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**Fall**

The Ambiguous Political Identity of

Gypsies in the United States

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Gypsy people have been migrating to the United States since the mid-nineteenth century. They came in several waves from different countries, eventually settling in urban cities such as Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago. Given years of historic persecution and being victims of genocide, Gypsies came to the U.S. to distance their people from such a history. Some Gypsy groups have maintained their strict traditional lifestyle and rituals, while other groups have completely assimilated to American society. Most Gypsy people claim ethnicity of the country they migrated from, and rarely, if ever, admit to being Gypsy. Given such an obscured entrance into the United States, a wide spectrum of cultural maintenance from complete adherence to traditional norms and assimilation to American society, and intentional misidentification in society, I will argue that there is no cohesive political identity for the Gypsy community in the United States.

**Caution in Discussing Gypsy Identity**

The image conjured when one hears the word “Gypsy” is most often a romanticized, exaggerated, and pejorative one. While pick-pocketing, itinerancy, dancing, and playing music are elements of Gypsy behaviors, they are not accurate representations of *who* gypsy people are, of what they deem accurately represents their identity and traditional ethnic heritage. In Europe they are known as Roma and are mostly not assimilated to society. In North America they have a multitude of categories and group identities, as some groups have assimilated while others have prioritized maintaining their traditional lifestyles separate from their host’s society. Even referring to Gypsy, Roma or Romani people as a “they” is problematic, because there seems to be no mainstreamed, mass identifiable set of behaviors or beliefs, or an agreed upon word to represent such people, therefore creating a cohesive group identity in North American Gypsy population (Hancock 2010). The Romani language is the most common denominator and extra-culturally identifiable train that links Gypsy groups, but numerous dialects with vastly variant lingual patterns suggest that the larger population of Gypsy groups in the U.S. today have little in common (Hancock 2010, Zhou et al 2015). Though most groups in North America speak Romani, each group has different economic engagements and levels of traditional maintenance and cultural assimilation (Gropper and Miller 2001).

“Gypsy” comes from the word Egyptian and was a misnomer informally assigned to traveler people from India who were mistaken for Egyptians. For some Romani people, the term “gypsy” is actually a pejorative term. Ian Hancock, a self-identified Romani and professor of Romani studies, linguistics, a leading activist for Romani American rights, and director of the Romani Archives and Documentation Center in Texas (RADOC), wishes to dispel the use of “Gypsy” to refer to his people. He contends that Romani, the language of his people, is the best identifying group term in reference to the estimated one million people in the United States who speak it (Randall 2003).

Despite this nomenclature that some Romani people deem inaccurate and condescending, some Romani are proud to claim the Gypsy name. The New York Gypsy Festival just completed its eleventh annual celebration, at which groups of Gypsy musicians and artists gather and publicly share their arts. The Gypsy Lore Society, the most extensive archive of Gypsy-related materials, proudly identifies with the term “Gypsy”. Oksana Marafioti is a Gypsy woman who wrote a memoir of her life, *American Gypsy: A Memoir*, about immigrating from persecution and marginalization in Europe, to the less ostracizing liberal democratic United States. She is very open about her Gypsy identity, and in an interview by NPR openly discusses the difficulties of claiming Gypsy identity with so many inaccurate representations of the term in society (NPR 2012).

Discerning whether individuals of the assimilated or non-assimilated Gypsy culture are concerned with identifying as Gypsy is difficult. Some groups are, as with the Machvaya in California (Gropper and Miller 2001). Yet there is no census of the community’s culture as a whole, there is no way of knowing exactly how many Gypsy people there, and there seems to be no consensus of the most accurate identifying term for the Roma, Romani, and Gypsy people in the United States. For the sake of discussion, I will refer to the Roma, Romani, and Gypsy people as Gypsies. Most resources gathered for this paper use such terminology. However, “Gypsy” is not to be identified with any negative, overly romanticized connotation, but must refer to the Gypsy population of peoples who speak any Romani dialect and are self-identified or identifiable as a Roma, Romani or Gypsy from the following mentioned migrant groups.

*The Non-Territorial Identity of Gypsy, Roma, and Romani People*

In recognizing individual and group identities, one often refers to an individual or group’s geographic origin. One who is Polish is referring to an ethnic bloodline from the clearly identifiable territory of Poland, one who is Romanian is from Romania. This theory is not applicable to Gypsy people. Genetic origins of the Gypsy, Roma, and Romani people are traceable to India and South Asia (Iovita and Schurr 2004: 267), but Gypsy people do not identify as Indian or South Asian. Most Gypsy people do not identify with any country or official state territory. Since the first generations of itinerant Gypsy groups, Gypsy people have encountered much persecution, were targets of genocide, and were generally found to be cultural outsiders wherever they lived (Fonseca 1995, Sutherland 1975, Nemeth 1991).

Gypsy people were travelers since their first identifiable diaspora nearly one thousand years ago. One can argue whether the nomadic and itinerant lifestyle is part of the culture of the original Gypsy ancestors (Silverman 1988: 50) or whether it became a lifestyle choice born of practical needs of self-protection from cultural animosity, finding work, escaping truant officers, visiting other groups for political or social reasons, “resting” from a long period of residency in one spot (Sutherland 1975: 51). Most resources discussing the travelling nature of Gypsy people do not discuss the original source of these groups’ itinerancy. Given the near millennium of itinerancy, it is safe to claim this history of itinerancy as the source of Gypsy peoples’ non-territoriality. Gypsy people are gathered in highly scattered, non-territorial, autonomous groups who only concentrate based on internally recognizable familial structures called *kumpania* (Sutherland 1975: 33), with group and family names derived from group occupations (Iovita and Schurr 2004: 268).

**Theory: A Political Psychological Approach to Gypsy Identity in the U.S.**

Using political psychology I will discuss why the deliberately elusive culture and fractured nature of the Gypsy community prevents formation of a cohesive, recognizable political identity for Gypsies. Political psychology emphasizes “social cognition—how people make sense of others and of themselves” (‘t Hart 2010: 100) and on explaining the political preferences, decisions, and behaviors of groups (‘t Hart 2010: 104). According to Leonie Huddy, Political Psychology is a theoretical approach to political identity that focuses on the psychological reasons an individual or group may identify with a particular group (Huddy et al 2013). One sub approach of political psychology theory is the symbolic approach that applies specifically to development of social identity and how that affects identification in intergroup contexts. This approach emphasizes

The psychological motivations that lead a group member to endorse or disavow an existing group membership. Turner and colleagues (1987; p. 42) have described this motive as a need among group members “to differentiate their own groups positively from others to achieve a positive social identity” (Huddy et al 2013: 11).

This is the exact understanding needed to approach why Gypsy people intentionally avoid recognition by other groups.

Application of political psychology for the purpose of understanding Gypsy culture can be observed with the Vlax Romani people. The Vlax Romanies’ decision to remain separate from their host’s majority culture is based on the psychological construct of identity filters. The Vlax remained removed instead of assimilating because of their dichotomous worldview of Gypsy and non-Gypsy (Silverman 1999). In the most general sense of the identifier “Gypsy”, Gypsies have historically been a marginalized community, with the Gypsy name alone inciting stigmatization. More traditional groups such as the Vlax Romani faced greater stigmatization, especially in host cultures with greater disparity in identifying factors (Sutherland 1975). The subjective worldview of more traditional gypsy groups like the Vlax Romani is rooted in a historic system of Gypsy versus non-Gypsy culture, which informs each interaction between Gypsy and non-Gypsy groups, internally prioritizing Gypsy over non-Gypsy groups (Fonseca 1995, Nemeth 1991, Okley 1983, Sutherland 1975). The Vlax Romanies are more marginalized from the majority society in the United States because they believe that cultural boundary crossing will dilute their culture and eventually dissolve their practices (Hancock 2008, Silverman 1999). This aversion to recognition for fear of social and political stigmatization based on one’s identity, in other words a psychological need for self-protection, is what leads to political ambiguity of the Gypsy people.

Politicizing a group identity can be advantageous for a group, as the group can partner with previously established political groups, (as in partisan groups), to enhance the group’s voice in political issues (Huddy et al 2013: 2-3). Another advantage of receiving group recognition from a political body is official recognition of human rights and protection from any force violating those rights, should the group be willing to overturn an amount of purity of group identity by conforming to the state’s laws and existing harmoniously within the state’s culture. This tradeoff represents the perennial issue in liberal states of recognizing collective identities while maintaining individual rights and identities (Taylor 2004). One may argue that politicizing the Gypsy identity in the liberal United States would be advantageous for the Gypsy people, given their human rights will be protected. For more traditional, marginalized Gypsy groups in the U.S., such as the Vlax, sacrificing any part of Gypsy identity negates any advantage of rights protection received from the government (Hancock 2008). In supporting this view, most social groups do not politicize their identity, or only do so on minimal levels in Western democratic states such as the U.S., depending on the group’s desire to be politically recognized (Huddy et al 2013: 3).

Political identity according to political psychology is defined is as: “a social identity that is either defined on the basis of a common political outlook, or has become political through the emergence of explicitly political group norms governing members’ outlook and action” (Huddy et al 2013: 5). This definition is aligned with the liberal concept of identity (Taylor 2004) implying that political identity arises from a preformed group identity, not vice versa. In other words, an individual is not liberal after checking a box labeled “liberal” on some census ballot. An individual is first liberal, then chooses to share that identity publicly in social or officially documented contexts. More traditional Gypsy societies lack desire for political engagement, again opting for strict exclusive understandings of culture and relationship with any state (Hancock 2010).

Self-identified Romani people are most often reticent about sharing the traditions of their culture, more often claim ethnic identity from their country of origin rather than explicitly claim their Gypsy identity, and prioritize protecting all cultural traditions and norms in their society over conforming to a political identity that would require releasing any honest element of ethnicity (Fonseca 1995, Silverman 1988, Lockwood and Salo 1994, Sutherland 1975). Thus, the psychology behind any existing Gypsy political identity is that the political identity established would arise from the ingrained individual and group identity of Romani people, if Gypsy people were to officially claim their identity. Examining Gypsy culture in the U.S. from this perspective will aid in understanding the political movement of Gypsy people in the U.S. and whether they have established legally recognizable collective identities.

**Immigration to the United States**

Gypsies have always been outsiders in their host states starting with their diaspora from Northern India nearly one thousand years ago, simultaneous with the western movement of the Ottomon Turks into the Balkans (Hancock 2012: 4:07). The gypsy culture is originally Indian and can be traced through the Romani language (Hancock 2010). Romani is the most common denominator of identity for Gypsy people, but is spoken in different dialects among almost all Gypsy groups. (Lucassen et al 1998: 18). In Europe, Gypsies experienced intense persecution for their non-territorial otherness, were victims of genocide during the Holocaust, and the intense ethnic conflict of the late 1990s in Yugoslavia. To escape such persecution, Romani people continued moving west and have mostly settled in the United States (Lockwood and Salo 1994, Sutherland 1975, Gropper and Miller 2001: 83). Many Romani people came to the U.S. starting in the 1850s, again in the 1880s through 1914, again in the early 1970s, and late 1990s through the present.

Zhou et al (2015) state a theory of Gypsy origin in an article about the locational determinants of Vlax Rom: “theories trace their history as camp-followers, remnants of an army of defeated Indian warriors, and members of the upper-strata of an undetermined ethnic Indian population” (Zhou et al 2015: 1). Estimates of how many Gypsy people there are in the U.S. range from fewer than 100,000 to over 1,000,000 (Zhou et al 2015: 1). On passenger lists and census reports, Gypsy people often claim the ethnic identity of the country they were traveling from in order to protect themselves from further discrimination (Lucassen et al 1998). In an effort to acknowledge such wariness and explain the definite inaccuracy of the Romani-speaking population in the U.S., a memo from the U.S. Census regarding the 2000 U.S. Census report states: “the Romani are very suspicious of census-taking activities. Many people still recall the persecution of the Gypsies under Hitler and view a census as a method of identifying Gypsies for potentially negative consequences” (VanHorn 1999). Though a narrow view of the many reasons a Romani American might intentionally misidentify as a different ethnicity, the understanding is a poignant reminder of the gypsies’ history of contentious relations with certain host societies. Stated below are generally known immigration patterns of Gypsy people to the United States.

*First Wave of the 1850s*

The first wave of gypsies in the 1850s were from England. This group is known as the *Romnichels* or “English Travelers”, and is also referred to as *Romanichel, Romanichal, Romnichal, Rom’nies* or *Romnies.* The most common term I have seen used is *Romanichal*, and will use that to refer to this group throughout the rest of the paper.Romanichals were mainly horse traders who migrated to the U.S. to partake in the booming horse market. Some became basket-makers for the Amish or Mennonite people, or would manufacture and sell rustic furniture (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 2). Aside from horse-trading, fortune-telling was the second most common and profitable service gypsies offered (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 3). They spoke what could be referred to as an Anglo-Romani dialect, a mix of Romani with English influence (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 3). Ian Hancock states: “While the majority of Romanichals are physically indistinguishable from the general Anglo-American population, they nevertheless maintain a strong sense of separateness from the gaujas or non-Romanies, and can maintain pollution taboos with some strictness” (Hancock 2008).

Irish and Scottish travelers arrived in the same wave as horse and mule traders. However, less is known of these two groups who do not speak the Romani language (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 4). There is some literature on Irish travelers, who are the main source of burgeoning media based on the gypsy and traveler culture in the United States. The show *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* on TLC is based on Irish travelers. Many gypsy people who identify with Romnichel, Rom, Roma, and gypsy culture find the show to be offensive and not an accurate representation of the culture (Strochlic 2013). One could argue that the gypsy culture brought such media upon itself, as a historical underlying behavior of some Romani groups is its history of theft and intentional ambiguity, thus breeding a concept of Romani people as an undesirable other from anyone non-gypsy or *gadje* (Hall 2001). Supporting such a claim would be “blaming the victim”, as Romani people have historically faced intense discrimination as universal cultural outliers. One could also argue that hundreds of years of romanticization and misrepresentation of the “gypsy”, from Irish travelers to Russian Roma, in historical documents and cultural references has greatly distorted the image of who a gypsy, Romani speaking individual is (Zhou et al 2015: 33). Irish and Scottish travelers will not be mentioned in the rest of this research piece.

*Second Wave of the 1880s*

*Rom* came with the immigrant wave from southern and eastern Euorpe in the 1880s and through the beginning of WWI when immigration to the U.S. halted (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 3). Rom consisted of subgroups, or *vitsa*, from Serbia, Russia, and Austro-Hungary. They can be separated into two subgroups. The *Vlach Rom,* originally known as *Kalderaša*, also referred to as *Kalderash, Kalderasha,* or *Vlax Rom,* are the most researched group in historical and current accounts of gypsy culture (Gropper and Miller 2001: 86, Sutherland 1975: 181), and are the largest of Gypsy groups (Sutherland 1975: 181) at about two-thirds of the Romani population in the U.S. (Hancock 2008). They were mostly nomadic and maintained the coppersmith trade (Gropper and Miller 2001: 86, Lockwood and Salo 1994: 2). Research in Northern American Gypsy studies is said to be “Kalderashocentric” (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 3) due to its focus mainly on the Kalderash people as the largest Romani group in the U.S. (Gropper and Miller 2001: 86).

The second subgroup of Rom is most commonly referred to as *Machvaya*, originally spelled *Mačvaia,* also frequently referred to as *Machwaya*. Machvaya were mainly horse-traders, and credited for spreading fortune-telling as an essential stream of income for gypsies (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 3). They are from the county of Mačva in Serbia and speak a different dialect from the Kalderash (Gropper and Miller 2001: 86), as their language was mostly from Serbia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, speaking a Serbian-based Romani dialect (Sway 1988). Machvaya were less nomadic, assimilated more to mainstream professions and society, and are considered by both groups as being more “prestigious” than their Kalderash counterparts (Hancock 2008). Kalderash are more mobile and maintain their culture “practically unhindered—albeit invisdibly—[and] are considered rather old-fashioned by Vlax visitors from Europe” (Hancock 2008).

The largest population of Machvaya is in Los Angeles, California, while the largest concentration of Kalderash are in New York City (Gropper and Miller 2001: 89). A large sedentary group of Machvaya also exists in the San Francisco Bay Area (Gropper and Miller 2001: 89). Other populations of both the Machvaya and Kalderash, the estimated size unknown, also exist in Chicago, and a considerably large population of about 20,000 Kalderash in Fort Worth (Hancock 2010). Machvaya are mostly assimilated, pay taxes, and send their children to school (Gropper and Miller 2001: 89). The Machvaya population in Los Angeles was estimated at 50,000 in 1989, but there is no knowing exactly how many Machvaya still identify as such. They tend to see all other kinds of Gypsy or Romani groups as “’people we don’t know’, ‘Kalderaša’, or to designate them by country of origin” (Gropper and Miller 2001: 88).

The *Bashalde* or “Musicians” is the next largest group of Romani people who migrated to the U.S. in the 1880s. They are Hungarian-Slovak, and came to work in the steel mills in the northeastern part of the U.S., finding work in cafes, clubs and restaurants, and as entertainers (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 4, Hancock 2008). Most *Bashalde* no longer work in the service industry, but some do still work as musicians (Hancock 2008).

Other *vitsa* that migrated with this wave of Rom include the *Ludar* from Northwestern Bosnia, and *Black Dutch* from Germany. Ludar were animal trainers and show people. Little is known of these two groups, and available literature is unreliable (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 4).

Another small wave of gypsies came in the 1970s with Russian and Serbian *Lovara*. It was estimated that over 2,000 or more live in Chicago (Sway 1988). These people were refugees in Yugoslavia who fled Russia during WWI. They traveled between Yugslavia and Hungary, finally settling and intermarrying with the Rom people in Chicago (Lockwood and Salo 1994: 4), and assimilating with an established group of Rom in New Jersey (Gropper and Miller 2001: 88).

*New Wave Continuing Since the Late 1990s*

The last wave of Romani people is perhaps the least identifiable with those earlier immigrant groups from the 1850s. Gropper and Miller cite that some of the more traditional *vitsa* are concerned that the original Gypsy culture is “disappearing totally” with the newcomers (Gropper and Millwer 2001: 90). Ian Hancock best summarizes this new wave:

These include Romanies representing many different European groups, all of whom have come to North America in the past 10 or 15 years.  They have an imperfect command of English, and speak a number of different dialects of Romani.  Many of them speak no Romani at all… They tend to be concentrated in New York and Chicago.  There is little social contact within these groups, and with American Romani groups, although alliances are beginning to be formed in New York.  Their priorities at the present time are less directed at establishing special schools than at getting established in homes and jobs in their new country. (2008)

Gropper and Miller (2001) cite several new *vitsa* in the U.S. that are territorially established and identify as Romani. *Meksikaia* are Mexican families living in California, and mainly sell cars for a living (88). There is cultural tension between the long-established Machvaya people, who see the Meksikaia as people who “dirty up the town and ruin business for the rest of us” (89). Other *vitsa* in the northwestern states include: *Costellos, Rišteršti, Kideršti,* and *Boyaša*. These northwestern groups are most often referred to by Machvaya as “some other kind” of Gypsy, as many of the new wave in the northwest are Born-Again Christians and have mostly dismissed the “old ways” (89).

**Boundary Crossing of Gypsy People in the United States**

Given the diaspora of Gypsy people starting in Northern India, migration through Europe, further fracture due to being constant targets for genocide victimization, settlement in various countries from Eastern Europe to England, the Gypsy people are a deeply internally fractured and diversified people. As seen above in the documentation of Gypsy immigration to the U.S., Gypsy people are scattered. They came from a variety of countries, speak many different Romani dialects, practice disparate traditions, and observe a spectrum of traditional adherence. Carol Silverman argued that the Gypsy culture was still very alive and thriving in this citation from 1988: “Although many innovations have occurred in Rom culture, they do not point to loss of ethnic identity, rather, change is a strategy of adaptation to new environments—both a strategy of manipulation of new situations and a creative response to them.” (Silverman 1988: 44). Others (Gropper and Miller 2001, Zhou et al 2015) show that significant boundary crossing and assimilation of different Gypsy groups has happened since the first wave of Gypsy immigrants came to the U.S. “Boundary crossing” is the act of immigrants changing elements of their culture to adapt aspects of their host culture (Zolberg and Long 1999: 8).

With each wave of gypsies came a different original identity and level of marginalization from the U.S. society. Gypsies arriving in the 1850s had more ability to practice and maintain aspects of their culture, what with the open frontier of the U.S. and less-populated, less-politicized American culture. They maintained strict separation from society with their dichotomous worldview of Gypsy and non-gypsy, and adherence to a specific form of intra-group policing.

*The Gypsies’ Dichotomous Worldview of Gypsies and Gajos*

In some Gypsy sub-cultures, non-gypsies—no matter what race or ethnic origin—are termed *gajos*. A *gajo* is someone who is inferior to a Gypsy or Romani speaker. They are perceived as being less intelligent, clever, clean, they humiliatingly work for others and derive profit from their own people (which is deemed deplorable), are settled in specific locations, adhere to schedules, and do not look, act, or speak like gypsies (Silverman 1988: 45). Carol Silverman states: “Any discussion of Gypsy ethnicity must account for the rich interplay between Gypsy culture and non-Gypsy culture” (Silverman 1988: 48).. This dichotomous worldview utilizes private traditional values of the individual identity to determine public relationships. Gypsies who hold such personal beliefs have no interest in establishing public relations with *gajos,* less the relationship should be economically advantageous (Sutherland 1976: 65). *Gajos* are almost a necessary evil for the more traditional, non-assimilated Gypsy people. This dichotomous perspective of identity could be derived based on the Gypsy history of continuous marginalization and ostracization as a community (Lucassen et al 1998: 55). All these observations are only part of what Gypsy people have revealed as their private, as their natural personhood. For some who identify with the Gypsy, Romani culture, the term can carry pejorative weight (Silverman 1988: 44). For some today, the term simply refers to non-gypsies as an American might refer to a European.

*Political-Psychological Analysis of the Gypsy-Gajo Conception*

Many scholarly texts discussing Gypsy people cite the idiosyncratic nature of Gypsy people intentionally claiming an identity other than Romani, Roma, or gypsy when asked by a *gajo* who they are or where they are from (Gropper and Miller 2001, Hancock 2008, Sutherland 1975)*.* It is possible to label this characteristic a defensive mechanism of the true Gypsy identity. A defense mechanism is an unconscious psychological coping strategy first defined by Freud. He determined that defense mechanisms happen on the unconscious level to reduce anxiety in unacceptable, unwanted, or potentially harmful situations. Put simply, defense mechanisms operate to help ward off unpleasant feelings (i.e. anxiety) or make good things feel better for the individual (National Medical Library 2011). I want to change this definition slightly by placing the happening of defense mechanisms in the conscious, rather than the unconscious as originally defined by Freud. My revised definition of a defense mechanism would then be: a coping strategy on the conscious level to reduce anxiety in unacceptable, unwanted, or potentially harmful situations. Defense is subtle, unknown to the opposition, and allows the defender to maintain peace of mind that the truth of the defender’s emotional, mental, or physical status is only known to the defender. In the case of some Gypsy people, a defense used to protect unwanted coercion or prejudice from others is to intentionally misidentify oneself as anything but Gypsy.

*Group Structure of Gypsy Communities: Kumpania, Kris Romani, and In-Group Policing*

As accounted for in Anne Sutherland’s book *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans*, each Gypsy group is under the authority of a *kumpania*. Sutherland states: “In addition to being an economic territory, the *kumpania* is the moral, social, and political behavior which comes under the control of the *kris romani*” (Sutherland 1975: 33). Each *kumpania* consists of all the male members of a community, which is composed of a certain number of households. The *Kris Romani,* a tribunal of elders who serve as the in-group police, is responsible for any moral, social, or political conflicts between Gypsy people of the *kumpania* under its authority (Sutherland 1975: 33). Families of the *kumpania* work together and support each other economically and in exploiting the resources of the *gadje* (Sutherland 1975: 34). *Gadje* is a common term among any Romani-speaking person that refers to anyone non-gypsy.

**A Brief Summary of Political Identity Advocacy**

In email exchanges with leading experts in studies of Gypsy apeople such as Ian Hancock, Sheila Salo, and Carol Silverman, the consensus that there is a Gypsy or Romani political identity is a far stretch. There have been few liaisons of Gypsy individuals such as Steve Kaslov who established strong political ties with prominent officials (Salo 1995: 42), and who advocate for representation on the United State Holocaust Memorial Council such as Ian Hancock, but no account from my research that cites advocacy for establishing a politically recognizable identity.

Steve Kaslov is perhaps the most prominent case in American Gypsy history of advocacy for improving the well being of his people. He corresponded with Eleanor Roosevelt for the purpose of maintaining secure homing, welfare, and “in general to improve by all lawful means the physical material, moral, and education condition and present and present status of the members of The Red Dress Gypsies Association…(Salo: 1995: 41).” The Red Dress Gypsies Association was founded by Kaslov as a center for advocacy of said items for Gypsy people, and to promote the Americanization of Gypsy people (Salo: 1995: 41). Conflictingly, he proposed a plan for a separate colony of Gypsies in the United States. Other notes of his consistency in vision for Americanizing Gypsy people and maintaining a separate Gypsy culture are observable (Salo 1995: 40-42). However, his impact helped to establish as “accepted history” the urbanization of the depression as a source of significant health and well being issues for the Gypsy people (Salo 1995: 41). The recognition won from political officials during the time of Kalsov’s activity was a significant precedent for Gypsies in the U.S. Kaslov’s activities and their effects is a case of significant impact that can be considered entirely on its own, with more detailed treatment than afforded in this brief summary.

The work of Ian Hancock is another case to be considered alone, as he is still a very prominent scholar and activist of Romani origin. He advocates for the elimination of the word “Gypsy” from discussing people of Romani origin, as it problematic with its carriage of exaggerated, romanticized, pejorative connotations for anyone who identifies as such (Hancock 2012). A common overlooked fact about the Gypsy culture is the extreme victimization during the holocaust. The general estimate is that about twenty five percent of the Roma population in Europe was murdered, which amounted to approximately 220,000 people (USHMM 2015). Preceding Hancock’s sole predecessor, William Duna, there was never a Romani person on the United States Holocaust Memorial Council serving as a representative of those 220,000 genocide victims. Hancock’s experience on the council was similar to Duna’s:

…members were for the most part distant; some were even openly hostile. During the coffee breaks I stood alone. A couple fellow members would tell me privately that it was shameful the way I was bine gtreated, but they would never speak of up publicly on my behalf. I was put onto two committees, Holocaust Education and Acquisitions, but was never invited to a single meeting of the latter, and was not once consulted at the former. When I spoke up about school curricula, I was completely ignored” (Hancock 2007).

Duna was appointed by President Reagan, and replaced during the next presidential administration, while Hancock was appointed by President Clinton and replaced during the succeeding Bush administration (Hancock 2007). Hancock still participates on other international Roma councils and teaches Romani studies at the University of Texas, and is a leading voice in advocacy for improvement of Romani well-being in the United States.

Ian Hancock’s advocacy is the most prominent case focused on gaining recognition for an internally established, externally articulated group identity. In a very brief, generalizing statement, there does not seem an overwhelming consensus among self-identified Gypsy or Romani people to gain political recognition for a personally recognized identity (Hancock 2008, Gropper and Miller 2001).

**Identity in the Liberal Democratic United States**

In a liberal democracy such as the United States, political recognition of identity is centered on the individual. Avishai Margalit and Moshe Halbertal define the anthropological aspect of the individual as the “person” and the metaphysical aspect of a person as the changeable “personality” (Halbertal and Margalit 2004: 539). They state: “The same person can undergo a radical change in personality yet still remain the same person, while the converse is not the case” (Halbertal and Margalit 2004: 539). The person is the physical body of a person that exists, which can undergo experiences and remain the same body. The personality can undergo those same changes and completely change over time the individual’s relation to the world. It is the existence of a personality from which freedom of expression and right to culture are derived. Jürgen Habermas politicizes the identity of a person by differentiating the “natural” from the “legal” person (Habermas 1995: 849). The legal person is the projected form of a person that is composed of the rights acknowledged by a liberal state and the natural person could be said as composed of the person and personality defined by Margalit and Halbertal (2004: 539) and individuated by their personal history as separate from the legal person (Habermas 1995: 850). The definition circulated by Locke may also be called upon to back this definition. Locke differentiated the private and public spheres of the individual. The private sphere may be the natural person consisting of the person and personality. The public sphere may embody the legal person. Thus, an individual consists of a legal person individuated according the rights acknowledged by a liberal polity, and a natural person individuated by distinct personality and history separate from the legal person. This human nature is what a liberal state recognizes as equal in all its citizens.

The issue with this political philosophy of identity is that most Gypsy and Romani people seemingly have no interest in gaining political recognition of identity based on their natural person. In fact, some Gypsy and Romani people actively choose to misrecognize their ethnicity in the presence of others, as discussed in previous sections. The articulate, applicable arguments of Charles Taylor concerning recognition in the U.S. become irrelevant under the framework of Gypsy people in the U.S. Charles Taylor argues in the “PoliticsofRecognition” that liberal states justify individual rights based on the need for individual recognition and dialogical process of establishing personal identity (Taylor 2004). The individual must first be recognized as distinct from other individuals, but as possessing by nature the need to establish one’s natural identity dialogically. Individuals create their own personal identity privately and intersubjectively, but need others to establish and fulfill that identity (Taylor 2004: 33). This need to establish one’s natural identity dialogically seems nonexistent in some Gypsy communities, as they are more interested in maintaining intragroup norms and social standing completely separate from greater society. Taylor’s arguments concerning identity are thus only applicable to those Gypsy and Romani communities who wish to assimilate and must establish and articulate a politically recognizable natural identity that can fit the liberal democratic precept of a legal person.

**Conclusions**

The case of a Gypsy or Romani identity is a highly complex matter given their fractured, diasporic history in Europe, historic persecution as an other in most host societies, group insularity, and complex interethnic coexistence. The case of the Gypsy and Romani identity in the U.S. is even more complex given the various waves of Gypsy immigrants from a variety of ethnic origins, and different levels of assimilation to American culture and traditional adherence as observable in the Kalderash and Machvaya people. A psychological approach to understanding the possible defense mechanism of intentional deception in ethnic recognition by non-gypsies is worth further investigation and possible testing. Because of this cultural character, there seems to exist a great disparity between interethnic perception of Gypsy and Romani peoples and Gypsy and Romani peoples’ self-understanding. It is debatable whether this disparity of perceptions is reconcilable, and a recognizable identity based on the liberal democratic structure of the legal person is possible.

More treatment can be given to exact evolution of traditional Gypsy practices such as fortune-telling and religious ceremonies, and whether and how those practices have assimilated to the American culture. Fortune-telling in New York City alone presents a deep case of Gypsy identity assimilation and economic establishment in a highly Americanized, urban population.

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