

“KEEP YOUR CLIENTS BECAUSE I QUIT”: AN ETHNODRAMA OF COMPLICITIES AND DISRUPTIONS TO ‘EMPOWERING’ ROMA WOMEN THROUGH PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT

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Ethnodrama (short for ethnographic drama) is a written script with dramatized narratives selected from interview transcripts, observation notes, journal entries, memory stories, life stories, and/or secondary print/digital sources. Researchers use it for its theatrical immersiveness to evoke deep reflections in readers/audiences. Ethnodrama can be an effective tool for studying migration. It can make visible the social justice and power issues, relations, and tensions between different actors affected by migration policies and those involved in making or implementing the policies. Ethnodrama further examines the role of positionality in migration research, particularly in collaborations between researchers and participants in unequal power relations, and invites readers to reflect on their own positionalities in relation to broader social issues. Ethnodrama communicates these aspects in everyday language while creating an entertainingly informative, aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative experience, thus being accessible and appealing to a larger audience.

I have previously used ethnodrama in conversation with an autoethnographic study as a disruptive and decolonizing way of seeking knowledge about my experiences of attending a migrant integration training in 2015–2016 as a Romanian migrant woman in Finland. I reflected on my ongoing journey of unlearning internalized prejudices and reminded readers of their responsibility to reflect on their own problematic histories, uncomfortable complicities, and subconscious racism. The script presented here is based on my experience of being employed in a cleaning project in 2021 as a work supervisor, Romanian-Finnish/English translator, and non-Roma mediator between Romanian Roma cleaners and Finnish clients. The script is a sample from a longer ethnodrama, which will be published in the book *Europeanization as Violence: Souths and Easts as Method* edited by Kolar Aparna, Daria Krivonos, and Elisa Pascucci.

Geopolitical and socio-economic contexts: Eastern European Roma and non-Roma migrants in the Nordics

Central and Eastern European Roma migrants – mainly from Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Poland – started coming to Finland as asylum seekers after the collapse of socialist regimes and during the late 1990s negotiations for the European Union’s expansion to those regions. A study by Camilla Nordberg shows how the presence of around 1000 Roma asylum seekers in 1999–2000 was

used as an argument for more restrictive asylum policies, with Finnish media and policy discourses framing the asylum seekers as “floods,” “waves,” and “invasions” of “bogus” or “economic” refugees from “safe” countries of origin, and all their asylum claims were rejected. Additionally, the Finnish government warned those countries that if they do not keep Roma migration under control, it could have negative consequences on their European Union membership application. Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Poland eventually joined the EU in 2004, alongside six other former socialist countries from Eastern Europe, in what became known as the “Eastern expansion.” Two Southeast European countries were denied entry in 2004, Romania and Bulgaria, due to stated reasons like corruption, the missing rule of law, and human trafficking – especially forced prostitution – that deemed the countries as “unsafe” to be welcomed into the EU. These reasons for EU entry denial of Romania and Bulgaria are exact opposites of the criteria introduced by the 2000 amendment to the Finnish Aliens Act 378/1991 that enabled the rejection of all asylum claims made by the Roma migrants from Slovakia, Czech Republic, and Poland. The amendment accelerated rejecting claims of applicants from “safe” countries of origin that have stable and democratic political systems, independent judicial systems, and adhere to international conventions on human rights.

Romania and Bulgaria eventually joined the EU in 2007. Discourses of unwanted migration from Southeast Europe abounded during the early 2000s EU negotiations, constructing the Roma as the scapegoat in both the “West” and “East,” and these discourses have had resonance beyond the early 2000s. A 2017 study by Nira Yuval-Davis and colleagues analyses Finnish media and public discourses that erect barriers between “integrated” Finnish Roma and “problematic” Eastern European Roma, while presenting crime statistics on Romania to delegitimize all Roma migrants regardless of their nationality. Relatedly, Alyosxa Tudor explores the attempts of non-Roma Romanian migrants to articulate their Europeaness and aspirations to white privileges by distancing themselves from Roma migrants through anti-Roma racism. Another 2017 study by Miika Tervonen and Anca Enache with Romanian and Bulgarian Roma migrants in Finland reveals the precarious conditions the migrants face in Finland, such as lack of access to employment, education, welfare, social, and healthcare services, with most of them being forced to engage in circular migration and informal labour while sleeping rough or in emergency accommodation centres run by Finnish church foundations.

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Despite the abundance of migration-related policies and practices in the Nordic countries, when it comes to Roma migrants, state apparatuses shift the responsibility towards the Roma's EU Eastern European home countries, while imposing bordering and policing practices against Roma migrants, and outsourcing social matters to activists, NGOs, and religious groups. As shown in a 2019 study by Markus Himanen, as well as a 2023 study by Gabriela Băncuță and I, EU Roma migrants in Finland also face threats of deportation, with Finnish police cooperating with Romanian and Bulgarian police officers on the streets of Helsinki and at Helsinki airport to ethnically profile and deport Roma people on stated reasons such as petty crimes, street work, or sleeping rough.

The project I worked for, which was run by a Finnish church foundation, trained and hired Romanian and Bulgarian Roma women in Finland with little or no formal schooling or language skills to do cleaning work. Romanian and Bulgarian migrant women from privileged racial and socio-economic positions, myself included, were hired as translators and mediators, and white Finnish women were hired to promote the project's cleaning services to potential Finnish clients. Moreover, the project was mainly run and sponsored by Finnish women who formed the majority in the decision-making board. None of the Roma women were part of the board and they never took part in board meetings. Occasional tensions in claiming ownership over the project occurred. Roma women rightfully saw how the existence of the project depended on them and their hard labour, and they wanted more participation in decision-making. Romanian and Bulgarian women working as mediators claimed ownership based on their intimate knowledge of the Roma women's needs and on the perceived centrality of their translation services to the project. Finnish women claimed ownership based on financially sponsoring the project or on bringing financial resources from the clients they secured.

The project offered me a part-time one-year contract with a fixed monthly income and an office to recruit Roma women as potential cleaners, to create and implement with the women personal work and training plans, to supervise and check the quality of their work, and to offer mediation and translation services whenever needed. The Roma women were hired as cleaners with zero-hour contracts, meaning they could have between 0 and 40 workhours per week and get paid a certain hourly fee, and it was up to me and other project coordinators to decide how many hours to give to each worker based on experience

and seniority. The project thus exerted power hierarchies in opportunities afforded to Roma and non-Roma women, relied on non-Roma "experts" claiming authority over Roma-related issues, and made decisions for the Roma without their input as decision-makers.

A few notes on ethnodrama as method

The following script is a sample from longer ethnodrama-based ethnographic material generated during my job in that project. In writing the script, I was assisted by guidelines on how to create ethnodramatic representations by Johnny Saldaña. In creating the characters based on the research participants and myself, I had in mind the characters' objectives, any conflicts that might prevent them from achieving the objectives, tactics and strategies to overcome conflicts, emotions and journeys from one emotion to another, attitudes (toward one's self, other people, and particular issues), and covert layers of unspoken meaning suggested through stage directions. In adaptations of stories that the participants shared with me, I included both verbatim extracts as well as edited and slightly revised passages from transcripts while trying to remain faithful to the participants' voices. I further considered how the resulting dialogues may be performed on stage and inserted italicized stage directions between brackets, such as movements, gestures, acting recommendations, or interactions between characters or with objects on stage.

In the adaptation of ethnographic notes and diary entries, I transformed the "in-my-head" reflective narratives into engaging conversational performances. When the original notes did not contain enough material for dialogues, I wrote plausible exchanges between characters based on the notes elaborated on the characters' thought processes through the italicized stage directions. The participants on whom the characters are based gave their informed consent for me to use the data in creating this ethnodrama. I used pseudonyms for the characters except for Gabriela at her request. The ethnodrama addresses the violence of "empowering" less privileged "others" on the "benefactors'" own terms.

An ethnodrama of complicities and disruptions

Act 1. At the office

An office desk centre-stage, facing the audience. Ioana is seated at the desk. Andrada is mopping

the floor. Andrada leaves the mop and walks over to Ioana's desk. A chair is placed next to the desk, slightly turned toward it and also facing the audience. Andrada sits on the chair.

Ioana [addresses Andrada enthusiastically]: We will visit a nice client's home today. If things go well, she will remain your permanent weekly client.

Andrada [addresses Ioana with doubt and cynicism]: Go there for what? For two hours? 20 euros? I can make that much in a few minutes selling magazines on the street. [continues with increased confidence] How can I live with two hours? And if I go today, who knows if you will call me tomorrow? Like this, you are wasting my time.

Ioana [visibly intimidated, trying to maintain her calm]: Look, I explained this to you from the beginning. For the time being, that is all we can offer. But we are looking for new clients and with time the situation will improve. Have some patience, please. Also, the number of hours is divided according to seniority. Those who have worked with us longer receive more hours. With time your number of hours will also increase.

Andrada [with a slightly raised and determined voice]: Look, I am struggling a lot. Everyone is ahead of me. There are others who have only been here for two or three months, and they already have stable work and I have been here for so many years – ten years! [continues with a strong energy while raising her voice higher] Ten years and you won't give me a more stable position!? So I can have a future, so my children will not suffer. Three-four hours one week, five hours the next... How can I survive on that? I don't have time, I have to sell magazines or beg every day from morning to night. Otherwise I waste my time, there is nobody to feed my children back in Romania. They rely on the money I send them.

Ioana [visibly frustrated]: Please, Andrada, like I said, have more patience. Things will improve. We have to work together on this, for the sake of everyone involved. Now we really must go, the client is waiting for us.

You know we cannot afford to lose clients.

Ioana attempts to stand up. Andrada remains seated with disappointment in her eyes. Ioana takes Andrada's hand in hers and gently squeezes it while looking with pleading eyes into Andrada's eyes. Ioana stands up. Andrada joins reluctantly. They leave the stage. Curtains fall. End of act.

Act 2. At the client's

A sofa centre-stage. Next to it a closet. A desk on the other side of the sofa. Anne is sitting at the desk, working on a laptop, facing the audience. A door next to the desk. Andrada and Ioana enter the stage, walking toward the door from the other side. Ioana knocks on the door. Anne slowly stands up from her desk and walks to open the door with some difficulty.

Ioana [after Anne opens the door, addresses her]: Hello! My name is Ioana, and this is Andrada [points towards Andrada]. We are from the cleaning company. I am here to translate any cleaning related requests from you to Andrada.

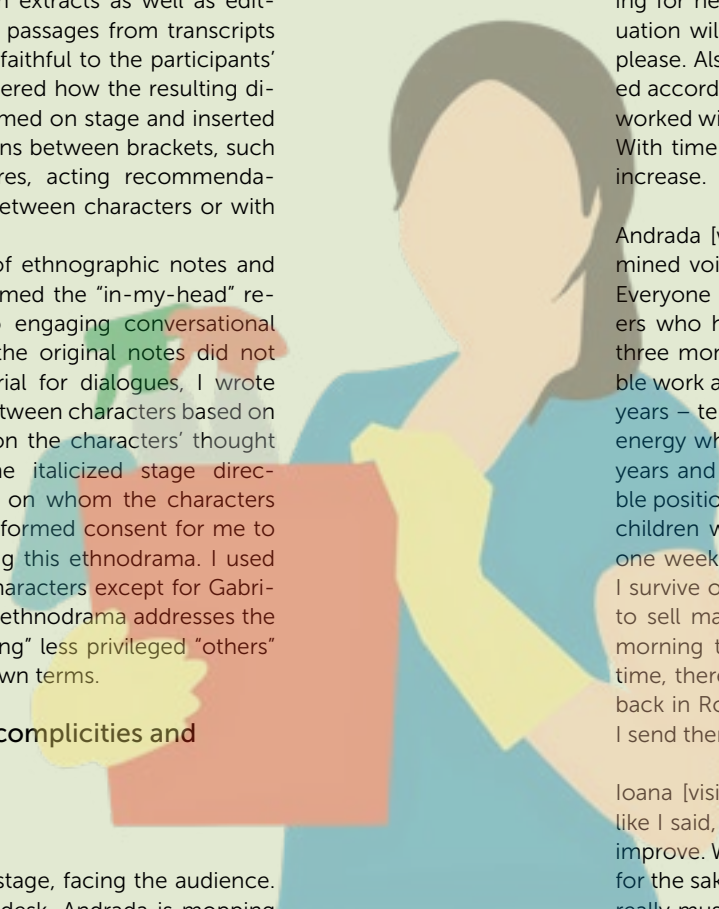
Anne: Yes, come in. [As Andrada and Ioana enter, she addresses them]: I will show you where the cleaning products are and explain what I need for each room. [Anne guides Andrada and Ioana to the closet. She opens it and addresses Ioana]: Can you please tell Andrada to take out the vacuum cleaner and that bucket from the closet?

Ioana [addresses Anne]: No worries, that's why we are here. [Addresses Andrada:] Can you please take out the vacuum cleaner and that bucket?

Andrada has a blank facial expression, her eyes gazing through Ioana and Anne, seemingly inattentive to what is going on. She gives no reaction to Ioana's request.

Ioana [addresses Andrada impatiently as she takes out the things from the closet herself]: Could you please be more cooperative? This is important.

Andrada [addresses Ioana calmly and detached]: This place is already clean and tidy. It seems like my services here are not



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really needed. I will go. You are wasting my time. [She walks toward the door. Ioana remains shocked, unable to move. Anne is watching confused the interactions between Andrada and Ioana. Andrada addresses Ioana as she reaches the door:] Are you going to walk me out? Come on.

Anne [addresses Ioana]: Is everything alright?

Ioana [addresses Anne nervously, shaking with discomfort, her voice trembling]: I am so sorry, but Andrada is feeling unwell today and has to leave. She is new and has not accommodated to the working pace yet. I am so, so sorry. This has never happened before. I will send one of our other cleaners to do the job later today or whenever it is most suitable for you.

Anne [addresses Ioana with pity, slightly annoyed]: Um... Alright... Send someone tomorrow please, same time. Please make sure she can do the job, this place really needs some cleaning, and I am unable to do it myself.

Ioana [addresses Anne]: I will. Thank you so much for your understanding. [Rushes toward Andrada. They both walk through the door. Ioana then snaps at Andrada angrily:] Why did you do that!? What did that woman do to you? What if she cancels our services? We cannot afford that!

Andrada [addresses Ioana firmly and decisively]: Don't worry, you can safely keep your clients because I quit.

Andrada and Ioana leave the stage. Anne slowly sits down back at her desk. End of act.

Postscript

An office desk centre-stage, facing the audience. Ioana is seated at the desk. A chair is placed next to the desk, slightly turned toward it and also facing the audience. Gabriela enters the stage and sits on the chair.

Gabriela [approaches Ioana]: Have you found a replacement for Andrada?

Ioana [addresses Gabriela]: Not yet.

Gabriela [confidently]: Hire me, doll.

Ioana [doubtfully]: But what if it goes terribly wrong again?

Gabriela [calmly and slowly]: It won't. I am friends with the other women. They have invited me to their homes, they trust me. And we will both discuss this with them before you hire me.

Ioana [inquisitively]: Why did Andrada quit like that?

Gabriela [lowers her voice, close to whispering]: She got intimidated by the other women. They refused to accept her. They said she got the job behind their backs. Which is partly true. When you hired her, neither of you discussed it with the other women. So, they took it out on Andrada. She could not sleep at night, all the time thinking and worrying about what the other women told her. Andrada told me once, "How do I make all these thoughts stop? They just go on and on in my head and I have no peace. I don't know whom to trust anymore." I tried to help her, but in the end, she also turned against me. She noticed that the other women like me and started getting envious.

Ioana [with shame and guilt in her voice]: So, Andrada had a very hard time because of me. I should have known better. What happened to her is terrible. I feel so guilty! Andrada came to me. I did not have any legitimate reason to tell her no at the time. I had a good opinion of her based on the interview I did with her. I should have known better.

Gabriela [matter-of-factly]: You see, there are many different types of Roma people. Many different types of languages, families, clothing. There are those who wear the kerchief in the front, those who wear it in the back. Andrada and I are Bădărani, those with the kerchief in the back are Bănățani, others are Ursari, others are Căldărari, others are more Romanianized and maybe they don't even speak Romanes. We have our own hierarchies and structures. Us Bădărani are seen more as "Gypsies" because we hold tightly to our old customs. So, we are usually at the bottom of the hi-

erarchy. We have it harder. But I've always found my way. I am resilient like that, and am a good people person, people like me. But Andrada is more closed and for her it was difficult to become accepted...

Ioana [shyly, her voice still trembling]: Yes, I noticed that you always wear "traditional" dresses and the kerchief, and the other women also wear Gadje dresses and don't wear the kerchief. So, I noticed the internal diversity among you. And I thought it would be good to have someone represent your group as well. But I didn't suspect there would be these strong barriers. So ignorant of me...

Gabriela [with confidence and optimism]: We all make mistakes. What's important is that we learn from them. You are new, still have many things to learn. There are other Gadje who have worked with us Roma for many years. You could have asked them. Or you could have asked us Roma.

Concluding reflections

The ethnodrama reveals the unequal power relations between the Roma workers/participants and myself as work supervisor/researcher and how that entails (epistemic) violence. I decided to hire Andrada based on meritocratic and neoliberal individualistic criteria, and my decision had unintended harmful consequences for Andrada and the other Roma workers, despite or even due to my good intentions. I also sought to bring social capital into the project by hiring a representative of what I had perceived as an underrepresented, more "authentic" community within the wider Roma community. Furthermore, I homogenized and essentialized Roma women by thinking any person could do the job simply by virtue of being a Roma woman.

Both Gabriela and Andrada challenged the racialized, classed, and gendered hierarchies reproduced by the cleaning project. Andrada was required to be more patient, to wait until her employment situation would eventually improve and to accept the insufficient number of work-hours that were given to her. Yet, she broke the status-quo through the act of refusal to perform cleaning services, thus refusing to invest in her subordination and her precarious incorporation into the Finnish cleaning sector. Gabriela taught me about the limitations of white activist scholarship, about how some of my decisions at the

workplace ignored the plurality and agencies of Roma women. For activist scholars, it is sometimes easier to present a homogenous group for a certain socio-political purpose and hold onto one's activist agenda and habituated forms of domination. Gabriela had to engage vertically with my ignorance. Although she was the expert and I was the novice in that interaction, I was speaking from the position of an employer who could offer Gabriela a job.

By focusing on aspects of positionality, the ethnodrama further challenges how the epistemic violence of the white academic agenda and dominance of white researchers intersect with the hierarchies of knowledge production in which an Eastern European white researcher, advisor, mentor, and interpreter – who is usually side-lined from the discussion – is now elevated as a knowing subject while silencing the resistant, divergent, and creative agencies of Roma women.

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