

Russian Jews and “Gypsy Punks”: The Performance of Real and Imagined Cultural Identities within a Transnational Migrant Group

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Introduction

This article will discuss the implications of the construction of cultural space among Russian Jews in New York City and the narratives employed to collectively produce and claim this space, particularly the repeated notion of being without a “home” or “place.” Analysis of these narratives will address the uniqueness of Russian Jewish identity and the historical factors that contributed to the isolation of Russian Jews in their homeland and in New York. Special attention will be paid to physical Russian Jewish spaces, considering these spaces as mediating agents in constructing cultural identity, as well the role of the music scene as it relates to cultural cohesion. This focus is drawn from communications scholar David Morley’s assertion that media technologies tend to “transport the individual or small family group to destinations (physical, symbolic or imaginary) well beyond the confines of home or neighborhood, combining privacy with mobility” (149).

Considering Russian Jews as a highly mobile group that centers on the exclusion of others, *inclusion* manifests itself through the construction of, and participation in, spaces that represent their physical and imagined communities. Using historical and theoretical research, a literature review, ethnographic techniques, interviews, analyses of songs and media, and the presentation of personally recorded media, Russian Jewish identity and alienation will be used as a means of understanding the “gypsy punk” movement that has emerged in the popular New York City nightclub, Mehanata, also known as “The Bulgarian Bar.” The rising fame of the self-proclaimed gypsy punk band Gogol Bordello will be considered, along with the textual, audio, and visual media that presents this scene to participants. Finally, the music scene as a whole will be contextualized within historical

perceptions of gypsies in both Russian and Jewish consciousness, and will be tied to previous instances of racial impersonation of marginalized groups, such as African Americans and Latinos, employed by Jews as a means of articulating outsider status in mainstream societies.

Jewish identity has been studied in its relation to psychology, religion, nationalism, ethnicity, history, and race. In a survey performed by social psychologists Vassilis Saroglou and Benoit Hanique, Jewish teenagers in Belgium reported stronger identity with their Jewish heritage than with Belgian, European, or cosmopolitan identities. This points to what sociologist Yasemin Soysal refers to as a “state of ‘worldlessness’” that has been the default experience of diasporic Jews for centuries and is becoming increasingly relevant to all contemporary migrant groups. According to Soysal, the state of diaspora is “the reification of categorical homelands, traditions, collective memories, and formidable longings. It is a category of awareness, in which present-tense practices lack capacity in and of themselves, but attain significance vis-à-vis the inventiveness of the past” (Soysal 2). This reiteration of a shared Jewish past not only transcends the physical boundaries of discreet nations, but uses the condition of homelessness to solidify relations between groups of people across space and time. Contemporary forms of media have become potential agents for group cohesion, a trend that media scholar Arjun Appadurai refers to as seeing “moving images meet deterritorialized viewers. These create diasporic public spheres, phenomena that confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of important social changes” (Appadurai 4). Media created and consumed by particular audiences can be interpreted as active articulations of a group imagination that is at times also a form of culturalism, or “the conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics” (Appadurai 15).

The Russian Jewish population of New York mobilizes its identity in ways that separate it from mainstream groups. As described by anthropologist Fran Markowitz in her ethnography of Soviet Jewish immigrants in Brighton Beach, the experience of being perceived as outsiders in both old and new lands has greatly shaped the process of acculturation, responses to it, and thus the forms diasporic communities have tended to take. The lives of Jews in Russia have historically included cycles of persecution, which led a large portion of the Jewish population to migrate to large urban areas within Russia particularly during the late 1800s and early 1900s, where they tended to focus on academic success (Markowitz). Jews began to take pride in

their intellect and cosmopolitanism, often asserting that they were smarter than non-Jews and further separating themselves from their persecutors. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Soviet Jews who flocked to New York discovered they did not fit in with American Jews, whose identities were centered around shared cultural and religious practices, such as the celebration of holidays, keeping the Sabbath, and going to Hebrew school—all practices to which Soviet Jews historically did not have access.

Problems with integration led many Soviet immigrants to settle insularly in Brighton Beach. Aside from the differences that soon surfaced between Soviet and American Jews, there were also internal differences within the post-Soviet population that reflected a Russo-centric hierarchy, which orientalized more “Eastern” Soviet Jews and gave preference to those from cosmopolitan cities. This hierarchy has manifested itself in the division between the “cultured” intellectuals and the “uncultured” materialists, giving a higher status to those who are urban and supposedly intellectually refined while looking down upon the simpler lifestyles of those from less settled, Eastern areas and imagining them to be more physically uncontrolled and barbaric (Markowitz 68).

Such internal divisions are not unique to the post-Soviet Jewish community in New York, but were also a point of contestation in the Central Synagogue of Moscow, described in the ethnographic fieldwork Sascha Goluboff performed in the mid-1990s. According to Goluboff, after the Soviet Union’s collapse, the Jewish community in Moscow began a transformational period in which immigrant Jewish communities, Georgian and Mountain Jews (the *Mizrahim* or Oriental Jews from lands once part of Persia), and Bukharan Jews (the *Sephardim*, who were linked to Jews from Spain), arrived in Moscow and began to interact with the Russian Jewish *Ashkenazim*, whose ancestors were from Germany. Their different racial backgrounds and divergent understandings of Jewish practices prompted battles over Russian Jewish authenticity and control over the physical space of the Central Synagogue. Issues of authentic Russianness and Jewishness, when not dictated according to racial divisions that gave preference to the *Ashkenazim*, were proven through performances of ritual that simultaneously encapsulated Jewish practice and Soviet culture. This contentious situation points toward the precariousness of Jewish life in the former Soviet Union.

The question of Jewish identity has been debated throughout different phases of Russian history. Historian John Klier argues that until the late 19th Century, it was accepted that Jews in the Russian Empire were

members of a religious faith rather than a distinct national and racial group. However, at this time, all Soviet citizens of the Empire became engaged in a struggle for national identity, with the main political contestations occurring between Poles and Russians. So, in addition to the national complications that accompany the construction and deconstruction of an empire, Russia also endured struggles that ensued from being both a member of European society and a part of the “Asian despotic states” (Mastyugina and Perepelkin 8).

Alliance to, and separation from, Europe has been mobilized at different historical periods to suit certain subgroups of the former Russian Empire and states of the Soviet Union in their quest for stable identities. According to geographer and Russian geopolitics specialist Mark Bassin, the beginning of the 18th century was marked by emphasis on ties to European civilization, as advocated by Peter the Great, but the 19th century brought about reactions from groups such as the Pan-Slavs, in which the uniqueness of Russian identity with respect to Europe was articulated. This difference often took the form of rejection of materialism and capitalism, as in Nikolai Ia. Danilevskii’s book *Zaria*, which “categorically rejected the immodest and quite unjustified conceit by which Europeans saw themselves . . . Indeed, rather than seeing Europe as a paragon of progress and social virtue, he identified its fundamental character traits as violence, a pernicious individualism, and quite uncontrolled lust for material profit” (Bassin 9).

The construction of nationalism in the former Soviet Union was based on performances of racial and cultural authenticity and permeated most nationalist discourse. The hierarchies enacted by Jews in post-Soviet Moscow (and consequently New York) extended outward into Soviet society, simultaneously fetishizing and marginalizing the group seen as most foreign in the Soviet Union—the Roma, otherwise known as the “gypsies.” Anthropologist Alaina Lemon explains that although Roma are not visibly distinguishable from Caucasians, Tatars, or Russians, their “gypsy” traits were said to lie “in the blood.” She supports this claim by analyzing an adaptation of *Gypsy* that was performed in the Moscow Romani Theater. The character of Budulaj uncovers the identity of his long-lost son when the boy easily learns “Gypsy dance . . . for he picks up the steps instantly, instinctively. His father thereby recognizes his own flesh just as immediately. The proof was in the performance” (Lemon 69).

The argument that Lemon poses is based on her fieldwork among Roma communities in Moscow, the suburbs of Moscow, and the Urals that took place between 1988 and 1997—the longest consecutive period being

between 1991 and 1993—a time heavily marked by the chaos of the fall of the Soviet Union. Beginning with an analysis of perceptions of gypsies in Pushkin’s *Tsygany (The Gypsies)*, she points out that Russian thought predominantly represents gypsies in a “dream of historylessness . . . an idealizing envy of gypsy life seemingly outside of history and beyond the reach of authorities” (Lemon 43). However, these perceptions frequently vacillated between fascination and disdain, lauding gypsy art and music while also viewing gypsy markets as dirty and chaotic. The Moscow Romani Theatre became a space where these perceptions played themselves out, both literally and figuratively, providing an opportunity for Roma to gain acceptance in a Russo-centric society through the exhibition of “untamed” talent in musical performances, which in turn influenced the Roma’s discourse of their own authenticity. For instance, performing Roma were ironically viewed as less authentic by non-performing Roma. This struggle for “authentic” cultural representation is also found among post-Soviet Jews in New York City, where the process of identity construction overtly uses and performs the culture of the marginalized gypsies in an effort to forge group cohesion through music and dance, creating a cultural scene that is as compelling as it is problematic.

Mehanata: An Introduction to the Presentation of a Space

Mehanata, also known as “The Bulgarian Bar,” has been located on Ludlow Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan since 2006, after eight years at its original location on Broadway and Canal Street. It functions as a restaurant, bar, venue for live bands, and nightclub. The decorum, activities and clientele that comprise the cultural space of Mehanata, as well as its marketing, represent the club as being authentically Eastern European and Jewish. The top floor’s seating area is sprinkled with Jewish iconography such as the Star of David, whereas the main floor has a bar, a stage where gypsy-style bands often perform, a dance area, and some seating. The lower level has a bar, an “ice cage,” a larger dance space, and a corner for the DJ. Both bars serve the house-special, vodka cider, which is scooped out from a large glass jar and is not available in most New York City bars. According to the official Mehanata website the ice cage is a unique refrigerated glass vodka room in which (for a \$20 admission fee) patrons have two minutes to drink six vodka shots from an ice shot glass while wearing a Russian military uniform (“Ice Cage”). Burdel Dali, a sponsor of Mehanata that hosts gypsy punk parties every Thursday night, describes their celebration in a flyer as “Gypsy Punk Parranda/Remixed Russian Festive/Ex-Yugoslavian

Anthems/Chalga, Electro, Flamenca” (“Burdel Dali Presents”). Another club flyer references a song by Gogol Bordello, a band that was instrumental in the rising popularity of Mehanata because the band’s frontman, Eugene Hutz, became well known among Eastern Europeans in New York as a DJ at Mehanata before his gypsy punk band gained international fame. The flyer advertises the party as “Start Wearing Purple! All your sanity and wits, they will all vanish (we promise),” a direct quote from the Gogol Bordello song entitled “Start Wearing Purple” (“Burdel Dali Presents”). Mehanata’s ties to the band Gogol Bordello are further reinforced by the pictures of Hutz sprinkled around the bar and framed on the walls. Gogol Bordello album covers are strategically placed as a backdrop behind the liquor at the main floor bar, almost appearing as if the bar were selling Gogol Bordello itself.

Mehanata’s claim to Eastern European authenticity therefore involves promoting the heavy consumption of vodka (a stereotypically Russian trait), and gypsy performances that connote lawlessness and freedom and create an environment where people who perhaps peripherally identify as part of a cultural group such as “Russian,” “Eastern European,” or “Jewish” can articulate their identities, while joining in the performance of being a wild and wandering gypsy. In this sense, the utilization of gypsy culture and performance becomes a fetishization of a romanticized form of freedom that doesn’t necessarily exist. It does not consider the authenticity of Roma representation but rather replicates an idealized and dreamt-up vision of what being a gypsy means.

A typical Friday night at Mehanata includes a performance by the “Grand Masters of Gypsy Music,” a band featuring saxophonist Yuri Yunakov—a well-known musician from Bulgaria of Turkish Romani descent—making continuous progressions while accompanied by musicians playing other instruments or making electronic sounds. Within an hour, the dance floor begins to fill up and the central activity is the experience of the music through intense movement. People jump around wildly and women frequently jump on stage and interact with the musicians, specifically the saxophonist, facing him and following his melodies with their movements. On the night that I saw the Grand Masters of Gypsy Music perform, Yunakov improvised over the melody of the “Hava Negilah,” a popular Jewish song that is played at festive occasions, implying a connection between gypsy and Jewish music and culture. In addition to the music, a female psychic often roams the main floor, giving readings for money or other types of exchange. After a friend of mine exchanged psychic readings with the woman, she introduced herself as a gypsy from Romania. Her self-identification as a

“real” gypsy was difficult to substantiate because of the tendency within this scene to identify as a gypsy in a way that is fictional, performative, and chosen.

Gogol Bordello: The Beginning of “Gypsy Punk”

Among the most popular and revered of gypsy punk bands, Gogol Bordello serves as a template for understanding the rest of the modern gypsy-influenced music scene. The connection between Mehanata and Gogol Bordello became clear in an interview with bar owner, Alex Dimitrov, which led to an explanation of the relationship between his bar and Eugene Hutz. Hutz also makes a reference to the original location of Mehanata in his song “Dogs Were Barking,” which states “I’ll meet you 10:45 on the Broadway-Canal/Disco-radical-transglobal,” which is followed by a very immediate switch to half-English, half-Russian lyrics that aren’t coherently translatable, “Beat fun cool feel sextoura/Vyderzhit ne vyderzhit li apparatura!”¹

The word “gypsy” coupled with the term “punk” has interesting implications in that punk encapsulates a particular mode of rebellion, anarchy, and resistance in a Western context, reaching its heights in the 1970s in Great Britain and the United States. Performance Studies scholar Tricia Henry describes the punk movement as “the blurring of boundaries between art and everyday life . . . intentional provocation of the audience; use of untrained performers; and drastic reorganization (or disorganization) of accepted performative styles and procedures” (1). During this period, the punk movement became identified in mass culture as the definitive statement of the annihilation of musical and societal norms, collectively rejecting the rules of the past because of the bleak and hypocritical present and future they provided. For example, music journalist Greil Marcus analyzes the lyrics of “Anarchy in the U.K.,” a song by iconic punk band The Sex Pistols, in which Johnny Rotten mockingly asks:

Is this the em pee el ay
 Or is this the yew dee ay
 Or is this the eye rrrrrr ay
 I thought it was the yew kay
 Or just
 Another

Country

Another Council Tenancy!

Marcus argues that “This was a code that didn’t have to be deciphered: who knew what the MPLA was, and who cared? It sounded like fun, wrecking the world. It felt like freedom” (8). Johnny Rotten, in his play on acronyms that stand for nations that essentially, according to punk and anarchism, stand for absolutely nothing at all, aimed to break down these fictional national barriers through chaotic performances of his senseless song lyrics.

In an attempt to gain first hand experience of Gogol Bordello’s role within New York’s Eastern European and gypsy punk music scenes, I attended a concert at the Fillmore at Irving Plaza New York City on March 9, 2010. Gogol Bordello’s opening band was Jesse Malin and the St. Mark’s Social, a traditional rock/punk band, which presented itself as being very “New York punk” in several ways. First in the name of the band, St. Mark’s, is a reference to St. Mark’s Place, a street in New York City known for its tattoo shops, alternative clothing stores, and roaming punks. One of their songs, “Burning the Bowery,” is also the name of a venue, the Bowery Electric, located one block away from the former location of the legendary punk rock venue CBGB’s, where the band had a four-week residency. Malin, the band’s frontman, lead singer, and guitarist, exclaimed to the crowd that he was from Queens and was wearing a “Wo-Hop” t-shirt, which is a Chinese restaurant in New York’s Chinatown.

Seeing Gogol Bordello in this context provided a new way of thinking about the term “gypsy punk.” Because the parties at Mehanata are more Eastern European and gypsy-oriented, I had always associated the band with displaced Soviets. A story Jesse Malin told regarding his previous tour with Gogol Bordello shed light on the connection between post-Soviet immigrants (and their fascination with gypsy music) and the meaning of the punk movement. Malin explained that when he went to Russia with the band and entered Red Square, he was shocked that the first thing he saw was a Starbucks. He concluded the story with the exclamation, “So we’re all in the same boat!”—a statement that attempted to appeal to both punks and post-Soviets in the crowd in that it implies a common domination by contemporary capitalism.

The aesthetic of a Gogol Bordello show is visually, musically, and emotionally stimulating for the audience, with most band members actively engaging with the crowd. A series of Youtube clips of the show I attended

in Spring of 2010 provide evidence of this.² As the show commenced, Hutz surfaced onstage strumming the first chords of a song and sang while his fellow band members slowly joined him—first the accordionist and violinist, who most noticeably bring the Eastern European and gypsy sound to the music, followed by the guitarist, bassist, drummer, and MC. The opening of the show invoked the impression that Hutz was a man playing his guitar with the casualness of a street performer who is later joined by his friends. This style was particularly evident in the performance of “Alcohol,” which was the first song performed as part of an enthusiastic encore. The mood of the song erupted as it progressed, inciting the chaotic and energetic dancing that is typical of a late night at Mehanata. This energy was also prevalent during the band’s performance of the anthem “Undestructable,” which prompted more traditionally Soviet group dancing in circles as well as aggressiveness that is typical at punk shows.

Hutz’s intimacy with fans allows for a connection between performer and listener that draws upon a shared sense of being alone, and yet having this feeling alleviated by the joining of kindred spirits in music and dance. Themes of alienation with respect to immigration frequently emerge in Gogol Bordello’s song lyrics, most notably in the song “Immigrant Punk” off the album *Gypsy Punks*, an anthem that states:

Immigrant, immigrant, immigrant punk . . . pow!
Upon arriving to the melting pot
I get pencilled in as a goddamn white
Now that I am categorized
Officer gets me naturalized
Now that I’m living up in God knows where
Sometimes it gets hard without a friend
But as I am lurking around
Hoptza! I see another immigrant punk
There is a little punk rock mafia everywhere you go
She is good to me and I am good to her
Legalize me! Realize me!

Despite the living in the USA
I'm still holding up in all my ways
I gotta friends, we got our band
We still make sound you can't stand
Without banging on some big old pot
Without getting out of bed
But I'm relaxed, I'm just lurking around
Hoptza! I see another immigrant punk
There's a little punk rock mafia everywhere you go
She is good to me and I am good to her
Legalize me! Realize me!
Party!
Of course, we immigrants wanna sing all night long
Don't you know that singing salves the troubled soul?
So I'm relaxed, I'm just lurking around
I got a method, and you don't
You got a dictionary kickin' around?
Look up the immigrant, immigrant, immigrant punk!

These lyrics introduce the term “immigrant punk” definitively and self-consciously, particularly in the last two lines “You got a dictionary kickin' around?/Look up the immigrant, immigrant, immigrant punk!” This challenges the listener of the song to recognize the label “immigrant punk” as official, which effectively plays on (and possibly mocks) the struggle for cultural and legal legitimacy that immigrants experience upon arrival in the United States. This is also suggested by the lines “Now that I am categorized/Officer gets me naturalized” and “Legalize me! Realize me!/Party!”

Resistance to, and questioning of, the authority of governing bodies bridges the gap between mistrustful post-Soviets and destructive, anarchistic

punks, as both groups have historically taken extreme measures to bypass institutional interventions and regulate their own affairs. According to Goluboff, Russians often accomplished this through the use of bribery and mafias to gain access to sparsely distributed goods under communism. For punks, this has been affected by leading rebellious lifestyles, through the distribution of fanzines that provided information on events, by criticizing the mainstream, and by articulating alternative ideologies through music. According to Cultural Studies scholar Dick Hebdige, the first known punk fanzine *Sniffin' Glue* “contained perhaps the single most inspired item of propaganda produced by the subculture—the definitive statement of punk’s do-it-yourself philosophy—a diagram showing three finger positions on the neck of the guitar over the caption: ‘Here’s one chord, here’s two more, now form your own band’” (112).

The song “Illumination” by Gogol Bordello provides an excellent synthesis of Soviet and punk mentalities. The lyrics start out with a declaration of paranoia:

Don't believe them for a moment
For a second, do not believe, my friend
When you are down, they are not coming
With a helping hand
Of course there is no us and them
But them they do not think the same
It's them who do not think . . .

The song continues to contrast the band ideology with mainstream thought while directly referencing a “we” that is punk:

But we who see our destiny
In sound of this same old punk song
Let rest originality for sake of passing it around
Illuminating realization number one:
You are the only light there is

For yourself my friend
You are the only light there is
For yourself my friend

This section of the song admits the music may not have originality, but rather exists to pass on an illuminating message of self-reliance in the face of social structures that create artificial boundaries. This message is not only found in Gogol Bordello's song lyrics, but can also be seen in the behavior of frontman Hutz, who continually breaks the boundary between himself and his fans through elaborate performance tactics. Hutz often throws himself into the crowd or crouches atop a large bass drum. Fellow band member Pedro Erazo enacted this same type of performance at the show I attended, while Hutz began taking swigs from a bottle of wine and danced joyfully onstage as the show gained intensity, creating the atmosphere of an intimate party as opposed to the formality of a show. Hutz additionally extended this effect by extending a personal invitation to the entire audience to attend an after party. He said, "Our music takes us on the road around the world, a lot, these years. And so, of course we miss playing here every fucking time . . . As always, traditionally, there will be after party for a show. However, it will not be at Bulgarian Bar. It's gonna break your instinct a little bit . . . We're gonna work on changing your reflexes a little bit. It's gonna be at Bowery Electric. Simple reason, much better sound system" ("GB-Invite"). Although he acknowledged his home base, Mehanata, he also endorsed the more mainstream punk venue where Jesse Malin and the St. Marks Social was having its residency. When hearing this announcement, it seemed to me that Hutz felt the need to give the audience a reason for not having the after party at Mehanata, as many people in the crowd were a part of his original Eastern European fan base that developed at the nightclub. The show ended with many thanks to the audience and an acknowledgment of their importance, with Hutz saying, "Thank you everybody so much . . . Perhaps we see you at the after party at Bowery Electric . . . We will be back as soon as possible . . . We're your fucking friends, Gogol Bordello!" ("GB-Invite"). Hutz's statement reinforced the relationship between the crowd and band members as informal and intimate.

Gypsy Tabor Festival: Representation of "Gypsies" by Non-Gypsies

The post-Soviet social scene that emerged in the nightclub Mehanata and the discourse and presentation of the band Gogol Bordello can

be contextualized within the frameworks of Russian Jewish alienation, lamentation, and disillusionment with the nations they inhabit but with which they do not fully identify. Although this scene is generally light-hearted, nonviolent, and fun, issues surrounding gypsy punk surface when members of the culture being used for expression, the actual Romani population, are not accurately represented. The Gypsy Tabor Festival, which is a yearly event created by Mehanata in celebration of gypsy music, was documented in 2009 by the team at Twilight Vision TV, which according to their official website "started as the brainchild of video editor/musician Kevin Rankin to fill the void of subcultural and underground arts and music in media for artists based in or passing through the New York City area. Twilight Vision chooses to feature subjects or events that are often neglected or ignored by other news sources because of their bizarre or unique nature."³

The Twilight Vision TV episode covering the Gypsy Tabor Festival provides a resource for viewing the New York gypsy scene in the process of its enactment. In an advertisement for the 2009 festival, the festival's official website states: "Tabor is a pan-Balkan smorgasbord of belly dancing beauties, Gypsy rock, Soviet roll, Balkan beats, multi-cultural performances in a variety of musical styles, ranging from traditional Roma music to contemporary ethno-ska, punk, rock, and trance-inducing tarantella all pumped directly into your brain by way of the ear canal, in accordance with the newest medical suggestions for Gypsy intake" ("Mehanata Gypsy Tabor").

Coverage of the festival begins with a conversation between the host and co-producer, Evan Kleinman, and a young woman named Liliya who is casually gulping a can of Heineken. After Kleinman asks if she had trouble finding the festival, Liliya lets loose her opinions on gypsy culture, which reflects stereotypes of gypsies, rather than any specialized knowledge. She states, "Maybe that's the right way. Maybe you should be lost for a while, and maybe you should just find it from like, the, you know, the energy that comes out of it. Gypsies don't put signs, you know you just have to know where you're going, and you find it." She explains why she likes gypsy culture: "It's really special because there are no boundaries. You're allowed to do whatever. Gypsies are free people, there's no country that they reside in. There's no laws. They travel from country to country, from place to place." Another festivalgoer named David interjects while raising his drink with the exclamation, "It's a twenty-four hour party! Cheers!" Later in the video Liliya admits, "I am not a gypsy, but I can be a gypsy by heart." Evan responds, "So you wish you were a gypsy?" To which Liliya responds, "I do, sometimes."

A Russian audience member named Sasha also expresses the sentiment of being “gypsy by heart,” stating “We are all gypsies inside of our hearts. We like to go places, we just wanna . . . you do whatever you want and whatever it brings us to, you know.” Another participant, “Gypsy Joe,” provides his own brief history of the gypsies, referring to them as a “nomadic race or tribe” who “picked up customs, languages, and religions of their host countries but they always kept their own secret language. That’s what kept them bound together.” Such a statement sheds light on why gypsies are an ideal group for post-Soviet Jewish immigrants to emulate, as both groups are seen as sustaining themselves cohesively while being strangers in foreign lands. The coverage also captures a conversation between two young women, Inga and Yolanda, who Kleinman refers to as “two lovely gypsy women,” but who do not seem to be Roma nor to display any special knowledge of Roma culture. During their conversation, one of the women comments, “Gypsy people are open and nice. They like to dance, they like music, they’re just very spiritual.”

Pretending to be a gypsy seems to be a quite prevalent phenomenon among festivalgoers as well as within the gypsy punk music scene, and is most strikingly visible in an interview with the Kreptatka Bar Band. Kleinman innocently inquires, “Where are you guys from?” to which a band member gives an elaborate response that begins with the statement, “Well, actually, we bend space and time. We’re an interstellar multidimensional gypsy clan,” followed by a clearly fabricated band mythology. The desire of the people in the video to express themselves as “gypsies at heart” is indicative of a process by which alienation from monolithic national cultural groups leads to the fetishization of nomadic gypsies whose stereotypical traits imply freedom from society, lawlessness, and the performance of these conditions through music and dance. Diana, who was one of the dancers at the Gypsy Tabor Festival, states in reference to the origins of her style of dance, “Basically what it was a cure for was social depression. A lot of women were just paralyzed by their shame and guilt cultures.” Later she says, with a bashful look on her face, “The only reason I dance is because I feel that it helps me deal with the despair of immigration.”

In spite of the seemingly harmless and carefree nature of the Gypsy Tabor Festival and Twilight Vision TV video coverage of its festivities, the producers of the video received a serious e-mail response from a Romani woman named Kristin Raeesi.⁴ In her response to Kleinman and the festival’s producers, she appeals to Kleinman’s Jewish roots saying, “I was more offended by the people you interviewed, who were spouting

the most ridiculous nonsense and misinformation, which as a member of a religious minority yourself, I am sure you can appreciate what happens when stereotypes are allowed to be perpetuated . . .” She also points out that not all gypsies “continuously travel from place to place, and that Roma culture in fact does include many cultural rules and norms which need to be strictly adhered to, one of which is a conservative dress code for women.” Many Roma women are expected to wear modest long skirts, in distinct opposition to the more revealing clothing shown in the video. Raeesi’s complaints intensify as she observes that:

The whole festival for me looked like the equivalent of a *black faced minstrel show*, with a bunch of non-Romani people playing music and dancing around in the name of an ethnic group which they know nothing about, except for some stereotypical ideas . . . My question is why doesn’t the organizer hire *real* Romani people to play at this festival? Maybe it is more fun to play Gypsy based on imagined realities, than to actually interact with real Romani people and learn who we are and what we are about.

This issue is particularly pressing for Raeesi, who serves on the Board of Directors for Voice of Roma, a nonprofit organization that hosts its own annual festival to raise money for projects that aid Roma communities in Kosovo. Her reference to a black-faced minstrel show is eerily reminiscent of Jewish history scholar Michael Alexander’s descriptions of the blackface performances of Jewish entertainer and movie star Al Jolson. Alexander interprets Jolson’s Jazz Age blackface and minstrel performances as reflecting a nostalgic return to slavery peculiar to the identity construction of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. As Alexander explains, although previous generations of Western European Jewish immigrants had the tendency to “identify up” and adopt mainstream values and behaviors as a method of cultural integration, the Eastern European Jewish migrants of the 1920s used the outsider status they had experienced in previous lands as a means of expressing Jewish identity (6). Such expressions were culturally plural and did not require strict observance of Jewish laws and mores. And so by “invoking the language of exile,” Jews held onto their outsider identifications as the preeminent (and often singular) way of realizing themselves as Jewish people (Alexander 6).

Alexander additionally posits that minstrel acts such as the ones performed by Jolson imply a type of cultural fluidity through which Jews

expressed a longing for freedom in a way that aligned them with the African American population. He states: “To Jolson, the greatest barrier between himself and African Americans was the color of his skin. Even this he tried to overcome—cosmetically and with an imagined black diction that he took with him everywhere offstage and systematically interspersed with Yiddish” (137). Although the Jews of this time may not have identified themselves as white, their minstrel performances invoke what American Studies scholar Eric Lott describes as “love and theft.” For Lott, love is found in the “celebration of an authentic people’s culture, the dissemination of black arts with potentially liberating results” and theft is the result of “‘mass’-cultural domination, the incorporation of black culture fashioned to racist uses” (17).

Critics Roger Bennett and Josh Kun further explain the complexity of Jewish-black relations in the music world in their description of, among many other artists, half-Jewish Willie “the Lion” Smith, whose Yiddish theatre tune “Eli, Eli” became a standard cover for black artists such as Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, and Paul Robeson after the song became a hit for Jolson and cantor Yossele Rosenblatt (65). Although many musicians directly acknowledged the exchanges, influences, and similarities of Jewish and black music, these two traditions are sometimes put at odds with each other in terms of authenticity. For example, Jewish trumpet player Sonny Berman wrote in the liner notes of his 1946 album *Beautiful Jewish Music*, “Jewish cantors and gypsies sound more like it than anything from Africa” (quoted in Bennett and Kun 71).

The Jewish display of non-white racial identification through music extended from the 1920s into the 1950s with the Jewish–Latin craze, as Jews who lived alongside Latinos in ethnic areas of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Harlem were exposed to the radio stations playing salsa and mambo. The relationship between Jewish and Latino musicians at this time was, in fact, one of mutual fascination. For example, Jewish vacation areas in the Catskills started to book Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Latino talent, whereas some Latinos were equally impressed by the musicianship of performers such as Larry Harlow (also known as “El Judío Maravilloso”—the Marvelous Jew).

Focusing solely on the fact that the gypsy representational practices of the modern-day gypsy punk music scene aren’t necessarily being drawn from authentic Roma culture, tends to overshadow the movement’s place in a historical tradition of appropriation, such as those previously outlined: Jewish/black and Jewish/Latino. Despite the plethora of issues identified by

Raeesi in her assessment of the Gypsy Tabor Festival, Alex Dimitrov, the owner of Mehanata and organizer of these events, displayed little knowledge of complaints about the perceived lack of authenticity in the presentation of gypsy culture that his bar and the surrounding music scene had produced.⁵ In an interview with Dimitrov, I asked him whether he knew of any negative responses to the video made about the festival. He looked at me blankly and responded, "What do you mean? Everyone likes video." His interest in "gypsy" culture seemed genuine, but centered solely around musical appreciation. When I inquired as to why he chooses to hold the Gypsy Tabor Festival, he responded in a matter-of-fact way, with words that perhaps reflect the simplicity with which cultural appropriation can be understood in the eyes of a person enacting it: "Because I like the music. A lot of Eastern Europeans like gypsy music."

In a more extensive and recent interview I conducted with Raeesi, she expanded on the nature of, and logic behind, her complaints regarding this cultural scene, and provided information about her unique background.⁶ Raeesi was born in the United States in the state of Wyoming in a Romani community, graduated from high school there, moved around quite a bit afterwards, and has returned to Wyoming to earn a Master's degree in Communications and Journalism, with a minor in American Indian Studies, at the University of Wyoming. She admits "It's fairly rare among the American Romani population to get higher education. But there's not one type of Romani person." This statement ties into her later arguments against essentialism and stereotyping of the Romani people. She identifies essentialism with the fact that "people are defining us in one particular way and it doesn't allow for diversity within the Romani people When you have stereotypical images, especially when they're so entrenched in society, people who are depicted in a certain way begin to internalize that. It leads to feeling really frustrated a lot of times because people don't see you as legitimate when you don't fit into those molds. It makes it that much harder to be taken seriously." The stereotypical depictions of the Roma do not leave room for understanding the nuances and plurality of culture, and because of romantic notions of a free and nomadic lifestyle, stereotypes also bypass elements of hardship, exile, and suffering that many Roma actually endure.

To gain a broader perspective on issues of representation, I later interviewed Evan Kleinman, the host and co-producer of the Twilight Vision TV episode on the Gypsy Tabor Festival and the creator and producer of *Punk Jews*—"a documentary series featuring stories of people expressing Jewish culture and religion in unconventional, and awesome ways. From musicians

to artists and activists, *Punk Jews* covers badass politics, music, art, fashion, philosophy, and religion that you can't see anywhere else" (*Punk Jews: A Documentary*). Thus, in addition to discussing gypsy punk with Kleinman, themes of Jewish exile, outsider identification, and race were also addressed. As the grandchild of two Holocaust survivors, Kleinman stated, "Probably many times it was that and that alone that identified me as a Jew. It's kind of weird, and with gypsy culture too—Roma culture—to be entrenched in a culture where the number one identifying factor is persecution. It's a really odd feeling, and it's kind of uncomfortable."⁷ He also drew a distinction between the words "gypsy" and "Roma," and speculated: "I think gypsy is this word that maybe non-Roma people created, perhaps Gypsy means, like, 'outsider.' Kind of like 'Jew.'"

In response to the complaints about his video, Kleinman expressed an understanding of the issues brought up by Raeesi, but viewed his role as simply a documenter of the Gypsy Tabor Festival—a musical event he considers to be inauthentic, but not intentionally disrespectful. However, conversation about his *Punk Jews* documentary series provided further evidence of a link between the Jewish and gypsy punk scenes outlined in this article. As someone who previously played guitar in punk bands, Kleinman was disconcerted by some responses to his choices for *Punk Jews*. Although some have said that the featured Jewish artists aren't truly punk, Kleinman counteracts this argument by referring to punk's status as a cultural mentality as opposed to simply a genre of music:

Although it's [punk is] associated with loud, fast music, it's really deeper than that. If you ask anyone who grew up in the punk rock scene, they'll say that the music is just an element of it As far as punk rock culture, there's a real essence, a real spirit to DIY work ethic, do things outside the mainstream These are not musicians who dedicated their lives to the craft of punk rock music. That was just a vehicle for them to communicate their thoughts and their views That's what punk is about. So anybody can really be a punk."

Punk's do-it-yourself mentality is precisely what Kleinman argues for in the online Jewish newspaper *Algemeiner*, when he describes the *Punk Jews* documentary. In the article, Kleinman suggests that too many Jewish people abandon the label Jew because they think it defines them. He argues that instead, Jews should take control over its definition for themselves. The

artists he chose to feature in his documentary are therefore not necessarily typical punks, but instead include Hassidic punk rockers, Yiddish street performers, and African American Jewish activists. In the article, Kleinman writes “the characters in *Punk Jews* show an emerging movement in New York City of people asserting their Jewish identity by defying the norm at any cost” (*Punk Jews: Why We Made It*). Kleinman’s documentary series is yet another instance of Jewish people asserting their outsider identity through music that is considered at odds with the cultural mainstream.

Conclusions

This article aimed to outline gypsy punk, a unique subcultural scene in New York City that draws heavily from post-Soviet ideology and identity crises (Bassin; Goluboff; Markowitz), Jewish sentiments of being the “outsider” (Alexander; Saroglou and Hanique), fascination with “gypsy” culture (Lemon), and the raw anti-establishment mentality of punk (Hebdige; Henry) to create an emergent alternative to alienation in the globalized world of the present day. The many facets of this new identity were mapped through the cultural representations and media outlets that unite its otherwise fragmented audience—the song lyrics, nightclub advertisements, websites, and videos that define gypsy punks. Despite the seemingly positive aspects drawn from strong identifications with this scene and the cultural identity that it helps to construct, which is exemplified by the band Gogol Bordello, a careful analysis of its key terms, and how they operate in cultural practices, the process illustrates a complex reaction in both members and spectators concerning its own authenticity, in particular the collective appropriation of stereotypes associated with the marginalized Roma people.

This appropriation is not unique to the gypsy punk scene, and participates in a history in which Jews have used cultural borrowing as a means of aligning themselves with non-white persecuted populations (Alexander; Bennet and Kun; Lott). Enactment of this brand of appropriation, as captured in Kevin Rankin and Evan Kleinman’s documentary of the Gypsy Tabor Festival, entails a whirlwind of excitement, drunkenness, and despair, as participants try to articulate who they are as individuals and group members. These issues are foregrounded by Kristin Raeesi, a Romani woman who took issue with the Gypsy Tabor Festival and its representation in Rankin and Kleinman’s Twilight Vision TV coverage through a series of e-mails and interviews in which she showed the potential negative effects of cultural borrowing and stereotyping on the marginalized/appropriated group. She emphasized that deeper power struggles are often ignored for the sake of

passionate music and light-hearted fun. Further research could explore the development and expansion of this music scene into a global phenomenon, and delve deeper into the alienation that is brought forth by increasingly typical postmodern, deterritorialized experiences of the world.

Notes

1. All of the band's lyrics, cited here and throughout this paper are available at <<http://gogolbordello.com>>, 4 April 2010).

2. Beginning of show: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q1EcQ9kzJls>>, 9 April 2010. "Alcohol" performance: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cJBm2BR1IUY>>, 9 April 2010. "Undestructable" performance: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehD3s-z3qig>>, 11 April 2010. Pedro Erazo interactivity: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PwsiI91Cey8>>, 9 April 2010. Hutz interactivity/drinking and dancing onstage: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Afaqa3j3x54>>, 9 April 2010. Hutz invitation to after-party: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWrqndJYfeg>>, 9 April 2010. Hutz goodnight and goodbye, show closer: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6FtqziWNcs>>, 11 April 2010.

3. All further Gypsy Tabor Festival Twilight Television references in this section come from the web site: <<http://www.twilightvisiontv.com>>. Accessed 11 April 2010. This quote is from: <<http://www.twilightvisiontv.com>>. Accessed 11 April 2010.

4. Raessi gave me permission to quote from her e-mail responses to Kleinman's program and to the festival itself.

5. All of the following comments come from a personal interview conducted with Dimitrov on 20 March 2011.

6. All of the comments that follow are from a personal interview conducted with Raessi on 29 August 2011.

7. Unless otherwise noted, all comments by Kleinman in this section are from a personal interview conducted on 1 September 2011.

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- "GB-Hutz picks up wine bottle." Available at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Afaqa3j3X54>> (accessed on 9 April 2010).
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