Oregon Roma (Gypsies)

A Hidden History

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SINCE THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, generations of Roma have made homes and built communities in Oregon. Portland’s Rose City Cemetery has one of the largest collections of Romani graves in the United States, evidence of the community’s vitality. Still, most Oregonians either know nothing about the Romani people or know them only through “gypsy” stereotypes based on romanticism or criminality. Despite continuous discrimination and racial profiling, Oregon Roma have shown a remarkable ability to conserve their language and culture and have even experimented with several novel forms of institutional education. This article demonstrates that continuity and innovation through an exploration of the historical trajectory of Roma in Oregon to the present, focusing on work, residential patterns, family and ritual life, religion, gender, education, legal status, and interethnic relations.

Oregon Roma squarely illustrate the shared history of American Roma in terms of culture, marginality, and adaptation, while the local forms of exclusion they have faced also specifically articulate Oregon’s history. Historians have demonstrated that Oregon lawmakers and enforcers have enacted restrictions and exclusions on Indigenous peoples as well as non-Europeans, such as African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos, while at the same time welcoming Euro-American and European immigrants, including Jews.¹ Roma are an exception to this welcoming pattern. Although Roma emigrated from Europe, many Oregonians treated them not as White, European “insiders” but rather as racialized and othered “outsiders.” Newspapers, political leaders, and police viewed and depicted them as criminal nomads. A combination of three negative concepts — race, nomadism, and criminality — has defined Roma for Oregonians even until today.

Those outside the community often refer to Roma as Gypsies, and some Romani speakers of English have claimed that term for their use as well. Gypsy connotes Egyptian origins, which are false for Roma, and usually has a strong negative connotation. In English, for example, “to gyp” means “to swindle.” Many Oregonians, and many Americans, today do not know that Gypsy refers to a specific ethnic group but rather believe the term refers to a chosen lifestyle associated with creativity, musicality, freedom, and nomadism.² These two stereotypes — positive and negative — are often paired. Here, I use Roma as an umbrella ethnonym (singular Rom, adjective Romani) because it emerged as a unifying, mobilizing term during the past four decades. Approximately one million Roma live in the United States, hailing from diverse Romani sub-groups.³ Kalderash and Machwaya, from eastern Europe, are the largest sub-groups in the United States and also in Oregon, where they number several thousand.⁴

ROMA GATHER in Portland, Oregon, on May 4, 1955, for a three-day celebration in honor of the St. George slovo (saint’s day) and a new Gypsy “king,” Steve Ephrem.
I have been doing advocacy work with Oregon Roma for over two decades, have been involved in several court cases, and have served as a consultant regarding Roma for three Oregon hospitals. In addition, I did fieldwork in the 1970s with Kalderash and Machwaya in New York City, and I have worked with many other sub-groups of Roma in Europe for three decades. Written historical sources on Roma are scarce, but I have found records in archives of the Oregonian and several other newspapers, as well as in several unpublished theses and reports. Photographs archived at the Oregon Historical Society, the Alfred Monner photography collection at the Portland Art Museum, and in private family collections have proved valuable sources. Classic works on American Roma and ethnohistorical information obtained from Romani families by other scholars have been useful as well.

MIGRATION: INDIA TO EUROPE TO OREGON

Linguistic evidence reveals that Roma are originally from India and that they migrated westward, reaching Europe in approximately 1300 AD. Romani, which Kalderash and Machwaya in Oregon still speak as their first language, is descended from Indo-Aryan. Roma migrated throughout eastern Europe by the fourteenth century and western Europe by the fifteenth century, some settling and others following a nomadic way of life. Roma have been indispensable suppliers of diverse services to non-Roma, offering music, entertainment, fortune-telling, metal working, horse dealing, wood working, sieve making, basket weaving, comb making, and seasonal agricultural work. Making a living from many of these trades required nomadism or seasonal travel.

European peoples and rulers’ initial curiosity about Roma quickly gave way to hatred and discrimination, a legacy that has continued until today. Despite their small numbers, Roma inspired fear and distrust; virtually every western European territory has expelled them. Authorities paid bounties for their capture, dead or alive. Additional repressive measures included confiscation of property and children, forced labor, prison sentences, whipping, branding, and other forms of physical mutilation. In the eighteenth century, the Austro-Hungarian Empire attempted assimilation by forcibly removing Roma children from their parents and by outlawing nomadism, traditional occupations, and Romani language, music, and dress. Similar assimilationist legislation was enacted in Spain after 1499.

The mixed coding of Romani otherness—as criminals and romantic figures— hinges on their depiction by non-Roma as free souls who are outside the rules and boundaries of European society, on their association with the arts and especially music and the occult, and on their perceived proximity to nature and sexuality. Ken Lee explains the standing of Roma by extending Edward Said’s concepts of Orientalism: “Whilst Orientalism is the discursive construction of the exotic Other outside Europe, Gypsylorism is the construction of the exotic Other within Europe — Romani are the Orientals within.” Roma are both orientalized and exoticized. Katie Trumpener emphasizes the association of Roma with an ahistoric, timeless nostalgia: “Nomadic and illiterate, they wander down an endless road, without a social contract or country to bind them, carrying their home with them, crossing borders at will.” Simultaneously, they are reviled as unformable, untrustworthy liars, and they are rejected from civilization. For centuries, Roma have served as Europe’s quintessential other; the double-edged stereotype continues to today.

In Romania, Roma were enslaved from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. As bonded serfs owned by noblemen, monasteries, and the state, they were sold, bartered, and flogged; even their occupations and marriages were strictly regulated. Slavery was abolished in 1856, and freed
Roma then migrated from southern Romania to neighboring countries, to western Europe, and to North and South America. Many Oregon Roma are descendants of those slaves.

According to Ian Hancock, “discrimination against Romanies (Gypsies) in America dates from colonial times; three were with Columbus. . . . Romanies were shipped as slaves to Virginia, Jamaica and Barbados from England and Scotland and to Louisiana from France and Spain.” Hancock posits that anti-Gypsy sentiment was bolstered by discrimination against Blacks after slavery was abolished and that discrimination continued during the Reconstruction era. In the nineteenth century, non-Roma referred to Roma as “colored.” President Andrew Johnson, when vetoing the 1866 Civil Rights Bill, said: “This provision comprehends the Chinese of the Pacific States, Indians subject to taxation, the people called gypsies, as well as the entire race designated as blacks, people of color, negroes, mulattoes, and persons of African blood.” Racist views supporting the veto were published in the North, such as in a New England newspaper editorial stating that Johnson did not believe “in compounding our race with niggers, gipsies and baboons, neither do we . . . [or] our whole Democratic people.”

The largest numbers of Roma arrived between 1880 and 1920 as part of the second wave of migration from eastern Europe. They settled in cities all along the East Coast. By the 1930s, Roma were migrating west in large numbers to take advantage of warmer climates, the relative freedom found in less populated regions, and new markets for their occupational niches. Oregon was an especially attractive destination because of its mild weather, wide expanse of land, and untapped customer markets for Romani trades such as metalcraft. Unlike the Chinese, Japanese, and African Americans who migrated to Oregon to seek work in mines, on railroads, and in agriculture, and as domestics, Roma worked only in their family settings and specialized in service trades such as metalwork, horse sales and doctoring, car sales and repair, carnival ride repair, and fortune telling.

EARLY OREGON HISTORY

The earliest documentation of Roma in Oregon appears in several 1893 newspaper articles, in which journalists accused Roma of kidnapping a young girl. The Oregonian reported that “Gypsies” had been coming to the Northwest for two years. “They are divided into small gangs in the summer and in the winter unite and usually camp in the hills near Chehalis, Wash.” The article accuses them of stealing animals as well as the girl, thus doubling the thief stereotype. A close reading of the Athena Press article (reprinted from the Spokane Review) reveals several prevalent themes:

The Lost Little Alma

J.W. Miller. Of Summerville OR, father of the little girl who was stolen from her home by gipsies [sic] last fall and traced as far as Moscow, Idaho is in Spokane on the hunt after the child. . . . About that time a band of gypsies with four or five wagons did pass east of Spokane and were overhauled, but no trace of the little girl was discovered. It was thought that the abductors had probably gone northward to the British line and had transferred their precious capture to some other tribe. . . . It is certain, however, that the girl was taken by these roving nomads. . . . The kidnapping proclivities of gypsies are historical, and it is also known that the booty stolen by one band is transferred at regular gipsy [sic] depots to other tribes and pass along from one band to the other until it is safely beyond the reach of detection. This may be the mode that these wanderers have of getting rid of their live plunder when they see fit to resort to child stealing.”
In quick succession, readers are presented with a series of impressions cloaked as “facts”: “the kidnapping proclivities of gypsies are historical”; they transfer their “booty” or “live plunder” to other “tribes” or “bands” at “regular gipsy depots”; and they are masters of deception. In other paragraphs of this article, the seven-year-old is described as “slender, small for her age,” and her father as “broken down. . . . The tears rolled down his cheeks and he sobbed audibly.” There are clearly two sides here — innocent vs. guilty — and all gypsies, the article implies, are guilty by their very nature. Note that the article presents no evidence for the assumed abduction. In the early-twentieth-century media, Roma were regularly accused of child theft, despite their small numbers and the lack of evidence. Parents warning their children would often threaten: “The Gypsies will steal you if you misbehave.”

Early-twentieth-century Oregon newspaper articles reveal a preoccupation with ridding the state of Roma, whom the writers racialized as dangerous others. A 1916 article, for example, reported that sheriffs guarded 150 gypsies who were near Roseburg on their way to a reunion, even though no illegal activity was witnessed. “No trace of a white child was found when the officers searched their camp tonight. It was reported . . . that a child resembling a missing Newport lad was with the gypsies. The gypsies were refused admission to Roseburg today and will be sent north tomorrow.” A 1906 article chronicles the efforts of a Portland Union Station depot policeman to remove Roma: “The police allege that the gypsies have such a penchant for stealing everything that is not nailed down that it is necessary to ‘keep an eye on them.’” The Ashland Daily Tidings in 1916 wrote: “True to their inborn instincts, the horde of gypsies which passed through Ashland last Sunday failed to get out of the country without committing a serious depredation.” Racialization is evident here when the journalist implies that “committing a serious depredation” is somehow “true to their inborn instincts.”

The racist underpinnings of Oregon Romani history can fruitfully be compared with the state’s Asian American and African American histories. Chinese Oregonians suffered brutal discrimination as a result of various acts during the Exclusion Era, from 1882 to 1943. A quick overview illustrates Oregon’s long-term exclusion of African Americans:

When the state entered the union in 1859 . . . Oregon explicitly forbade black people from living in its borders, the only state to do so. . . . In 1844, the provisional government of the territory passed a law banning slavery, and at the same time required any African American in Oregon leave the territory. Any black person remaining would be flogged publicly every six months until he left. Five years later, another law was passed that forbade free African Americans from entering into Oregon. . . . In 1857, Oregon adopted a state constitution that banned black people from coming to the state, residing in the state, or holding property in the state. . . . Oregon itself didn’t ratify the 14th Amendment — the Equal Protection Clause — until 1973. . . . It didn’t ratify the 15th Amendment, which gave black people the right to vote, until 1959. . . . This history resulted in a very white state. . . . The rise of the Ku Klux Klan made Oregon even more inhospitable for black people. The state had the highest per capita Klan membership in the country. . . . Democrat Walter M. Pierce was elected to the governorship of the state in 1922 with the vocal support of the Klan.

Facing such hostility, only a small population of African Americans lived in Oregon before World War II, when large numbers arrived to take part in work related to the war.

Like African Americans, some Roma were lured to Oregon in the 1940s by jobs building war vessels near Portland. Both groups, however, were barred from unions and from skilled jobs, many of which were advertised as “white only.” According to Darrell Millner, professor emeritus of Black Studies at Portland State University, “After the war, blacks were encouraged to leave Oregon . . . with the mayor of Portland commenting in a newspaper article that black people were not welcome.” In December 1944 — in the middle of a severe winter and when their labor was no longer necessary — the city forcibly removed Roma. Portland mayor Earl Riley (one of the most corrupt mayors in the city’s history) issued one-way gas rations to dozens of families, half the Roma population of the city. The Oregonian stated: “We are right proud of our mayor. Some people will say the gypsies are colorful . . . but after a while any town will reach the end of its patience. . . . For a gypsy is always a gypsy, and a gypsy is ever a problem. To municipal authorities gypsies are not less than a protracted headache.”

WORK, TRAVEL, AND RESIDENCE

When Kalderash migrated to the United States, they maintained a semi-nomadic way of life, moving seasonally in the vast American landscape for work as “service nomads.” They often set up tents during the summer months and rented cheap apartments during the winter. In Oregon, men worked in metalwork (such as copper and brass plating and forging, and sheet-metal work) and in fashioning and repairing kitchen pots, hardware for looms, and horse gear. Until the 1920s, when stainless steel came onto the market, kitchen pots, pans, and utensils in both restaurants and homes had to be re-plated; this was a Romani skill, sometimes a monopoly. Roma transported mobile forges along regular circuits, first by horse and cart and then in cars and trailers. Young boys learned the craft from their elders by observing and practicing in apprenticeship.
During the 1930s into the 1950s, Roma transferred their metalwork skills to the emerging car market. This was especially important in the American West, with its wide expanses and lack of public transportation. Roma in Europe had also been trained in the horse trade, and they used this sales acumen in the expanding car transportation trade in the United States. Men became experts in both car body and fender repair and in selling used and new cars and trailers. The Ephrem family’s male elders had several car lots in Portland in the 1950s; in the 1970s, one brother moved his residence and lot to Eugene, where his sons and grandsons still deal in recreational vehicle sales today. Until the 1980s, bodywork was usually solicited face to face by Roma approaching owners of damaged cars in parking lots. The work was done on site or at the home of Roma, and there was no need to rent a shop site. During the 1980s, insurance companies began requiring customers to patronize approved shops for body work, which dramatically curtailed business for Roma.

Although Roma travel decreased during the mid-twentieth century, it remained part of the ethos of Romani life, serving economic functions as well as promoting spiritual health. Travel was also a mechanism to solve conflict. One elder member of the large, extended Ellis family narrated how “getting on the road” was beneficial “for health and business — to feel better, to get more contacts.” Men regularly traveled from Oregon to southern California and Nevada to buy cheap used cars that they resold at a profit in Oregon, sometimes bringing along their large extended families.

During the 1940s and 1950s, American Roma began to spend more time in cities, including Portland. As they began to rent apartments for longer periods of time in the downtown areas of northwest and southwest Portland, they also used those locations as fortune-telling parlors. Many Romani families have narrated stories of harassment while living in downtown storefronts. A 1957 archival photograph documents one such residence with the label: “store building at 1331 Southwest First Avenue serving as a home for a family of Portland Gypsies. Many Gypsies in the Portland area resorted to living in such buildings.” Romani families targeted streets where there was considerable foot traffic to attract customers. The fortune-telling parlor was located in the front, and the family lived in the rear, reflecting the desire to keep work within the family. Housing regulations often prohibited these living arrangements, and families were fined and evicted. Matt Salo documents similar widespread harassment, surveillance, and searches by police of Romani fortune-telling establishments in the 1970s in other United States locations.

Legal disputes over downtown residences located in storefronts were numerous. A 1966 Oregonian editorial, for example, stated: “Some years ago the City of Portland sought to halt the endless complaints about Gypsy activities by enforcing its housing ordinances and evicting the occupants of storefront dwellings. But the Gypsies who are smart enough to pay generous rentals, and on time, found the building owners made powerful legal allies.” Simultaneously, the editorial denigrates Gypsies for their “activities” and also for paying their rent on time. The editorial also claims Roma are “unmindful of decrees emanating from officialdom” and warns “guileless male pedestrians who . . . eventually should learn that the thing to do when walking past a Gypsy establishment is to keep on walking.”

Note that deception related to Roma work — implicitly including fortune telling, the main occupation in storefronts — is assumed. In 1962, the Oregonian reported on “The mayor’s committee on the Gypsy problem,” which had been formed in response to “numerous
complaints regarding Gypsy families living in store buildings in the downtown area and ‘preying on’ passersby.” The mayor’s committee recommended that they move out of the area. Gradually, they did move, due to continual citations.

This pattern of residential displacement has clear parallels with the experiences of African Americans in Portland. As the population of African Americans increased in the 1940s, housing available to them was mostly in the wartime development of Vanport. After the war, when their labor was no longer needed, “the Housing Authority . . . mulled the dismantling of Vanport,” but the flood of 1948 did it for them. Many African Americans then moved to the Albina neighborhood, which “was identified by the city’s financial and political power structure as a target area for black resettlement.” After several displacements for development, the area has recently become gentrified, forcing Blacks to the suburbs. It is clear that the residences of people of color in Portland have been subject to economic and social control.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Roma began to buy homes and move from downtown to outlying Portland neighborhoods, where they also established car sales lots. A 1967 article reports that five hundred Roma lived in the Southeast Eighty-Second Avenue neighborhood, and several Roma car lots are still in that area today. They also continued to live on the west side of downtown until they were forced out during the 1970s by high rents and by citations for violating city residential codes.

In addition to work related to cars, other Romani males’ occupational niches in Oregon included occasional seasonal agricultural work (such as picking fruit), middleman peddling (such as selling Christmas lights from parking lots), construction trades (such as black-topping, roofing, plastering, and painting), and repairing stoves, furnaces, boilers, shopping carts, and carnival rides. Working the summer carnival circuit, many Romani families owned and repaired rides, and operated rides, animal shows, photography
booths, and most notably fortune-telling booths. In the 1970s, public assistance, or welfare, became an important source of income for Kalderash; many Oregon families applied and were approved.

Romani occupations in Oregon required adaptation and flexibility in response to changing markets and legal constraints. These characteristics are emphasized in the literature about Kalderash throughout the United States. While they alternated between nomadism and sedentarism, as required by work situations, one constant preference in Kalderash traditional occupations is a basis in family enterprises. Family, however, is large and extended; kin includes everyone in a person’s vitsa (relatives who descend from a real or mythical ancestor).

Soon after Kalderash migrated to America, fortune-telling became the quintessential female occupation. It remained the main source of family income until the 1980s, when many Roma converted to Evangelical Christianity. Fortune-telling struck a resonant chord with non-Romani clients of varied backgrounds. In addition to street walk-ins, women often had steady customers who patronized them for years, even over long distances via telephone and letters. Males worked much less regularly than females, and women therefore were expected to provide most of the family income.

At a young age, girls learned the trade by observation and apprenticeship, and a woman’s worth as a bride often depended on her skills in fortune-telling. A Romani elder told me in 1980: “For a woman not to be able to read a palm is an insult.” Roma women are experts at sizing up a person by what they say, wear, and do, and they learn and employ the belief systems of American clients from many cultural backgrounds to offer them what I label “folk psychotherapy,” meaning a traditional way of doing therapeutic character readings.

As early as 1920, advertisements for divination appeared in Oregon newspapers. A survey of “Oregon’s historic newspapers reveal[s] that fortune-telling and divination were often newsworthy topics of interest in the early 20th century, touching on notions that continue to fascinate people.” Fortune-tellers advertised via printed handbills distributed in parking lots and on street corners. Although most Romani women were illiterate, they composed creative flyers by dictation, incorporating the symbols and beliefs of their customers. Kali, a Romani elder woman, narrated various strategies for attracting customers during the 1950s through the 1970s. At the motel where she was staying, she passed out handbills among the maids and waitresses and did readings in her room. Likewise, when visiting the hospital, she advertised among the nurses and attendants, and she always gave her driver a handbill when taking a taxi. Another woman remarked, “I like to take handbills to the telephone company because there are lots of people.... in line.” Kali also used her skill to barter for reduced prices on goods: “This carpet wasn’t too expensive because, when we went to the factory to get it, I told a couple of fortunes to the salesladies in the waiting room and so they knocked off $100 here and there.”

Many women stressed to me that fortune telling rarely means merely predicting the future. Rather, it encompasses character readings, spiritual advice, dream interpretation, psychic insight, palmistry, tarot-card readings, and the selling of amulets. An elder woman explained, “I used to be so exhausted after a full day... believe me, sitting there hour after hour hearing the same stories, the same problems. Everyone thinks they’re different, but they have the same problems. All they need is confidence and strength and a friend and that’s what I am. They need to know they’re not crazy. I try to help people get strength. Of course there’s the money, but I believe I’m helping them.”

Despite the popularity of fortune-telling, authorities targeted that work. In 1980, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) represented Roma seeking to overturn a Roseburg, Oregon, regulation outlawing “arts of the occult.” While a Roseburg pastor labeled fortune-telling “a form of witchcraft,” the ACLU argued that there was no ban on astrology columns common in many newspapers and stressed unequal enforcement of the regulation. The Romani plaintiffs highlighted racial discrimination, stating: “We belong in the darkness? Why? Because we have dark skin? When people hear the word Gypsy, the first thing they think of is we steal.” Romani elders corroborated
these sentiments, narrating continual police harassment for fortune-telling. The Roseburg case was dismissed because the family moved to a location outside the city limits, but similar cases have been won elsewhere.57

In 1984, the California Supreme Court overturned, as an unconstitutional infringement of free speech, an Azusa, California, ordinance that banned fortune-telling. The court held that astrologers and fortune-tellers have the same constitutionally protected right to charge for their opinions as other mainstream forecasters, such as stock advisers and political pollsters. The case, Spiritual Psychic Science Church of Truth, Inc., et. al. v City of Azusa, was based partially on considering fortune-telling to be part of Romani religion.58 As Hilary George-Parkin explains: “While the ruling applies only in California, a handful of other courts have since followed suit in response to claims brought by fortune-tellers and the [ACLU]. They . . . hold that the U.S. Supreme Court’s consistent opposition to prior restraint means that blanket bans on fortune-telling should hold no weight under the Constitution.”59 In Oregon, I uncovered one current law against fortune-telling, in Yamhill.60 Note that fortune-telling fraud is illegal, as is all business fraud; however, the assumption that all Roma fortune tellers are involved in fraud remains widespread.

PURITY/POLLUTION BELIEFS, RELIGION, RITUAL, AND GENDER

Kalderash explain their preference for family-centered work by underscoring the importance of maintaining the boundary between Roma and non-Roma. Their cosmological structure emphasizes the divide between Roma and non-Roma. Roma demonstrate ritual purity by following rules of symbolic and gendered cleanliness. Because non-Roma lack these rules, their world is unruly and impure, and it should be avoided when possible. Thus Roma should not marry, socialize, eat with, or work with non-Roma.61

The Kalderash body is divided into the clean upper half (with the head and mouth as the center) and the impure, polluted, lower half, associated with bodily functions, sexuality, and reproduction. Roma do not sit on tables or other eating surfaces. Many Roma bring their own pillows to hotels and hospitals. Roma always use a separate towel for the head. One elder man never uses a towel to dry himself when he showers, preferring to use new paper towels. Food and anything it touches is especially screened. When moving into a new apartment, Kalderash will install new kitchen and bathroom sinks; if they cannot afford them, they use new basins to wash food, but never use them to wash underwear or a floor mop.

Kalderash eat only at restaurants that other Roma recommended. I have observed many elders using disposable plastic ware or their hands, rather than the establishment’s silverware, which might be unclean. A non-Romani person who eats in a Kalderash home, is served on dishes reserved for non-Roma. I measured my own “acceptance” in part by the dishes on which I was served. At first, I was served on dishes reserved for non-Roma, but after being integrated into the community, I was served on dishes that Roma themselves used. In the scholarly literature, this purity-pollution distinction is termed the marime system, referring to the word for ritual pollution.62

The marime system is intricately tied to strict gender roles. Females are inherently polluting, especially during menstruation and childbirth. All discourse about and supplies related to these functions, and to sexuality in general, are strictly relegated to the private realm. Menstruating women do not cook for others, and pregnant women do not attend public Romani events. When a Romani woman and I were doing a joint presentation for a Beaverton, Oregon, hospital in 2014, for example, she excused herself from the room when we discussed sexuality and menstruation.

Men and women after puberty socialize and eat separately in public, and women do not let their bodies appear higher than men’s bodies in public. A woman, for example, does not walk across a seating area occupied by men. Women wear long skirts and do not wear pants, but low-cut tops and breast feeding in public are acceptable. Married women wear a head scarf. At large family banquets, and even at home whenever guests are present, there are separate tables for men and women.63

Interruption automatically makes a person marime, and it therefore is severely avoided. One forty-six-year-old woman told me she was “disowned” by her family when she divorced her Romani husband and married a non-Romani man. Notably, only a woman can deliberately make a man marime by defiling him in public, which she can do by touching him with a shoe or slip. When a person is marime, he or she is ostracized and cannot socialize with other Roma. This is a grave social stigma and is enforced by other Roma, lest they, too, become marime. The length of marime status and its revocation are usually conferred by a kris, the internal legal system. The kris is composed of elder men and occasionally elder respected women who represent extended family units, vitsi, who rule by consensus in a face-to-face meeting.64

In general, Kalderash society is patriarchal: men occupy all public authority roles as head of families, descent is patrilinial, post-marital residence is patrilocal, and the kris is a male realm. A big man (baro Rom) serves as head of his extended family. There is no inherited royalty, although powerful men may claim the title “King” as a broker with the non-Romani world. Women defer to men in public, and men occupy the best chairs and eat first. Still, there are many spheres of female power. Women wield the powers of providing larger incomes (if they do well in fortune-telling), budget management,
serves as a primary mechanism to redress injustices against women, such as domestic abuse.65 Gender roles are variable through the lifetime, with elders (including women) achieving enormous respect. Roma do not utilize old-age homes. Young people tend to listen to their parents, respecting their experience. Dating is prohibited, and marriages are arranged by elders; young people can exert control over marriage choices by appealing to kin or by eloping. The groom’s family pays a bride price to the bride’s family ($5,000 to $6,000 in the 1980s, and now about $10,000), indicating the bride’s status as an income producer. In the case of divorce, a kris decides how much of the bride price to return. Weddings are lavish, multi-day performative events, with many rituals and with Romani music and dance. Machwaya also celebrate a slovo, honoring the family’s saint’s day.66

The concept of luck, or bokht, and its absence governs much daily and ceremonial Kalderash life. Luck comes from and is also manifested by health, travel, respect, a large family, and doing things the Romani way. Roma respect their ancestors and the spirits of the dead, and thus closely scrutinize death rituals. Funerals are very important, and a lavish memorial feast, or pomana, is held at several intervals after death. If the dead are disrespected, people may fall ill, and tragedies may strike. Ancestors communicate with the living through dreams and signs in nature that gifted elder women can interpret. This focus on the dead inspires Kalderash to spend generously on huge gravestones and to visit cemeteries regularly to honor and share food with the dead.67

Rose City Cemetery in Northeast Portland has a large section devoted to Romani graves.68 Ornately decorated gravestones display photographs of the deceased, making a cemetery visit a personal experience. Family members always request to be buried together. In 1975, a “King” died in Kansas and his body was shipped to Portland for burial at Rose City Cemetery, where a three-day wake was scheduled for “thousands of Roma.”69 This illustrates the national importance of Rose City Cemetery. A series of photographs from the

ROMA ROAST whole lambs and chickens in Portland, Oregon, for the St. George’s day feast in 1953.
1950s and 1960s reveals that funerals were large and featured processions to the cemetery, where Roma stopped at every corner to pour water on the ground to honor the deceased.

On Easter, birthdays, and other memorial dates, groups of extended families still visit the cemetery to eat and drink with the spirits of the dead. Socializing, pouring drinks on the ground, and leaving food are required practices that have generated complaints by non-Roma. In 1978, such disputes were reported in the Register Guard:

*About 200 Gypsies were asked to leave the cemetery following complaints. . . . "We came from many miles to visit, said [James] Marks . . . Marks said his people were asked to leave because they were practicing a tradition of pouring soda pop, beer, and wine by the graves of their dead . . . . [Director] Ollerenshaw . . . said . . . they had been drinking and carrying on. . . . Alcoholic beverages are not allowed. The . . . director said . . . the burial site is "not a picnic park."*

This Rose City Cemetery dispute illustrates two points: first, the combination of having a very large number of Roma buried there and the utter importance of respecting the dead in Romani culture both make Portland a significant location for Roma. Secondly, non-Roma continue to stereotype and misinterpret Romani culture.
EDUCATION

Given the family orientation of work, the rules of cleanliness and ritual, and the primacy of the Roma/non-Roma boundary, it is not surprising that for many decades after first arriving in Oregon, Kalderash did not see the need for institutional education of their children. They taught the youth their trades at home, and literacy was not valued. They hired non-Roma for tasks such as writing fortune-telling correspondence and handbills and for paying bills, or they learned just enough to cover vital tasks. Some families kept their children in school for years while others took them out when traveling for business or ritual purposes. A series of Oregonian articles in the 1960s portrays a hopeful but tense relationship between Roma and school authorities. A 1969 article claims the principal "has not had to seek court action to get Gypsy families to send their children to Couch. Although they still come and go, Gypsy enrollment was placed at 36 earlier this year. . . . They're actually an asset to the school when they're here because of what they teach the other kids. . . . With consideration for one another, loyalty and cohesiveness, and the older children look out for the younger."73 A 1967 article attributes school attendance progress to:

1) efforts by the Gypsy Kings to convince more of their people so that the [20] children should be in school and, 2) the continued drive by school officials to attract the Gypsy youngsters to the school and keep them there. . . . [School officials] agree that they have never seen mothers and fathers more devoted to their children than are the Gypsy parents. They add that the children seem inherently bright and are rarely problem children when they are in school. They add that the children are seldom if ever involved in police or juvenile problems.74

Indeed, in the 1970s, "King" John Ellis, a bold, visionary leader who amplified the ethnic-rights discourse of the time, took a prominent role in convincing community members that schooling was necessary. He set an example by enrolling his three children, and he advocated for special Romani classrooms. Several Portland programs were launched that aimed at fostering work skills and literacy for Romani youth; they represented a rare attempt to address Romani education. Only a handful of other cities (including Seattle, Washington; Richmond, California; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) have tried Romani-centered schooling.75

One Portland effort was a vocational rehabilitation program focusing on used cars, which ran from 1970 to 1975. Another was a vocational and educational program at Portland Community College for adults between fifteen and fifty-two years of age, from 1970 to 1974. There were also two literacy programs, one in the 1975–1976 academic year at Woodmere School in Southeast Portland, for Roma between sixteen and twenty-one years old, and one in 1977, for children from six to eleven years old. All these programs initially included small stipends to entice participants to attend school. After the grant money ran out, attendance dwindled.76

In 1978, Ellis boldly asked Oregon Governor Robert Straub for a Romani community center that would include a classroom. He had helped form the Oregon International Gypsy Foundation in 1972, and he kept abreast of other Roma school experiments in Seattle, Tacoma, Baltimore, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Richmond, California.77 A center was never established, but Portland school administrators wanted to cooperate with Ellis to form a school. They insisted that the eventual goal would be mainstreaming; likewise, Romani leaders insisted that Romani culture needed to be respected, not assaulted. In the summer of 1978, the school district established the Vestal School Gypsy Education Program in Northeast Portland for children ages six to seventeen. Instruction of Roma children took place in a separate classroom, with all ages combined, but recess was integrated with the other children. One teacher and two aides worked in the classroom. Thirty children enrolled, and an adult summer evening session was added, administered by Portland Community College. In 1979, an afternoon session was added to the children's evening session.78 Ellis and two other leaders, Lee Ristick and Coy Ristick, were put on the payroll as Special Gypsy Counselors — that is, as mediators between Romani families and the school administration.79

By 1979, forty children attended Vestal. The Oregonian reported: "The Gypsy leadership has also come to realize the value of skills learned in school. . . . Ellis . . . attends class with the Gypsy children. . . . He also recruits children in to the program, transports them to and from school in his van and advises the teacher."80

In evaluating the Vestal program, anthropologist Steven Rubin states that it lasted longer (three years) than other programs in Oregon and that the two hundred children who attended at various times demonstrated huge progress in literacy and developed positive attitudes toward school. He attributes these successes to the rejection of the "Anglo-conformity model" and the sensitivity to Romani culture, family orientation, and scheduling; for example, the school was closed for community weddings, funerals, and other rituals. The goal of mainstreaming, however, was not met. The biggest problem was attendance.81

Education scholar Yvonne Egan concurs that the carnival circuit and other work
and ritual obligations were more important to families than school and notes that “frequently the parents’ worst fears for their children came true — they felt shamed and ridiculed.” Discrimination was a significant problem, also identified by Harper: “The children encounter prejudice among the children in the regular Vestal School. They are occasionally subject to taunts like ‘Here come the Gypsies, better watch out that they don’t steal anything’.” In some cases, school materials were racist. In 1983, for example, Eugene Roma elder Jack Ephrem requested that the children’s book Blaze and the Gypsies, in which a horse is stolen by gypsies, be removed from Springfield’s Guy Lee elementary school because it perpetuated stereotypes.

Another experiment in innovative education for Portland Roma began in 1996, during a decade when Roma were negatively affected by the federal curtailment of welfare benefits. Many families could not afford to pay fines for violating mandatory education laws. After John Ellis died, his brother Pete Ellis approached the David Douglas School District about a Romani evening school to solve problems of truancy and job training. The superintendent stated that, “frustration made the district receptive to a short trial.” The first group of seventeen students grew by 1998 to seventy students, aged five to twenty-one years. The evening school, which operated year-round except during August, was located at Alice Ott Middle School. Ellis received $20,000 a year to be a liaison; two teachers and one aide worked in the program. Approximately two thirds of the attending children were from outside the school district, and parents were allowed to sit in on the classes, often also learning literacy skills. In a 1998 interview, Pete Ellis said: “The bottom line is we live in a computer world. We want to make something of ourselves. We want to be doctors. We want to be lawyers. . . . We’d like to keep our culture but we want to be part of this world.” Even though the school was successful, it only lasted a few years due to absences and the growing popularity among Roma of home schooling.

Today, there are no special programs for Oregon Roma, and some parents send their children to neighborhood schools. Attendance varies tremendously from family to family, and children rarely attend past sixth grade. Parents today say they are “afraid of drugs, sex, and guns” in public schools. Thus, home schooling has emerged as a viable alternative. Many families hire tutors at home and/or encourage their children to learn to read and write through the internet. The wealth of information available on the internet has motivated many Roma (young and old) to become literate. The internet and social media are becoming especially important to the younger generation. Obtaining a drivers’ license serves as another motivation for education. Still, middle-aged and elder Kalderash today tend not to be literate, and this is a huge challenge for the future.
CHANGES SINCE THE 1980S

Significant changes in Romani life began in the 1970s, including curtailing travel, moving from downtown Portland storefronts to Northeast residences, and employing tutors at home. The most striking recent change for Oregon Roma, and indeed for all American Kalderash, however, has been the widespread conversion to Evangelical Christianity since the 1980s. Pentecostalism spread to American Roma via Romani pastors from western Europe. Portland currently has two churches, the largest of which is Grace Ministries with God's Gypsy Christian Church, where pastor John Ellis (Mancho) presides.88 Although there is scant scholarship on American Romani Pentecostalism, we can observe similar patterns to the rise of European Romani Pentecostalism, namely prohibition of fortune-telling, drinking alcohol, and enacting funerary rituals such as pomeni.89 Machwaya have converted in fewer numbers than Kalderash; Machwaya, in fact, still celebrate their St. John celebration, slavo. Some Machwaya, and even some Kalderash, also still tell fortunes.

Sunday Romani evangelical church services in Portland are very dynamic, with sermons in Romani and English and with live music (Jesus praise songs in both languages) and bodily movement. Roma of all ages attend, and the church has become the focus of community life. In smaller Oregon towns such as Eugene, the few Romani families attend mixed Roma and non-Roma evangelical congregations. In general, leadership of the Romani community has become more fragmented, and the kris is rarely assembled. Weddings and funerals are still very lavish events that attract hundreds of Roma, many regularly travelling long distances from neighboring states to these rituals. Christmas and Easter have also become important holidays. Video clips of these events are frequently posted on YouTube. Young people are taking more vocal roles in their marriage arrangements, although the elders are always the public ritual spokespersons. Intermarriage occurs more frequently but is still not ideal. The marime system has declined somewhat, but many families still follow bodily rules; even Christian families own multiple washing machines. One elder Ephrem family woman narrated: "We can afford it, so we have four washing machines — for male and female, and for top and bottom."89

The steep decline in fortune-telling is due both to Pentecostalism, which defines it as a sin, and to non-Romani competitors moving into the spirituality niche. During the 1990s, non-Roma began to provide similar services under the rubric of new-age spirituality, and Roma women lost their monopoly. For many families, core income has dramatically decreased, and some men have subsequently increased their car businesses. Body and fender repair, however, is now additionally perilous due to the huge bureaucracy. Transactions require submitting vast paperwork to insurance companies, and many Roma do not have the skills to deal with these institutions. Still, most Kalderash and Machwaya are still reluctant to work for non-Roma. Rarely do women work, and boys still learn the used car business from their fathers.90

The health of Oregon Roma has declined steeply with a noted increase in rates of diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and hypertension; few Roma live beyond sixty years. Eating calorific and fatty foods, smoking, and sedentary lifestyles may all contribute to this decline. Roma regularly utilize doctors, and when someone is very ill and hospitalized, relatives are obliged to hold a vigil around the sick person. This surge of visitors of all ages, who want twenty-four-hour access, often conflicts with hospital rules. To promote cultural sensitivity, I have lectured with Roma on health beliefs in several Portland hospitals.91

Oregon Roma also face problems because they do not have legal documents. Middle-aged Roma often lack birth certificates because they were born at home and lack marriage certificates because they did not file legal documents. Some also have multiple names. Traditionally, Roma are known to other Roma through designation of their vitsa plus a kin location, such as "Jack's son Pete." Nicknames are also common. If legal forms were filed, they were usually filled out by non-Roma and may contain variable names. In the past, Roma were distrustful of governments and preferred to operate below the radar of officials. Even today, some government office workers treat Roma with disdain. An elder woman from the Ellis family narrated: "Whenever I walk into the social security office, clerks close their windows; they see my long skirt and diklo [headscarf], hear our language and run."92 Name discrepancies and lack of documents have led to problems with social security and drivers’ licenses. I have been involved in several legal cases where we showed that consistent oral testimony from community members was proof of a birth or marriage despite lack of, or contradictory, documents.

Another troubling problem facing current Oregon Roma (and all Roma) is persistent stereotyping regarding criminality. Historical tropes about laziness, thievery, and curses are still used in the media and surface in court cases.93 The most famous U.S. case involved the family of self-styled “Roma Senator” Jimmy Marks in a decade-long battle against the city of Spokane, Washington, regarding a 1986 sting operation that involved a ten-hour illegal search of two homes that made the family marime. The police “characterized the Markses as
a crime family.” For the first time in the United States, Roma sued a city based on violation of their civil rights and police misconduct. After much publicity, mostly negative, the case was settled out of court in 1997 for $1.43 million, in favor of the Markses. Most of the money was spent on lawyers’ fees.66

Criminal and exotic stereotypes resurfaced in the 2000s, when two reality television shows debuted: My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding (TLC channel, with spinoff shows), about Romnichels and Travellers, and American Gypsy (National Geographic channel) about Kalderash in New York City. These shows are advertised as exposés of various frauds, and they emphasize violence, opulent wedding dresses, and over-sexualized young girls. Writers published critiques of the stigmatizing shows, including the wildly popular British show, My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding, which inspired the American versions.67 Oregon Roma are vocal in condemning these programs; a middle-aged car salesman told me: “These shows are disgusting; they have nothing to do with us!”68 Many Oregon Roma resort to “passing” as another ethnic group to avoid the stigma of being gypsy.

Media outlets report cases of fortune-telling and other business fraud as if Roma ethnicity is linked directly to thievery, revealing a pattern of racial profiling. Until recently, for example, the Oregonian reported these cases by citing gypsy ethnicity.69 Education media scholar Theresa Catalano’s analysis of thirty-five U.S. and Canadian newspaper articles about “gypsy crime” revealed that Roma are often portrayed as “lacking family values,” and that words such as “prey and cockroaches,” “gypsy scam,” and “gypsy fraud” and phrases contrasting “us and them” are frequently used. These repetitions create the metaphor of Roma as criminals.70

For several decades, specialists in so-called “gypsy crime” have trained officers in police departments in many cities, perpetuating widespread ethnic profiling. Dennis Marlock of the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, police department, who leads seminars on “gypsy scams,” defined Gypsy as “a criminal lifestyle of thievery and deception dating back to 1000 AD.”71 In response, Hancock has led a tireless exposé of this widespread “institutional antigypsyism within American law enforcement.”72 According to a 2016 Oregonian article, Portland police admitted that they hosted the seminar “Without Mercy: Criminal Gypsies/Travelers & the Elderly,” given by retired detective Gary Nolte, head of Gryphon Training Group.73 Nolte’s resume erroneously claims: “it should be noted that ‘Gypsy’ is a lifestyle and not specific to any one ethnicity.”74 The training materials imply that all gypsies commit elder fraud, and that elder fraud is regularly committed by gypsies. The seminar flyer reads:

FACT: Criminal gypsies/travelers make an estimated $17B/annually and don’t pay taxes.

FACT: Criminal Travelers/Gypsies have targeted the Pacific Northwest for decades.

FACT: We have made a database with approximately 4,000 suspects. . . .

Criminal element of the gypsy and traveler communities has invaded every major metropolitan area in the U.S., our friends in the Pacific Northwest and north of the border as well.75

Roma are beginning to fight these portrayals with legal assistance from the American Civil Liberties Union.76

A final challenge that Roma face in Oregon today is appropriation of their culture. Gypsy costumes are ubiquitous on Halloween, contra dancers call a seductive move “the gypsy,” and Portland is home to the “Gypsy Caravan Tribal Belly Dance” company, with no Roma.77 “Gypsy chic” is a widespread clothing genre, “hipsters” are now “gypsters,” and food products range from “Gypsy Crunch Cereal” to “Gypsy Tea” to “Gypsy Rub” for ribs. It is clear that many Americans embrace either a fantasy idea of Gypsies as free wanderers or a criminal idea of them as thieves — or both simultaneously.

CONCLUSION: WIDER FRAMEWORKS

In considering the local case of Oregon Roma, we need to examine the wider framework of recent European Romani history and political mobilization. No Oregon Roma are currently activists, but from the 1970s to 1990, the Portland Ellis family lead pioneering education reforms. I believe that if more Roma knew their history, they would be more activist; however, it is neither taught in schools nor discussed at home. Thus Kalderash often do not know, for example, about the Holocaust, when a Nazi extermination campaign murdered approximately 600,000 Roma.78 Only recently, very few Roma have received monetary compensation, and rarely have Roma received recognition in museums and memorials as victims. After World War II, the communist regimes in Eastern Europe continued to define Roma as a social problem. Targeted for integration into the planned economy, Roma sometimes were forced to give up their traditional occupations and were assigned to the lowest-skilled and lowest-paid industrial and agricultural state jobs (such as street cleaners). Nomadic Roma were forcibly
settled, settled Roma were sometimes forcibly moved, and sometimes aspects of their culture, such as music, were outlawed. Specific policies varied by country; for example, forced sterilization was common in Czechoslovakia and Sweden until the 1970s. Some Oregon Roma have heard of more recent abuses.

In the post-socialist period, harassment and violence towards the Roma of Eastern Europe have increased, along with marginalization and poverty. Today, they are the largest minority group in Europe (population approximately ten to twelve million) and have perhaps the lowest standard of living in every country, with unemployment reaching 80 percent in some regions. Roma face inferior and segregated housing and education, including tracking of children into special schools for the disabled in nations such as Hungary. Poor health conditions, specifically higher infant mortality and morbidity, shorter life expectancy, and higher frequency of chronic diseases all plague European Roma. Discrimination is widespread in employment and the legal system, and even educated people routinely express disdain for gypsies. Hate speech and racial profiling are common in the media. Perhaps most troubling are the hundreds of incidences of physical violence against Roma perpetrated by ordinary citizens and also by the police.

Some Oregon Roma are aware of the European Romani human rights movement that has mobilized in the past twenty years via a network of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) such as the European Roma Rights Centre. This movement has drawn much public attention and funding, but material conditions have hardly improved. The “Decade of Roma Inclusion,” inaugurated in 2005 by the Open Society Institute and the World Bank and endorsed by many European governments, aimed to ensure that Roma have equal access to education, housing, employment, and healthcare. Unfortunately, most agree that the decade’s goals have failed.

Although political mobilization is rare among Kalderash today, there are a few activists, such as George Eli in New York. In contrast, Oregon Roma try to keep a low profile so they are not targeted; this is a historical tactic of survival. In explaining their low visibility, we need to remember that Oregon is a very White state and that Portland is the whitest large city in the United States (72.2 percent White and only 6.3 percent African American). Rates of prejudice against Roma are quite alarming all over the United States.

In 1992, the New York Times published an American poll that surveyed public opinions of fifty-eight different racial and social groups over a twenty-five-year period. “Gypsies” were consistently ranked at the very bottom — even lower than a fictitious group of “Wisians.” “European groups generally monopolized the top of the ladder” and non-Europeans the bottom, but Roma were the exception. I hold that the potent combination of three concepts — racialization, nomadism, and criminality — have negatively defined Roma.

In this summary of the history of Roma in Oregon, I have attempted to highlight the tension between continuous discrimination and the challenge of keeping Romani language and culture vibrant. This testimony from an elder in 1980 summarizes his frustration and echoes many narratives I heard from Oregon families:

I’ll tell you, I had pressure all my life in the United States from people being prejudiced on the Gypsies. When they hear Gypsy people, they don’t let me advertise in the newspapers, they don’t let me get a license. They kick you out of the counties because they don’t want them to settle down and tell their fortunes . . . they run them outta town. I’ve been runned and marked, just by . . . saying I’m a Gypsy.

In spite of long-term structural racism, Roma still seem resilient. In a 1988 article, I analyzed how changes in language, occupation, residence patterns, frequency of travel, and means of transportation do not signal assimilation because the foundational Roma/non-Roma boundary is maintained. This still holds true. Despite changing economic and cultural conditions, Roma still feel strongly that they are Roma, and they live their lives as Roma. They have not assimilated and have only selectively integrated. Gropper and Miller term this “selective multiculturalism,” and I add that it evinces a fine-grained ability to adapt without losing core identity. Sutherland similarly claims that Roma exhibit a “high degree of cultural flexibility.” Strategic adaptation plus a strong sense of group identification have helped Roma negotiate challenging historical circumstances. In the future this combination will be important in response to new challenges related to gender, education, and work skills.
NOTES


2. This is illustrated by the use of “gypsy” in the names of dance and music groups, in foods, and in fashion.


4. Kalderash comes from the Romanian word for copper pot. Machwacha refers to Machwa, a region in Serbia. I use Kalderash as an umbrella term for both groups, because they are intermarried in Oregon. There are no official census figures for Roma in Oregon. My number is an approximation based on community members’ estimates.


9. Hancock, We Are The Romani People. Hancock notes that Kalderash and Machwachs are part of the Viach Romani dialect group.


18. Personal communication with author, ER, sixty-year-old Oregon woman, April 15, 2015. Abbreviations are used to preserve the anonymity of consultants.


30. “Gypsies off for Texas,” Oregonian, December 28, 1944, p. 10. Loving also deals with this eviction in “Community in Flux.” Mayor Earl Riley’s corruption is docu-
33. Personal communication, TE, sixty-four-year-old Oregon man, March, 12, 1998.
38. Hancock, “Gypsy Mafia, Romani Saints,” 12, 1979, p. 27.
44. Personal communication, MJ, fifty-nine-year-old Oregon man, January 9, 1983, p. 1B.
46. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 77–98
56. Ibid., 386.
61. See Sutherland, Gypsies, 257–87; Miller, “Macwaya Gypsy Marine”; Silverman, “Pollution and Power,” 55–70.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Miller, Lola’s Luck; Sutherland, Gypsies.
74. “Gypsy Christian Church,” http://portlandchurch50megs.com (accessed February 11, 2017). The church is located at 715 S.E. Woodstock Street in Portland, Oregon. It has its own video channel where baptisms and other services are posted: http://www.ustream.tv/channel/portland-gypsy-church. Pastor Ellis is a member of the large Ellis family mentioned above.