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Invisible Strangers, or Romani History Reconsidered

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Abstract

This essay proposes that the invisibility of so-called Gypsies in Middle Eastern and Central Asian historiography derives from two linked phenomena. First, the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and North American philologists, medievalists, and ethnographers delegitimized the Strangers' languages, along with the cultures and histories that these languages expressed. The erasure of Strangers from modern historiography was nearly total. Secondly, the category of Strangers was transformed in the wake of the Holocaust as Roma activists drew on Nazi racial categories to base Roma identity on linguistic criteria.

Keywords: Banū Sāsān, Roma, Holocaust

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In the late sixteenth century a Muslim silk weaver named Kamāl al-Dīn regularly recorded anecdotes and observations about his life and work in Ottoman Aleppo. A lengthy fragment of this notebook survives today and makes for an unusual witness to this time and place, representing the perspective not of members of the religious, military, or scholarly elite, but that of an ordinary craftworker.[i] Kamāl al-Dīn lived in the northeasternmost quarter beyond the city walls, not in the city center where the old, elite families resided. The external border of his neighborhood fronted wilderness and absorbed a critical branch of the Silk Road that extended eastward through Central Asia and into China. New migrants from Central and East Asia tended to settle there, and this cultural mix may have nurtured his sensitivity to people and their languages. In his notebook Kamāl al-Dīn recorded an Arabic sign alphabet that he had learned, composed entries in Ottoman Turkish and Arabic, and discussed a Hebrew wall inscription with

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[i] This manuscript, Forschungsbibliothek Gotha ms. orient. A114, represents the earliest known notebook in Arabic by a craftsperson. An Arabic edition, Arabic study, and English study of this work will soon be published in Beirut.

a Jewish friend. Perhaps most astonishingly, in early 1589 Kamāl al-Dīn noticed an unusual occurrence on the streets of Aleppo.

> I saw an easterner singing in seven languages with his tambourine in his hand. First, he sang in Arabic, then in Turkish, then in Persian, then in Kurdish, then in Gorani, then in the language of the strangers (*bi-lisān al-ghurabā'*), then in Hindi. In other years I have seen Indians with a dancing boy. They were playing a long-necked stringed instrument (*ṭanbūr*), a tambourine, and a vertical flute. Two copper bowls were in the hand of the boy. They wander from one musical act to another, just as the warbler (*dukhkhal*) does. Of their singing one can know the metre, but not understand its meaning, unless you are from among them. Praise to the great Creator. (Kamāl al-Dīn, fol. 42v)

When first reading this list of seven languages, "the language of the Strangers" struck me as an uncharacteristically opaque phrase from an author who, in other passages, had taken pains to explain obscure terms. Judging by the syntax and grammar, it is clear that "the language of the Strangers" was not synonymous with "an unspecified foreign language" and also that "the Strangers" were a group recognizable to sixteenth-century Mediterranean readers, but who were they? A yearlong investigation brought unexpected revelations. A peripatetic tribal group known as the Banū Sāsān, whose members worked as beggars, street entertainers, and traders, renamed themselves *ghurabā'* (Strangers) in the thirteenth century, and this self-identification—the classical Arabic term for so-called Gypsies—has endured into the present. The *ghurabā'* also spoke a mixed language that they called Sīn and that outsiders called "the language of the Strangers."[ii] Today, Sīn, which some of its speakers now refer to as Sīm, survives as a spoken language among entertainers in Alexandria and Cairo, and among the peripatetic Ḥalab community who live along the Nile basin in Egypt and the Sudan.[iii] The umbrella terms *Gypsies*

[ii] For a detailed history of the Banū Sāsān/*ghurabā'* and the Sīn tribal language, see Richardson, "Tracing".

[iii] The terms *Sīm* and *Sīn* refer to the same language. In early 1970s Cairo, Rowson observed that "more educated speakers say <u>siim</u> and are puzzled by <u>siin</u>, while the reverse is the case for the less educated" (15-16).

and *Strangers* are similarly vague, in that they encompass the Armenian Lom and the Levantine Dom, who speak Indo-European languages closely related to Romani, *as well as* the English Travellers and the central European Yenish (German, *Jenische*; French, *Yéniche*), who speak wholly unrelated languages. This broad conception of affiliation and identity sharply contrasts with researchers' tendency to treat the Roma as an *isolated diasporic Indian community*, obscuring their historical relationships with culturally similar, but linguistically distinct groups. Neglecting relationships with European and Ottoman Jews and certain traveling groups in central Europe that the Roma had forged through daily life and common interests distorts Romani history by propping up racist framing of the Roma as representative of a "pure", "uncorrupted" culture. Modern Romani studies are premised on a linguistic view of kinship. "Only if isolation [of the field of Romani Gypsy studies] is shattered and a fundamental debate about the premises of Gypsy studies takes place in prestigious periodicals and is addressed to a broad academic public can we expect, perhaps, to arrive at a deeper understanding of the history of Gypsies" (Willems, 34) In this article I will argue that defining Roma ethnicity on linguistic models of kinship has long sustained the isolation of Romani studies from other "Gypsy" studies, and I will detail how this model has sustained itself into the present.

In the first half of this study, I seek to show how the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and North American philologists, medievalists, and ethnographers delegitimized the Strangers' language and the culture that this language expressed. In the latter half I consider how the German government's compensation laws for Holocaust victims shaped modern Roma identity. As Julia von dem Knesebeck has observed, "Ironically, the post-war developments in a way reinforced the racial categorisations created by the National Socialists. … Because of the way in which the fight for compensation developed, the National Socialist

treatment of Roma came to be not only regarded as a racial persecution, but as the persecution of a race, which appears to have turned 'being Roma' from a social and cultural to a racial identity" (222). After World War II the European Roma element of the Stranger community came to global prominence as victims of the Nazi genocide. Beginning in the 1970s, to make themselves legible to a legal regime that only recognized victims of racial, political, and religious persecution, Roma activists in the United Kingdom, France, and Yugoslavia patterned a Roma ethnicity on the Nazi definition of Zigeuner. In this process of what Slawomir Kapralski has termed a "Roma ethnogenesis", the Roma were constructed as culturally distinct from the Yenish and disconnected from any Asian or North African heritage (269-84). These related developments reveal how the Strangers became lost to modern historians as objects of historical inquiry.

Recovering and integrating the medieval past of Strangers into global medieval studies would constitute a radical reimagining of the interconnectedness of Afro-Eurasian history. To give but one example, descriptions of the blockprinting process first appear in tenth-century Arabic sources, where production is always mentioned as having been developed by the Banū Sāsān/Strangers, and the specialized printing vocabulary is entirely in Sīn. Not recognizing the printing vocabulary in these otherwise Arabic passages, researchers have interpreted it as corrupted Arabic, so that documentation of premodern Arab printing seems unreliable. For example, the Sīn word for "carved printing block" is *ṭarsh*, but in classical Arabic, *ṭarsh* means "deafness." So descriptions of carving and inking a "deafness" to print an amulet feel opaque and unsatisfying to readers. In trying to make sense of these passages, researchers have assumed scribal error and have argued for changing the letters to make more sense in Arabic (D'Ottone, 70n8).

Archaeologists have excavated block-printed texts composed in Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, and Coptic in Damascus and Egypt, with production dates estimated between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. But key questions about the technological import of these objects remain unexplored. Is there evidence that the *ghurabā'* produced amulets with movable type? Did printing technologies to Europe spread through the migration of Sīn-speakers across North Africa and into Andalusia? Understanding the mechanisms of transfer of print technologies requires a sensitive engagement with the history of the *ghurabā'*, beginning with their language and customs.[iv]

Defining Strangers

Yenish settlements have historically clustered around the River Rhine that flows northward from its source in the Swiss Alps through France, Germany, and the Netherlands, and into the North Sea.[v] The modern-day Yenish and Ḥalab Sīn-speakers have much in common; they have long maintained concentrated settlements in the Rhine and Nile Valleys, respectively. In spite of their entrenched histories in these regions, they are marked as outsiders by their compatriots due to their mixed languages and livelihoods as petty traders and beggars. The Yenish language has a German grammatical base, and its vocabulary derives mainly from German, Hebrew, and Romani (Siewert 5).[vi] That the Yenish maintained close contact with

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[iv] I am currently preparing a monograph about the *Ghurabā'* of medieval Islamdom, where I explore questions of cultural contact and technological transfer.

[v] The German Ministry of the Interior, Building, and the Community recognizes four national minorities: the Danes, the Frisians, the German Sinti and Roma, and the Sorbs. The state does not collect population statistics on any ethnic group, so even if the Yenish were granted official minority status, their precise numbers would not be known.

[vi] Siewert claims that Yenish vocabulary derives from Rotwelsch (29%), Hebrew via Yiddish (28%), modern German (9%), old Westphalian dialect (9%), Sinte Romani (17%), unknown (9%), Romance languages (0.8%), and Slavic languages (0.4%). The Rotwelsch category needs to be better specified. Rotwelsch itself is defined as "the argot employed by crooks, thieves, and

Jewish and Roma communities is evidenced in the significant lexical absorptions, but is also substantiated through historical documentation. After World War I, many traditionally Roma habits like begging, fortune-telling, and itinerancy were restricted in Germany, and the Roma were made to live in housing for the poor outside large urban areas. Though the Roma and Yenish plied similar trades, often occupied the same camps, intermarried and absorbed each other's vocabularies, their histories are rarely told together (Lewy 47). Both groups were targeted by Nazi laws: Roma classified as "Gypsy" and the Yenish as "asocial." Between 1935 and 1945, many Yenish were interned in camps and deported from Germany and the Netherlands, and as many as five hundred thousand Roma and an undetermined number of Yenish were exterminated in concentration and labor camps.

On its face the historiographical separation between the Yenish and the Roma is clearly arbitrary, akin to deeming the Ojibwa nation as other than Indigenous because their language group is distinct from that of the Cherokee nation. Rather, anthropologists eschew essentializing groups based on "predetermined, global criteria." Current discussions privilege defining indigeneity "in local and relational terms" that depend on context and relationships with their environment. As such, they construct ties through settlement in the Americas, shared belief systems, and lifestyles (Sillitoe 35-36).

So how did Strangers understand themselves and their relationship to broader society? The term *Stranger* suggests a specific outward stance. In 1908 the German Jewish sociologist Georg Simmel published an essay about those members of a given society who complicate the binary of exclusion and assimilation. They constitute "an element of the group itself …--an

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vagabonds in the German-speaking portions of central Europe" and contains 22% Hebrew vocabulary (Rendsburg and Jütte, 111, 431-434).

element whose membership within the group involves being both outside it and confronting it (144)". It is precisely this ceaseless negotiation of belonging to non-Stranger communities and subsequent adaptations to shifting those communities' needs that defines the Strangers' worldview. For Simmel community bonds are forged and solidified through economic relationships, like the division of labor and land ownership. Therefore, the archetypal strangers were tradespeople who furnished products and services that the local population could not provide themselves, as well as European Jews who were not owners of land—"land not only in the physical sense but also metaphorically as a vital substance which is fixed, if not in space, then at least in an ideal position within the social environment (144)". Simmel's reading, in its privileging of labor categories and property as key determinants of social class, has a distinctly Marxist cast, but the medieval Strangers organized themselves into professional tribes and did not claim specific territorial origins.[vii] It is precisely this definition of strangerhood that researchers Joseph Berland and Aparna Rao argued was the distinctly unifying principle—over and above ethnicity, religion, language, or nationality—of peripatetic populations in Asia and Africa (8-14).

This shared identity as Strangers is reproduced in the names that contemporary Muslim Gypsy communities have given themselves in the Balkans, Africa, and Asia, many of which are some form of the name *ghurabā'*. This apparent naming continuity underscores the foundational

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[vii] Other theories of strangerhood investigate social phenomena arising from modern contexts. In *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (2014), James Vernon has argued that exploding population numbers and mobility in Victorian Britain created a society of strangers. A presupposition of his work is that nineteenth-century subjects felt connected to, not merely ruled by, the crown and state. In the premodern contexts that I examine, alienation from ruling families was mostly expected, in part because from the tenth to the twentieth centuries, the Arab Middle East was dominated by Turkic and Persianate rulers. Imperial subjects needed only recognize and submit to their sovereigns, not actively identify with the families. The strangerhood I investigate is a cultivated social and cultural alienation, with an implicit political one.

importance of the Strangers choosing to call themselves *ghurabā'* by the thirteenth century, as well as the deliberate cultivation of social status outside of the mainstream. The term *gurbet* entered the Ottoman Turkish lexicon sometime after the 1550s, designating the same groups as the Arabic *ghurabā'* (Çelik 191n34). The Kurbat Gypsies of Syria speak Domari; the Afghan and Iranian Ghorbat are Shi'ite peripatetics who speak Ghorbati; and in Egypt and the Sudan "the most common description of Gypsy groups along the Nile is *ghurabā'*, which means Strangers" (Streck 120). In Tibet, where Muslims are grouped according to perceived origins, there are three main Muslim communities, the Gharīb, the Lhasa Khache, and the Wabaling. The Gharīb are distinguished by their non-Tibetan name and their low-status work as beggars and street cleaners (Altner 348). Additionally, many European Muslim Gypsy communities *also* bear this name. In the Balkan Peninsula and in Romania, one finds the Muslim Gurbeti clan, who speak Gurbeti, a Vlach Romani dialect. On the island of Cyprus lives the Gurbet clan who speak Gurbetçi, and in Crimea the Gurbét clan also refer to themselves Truchmén (probably a version of 'Turkman'). Finally, in North America the Roma call the non-Roma Travellers *gurbet* (Rao 293n8; Cantineau 39). The Stranger label has deep historical roots and enduring continuity. The reproduction of the word *ghurabā'* in these communities' names signals a shared, if largely forgotten, past, and the migration of *ghurabā'* groups through Afro-Eurasia confirms the wide dispersal of earlier Stranger communities (de Goeje 67-68). When the category of Stranger goes unacknowledged, these modern communities are fragmented to the point of unrecognizability and unrelatability, reduced to exotic and mysterious "people without a history" who speak unclassifiable languages.

The Strangers' self-fashioning as an alienated people emerges in pre-modern writings and also in modern memoirs and ethnographies of Roma and similar groups. Jan Yoors, a Belgian

Flemish non-Roma who left his family in 1934 at the age of twelve to live with a Roma traveling unit, related an illuminating exchange with Pulika, a Roma elder. When Yoors referred to the Kalderash Rom as Russian Gypsies, "Pulika wearily told me how misleading it was to single out Gypsies by a national identity, in view of their constant, wide-flung traveling. He said I at least should know they were 'a race of strangers'" (134). Pulika rejected homogenizing, territory-based national identities, in favor of a "racial" identity that eschewed bloodlines, territory, or language. This sense of solidarity may arise from a shared embrace of non-majority values or from the loss of specific identities denied by the state. The principle of strangerhood derives its force from "denaturalizing the categories upon which contemporary structures of power rested and so destabilizing those structures of power" (Scott 285). In this next section, I will examine how the modern European nation-state discursively fragmented the Stranger community by categorizing them into units accepted by the state, influencing the ways in which scholars approached and imagined Strangers.

Genetic Purity and Languages

In 1808 the philologist Friedrich Schlegel advanced the hypothesis that Sanskrit was the ancestral language of the Indo-European language family, illustrating the importance of ancient Asia for studies of modern Europe. As Edward Said has characterized Schlegel's philosophy: "Language and race seemed inextricably tied, and the 'good' Orient was invariably a classical period somewhere in a long-gone India, whereas the 'bad' Orient lingered in present-day Asia, parts of North Africa, and Islam everywhere" (99). Arthur de Gobineau developed this idea further in his *On the Inequality of the Human Races* (1861), by proposing the existence of a superior parent Aryan race. This problematic linkage of language with race enjoyed wide acceptance in late 19th-century scientific communities and the familial/genetic model of relations

influenced philological study. Languages belong to "families" with genetic lineages, such that we can speak uncontroversially of "ancestral" and "parent" languages. "Sister" languages, like Arabic and Hebrew, share a common "ancestor." A so-called "bastardized language"—such as American English from the perspective of a speaker of British English—referred to what is now known as a dialect. The "bastardization" conveys the judgment of linguistic illegitimacy and tainted transformations. Even if linguists have abandoned the concept of bastardization, the idea of linguistic purity still has legitimacy in scholarship on the Middle East.

Language contact produces pidgins, creoles, and multilingual mixed languages that arise from everyday exposure and exchange. In the case of mixed languages like Sīn, the grammatical base derives from one language, and the lexicon from one or another different languages, most famously exemplified by Jewish languages other than Hebrew. Yiddish (Judeo-German), for instance, has a German grammatical base interspersed with Hebrew vocabulary; Judezmo/Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), Shuadit (Judeo-Occitan), Yevanic (Judeo-Greek), and Italkian (Judeo-Italian) have traditionally been considered "multi-genetic languages", though more recent research rejects the kinship terminology, reframing Jewish languages in terms of "fusion" or "divergence and convergence" (Beider 77-121). This more flexible approach circumvents the rigid genetic model of linguistics that has sustained particular cultural hierarchies.[viii] The dynamism of contact better captures the lived experiences of language speakers and paths of linguistic development of mobile populations.

While language families have some scientific validity, reliance on this model alone to explain all linguistic phenomena simplifies complex historical developments. The anthropologist

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[viii] Even though these shifts are promising, resistance from Middle East specialists persists. In the *Handbook of Jewish Languages*, which surveys Jewish mixed languages globally, only Judeo-Iranian languages are identified as "secret languages" (Borjian).

Michel-Rolph Trouillot noted that Western observers created subalterns by weaponizing language against foreign populations.

> Because these observers did not find grammar books or dictionaries among the so-called savages, because they could not understand or apply the grammatical rules that governed these languages, they promptly concluded that such rules did not exist. … [T]he field was uneven from the start; the objects contrasted were eminently incomparable (7).

Many observers—from the ninth century to the present day—have resolved the incommensurability of Sīn grammar with those of recognized languages by demoting Sīn to a casual jargon used within a community of thieves, tricksters, and beggars. In spite of today's interdisciplinary consensus *that Sīn*-speakers are disreputable people who share a degraded form of speech, medievalists and social scientists have been largely unaware of each other's scholarship on the subject. Most medievalists do not know that the language of the Banū Sāsān is a living language, and, conversely, most anthropologists and sociologists are unaware of Sīn's medieval history. How did these separate epistemological traditions result in the same problematic conclusion?

Orientalist Discourses on *Sīn*-Speakers

Alfred von Kremer, who served as the Austrian Consul to Egypt from 1859 to 1862, published his observations on the African country in two massive volumes entitled *Aegypten* (1863). The section on so-called Gypsy groups, which was translated into English and published the following year, opens with a comparison of the Jewish and Stranger diasporas. "Excepting the Jews there is no people so scattered over the earth as the gipsies. Homeless and yet everywhere at home, they have preserved their physiognomy, manners, and language (262)". Kremer evokes the exceptionality and strangeness of their perpetual deracination, a condition that feels intensified among the Strangers, because unlike the Jews, they claim no ancestral homeland. For Kremer and for generations of scholars after him, their language—like their

lineage—is condemned because it is unclassifiable and untraceable. "All these subdivisions of the Egyptian gipsies speak the same thievish slang language, which they call *Sīm*. Nothing certain is known concerning the origin of this word" (265). Following this statement, Kremer includes one hundred six Sīm words that he learned from members of the Ḥalab tribe, specifically a snake-catcher in Cairo and from other native speakers in Upper Egypt. On the basis of this slender evidence he reaffirms his earlier impression of the language: "There can be no doubt we have here to do with a thievish slang dialect, made use of by the gipsies in order not to be understood by strangers. The circumstance that amongst themselves they speak Arabic, and *Sīm* only in the presence of strangers, is decisive on this point" (266). Kremer registers his exclusion from conversation as a sign of Sīm-speakers' hostile intent, though all he seems to describe is a community that is, at minimum, bilingual.

Subsequent European researchers tended to relate their findings to Kremer's. Émile Galtier argued forcefully that Kremer had indeed gathered vocabulary of a language that had lost the ancient 'Gypsy' grammar, but was nonetheless a 'Gypsy' dialect (6). In 1920 Enno Littmann compiled a dictionary of "Gypsy Arabic," collating his wordlist from past publications, including Kremer's West Asian Gypsies. In the introduction Littmann directly disputes von Kremer's assessment of Sīm as "Kauderwelsch" (gibberish), arguing instead that it was an Arabic dialect with "Gypsy", Hebrew, and Syriac vocabulary. "I believe that it is abundantly clear from the aforementioned that the situation is reversed, that the Ḥalebī-language was originally created in the way it is here, and that it only recorded individual Gypsy words, as well as words from other Arabic dialects, perhaps also from the Hebrew and Syriac" (26-27). In 1926 Paul Kahle published his own word-list of Sīm terms that he had learned from singers, storytellers, actors, and shadow play artists in Cairo. He claimed that because Kremer collected his wordlist

unsystematically, a serious scientific investiation of Sīm's linguistic structures would require more carefully obtained data (313-22).

Research into Sīm/Sīn and Asian Stranger groups fell dormant during the Second World War and for many years afterwards, only to be revived in the 1980s by social scientists who have not engaged with the critiques of Galtier, Littmann, or Kahle. The acceptance of Sīm as a secret language is near total among specialists of the region. During her fieldwork with Egyptian *Sīm*-speakers, the sociologist Alexandra Parrs learned—through her Arabic-English translator—the Sīm terms *cell phone*, *thief*, *woman*, and *police* from a field informant. On the basis of this meagre list, she concluded that "[t]he term 'thievish language' used by Kremer does, in this case, express a literal meaning. Sim has become a language or a code for theft and has reduced [its speakers] to that very identity (177)". A language implies historical and cultural depth on the part of its speakers, whereas a code suggests artificially or spontaneously formed speech, falling outside of genetic linguistic development.

For instance, in the late 1990s the anthropologist Karin van Nieuwkerk interviewed female entertainers in Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt, who spoke Sīm. "How to understand the use of a secret language by a group which apparently has no marginal and excluded social status? Why do they have a secret code if they have nothing to hide and are more or less accepted?" (29) The assumption that Sīm-speakers must be dishonorable becomes difficult to reconcile with the direct observation that ordinary Egyptians also speak this language.

The medievalist encounter with the Banū Sāsān and their language, though limited to texts and images, has yielded similar research outcomes. Part of the difficulty stems from how languages have been traditionally taught. Acknowledgment of language contact in the pre-modern Middle East has been mostly limited to Jewish languages like Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-

Syriac. The Andalusian historian and geographer Al-Bakrī (d. 1046 CE) transcribed samples of an Arabic pidgin spoken among Black residents of the town of Mārīdī in southern Sudan (Thomason and Elgibali 321-22). The most extensive and most influential historical treatment of the Banū Sāsān remains Clifford Bosworth's study, based on two lengthy didactic poems—one from tenth-century Iraq and the other from fourteenth-century Syria—that aimed to inform an Arab audience about the tribe's language and culture. Abū Dulaf al-Khazrajī, the author of the earlier poem, identified as a member of the Banū Sāsān, and Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Ḥillī, the author of the second one, claimed that a patron had commissioned him to embed himself among the Banū Sāsān and write about their language. Bosworth ultimately concluded that the vocabulary presented in the poems formed part of a jargon or a criminal argot (1: 150-79). I have more recently argued that Sīn is a mixed language or para-language that takes the form of embedding a substitutive vocabulary into the grammatical structure of other languages. Historically, Sīn has been spoken within communities of peripatetics and commercial nomads throughout West Asia, in North Africa, and the Sudan (Richardson, "Tracing," 115-57).

Drawing on Bosworth's analysis, one medievalist concluded that "the Banū Sāsān argot seems to have been a highly developed code. Its basic appeal to beggars and enterprising travelers hardly disappeared with the Banū Sāsān themselves—coding one's speech for an illicit trade, of course, seems transhistorical" (England 166). He continued by comparing Sīn to graffiti in North American train yards. Bosworth acknowledged that certain features of the Sāsāni language challenged his classification and his assumptions about slang formation. He remarked that "one would not expect to find jargon words for prepositions or conjunctions," like *upon*, *by*, *until*, and *up to*" (2: 314). Occasionally, Bosworth came across evidence of a Sāsāni word's relationship to ancient Middle Eastern languages. In one of Abū Dulaf's verses, a Sāsāni

man clandestinely defecates beneath a mosque carpet, then cleans himself by wiping his buttocks against the wall of the prayer niche (2: 208, 274). The Sāsāni term used for prayer niche is *midhqān*, and in ancient South Arabian inscriptions, *mḏqnt* and *mḏqn* means 'a place of prayer within a temple' ('Alī Ghūl 331). Bosworth dutifully acknowledges these occurences as curiosities, while resisting further analysis. To complicate the jargon paradigm, some of the premodern *Sīn* terms also appear in languages of modern peripatetics, so how to account for a jargon that persists for nearly one thousand years? These categories imply unseriousness, social instability, and anti-social behavior and also capture none of Sīn's linguistic complexity, disincentivizing researchers from treating it as a worthy subject of investigation. As I wrestled with this question during my research, it became ever clearer that the jargon framework was too narrow and should be discarded in favor of something more encompassing—namely, a mixed language.

Languages spoken by Persianite itinerant groups with non-conforming grammars are frequently described by scholarly and lay observers as 'secret languages' that function primarily to conceal speakers' conniving activities from presumably upright outsiders (Schwartz; Pstrusińska; Voskanian; Melikian; Paul). Even the most well-meaning researchers do not examine these languages as minority dialects, rather centering their own experiences of incomprehension when confronted with this novelty. Furthermore, if they can not understand these minority dialects, then even ordinary features of these languages are interpreted as extraordinary. Similarly, Olaf Günther, an anthropologist who studies the Mugat Gypsies in northern Afghanistan, has documented important Mugati vocabulary as evidence of their so-called argot. After presenting a list of Mugati terms for such household items as rice, plate, and bread, he wondered why a 'secret language' would extend into the vocabulary of everyday life

(248). Of course, as Trouillot reminds us, "grammar functions in all languages" (7). Exempting non-Westerners from the natural order of things removes them from ordinary historical processes and ultimately prevents researchers from objective engagement with these subjects and their languages. This wrongly perceived absence of linguistic order was interpreted as evidence of either the freedom of noble savages or of their unredeemed primitiveness.

Unthinkability

What historical possibilities have been obscured, if not foreclosed, by internalizing particular narratives? In West Asian historiography one can cite the inviolability of the Qur'an as a concept long unquestioned by historians. David S. Powers has written frankly about his own struggles with this taboo. "The idea that the early Muslim community might have revised the consonantal skeleton of the Qur'ān is *unthinkable* not only for Muslims but also for many Islamicists—including, until recently, myself. This unthinkable proposition is one of the central concerns of the present monograph" (iii). Only when Powers was willing to break with this tradition did he examine some of the earliest Qur'an manuscripts for evidence of revision and tampering, ultimately identifying significant changes to the core Qur'anic text. Similarly, the status of blue and green eyes as despised in medieval Islamdom has only recently been entertained. The physiognomy of whiteness has been so widely assumed to convey neutral, if not positive, associations that medievalists have rather assumed scribal error than entertain the possibility that medieval authors intended to express dislike of pale eyes (Richardson, "Blue," 113-15).

Unthinkability in the context of Romani history functions similarly and extends into two key realms. First, there is a pervasive assumption that the Roma, as unlettered nomads, left no recorded history, so the field of premodern Romani history barely exists. The earliest written

records about the Roma appear in fifteenth-century Europe, penned by non-Roma observers. Historical knowledge about pre-fifteenth-century Roma is inferred through analysis of their Romani language. Its classification as an Indo-Aryan language indicates historical roots in western India. Kurdish, Persian, Greek, and Turkish loanwords in modern Romani point to migrations and long stays through these territories. Related Indo-Aryan languages and dialects, such as Lomavren, a mixed language spoken by the Lom of Armenia, and Domari, spoken by the Dom of West Asia, became markers of a distinct racial category. Secondly, after World War II, the Roma reinforced racial pseudoscience to represent themselves before European publics as a racialized nation in exactly those homogenizing terms set forth by Oriental philologists and in Nazi discriminatory laws. Historians have not challenged this framing.

Constructing a Roma Racial Subject in Modern Europe

As discussed above, central to a racialized myth of language was the notion that one could eradicate 'intruders' and isolate pure language. Linguistic hierarchies arose with "less pure" non-genetic languages like creoles, pidgins, and mixed languages occupying an uncertain classification and scientific validation. The pseudoscientific genetic model has not been abandoned, but rather strengthened by parallel racial pseudoscience. Racial families can be "bastardized" by race-mixing, diluting the assumed purity of genetic racial groups.

In 1417 a group of self-identified "Egyptian" pilgrims arriving from Hungary approached King Sigismund at Lake Constance—a body of water fed by the River Rhine—for a letter of safe conduct, and the sovereign obliged. This document has been lost, but another safe conduct letter that he composed in Slovakia in 1423 and issued to one Ladislav, Duke of the Egyptians, does exist in Latin summary. In this source, Sigismund, by then the Holy Roman Emperor, betrays no anxieties about his encounter with an elite "Egyptian" leader and his courtiers, and the document

bears witness to mutual recognitions of sovereignty and respect. Presumably, the earlier 1417 document conveyed similarly easy relations. The "Egyptian" leaders sought out sovereigns and popes, to ensure safe passage through Europe, and either borrowed local titles or were granted these titles by European dignitaries. These encounters are singular for their seeming about-face to later narratives in legal records, popular songs, and literature that portray the conduct of the "Egyptians" only in terms of deviance.

Although the Roma endured nearly four hundred years of slavery, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in Wallachia and Moldavia, they are more commonly associated with a later period of European mass violence, the Nazi German campaign of racial genocide.[ix] The Nuremberg Laws, passed in September 1935, defined citizenship as something only those with German 'racial' heritage could claim. A follow-up decree issued on November 14 that same year defined degrees of Jewishness, and on November 26, a parallel law defining Gypsies (Zigeuner). The distorted racial logic outlined below still persists, as shall be seen, in contemporary understandings of the Roma community.

1. Z   pure Gypsy (*Vollzigeuner* or *stammechter Zigeuner*)

2. ZM+   *Zigeunermischling* with predominantly Gypsy blood

3. ZM   *Zigeunermischling* with equal parts German and Gypsy blood

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[ix] From 1391 to 1476, most rulers of Wallachia and Moldavia, the territories that with Transylvania now make up modern Romania, agreed to pay tribute to the Ottoman Empire. In 1476, Wallachia and Moldavia formalized their status as vassal states to the Ottomans, but were independent enough to construct their own legal and governance structures. Slavery seems to have been institutionalized in the 1470s. Though it is unclear how slavery began in Wallachia and Moldavia, it endured until 1856 when the sale of humans was abolished in the territories. The literature on this phenomenon is rather thin, and an in-depth study is a desideratum. For more, see Marushiakova and Vesselin; Sugar, 113-126.

      a. a ZM degree I is a person who has one German and one pure Gypsy parent

      b. a ZM degree II is a person who has one German and one ZM degree I parent

4. ZM- *Zigeunermischling* with predominantly German blood

5. NZ   *Nichtzigeuner* encompasses all remaining cases of non-Gypsies (Lewy 127).

The construction of the first concentration camp for Roma began months after this declaration. Between 1935 and 1945, as many as five hundred thousand Roma were exterminated in concentration and labor camps alongside an unknown number of itinerants, such as the Yenish. When Nazi Germany fell, Allied forces pursued policies of denazification and reparations. In 1953 the West German government passed new Compensation Laws "that not only limited the group of recipients to within Germany's borders, but also limited compensation to three specific victim categories: racial, political, and religious" (Knesebeck 99). Under this formulation Jewish survivors of the Holocaust received reparations, but Romani citizens of Germany who made these same claims upon the state were denied them. According to West German officials, the Roma had only been targeted by the Nazi regime as asocials and criminals, making them ineligible for compensation (Lewy 202-204). Ironically, having been abandoned by the state, the German Roma were forced to beg West Germany and non-governmental organizations for charity, although it was their public begging that had initially inspired Nazi condemnation. The only possible responses were to either question the restrictive definition of genocide or to adjust their petitions to the demands of the law. Sinti and Roma activists in Germany rejected attempts by other groups to present a common Romani front and claimed racial persecution without claiming a racial identity (Margalit 184-7). The German Sinti and Roma have also petitioned to be recognized by the German government as an official ethnic group, but the requests have not been approved (Gheorghe 830). The efforts of Romani groups in the UK, France, and

Yugoslavia to establish a Romani ethnic identity mirrored the developments among other groups who demanded cultural and political recognition in the 1970s and may also have been patterned on successful Jewish claims for compensation.[x] In 1971, a number of Roma groups convened for the first World Romani Congress in England, where members voted to adopt a Romani flag and anthem and to repudiate the exonym *Gypsy* in favor of *Rom*, the Romani term for "man." In a deliberate parallel with the Hebrew *Shoah* (destruction), in the year 2000, a linguist of Romani origin, began using the term *Porrajmos*—a Romani word that means "devouring"—to refer to the Roma Holocaust (Hancock). The term has not gained wide currency, as it is "used by only a handful of activists, many of them non-Roma, and it is unknown to most Roma, including relatives of victims and survivors" (Matras, "Conflict," 195), but the move is part of a broader political strategy. As the sociologists Andrew Woolford and Stefan Wolejszo have noted, "much depends on the ability of victim groups to articulate and gain public and political acceptance for the trauma narratives they use to describe their suffering and to communicate the necessity of reparative action" (875).

Related efforts have focused on influencing European language policies and having Roma rights recognized as a human rights issue. Linguists worked to standardize the Romani language in Latin script, and activists petitioned nations to sign the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages recognize Romani as a minority language within their border. When Spain became a signatory to the charter in 2001, it agreed to recognize Catalan and

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[x] There is a vigorous debate between scholars who accept the claims of a national Romani history (whether out of conviction or in solidarity with choices of strategic essentialism) and those who see that history as more or less constructed. In the former camp are those, like Ian Hancock, who emphasize the legitimacy of a national history. Among the latter scholars are Leo Lucassen, who claims that in Western Europe the term "Gypsy" was created for policing. See Lucassen; Okely; and Surdu. Taking a moderate position, but principally opposed to nationalist claims is Yaron Matras. See Matras, *Romani Gypsies*.

Basque as minority languages, but not Romani. Other efforts include encouraging the teaching of

Romani in European universities by publishing language-learning materials (Matras 156). In

April 1996 Roma activists founded the European Roma Rights Centre to centralize the struggle

against anti-Roma legislation and incidents, like police brutality, forced sterilization of women,

and segregated schooling.[xi] These developments have had varying influences within European

Romani communities. More successful has been the official Germany response to Roma

suffering. A memorial to Roma and Sinti survivors of the Holocaust was dedicated in 2012 in

Berlin.

Of all of the activists' adopted proposals, the name change from "Gypsy" to "Roma" has

had the greatest influence on scholarly discourse about traveling communities. Replacing usages

of "Gypsy" with "Roma" flattens differences in this cultural landscape, and the nomenclature

presents certain challenges for specialists. The erasures from this new convention are handily

illustrated from a recent *New Yorker* article about the effects of the Syrian civil war in the

northern town of Saraqib: "Many of Saraqib's thirty thousand inhabitants trace their roots to

Ottoman times, though in recent decades a community of Roma has settled on the south side,

cornering the market in dentistry" (Gopal 38). As far as I know, there is no Roma community in

Saraqib, though it is home to a documented Domari Gypsy community—also known as Kurbat,

from *ghurabā'*—that specializes in dentistry (Herin 407-408). I presume that the *New Yorker*

journalist was informed that "Gypsies" lived in the city, then substituted this problematic term

with the preferred, though imprecise, *Roma*. Such cultural distinctions are meaningful in West

Asia, where Romani and Domari communities have co-existed and interacted for centuries. The

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[xi] The ERRC began publishing the *Roma Rights Journal* in 1998, and these volumes document
the organization's various legal campaigns.

interactions are especially well documented in Iran, which is home to Roma and non-Roma Stranger groups (Windfuhr 271-292; McDowell 162-66).

Conclusion

Joan Scott has argued that "identities don't preexist their strategic political invocations, that categories of identity we take for granted as rooted in our physical bodies (gender and race) or our cultural (ethnic, religious) heritages are, in fact, retrospectively linked to those roots; they don't follow predictably or naturally from them" (285). As with the modern Rom, reifying a sealed and bounded ethnicity serves the aims of Romani nationalist projects, a movement that arose from the post-WWII erasure of Romani suffering and denial of European citizenship, but it has had a distorting effect on any studies of Stranger history. Following eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Hungary in the 1990s, Michael Stewart also concluded that the Rom resisted essentialized racialization. "The Rom do not have an ethnic identity. For them, identity is constructed and constantly remade in the present in relations with significant others, not something inherited from the past" (28). Social scientists can appreciate the political aims of Romani nationalism without accepting its essentialist premises.

Acknowledging a Stranger paradigm would pave the way for, say, Roma-Yenish-Jewish histories of early modern Europe or histories of medieval Middle Eastern Strangers, in which mixed languages like Yiddish, Angloromani, and Yenish are studied anthropologically, and begging is not ascribed to social or racial deviance. Mixed languages bear witness to long and complex cultural interactions, and professional beggars should feature in labor histories as participants in informal economies, possessing different degrees of competence, creativity, and financial success. The narrative of beggars as code-speaking criminals who defraud naïve publics is informed by state laws, like those of Mamluk Egypt (1250-1517), the nineteenth-century

United States, and Nazi Germany, that pathologized public begging (Richardson, *Difference*, 39; Schweik; Ayaß). The possible appeal of subsisting on charitable donations is lost in these framings. For one, the state cannot easily tax the earnings of women, men, and children who beg. Secondly, unlike the case of borrowed funds, there existed no obligation of repayment—with or without interest. Third, begging is not location-dependent, thereby serving the needs of mobile, non-agrarian populations. In short, public begging permits people to conduct lives beyond the reach of the state and may have served as a survival strategy in hostile environments.

The invisibility of Strangers stems from political and discursive choices made by philologists, historians, literary specialists, government propagandists, legal fictions, and even the European Roma and Sinti themselves. However, with the revelation that the ostensibly lost Strangers have appeared, since at least the tenth century, in Arabic, Persian, and *Sīn* sources, a more complex appreciation of the history of the Roma and other peoples traditionally understood as Gypsies and peripatetics is now possible.

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