultures we study are themselves processes of becoming, and that our scholarship, at its best, participates in rather than merely observes that becoming.

Matt T Salo and Sheila Salo: The Archival Imperative

If my work emphasized spatial patterns, the Salos — Matt and Sheila — emphasized temporal depth. Their contribution to Romani-American studies was primarily historical and archival, rooted in a conviction that the documentation and preservation of Romani material culture, immigration history, and community organization were scholarly imperatives of the highest order. Matt Salo's edited volume *The American Kalderaš: Gypsies in the New World* (1981), based on a symposium sponsored by the Gypsy

Lore Society's North American Chapter, remains a landmark collection — one of the first sustained scholarly examinations of a specific Romani subgroup in the American context.

The Salos' work was distinguished by its attention to internal diversity within the Romani-American population. Where popular accounts — and even some scholarly ones — tended to speak of “the Gypsies” as a monolithic group, the Salos carefully delineated the differences among Kalderaš, Machwaya, Lowara, and other subgroups, each with its own dialect, occupational traditions, migration history, and internal social hierarchy. This insistence on specificity was a genuine contribution: it forced readers to confront the complexity of a population that had been flattened by stereotype and generalization.

Sheila Salo's photographic work deserves particular mention. Her photographs of Romani-American life — images of weddings, funerals, work sites, domestic spaces — are held at the Smithsonian Institution and constitute an irreplaceable visual archive. In a community that has historically been wary of external documentation, and where material culture is often ephemeral, these images serve both scholarly and cultural functions. They are evidence and memory, data and elegy.

Matt Salo also made significant contributions to understanding Romani immigration history and interethnic relations, publishing extensively through the Gypsy Lore Society on topics ranging from Kalderaš economic organization to the social construction of ethnic identity among commercial nomadic groups. His work on Romani immigration to the United States traced the specific pathways by which different Romani subgroups arrived, settled, and adapted — providing the kind of granular historical detail that larger theoretical frameworks require but often lack.

The limitations of the Salos' approach were, in a sense, the obverse of its strengths. Their work was primarily documentary rather than theoretically innovative — it described and preserved more than it analyzed or interpreted. This was a deliberate choice, rooted in a legitimate concern that the material would be lost if not recorded, but it meant that the Salos' contributions were sometimes undervalued by scholars who prioritized theoretical sophistication over empirical richness. Additionally, their institutional context — the Gypsy Lore Society — carried its own freight. The GLS, founded in 1888 in Britain, had deep roots in a Victorian-era fascination with “Gypsy life” that was often romanticizing, sometimes condescending, and always shaped by the power asymmetries between Romani subjects and *gadjé* scholars. The Salos were among the most rigorous and respectful scholars within that tradition, but the tradition itself was not neutral, and their work inevitably bore its imprint.

Anne Sutherland: The Hidden Americans

Anne Sutherland's *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* (1975, revised 1986) was, for many readers, the first comprehensive ethnography of Vlach-speaking Rom in the United States, and it remained the most widely cited work in the field for decades. Sutherland conducted extensive participant observation among Romani communities in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles, producing a richly detailed account of kinship systems, marriage patterns, leadership structures, economic practices, and the social organization of daily life.

The conceptual centerpiece of Sutherland's work was the system of *marimé* — the elaborate codes of ritual purity and pollution that governed Romani social interaction. Sutherland demonstrated

that *marimé* was not merely a set of hygiene rules or superstitious prohibitions but a comprehensive cultural logic that organized space, time, gender relations, intergenerational authority, and the boundary between Rom and *gadje*. A woman's lower body was *marimé*; certain foods prepared by non-Romani people were *marimé*; specific behaviors, contacts, and transgressions could render a person *marimé* — polluted, and therefore temporarily or permanently excluded from the community. The system was simultaneously a mechanism of social control, a marker of ethnic identity, and a technology of boundary maintenance.

Sutherland also provided detailed accounts of the *kris*, the bride price system (*daro*), the role of the *rom baro* ("big man" or community leader), and the economic strategies by which Rom families sustained themselves — primarily fortune-telling, but also auto body repair, roofing, paving, and various forms of trade. Her portrait of Romani economic life emphasized adaptability: the Rom were not locked into archaic occupations but were shrewd readers of market opportunities, shifting their economic activities in response to local conditions while maintaining the cultural infrastructure — kinship networks, territorial agreements, the *kris* — that made such flexibility possible.

The title itself — *The Hidden Americans* — became iconic. It captured, in a phrase, the paradox of a population numbering perhaps several hundred thousand that had managed to live in the midst of American society while remaining almost entirely invisible to it. Sutherland's answer to the question of how this invisibility was achieved was multifaceted: the Rom avoided institutions (schools, hospitals, census enumerators), used multiple names and identities in their dealings with *gadje*, and cultivated a public persona — the fortune-teller's storefront, the used car lot — that was visible but deliberately misleading, presenting a commercial surface that concealed the depth and complexity of the community behind it.

The limitations of Sutherland's work, viewed from a metamodern perspective, are largely structural rather than personal. Her ethnography was shaped by the functionalist tradition in anthropology — a tradition that excelled at revealing how the parts of a cultural system fit together but tended to make that system appear more static, bounded, and internally coherent than it actually was. The Rom in *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* are resourceful and culturally rich, but they can also seem frozen in an ethnographic present, their practices described as if they existed outside of history. The revised 1986 edition addressed some of these concerns, but the fundamental orientation remained: Romani culture as a system to be described, rather than a process to be traced through time and contested space.

Marlene Sway: The Middleman Minority Thesis

Marlene Sway's *Familiar Strangers: Gypsy Life in America* (1988) brought a distinctively sociological sensibility to Romani-American studies. Drawing on the middleman minority theory developed by Edna Bonacich and Hubert Blalock, Sway argued that the Rom occupy a structural position in American society analogous to that of other "middleman" groups— Jews, Armenians, overseas Chinese, Koreans — who maintain economic niches through ethnic solidarity, endogamy, sojourner orientation, and deliberate cultural boundary-maintenance. The comparison was bold and, for many readers, illuminating: it linked the Rom's distinctive cultural practices to a broader comparative framework, suggesting that Romani persistence was not merely a matter of cultural inertia or romantic attachment to tradition but a rational, structurally intelligible response to the demands of a particular economic and social position.

Sway's fieldwork, conducted in California and Virginia, grounded her theoretical argument in observed practice. She documented how Romani families organized their economic activities, how territorial agreements among *kumpanias* (family-based local groups) regulated competition, how the *kris* enforced economic norms, and how the *marimé* system reinforced the social boundaries that made ethnic economic solidarity possible. Her treatment of the Romani legal system and economic territoriality was particularly sharp: she showed how the *kris* functioned not merely as a dispute-resolution mechanism but as a regulatory institution that governed market access, territorial rights, and intergroup relations — a kind of informal commerce commission operating entirely within the Romani community.

Sway also offered a more comparative and global perspective than her predecessors. By drawing explicit parallels between American Rom and Romani communities in Great Britain and Yugoslavia, she situated Romani-American studies within a broader transnational framework and suggested that the dynamics she observed in California and Virginia were not uniquely American phenomena but expressions of a more general pattern of middleman minority adaptation.

The middleman minority thesis, however, carried risks that Sway did not always fully navigate. The model, while illuminating at a structural level, could reduce cultural complexity to economic strategy — implying that Romani identity, ritual, kinship, and social organization existed primarily in the service of economic function. This is a familiar problem in sociological functionalism: the risk of explaining culture away by explaining its utility. The *marimé* system, for instance, is undoubtedly a boundary-maintenance mechanism, and it undoubtedly serves economic functions by reinforcing ethnic solidarity; but it is also a cosmology, a system of meaning, a way of being in the world that cannot be fully captured by a functional account of its economic consequences.

Additionally, the comparisons central to the middleman minority thesis — Rom as analogous to Jews, Armenians, overseas Chinese — risk overstating the parallels between very differently situated groups. The historical experience of the Rom in Europe — enslavement, the Porajmos, centuries of expulsion and persecution — is sufficiently distinct that any comparative framework must be applied with caution. Sway was aware of these risks and addressed them to some extent, but the theoretical architecture of her book inevitably emphasized structural similarity at the expense of historical particularity.

A Collective Portrait

What do these four bodies of work, taken together, reveal about the state of Romani-American scholarship in the closing decades of the twentieth century? Several patterns emerge.

First, there is a shared emphasis on boundary maintenance as the central problematic of Romani-American life. All four scholars, despite their disciplinary differences, converged on the observation that the Rom's survival as a distinct community in the midst of American society depended on the active maintenance of cultural boundaries — through *marimé*, through endogamy, through economic niche specialization, through strategic invisibility, through the legal and territorial governance of the *kris*. This convergence is significant: it suggests that boundary maintenance is not merely a scholarly construct imposed on Romani life but a genuine organizing principle of that life, observed independently by researchers approaching from different angles.

Second, there is a shared attention to economic adaptation. Whether framed as ecological niche-filling (Nemeth), historical occupational evolution (Salo), economic flexibility within a cultural system (Sutherland), or middleman minority strategy (Sway), the economic ingenuity of Romani Americans is a constant theme. The Rom emerge from this literature as extraordinary economic pragmatists — people who have survived, and often thrived, by reading the economic landscape with exceptional acuity and responding with speed and creativity.

Third — and most critically for a metamodern reassessment — there is a shared blind spot: the limited presence of Romani self-representation in these texts. All four scholars are *gadje*. All four relied, to varying degrees, on relationships with Romani informants whose voices appear in the published texts primarily as data — quoted, paraphrased, interpreted, but rarely accorded the authority of co-authorship or independent commentary. This is not to accuse any of these scholars of bad faith; the conventions of mid-to-late twentieth-century social science did not encourage co-authorship with research subjects, and the Romani community's own preference for strategic invisibility created real barriers to Romani participation in scholarly discourse. But the result, nonetheless, is a body of literature in which the Rom are more spoken about than speaking — a literature of representation rather than self-representation.

The question of voice and authority is not ancillary to the scholarly project; it is central. Who speaks? For whom? With what right? On what terms? These questions, posed with increasing urgency by postcolonial and decolonial critics since at least the 1980s, apply to Romani studies with particular force. The Rom have been studied, described, catalogued, photographed, and theorized by outsiders for centuries — from the earliest European accounts of “Egyptians” and “Bohemians” to the Victorian enthusiasms of the original Gypsy Lore Society to the social-scientific monographs reviewed here. At no point in this long history have Romani voices been accorded equal weight with the voices of those who studied them. A metamodern reassessment must begin by naming this asymmetry, even — especially — when the scholars in question are people of genuine goodwill and scholarly integrity.

Carol Miller's *Lola's Luck*: Toward an Intimate Ethnography
Carol Miller's *Lola's Luck: My Life Among the California Gypsies* (2009) occupies a singular position in the literature of American Romani studies. It is not, strictly speaking, a monograph: it lacks the theoretical apparatus, the systematic data presentation, and the disciplinary conventions that characterize the works of Sutherland, Sway, or myself. What it offers instead is something rarer and, in certain respects, more valuable: an intimate, reflexive, deeply personal account of a decades-long relationship between a *gadje* anthropologist and a Machvaia Romani matriarch named Lola.

Miller came to Romani studies as a graduate student in anthropology, initially intending to study ritual, kinship, and belief among the Machvaia (also written Machwaya) Roma of California — a subgroup of Serbian Romani origin with a distinctive identity and cultural practice. Her initial encounters followed a familiar pattern: doors closed, fortune-tellers declined to be interviewed, the community's practiced resistance to outsider inquiry held firm. Then Lola intervened — or, more precisely, Lola commandeered. Pressed into service as a chauffeur for this imperious, charismatic, deeply shrewd woman, Miller found herself drawn into a relationship that would last decades and would fundamentally reshape her understanding of what ethnographic engagement could mean.

The book that resulted from this relationship is simultaneously a personal memoir, an ethnographic account, and a character study. Its generic hybridity is not a weakness but a strength — and, I would argue, a harbinger of more honest forms of cross-cultural writing. Where Sutherland and Sway maintained the scholarly distance required by their disciplinary conventions, Miller's narrative voice is intimate, reflexive, and at times vulnerable. She does not merely describe Romani culture; she describes being changed by it. She does not merely report her observations; she interrogates her own motivations, her emotional entanglements, her failures of understanding. This positioning — neither detached observer nor fully immersed participant, but something oscillating between the two — makes *Lola's Luck* arguably the most metamodern text in the Romani-American corpus, even though Miller would not have used that term.

Lola herself is the book's greatest achievement. In the monographs of the 1970s and 1980s, individual Romani people appear primarily as exemplars of cultural patterns — as kinship nodes, as economic actors, as bearers of *marimé* codes. They are interesting because they illustrate something about “the Rom” as a collective. Lola, by contrast, is interesting because she is Lola. She emerges from Miller's pages as witty, strategic, generous, manipulative, fiercely loyal, intermittently cruel, extravagantly theatrical, and deeply, irreducibly human. She compared herself to Bette Davis. She dispensed advice on love, business, and marriage from behind a fortune-teller's storefront. She navigated the complex social politics of her community with a pragmatist's shrewdness and a storyteller's flair. She was *barvali* — big, powerful, and lucky — and she knew it.

Miller's portrait of Lola functions as a corrective to two persistent distortions in representations of Romani life. The first is the romantic stereotype — the “free-spirited Gypsy,” wandering, dancing, unburdened by the constraints of settled society. Lola is too specific, too complicated, too stubbornly herself to be contained by this fantasy. The second is the sociological abstraction — the “middleman minority member,” the “boundary maintainer,” the “practitioner of strategic invisibility.” Lola does all of these things, but she does them as Lola, with motives that are personal as much as cultural, idiosyncratic as much as structural. By restoring individuality to a figure who might otherwise be reduced to a type, Miller performs an act of scholarly ethics as much as literary craft.

The methodological implications of Miller's work are significant. Her decades-long immersive relationship with the Machvaia community raises questions that the earlier monographs largely sidestepped: What does it mean to be both friend and scholar? How does one navigate the tension between fidelity to one's subjects — people who have trusted you with access to their lives — and the demands of publication, which inevitably transforms private experience into public text? Miller's candor about her own emotional entanglements — including, remarkably, a romantic relationship with a married Romani man — pushes these questions to the foreground with an honesty that is bracing and, at times, uncomfortable. Whether her choices were ethically defensible is a question that reasonable scholars will answer differently; that she chose to reveal them rather than conceal them is itself a contribution to the ongoing conversation about ethnographic ethics.

Lola's Luck also complicates the neat scholarly narratives of the earlier literature by revealing the extent to which ethnographic relationships are bidirectional. Miller was not merely studying the Machvaia; the Machvaia were studying her. Lola was not merely

an informant; she was an agent who managed the relationship with Miller for her own purposes — extracting favors, shaping the narrative, controlling access, deploying the anthropologist as a useful *gadje* ally in the complex politics of Romani community life. This is not a criticism of Miller's work; it is a description of how ethnographic relationships actually function, stripped of the fiction that the scholar is the only active intelligence in the encounter. If the earlier monographs sometimes treated the Rom as objects of scholarly attention, *Lola's Luck* makes clear that the Rom were always, simultaneously, subjects of their own agency — observing the observers, using the users, and telling the storytellers what stories to tell.

Toward a Metamodern Romani Studies

More than half a century separates this reassessment from the 1972 pamphlet. In that interval, the intellectual landscape of Romani studies has been transformed — not once, but repeatedly, in response to broader currents in the social sciences, the humanities, and the political world. A brief survey of these transformations is necessary to frame the argument for what a metamodern Romani studies might look like.

The most consequential change has been the growth of Romani self-representation in scholarship, activism, and cultural production. When the monographs reviewed above were written, Romani-American studies were almost entirely a *gadje* enterprise. Romani people participated as informants, subjects, and occasional collaborators, but the conceptual frameworks, the publication venues, the institutional affiliations, and the authorial voices were overwhelmingly non-Romani. This has changed. Romani intellectuals—scholars like Ian Hancock, a Romani linguist and activist who spent decades at the University of Texas at Austin, and Ethel Brooks, a Romani sociologist — have challenged the outsider monopoly on Romani knowledge production. Romani artists, filmmakers, and writers have created representations of Romani life that refuse the mediating lens of *gadje* interpretation. Romani-led organizations have articulated political demands on their own terms. The field, in short, is being decolonized — slowly, unevenly, incompletely, but perceptibly.

The influence of postcolonial and decolonial theory has been significant. Scholars working in these traditions have drawn attention to the ways in which Romani studies, like other area-studies and minority-studies fields, has been shaped by the power asymmetries of its institutional context. The Gypsy Lore Society, for all its contributions to the preservation of Romani culture and history, was founded in an era of Victorian exoticism and has struggled — with varying degrees of sincerity and success — to reckon with that legacy. The very category of “Gypsy studies” implies an outsider-defined object of inquiry, a population to be studied rather than a community to be engaged. The terminological shift from “Gypsy” toward “Roma” or “Romani” — while far from universal and still debated within Romani communities themselves — reflects a broader movement toward self-determination in naming and representation.

On the question of terminology, a metamodern honesty is required. Many American Rom continue to use “Gypsy” self-referentially, without the stigma that the term carries in some European contexts. To insist, from a position of scholarly authority, that the term is always and everywhere inappropriate would be to override the expressed preferences of some members of the community in question — a form of paternalism disguised as respect. At the same time, to use “Gypsy” uncritically, without acknowledging its complex history as a label imposed by outsiders, would be

to ignore the very power dynamics that a metamodern approach seeks to hold in view. The solution is not a fixed terminological rule but a contextual sensitivity — using the language that best respects the specific community and situation under discussion, and being transparent about the choices one makes.

The concept of “strategic invisibility” — which runs like a thread through all five bodies of work discussed in this essay — deserves particular attention in any forward-looking assessment. The Rom's deliberate avoidance of census enumeration, media visibility, and institutional engagement has served, for centuries, as a remarkably effective survival mechanism. It has preserved cultural integrity, shielded the community from hostile scrutiny, and maintained a space of autonomy within societies that have repeatedly attempted to assimilate, expel, or destroy Romani populations. But strategic invisibility comes at a cost. A community that is not counted cannot easily claim resources. A community that avoids institutional engagement cannot easily influence policy. A community that cultivates its own unknowability cannot easily combat the stereotypes and misinformation that fill the void of public knowledge. In a diversifying America where, political recognition is increasingly linked to demographic visibility, strategic invisibility begins to function as a double-edged sword — protective and constraining in equal measure.

What, then, would a metamodern Romani studies look like? It would, I suggest, be characterized by a willingness to hold multiple truths simultaneously — not as contradictions to be resolved but as tensions to be inhabited.

It would hold that the Rom are a people with deep historical roots and a vibrant, adaptive culture — and that scholarly representation of that culture has been shaped by outsider perspectives, power asymmetries, and institutional contexts that are not neutral. It would hold that the monographs of Nemeth, Salo, Sutherland, and Sway represent genuine contributions to knowledge — and that they are also artifacts of a particular moment in the history of the social sciences, shaped by assumptions about authority, objectivity, and voice that subsequent generations have rightly questioned. It would hold that Romani voices must be centered in Romani studies — and that “centering” does not mean fetishizing “authenticity,” creating a new hierarchy in which only Romani scholars may speak, or demanding that every Romani person become a spokesperson for their community. It would hold that sincere engagement across cultural boundaries — the kind practiced, however imperfectly, by all five scholars discussed here — remains valuable when conducted with humility, reflexivity, and a genuine willingness to be changed by the encounter.

A metamodern Romani studies would also resist the temptation of closure. The modernist impulse is to describe, explain, and resolve — to answer the question “Who are the Gypsies?” once and for all. The postmodern impulse is to deconstruct the question itself, to reveal it as an exercise in power, and to conclude that no answer is possible or desirable.

A metamodern approach does something different: it continues to ask the question, sincerely and with real curiosity, while acknowledging that the answer will always be partial, provisional, and shaped by the position from which it is offered. It replaces the quest for definitive knowledge with the practice of ongoing, attentive, respectful engagement.

Conclusion: An Ongoing Conversation

Let us return, finally, to the question posed by the title: Who are our Gypsy neighbors? In 1972, I attempted an answer that was

descriptive, informative, and well-intentioned — an answer shaped by the modernist confidence that a competent observer could render a complex community comprehensible to an interested audience. That answer was not wrong, but it was incomplete. It described patterns without always hearing voices. It mapped territories without always acknowledging that the map, too, is a form of power.

The metamodern answer is not a fixed description but an ongoing conversation — one that requires gadje scholars to listen as much as they speak, and one that the Romani community itself is increasingly directing. The four monographs reviewed here, and Carol Miller's intimate memoir-ethnography, represent waypoints in that conversation: moments when outsider scholars, working with the best tools and intentions available to them, tried to bridge the gap between Romani and non-Romani worlds. Their work remains valuable — as documentation, as analysis, as evidence of what can be learned through sustained, respectful engagement. But it is the beginning of the conversation, not its culmination.

The next generation of Romani-American studies will be shaped by forces that the scholars of the 1970s and 1980s could not have anticipated: by Romani scholars and activists who bring insider knowledge and critical perspective to the academic enterprise; by digital media and transnational networks that allow Romani communities across the globe to communicate, organize, and represent themselves in unprecedented ways; by the evolving politics of identity in a diversifying America that is still learning how to reckon with the complexity of its own population; and by the metamodern realization that sincerity and critique, engagement and self-awareness, are not opposites but partners in the pursuit of understanding [1-14].

The 1972 pamphlet was a beginning. This reassessment is a waypoint, not an endpoint. The conversation continues, and its most important participants are those whose voices have been, for too long, the least heard — the Rom themselves, our neighbors, hidden and unhidden, familiar and strange, utterly particular and deeply human.

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