

## **Review: *Writing the Roma: Histories, Policies and Communities in Canada***

*Michelle Kelso, The George Washington University*

Cynthia Levine-Rasky. *Writing the Roma: Histories, Policies and Communities in Canada*. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2016. 210 pages. ISBN 978-1552668825

Canadian immigration policies have made it possible for refugees from around the world to enter the country to begin new lives. Cynthia Levine-Rasky's work endeavors to tell the story of Roma asylum seekers living in Toronto. She draws inspiration for her work from the fields of critical ethnography and community-based research, drawing on both but conforming to neither, with her expansive research agenda aiming to explain Romani peoples, to re-configure questions of Romani identity and history, and to understand the system of processing refugee claimants as applied to Roma in Canada (p.3). The author posits that to understand the human rights abuse claims of Roma refugees seeking residence in Canada, one first has to understand the people, and their past and current struggles.

The first chapter of the book opens promisingly with the author's description of initiating her field work at the Roma Community Centre (RCC) in Toronto, which assists Roma migrants. Over a four-year period, the author tells us that she adopted a participatory-action framework by volunteering at the RCC, taking on administrative tasks, advocacy work, and grant applications, giving her first-hand insights into bureaucratic as well as social and political issues confronting migrants. The NGO work also opened the door for Levine-Rasky to conduct interviews with Roma that she, as a non-Romani outsider, may not have been able to do otherwise.

Levine-Rasky divides the book into four parts, beginning with an introduction to Roma peoples. Levine-Rasky rightly points out that Romani identity is not monolithic, as often believed by non-Roma, but rather is diverse and non-static, thus encompassing a variety of lifestyles, languages, religious and cultural beliefs. Over several chapters, she outlines the Indic origin of Roma, explains their cultural practices, and provides a summary of centuries-old histories of Roma in their East and Central European homelands. Also included is an informative chapter on the plight of Roma during WWII. The author then delves into the communist and post-communist eras, sketching an incisive account of the recent rise of nationalism and pervasive racism against Roma, which has led them to flee countries such as Hungary, from where the largest number of Roma claimants in Canada originate. She concludes the book with an overview of some of the RCC's endeavors.

There are several strengths to this book, notably the fact that it comprehensively introduces readers with scant knowledge of Roma to Romani peoples and their histories. Arguably, the most fascinating historical materials Levine-Rasky presents relate to Roma in Canadian history (pp.31-43). She writes that "[p]rovincial archives

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and other sources reveal that Roma were travelling through every region of the country from the late nineteenth century” (p.33), providing examples of Roma encampments. One gem in this section is the portrait of Michael T. Butch, president of the RCC, and his family. It personalizes the historical materials, introducing us to one Romani family. Unfortunately, we learn little else about Mr. Butch as an informant-participant; this portrait appears more as afterthought than as development of a key informant who, typically in ethnographies, take center stage. The Canadian history segment is sadly too brief, which may be due to difficulty in accessing or a shortage of materials. Levine-Rasky also provides an outstanding analysis of Canadian immigration policies, contextualizing bureaucratic hurdles that Roma claimants face in the system from a macro-perspective while also exposing local prejudices against Roma.

*Writing the Roma* is beautifully written and meticulously researched by a talented scholar. However, the book has several drawbacks. First, Levine-Rasky neglects to introduce us in any significant way to her respondents as individuals living as refugees in Toronto, who she says are the focus of the book (p.4). She spends over five chapters concentrating on Romani identity and history, and then on the Canadian immigration system. Readers receive only a smattering of information about her 46 informants (pp.9-10). Who are Frank, Elizabet, Ruby and Peter (pseudonyms), among others, whom she identifies as refugees? What are their lives like in Toronto? What are their individual concerns, hopes and dreams as newcomers to Canada? We never really find out other than reading snippets from interviews compiled at the end of each analytical chapter. Unfortunately, Levine-Rasky dilutes what might otherwise have been an excellent study on Roma migrants by focusing largely on the macro picture, or “national framework” (p.4).

Second, the ethnographic material, which is quite promising in the first few pages, disappointingly disappears from most of the rest of the book. Instead, chapters provide a dizzying array of analysis of previous scholarship concerning Romani identity, history and Canadian migration. Although informative, this is puzzling and frustrating to read in a work that draws upon both critical ethnography and community-based research. What these methods do, at their best, is connect readers to the life worlds of informer-participants, especially those at the margins of societies, allowing insight into their daily lives while nesting communities in the broader macro-social, political and economic forces. The author rightly addresses the ethical concerns in ethnography through the problems that can occur as researchers write subjective representations of others (p.4), as noted in the title of the book. However, the avoidance of Geertz-style “thick description,”<sup>1</sup> a hallmark of ethnography, renders the books emotionally distant. I couldn’t help but compare this book to recent outstanding critical ethnographies whose aims were similar to Levine-Rasky’s, which as she puts it was undertaken in part to “let my participants tell their stories and to embed their words in a social context in order to improve understanding of this historically maligned group,” seeing herself as “as an ally in the struggle for human dignity” (p.11). For example, in *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworker in the*

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<sup>1</sup> Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

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*United States*,<sup>2</sup> Seth Holmes travels and works alongside Mexican migrants who have illegally crossed the border, laboring in strawberry and other fruit fields to understand their life worlds and constraints placed upon them. In Angela Garcia's *The Pastoral Clinic*,<sup>3</sup> the author takes a job as an assistant at a drug rehabilitation center to get to know and understand the lives of Hispanic heroin addicts living in New Mexico. In each work, we come to know individual respondents through the researchers and their field notes and interviews, as well as becoming acquainted with the larger structural issues that these communities face.

Levine-Rasky misses the opportunity to acquaint readers with her participant-informants by using data from her observations, interactions and interviews with them, gathered while she served at the Roma Community Centre (RCC). While she does include gripping and poignant interview excerpts at the end of chapters that she writes emerge from "dynamic dialogue with my research participants," (p.11) they are presented separately from her analysis, and thus she succeeds only in further distancing readers from understanding how Roma make sense of their lives and the constraints placed upon them. Perhaps she could have focused more on the work she was involved in at the RCC, which she mentions at the book's beginning and only briefly returns to in the last chapter. Or she could have featured several Roma migrants, setting up case studies of how they worked through the Canadian bureaucracy. Through her choice to write a broader view of the history of and challenges facing Romani migrants, the author relies overly much on prior research and unfortunately does not feature nearly enough about her own fieldwork and the lives of Roma respondents.

Nevertheless, *Writing the Roma* certainly merits attention and will appeal to those in the fields of Romani studies, sociology, government, policy and migration.

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<sup>2</sup> Holmes, Seth M. *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farm Workers in the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Garcia, Angela. *The Pastoral Clinic: Addiction and Dispossession along the Rio Grande*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.