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Silverman, Carol

Silverman, Carol Interview: Bronx African American History Project
Fordham University

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Interviewee: Carol Silverman
Interviewers: Oneka LaBennett
Date: Friday, September 4, 2009

Transcriber: Samantha Alfrey

Oneka LaBennett: Today is Friday, September 4, we are at the Bronx African American History Project at Fordham University and the interviewer today is Oneka LaBennett, interviewing Professor Carol Silverman who is going to talk about growing up in the Bronx, but also her research on Roma youth in the Arthur Avenue area. So I want to begin Carol by asking you to say and spell your name.

Carol Silverman: I'm Carol Silverman. C-A-R-O-L-S-I-L-V-E-R-M-A-N.

OL: Okay, and if you would not mind telling me your date of birth and where you were born.

CS: I was born on March 30, 1951 in the Bronx. I believe I was born on Intervale Avenue but my parents moved to where I grew up on Seymour Avenue between Allerton and Arnow when I was 9 months old. So basically I lived my whole childhood in the Bronx, until I moved to the West Coast for my job at the University of Oregon.

OL: Oh really, so your entire life was in the Bronx.

CS: Yes, I moved when I was 20-something years old. Well, I mean, I went to grad school at the University of Pennsylvania, and I always lived in New York though not necessarily in the Bronx. I also lived in Brooklyn--Flatbush--I lived in Manhattan--Central Park West. And when I went to the University of Pennsylvania I always had an apartment in New York. So I commuted, though in those days, you had half an apartment in New York, and a third of an apartment in Philadelphia, and still only be paying a few hundred dollars a month.

(Laughter)

OL: Not so much anymore.

CS: Right.

OL: So tell me a little bit about your early childhood in the Bronx--where you lived, when your parents brought you home, where was that house exactly, what was it like?

CS: Well, we lived in a new neighborhood at the time, 1951 or 2, where two-family houses were the rage at the time. Because, for people who were not really rich, working class people, you could get an income from the tenants downstairs. So, my father's parents, well his father had died very young, and he was basically supporting his mother. My mother was an only child and she was supporting her parents and my grandfather on my mother's side was a pharmacist. He had a pharmacy on, I think it was Intervale Avenue. And so they had to really think hard about where they wanted to move and they were kind of moving from the urban South Bronx to the Northeast Bronx where we were. And so the two-family house was a good solution because they rented out the bottom and got an income. And at the time, when we moved in, the ethnicity of the neighborhood was mostly Italian, Irish and Jewish. I never actually met a WASP until I was a

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grown person, until I left New York. (Laughs). It was a very ethnic area and very family-oriented. And I remember going to elementary school and half the school was absent on Catholic holidays, and the other half was absent on Jewish holidays. It was a very happy interchange. I knew quite a lot about Catholic school, some of my friends were in Catholic school. They also knew about secular Judaism. We were not religious growing up, but some of my friends were religious. They built the neighborhood, it became kind of a middle class neighborhood. The neighborhood has changed tremendously through the years. When I moved out it was actually in a decline, all of New York was sort of in a decline in the '70s, crime and so on. I went to grad school. Actually, I went to City College first. I moved out, first I moved to Manhattan to go to City College and then Brooklyn. Then when I went to grad school I was living in Philadelphia for a while. The neighborhood went through quite a lot of changes and seemed pretty rough in the '70s. But now it is an extremely diverse neighborhood. So, actually, my mother lived in the same house for 57 years.

OL: Oh my goodness.

CS: Yes. So I just sold it last year when she passed away. So I have seen the neighborhood change, very close-up. So quite a number of African-Americans moved into the neighborhood, Dominicans, people of mixed Caribbean backgrounds, Cuban, Chinese, all kinds of mixtures. But very stable families who actually put a lot of money into their houses. It turned out that even though we were sort of the long-term resident, everyone had upgraded, and we kind of looked like the poor relatives on the block. (Laughs) My mother was elderly, and she, you know, didn't want to put money into the house. She became quite ill at the end. Eventually we sold the house. So by the time I started doing the fieldwork for my dissertation and got interested in Balkan peoples, right in my neighborhood in the Bronx I discovered that there were Albanians, Bosnians and Macedonian Roma. So of course they weren't there when I was growing up, but by the '80s they were moving from here, the Arthur Avenue neighborhood, into some of the private houses in the Pelham Parkway area, where I was from. And now, last year I sold my family home to a Romani family that I do research with.

OL: Really?

CS: Yes, and on our block there is three other Romani families, and so their has been an exodus from the Arthur Avenue area to the Pelham Parkway area, also to Westchester, because the Arthur Avenue area is a little rough in terms of street life. Plus, families, like every ethnic group, become more middle class, they want to move out of the inner-city, have a house, have a backyard, have a fence, and move into, quote, a little more suburban, even though Pelham Parkway is just a five minute bus ride from here. To them, it's a big difference.

OL: Oh, I'm sure.

CS: And when they do own homes in the Pelham Parkway area, they come back to the Arthur Avenue area to shop, visit relatives. They are in the area quite a lot, even if they move away.

OL: Wow, I have so many questions I want to ask you because you are saying so many fascinating things. I want to go back a little. You mention sort-of being able to observe life in the

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Bronx for such a large period of time for most of your life, having lived there. One of the things that we have encountered again and again in interviews with people who grew up in the Bronx before the 1950s and after the 1950s is the kind of stark change in life starting around the 1970s with the influx of certain types of drugs in the Bronx and the kind of disinvestment in schools and other public facilities in the Bronx. So if you could talk a little bit about what family life was like on your block and in your neighborhood kind of in the '50s and '60s, and then what sort of changes you observed starting in the '70s.

CS: Well, I could say that growing up in the '50s, we never locked our house. We never, ever locked our house. There was a farm on the corner. They had a cow. That was a little--I remember when I was really young and we used to have a milkman who delivered milk in a bottle. This was when I was very young, but I do remember it. And everyone used to tell my mother, "You should lock the door, things are becoming, you know, rough around here" and my mother would say, "Oh I don't see it at all." But by the time the '70s--there was absolutely no question. So, I actually moved to Philadelphia to go to grad school, so I wasn't living in the Bronx, but every time I would come back, subways would be a lot rougher, and the danger--the kind of--carrying a gun, having drugs in the street, the level of garbage, just disrepair. It seemed like there was less infrastructure, and so people retreated. They didn't stay out that much on the block. Although, I still remember getting together with my friends even in my 20s. That was the early '70s, when I came back from college, and so on, getting together. But in the '50s and '60s, we were totally on the street. We were playing stoop ball, in the middle of the street, you know. There was very little car traffic in those days. Everybody knew everybody on the street. We were in each other's houses, who had this better television than the others, because we had, you know, one of the first televisions in the house. I think people withdrew when they sensed danger in the street, they kind of withdrew inside their homes, and so there was less, you might say, socializing in the street. Certainly when we went on vacation with our neighbors of very different ethnicity, backgrounds. We went on long vacations with our Catholic neighbors who found a church at a bungalow colony wherever we went. That was just their thing. There was absolutely no problem crossing ethnic or religious boundaries in those days. People were less afraid, and then in the '70s, the city in general became a more dangerous place, with drugs and guns. And of course that's when I left too, but every time I would come back my mother would say, "Don't take the subway, I'll give you money for a taxi." Which was never a problem earlier. Of course I did take the subway, and I made a commitment to just be a regular New Yorker, not withdrawing. My parents never considered moving to the suburbs at all, no. We said, this is our neighborhood, whatever happens to it, its part of our neighborhood. Now if you know that area, the Pelham Parkway area, it is very, how could I say, hierarchical. Even what street you're on, people say, "Oh, that's a good street; that's a bad street." Our subway stop is Gunhill Road on the 5 train, and that's a pretty rough stop. So, my mother's friends would say, "Oh don't let her walk to the subway, but you can walk to the number 12 bus," because that was Pelham Parkway. So even which direction you walk was codified as to who's there.

OL: Right, right, that's interesting.

CS: And that's when race relations started to get pretty ugly, I would say. I heard a lot of racist comments against African-Americans, which I had never really heard growing up. But there weren't that many African-Americans. So when African-Americans moved--there were, I mean,

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we had several African-Americans in a class of, you know, 30, maybe about 5 or 6. But when the neighborhood did change to be more Hispanic and African-American, a lot of people just attributed guns, drugs, you know, to the new people. And you know, it was true to a certain extent but not to another extent, because there were many middle class and stable families who moved in as well.

OL: Yes, yes. That's really interesting. We had so many people say what you're saying about the kind of ease of relationships between ethnic groups in the Bronx, in the '50s and '60s, and then things changing in the '70s. I'm wondering if you had any siblings, if there were any children in the house who were younger than you.

CS: Yes, my sister is 4 years younger. She might have had a slightly different view, but like in many traditional families, I was sort of in charge of protecting her. So I had to make sure she was holding my hand on the way to school and not going down a different block, and so on. Yes, I actually don't know what she would say, from a slightly younger point of view.

OL: The other question I had was, you mention selling your mother's house and how the neighborhood has changed---

CS: Oh, tremendously.

OL: Is that--those changes of African Americans and Latinos buying houses in the neighborhood--when did that start happening?

CS: Oh, I would say that started in the '90s--no, actually--I'm sure it started earlier, but the diversity of middle and working class people buying houses just mushroomed in the late '80s, early 90s for sure. I think African American and Hispanic people bought houses in the late '70s, '80s. Now it's a much more diverse--we have people from East Africa on our block, we have African-Americans, we have Albanians, Bosnians, all kinds of Caribbeans, Roma, Jews, Italians and Irish from earlier generation as well, Chinese. I was just walking to the bus and I saw a whole extended family of Chinese people, and they were doing the same thing that the Romani family was doing around the corner, sitting out there, 3 or 4 generations. When I talk to people now in the Bronx, people feel a certain pride in that area. They say this is a really good area, people take care of their homes, people were investing in fences and new awnings. Sometimes you can't even find a parking spot, because there's 2 cars per family. You know, cars tend to be a status symbol, and so you can tell people are definitely investing in their homes and in their families. Now for me, I think that's a great thing to break down barriers, is to live side-by-side with people who have the same kind of economic or even family values as other people. And so you rely on your neighbor for--you know, a broom or whatever--you would not believe what people did for my mother who was ill for many years in her own home and eventually had 24 hour care. People would shovel her driveway, I mean, she had two sets of steps going up, they would shovel the steps. They would do her gardening for her. They would get her food, they would check up on her, they would go into the backyard to make sure everything is just okay. So, I am just amazed how nice people were to her and how the neighbors continued to be giving to an elderly person.

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OL: That's remarkable, and it's also that happened relatively recently. I mean, that going on in the '50s would be very--

CS: Oh yes, I'm talking about in the last 10 to 15 years. Because again my mother was like the oldest resident on that block. The fact that she saw people come and go and this last sort of investment of families, I think is very stable and bodes well for the future. So for example, in our house, we are the end of a row of houses, so that in order to get into somebody's backyard on the attached houses, you have to go through the house--my mother said, "Oh just come around our house and we'll make a fence to let you in your houses." So if they have to redo their deck in the back, they're using my mom's backyard. She opened the fence for them.

OL: Wow, that's--

CS: Yes, she made a gate into their backyards, for our neighbors.

OL: That's incredible, that's a great story.

CS: Another interesting story is when my mom passed away and I wanted to sell the house, of course I contacted some real estate agents just to see what the going rate is, and I also decided to call the community, call people in the community that I work, the Romani community. When in one hour there was a family there, and that's the family that we continued to negotiate with and eventually sold it to. And this was last September, right before the stock market crash and every thing kind of fell into place. They probably got the last loan that the Bank of America ever gave. It was sort of meant to be.

OL: Definitely.

CS: And then my neighbors, they were close to my mom and they said to me, "What are you going to do with the house?" I said I'm going to sell it and they said, "We're concerned, who are you going to sell it to?" And I said, believe me I will sell it to people you will like. So when they saw me talking to people, they said, "Who are these people? What are they like?" They were so concerned. And of course I had to explain to them who these people were. I said they are from a place you never heard of called Macedonia, but they're Muslims but they're not fanatic. I had to explain everything: "They're Roma, you might know them as gypsies, but they're very upstanding people; you'll really like them. They're family-oriented, they're working-class people like you are, and so on. Then within a month they had totally bonded with our neighbors, to the point that when I call up there, they are always at our house or their house having a barbecue or at Home Depot buying something for home improvement. So, whereas in the past people might have been reluctant about the word "gypsy," "Muslim" anything, I think that in a neighborhood like that it's a much more open thing. People have seen their family, they see they're people who are investing in the future, they have relatives visiting all the time, they did all the repairs in my mom's house by themselves with relatives, they did not hire a single person. And so the neighbors helped out. They said, "Oh we know how to do a bathroom, we know how to do a floor, we know how to scrape the living room floor," or something like that.

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OL: Wow, that's amazing. That's wonderful. I wanted to ask you, you and I were speaking earlier about your interest in music from all over the world, different kinds of music. I was wondering what you were listening to in the 1970s and when you came home for visits, were you at all aware of the kind of types of musics that were emerging from the Bronx or even in New York City at the time.

CS: Not really, I mean since I was in grad school, I was more aware of what scholars were paying attention to. So I knew about the emerging hip-hop forums, but I didn't spend enough time in the Bronx to see it or hear it. No, I remember that seminal movie *Style Wars*. Which is, you know, the classic early video on hip-hop culture. Looking at it in grad school in Philadelphia at the University of Pennsylvania, saying oh yeah, that's my neighborhood.

[Laughter]

CS: But still, I'm Jewish, East-European from the Bronx, I didn't have African-American friends doing hip-hop on the streets. I knew it was around but it wasn't my thing.

OL: Yes, I can understand that. I want to talk about your research, but I want to give you a chance to share anything else about growing up in the Bronx that you might want to share that I haven't asked about.

CS: Well the only thing I can say as a bridge to my research is in 1988 I was attending a conference in Staten Island on Romani culture. I had already written my dissertation on a different group of Roma, in New York, in Brooklyn. I did my research in Brooklyn and in other places. The group of Roma I wrote my dissertation on are from Serbia, Russia and they do fortune telling in the US here, if you've seen reader and advisor things. That group is quite conservative group, very different from the Macedonian Romi that are in the Bronx. Anyway I did my dissertation with that group. So I was presenting papers and written articles. So I went to a conference in Staten Island on Romani studies and there were several gentlemen in the back who I recognized as Roma right away. But they didn't really look like the Roma I knew from New York or Brooklyn. So I started talking to them and they said, "Oh we live in the Bronx." And I said, oh really, where do you live? They said, "Allerton Avenue, Barnes Avenue, Mace Avenue, Pelham Parkway area, Belmont." I said, "Oh you're kidding, that's where my mom lives, and that's where I'm staying." They said, "Oh you have to come visit our homes, and you have to meet my wife." You know, it's not proper to visit a man, you come and meet the wife. I was floored. I did not know that there were Roma from Macedonia living relatively in my neighborhood in the Bronx. And that's when I got the inclining, that's when I decided to follow-up on it. I already knew about Roma, I knew about Roma history, I spoke some of the language. But that brought my tie back to the Bronx. Actually that moment brought together two threads of my research. I had been doing work with Roma, these other kind of Kalderash who are fortune-tellers and they do car repair. And the other strand of my research was from Balkan music. So I had been to Macedonia and Bulgaria many, many times. I spoke those languages, I was doing research on folk festivals, on socialism, on post-socialism, when that happened. So at that moment I said, oh my god there's Balkan Roma in the Bronx. And I didn't know that.

OL: That's amazing. So you switched your research topic?

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CS: Yes, I switched my research topic. The gentlemen at that conference, I still know them, will see them later today. They said, "oh you have to come to our *sunette*," which means a circumcision party, "It's happening later on this year." So I met their wives and then they invited me to this incredible party. That was my first Romani event. It took place at Eastwood manor on Eastchester Road and Boston Post Road, was the exact catering hall that I used to go to as a child for all the Bar Mitzvahs. And now I've been there at least 20 times for Romani weddings, Romani circumcisions, New Years parties, other events, also Albanian parties, I've been there. It's the very same neighborhood, the very same hall, but now different ethnic groups use it.

OL: That's really fascinating. So how did you become interested in youth in particular?

CS: Well, my project for the last, over 10 years, was actually about music. It's the music thing that united my interest in the Balkans and in Roma. If you go to the Balkans and travel there you notice right away that there's this kind of ugly paradox that Roma are respected for music and despised as people. But if you're interested in music you have to notice the tremendous role of Roma as professional musicians in the area. So I couldn't ignore the role of Roma, it's just that it's not easy to do Romani research, they tend to be a kind of reluctant group to let in outsiders and they have also been maligned by pretty much everyone, including scholars. So they don't necessarily welcome you at first. Though I find Roma to be extremely open people, to me. So in the Balkans I had observed Roma from afar as professional musicians at weddings, but in New York I had done all this work with fortune tellers and car repair people, a little bit with music, but then, when I met the Roma in the Bronx who came from Macedonia, they said, "Well you should go back to Macedonia and see what our weddings are like there. You've been to a circumcision ceremony here, we all have musicians in our families," so they actually set me up in Macedonia with their relatives. So while I was in the Bronx, I met people who were on various visas doing various, you might say, semi-legal work, but basically coming on a tourist visa, working and then going back home in order to bring dollars back home to a very poor country. So they sent me back to Macedonia and I learned some of the language and lived in Macedonia for pretty much all of 1990 with my family, in some of their communities. Then I came back here and was more of a traveler than they were. I had some grants, I had the ability to take summer vacations off which they didn't, so when people came to America from Macedonia, very often they had to wait 10, 15, 20 years to go back to see their relatives whereas I could go every summer. So they were sending me "home," they call Macedonia "home" even though it's another diaspora location from India, which is their original homeland. They were sending me home with gifts and videos, and I was bringing videos back.

OL: What an interesting role for the anthropologists.

CS: Absolutely, very, very interesting.

OL: Bridging those two communities.

CS: So music was the main focus of my research for over 10 years, because it's such a vital part of the community. I mean live music, the dances they do, the costumes, everything that goes on in very complicated rituals. I have a book coming out next year with Oxford, it's called *Romani*

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Routes its about music and Diaspora. It includes a few chapters on the Bronx weddings and ceremonies, comparing them to those in the Balkans. But as I was doing this project, a number of people in the community said, "You know, Carol, you know our music really well. You've been to all these weddings, you've done the video taping. What we really would like you to focus on is some of the things that no one's paid attention to. Everyone associates gypsies with music. We know we're good at that. But do people know that our young people are going to college now? That our girls are becoming accountants and paralegals and business executives, and so on?" And I said, that's a really good idea, help me conceive this project. So several women in the community said, "We'll help you get in contact with young people. We want the world to know who we are, in all our aspects, not just our celebrations, not just our rituals, not just our music. And we think this is a really good turn in our community, to focus on youth and to focus on education." So they actually helped me set this up, whereas I had observed lots of things before, these two weeks I've done pretty in-depth interviews and focus groups with several generations of girls and boys. It's been very interesting. So I've turned to youth because they said it was important. But now that I'm in it, I realize this is extremely important, both theoretically and ethnographically. In fact it's been a pleasure to talk to you about some of the theoretical literature, about how to interpret what I'm saying. What commonalities does it have with West Indian households, even though the family design is not exactly the same, and why are these things happening?

OL: It's also really interesting to me that they were so actively trying to change the representation of their people and make this the agent in stating how they should be seen, how they wanted to be represented.

CS: Well only a few people in the community were that proactive, but those that were said it very, very consciously, said it very beautifully. I did actually quote them because I thought that was such an important motivation.

OL: Absolutely. So if you could talk a little bit about some of the things you and I were discussing before about what you found working with the youth, some of the specific challenges they face living in the Bronx, how they are perceived by other ethnic groups, that would be great to hear about.

CS: Well, of course the word "gypsy" has a lot loaded into it historically, both the kind of hyper romanticization of freedom, loving, not bound by the rules of society, musical, sexual, all of that, which again is a positive stereotype but also doesn't fit with the working class, the working model if you're trying to get a job or an apartment. But then there's all the negative stuff which is very, very pernicious about being lazy, taking advantage of either welfare or unemployment or worker's comp or other things, and not wanting to work, even stealing--something's missing in an office, must be the gypsy. So they face this everyday. Now discrimination in America works very different from Europe and actually Eastern Europe and Western Europe is different but similar in some ways. The kind of overt discrimination you don't find in America so much. In Eastern Europe and Western Europe it is absolutely unbelievable, the kind of racism. Even among educated people, among professors. When I told--I was staying with professors at the University of Scopia (?) in the literature department--they begged me not to go to the gypsy

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neighborhood and live there. They said I'd be killed, I'd be raped, I'd be maimed, I'd be robbed. They would give me their bedroom--they'd sleep in the kitchen--please do not do that.

OL: Wow.

CS: And then, of course, I did it anyway. I invited them to where I was living and they said--oh they could not believe how clean and beautiful it was. They had never been in that neighborhood. They had never spoken to a gypsy person except maybe to hire a cleaning lady, or to give a dollar or something on the street or not give it, or throw somebody away--push somebody away on the bus. So there really is no contact between Roma--most Roma--and other ethnicities, the majority of other ethnicities in Eastern Europe. Oh, it's just terrible, the levels of prejudices and actual overt discrimination and violence have risen since 1989. So whereas my interest started out music and ethnographic, I became a human rights activist because I had to, just from what I saw. So that I'm very much involved in activist projects both over there and here. So discrimination over there has been and economic challenges have been the major motivation for immigration. But now people here, they face more subtle types of discrimination. Most Americans have never met a gypsy, they don't really think there's a gypsy ethnic group. They might know them from cartoons or from literature, from television, from movies. It's more remote and its like fortune telling, moving around. But also there's the dishonesty part. So quite a number of people in this community do not want to admit they're Romani. They pass as other ethnic groups. They say they're Macedonian. They say they're Turkish. It's a multilingual community. They speak Macedonian at home, sometimes Turkish, sometimes Romani language, and English. Sometimes the language of Western Europe, because many of them immigrated to Western Europe first. So in some families there are four or five languages. And yet, in school their kids might be considered "disabled" because they can't speak English, but they can speak four or five other languages. That's a very big problem in Eastern Europe, where children are trapped into schools where they are disabled, from three or four years. There have been human rights cases in Strasbourg according to human rights. But anyway, here, the community is, I would say, half and half. Half outed and half passing. And it's an individual decision. But there are certain--you might say community markers--that people agree to. For example, the mosque on Belmont Avenue is called the Islamic Center, and everyone who is Muslim is welcome to there. But the majority of people who go are Macedonian Muslims. But there are also Albanian Muslims, African-American Muslims, African Muslims. It's a place where people can become aware of ethnicities in a safe environment. One thing I've noticed in addition to the youth becoming more educated in the second generation is in the last five years, I would say--maybe six to ten, the religion has become more important in the younger generation. And the older generation, too, but it actually started with some young people who became revitalized, to use the Muslim religion as a basis of their community and ethnic identity. This is quite new.

OL: Do you think it has to do with the post-9/11 era, and the way the Muslims were viewed?

CS: No, I don't think so. It's happening in Macedonia, too.

OL: I see.

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CS: So I think its kind of a search for an identity that is larger than gypsy or Romani, and also broader in that they see Islam as a set of values, not a religion. It's a set of values. For some of the guys, it has helped them get rid of drugs, get off the street. I think its set a good model, in a sense. It's serving more functions than religion at the moment.

OL: Are there any outward markers of their religious identity in school, for the girls in particular? In terms of being separate from other genders or how they dress--is there anything like that?

CS: Well, superficially you might say yes, there's modesty and no belly showing or that. But see, they had that before this Muslim revival. All Balkan peoples pretty basically, traditionally, separated men and women socializing, whether they're Eastern Orthodox or Catholic, they had to test their virginity at marriage. All the Balkan peoples historically have shared cultural things like that, about female modesty. But the difference of the twentieth century, now the twenty-first, is that the Muslims of the Balkans have held onto those things longer. Among the Muslims in the Balkans, the Romani Muslims even longer. So one of the reasons again, we were talking about why the girls are succeeding in school more, is that they have to come home, they can't hang out on the streets. They are expected to be virgins at marriage--there is a test of virginity--by the way, all the girls still believe in that.

OL: Really?

CS: That's one thing that they say--you know, "sexuality in America is pretty rampant and this is one thing that we can be proud of in our culture." And then I would push them on it, and they would argue among themselves. Well why isn't there a test of virginity for guys? Are they part of your culture, too? They would say, "Oh you could never enforce that." And so on. "Yeah they should take care of themselves, but we know for ourselves." They all want to marry other people in their culture, and there is intermarriage. We talked about the instances were it succeeds and instances where it doesn't. The young girls are becoming more analytical but they're not rejecting tradition at all. They're being more analytical about it. It's kind of pick and choose, but pretty much they hardly criticize their parents, the rules that their parents set for them. They say, "Yeah, I went through my rebellious period. I had Spanish boyfriends, and now I see I don't want to end up in a Puerto Rican family. I want my husband to be able to speak my language, to go home with me in the summer, back to Macedonia."

OL: Really? Interesting.

CS: It is very interesting.

OL: Is there a religious leader who performs the test of virginity?

CS: It is not a religious leader, it's the mother in law.

OL: Oh, you're kidding. That's really interesting.

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CS: And that's pretty common in most Balkan cultures, yes. The mother-in-law basically says "Yay" or "Nay" if she's a virgin. The mother in law doesn't even have to see any blood. If the mother-in-law thinks the person has a good reputation she'll say everything's fine and they celebrate.

OL: That's really fascinating.

CS: Basically, the idea is that the good news about the bride's virginity is delivered back to the bride's mother. It's a very female thing. The groom's mother is okaying that the bride's mother did her job.

OL: And an interesting power role for the mother-in-law, the wife of the groom has this significant role in the union. Really fascinating. Do you think that the girls, more so than the boys, are marked as "other" in school, because they are perhaps dressed more modestly than other girls, can't hang out after school?

CS: I actually don't know the answer to that question. I would say--I actually don't know. I know the girls, I see how they're dressed, and they're not dressed that different. They wear--low-cut is okay, just no skin. And they're not wearing mini skirts. They wear makeup, they look pretty much like any other girls, too. But they're not having sexual activities at a young age, and that does make them different, and they don't hang out and go to clubs with the other ethnicities in the area. They might have friendships or lunch, but basically all deep socialization are with their cousins and friends from Macedonian community. The guys, I think, do have more friendships at school. They also look pretty similar in their attire and gold chains and earrings and so on. So I would say--I don't think they're marked. It would be good to actually talk to teachers, see how they know what ethnicities their students are. As far as any example is indicative, I think teachers are pretty aware of ethnicities, they figure things out pretty quickly. I think people in New York are pretty savvy about ethnicities.

OL: Yes, I think so, too, although you did mention earlier that there are people in the Bronx who mistake them for Latinos--

CS: Yes, that's very true. On the street you wouldn't be able to tell them from Latinos or Middle Eastern people. But I think in a classroom, when you see a name--their names are Muslim names, like Aisha, Mumodoski (?), Mahmoud. Even though they have "ski," those are the Slavic endings, usually the core of the name is a Muslim name. The other thing is that you can't tell they're Muslim by looking at them, in the younger generation. They don't cover their hair--it's not that type of Muslim. The only women who actually would cover their hair are over 60, who might wear a scarf this way. But the young girls don't do that, and the boys are not marked as being Muslim at all. Right now is Ramadan in their school they might be fasting. Some of the college students are fasting, but they keep it to themselves. If someone offers them a glass of water they say, "no thanks." They don't even tell them why.

OL: It's interesting that it sounds like from the perspective of the girls and elders, they see their cultural traits as kind of an avenue to success. So the parents want the daughters to be accountants and lawyers and do well. The daughters want those things too but they see their

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cultural background as the way to get those things. So they're kind of modern day aspirations but they're being approached through very traditional ways.

CS: They see that the rules that they had actually helped them succeed, for the girls anyway. Because they had to go home after school, they would like to do that with their own children. I've talked to young mothers who have three-year-old kids, I say what would you do different, they say, "Same things my parents told me: get an education, come home, do your homework. If you're out I need to know where you are, who you are with, when you are coming home and if I don't approve, you just get right back here." They want to do the same thing. A few said that intermarriage might be different. A few have used Islam to actually question the test of virginity, saying it's just between a man and a woman and it shouldn't be a public event. It's okay if a man and a woman decide that this is important to them, but it shouldn't be everyone's celebrating carrying a sheet on their tray, which is what they do. So they're actually getting--when they get trained in Islamic religion, they're actually using that to interpret their culture a little bit differently. Not exactly question it, but interpret it differently.

OL: I mean I can talk to you about just that subject alone forever, but I wanted to also ask, you mentioned the mosque, and you mentioned that even when they move to other neighborhoods, they return to the Arthur Avenue area for socializing and shopping. What other kinds of products and services do they have in the Arthur Avenue area?

CS: Oh, it's a wonderful area. It's a historic, Italian area, and its continued to have a European sort of marketing slant. So Tony & Tinas Pizzeria has fantastic burek, that's run by Albanians actually, and that's a kind of cheese pastry that's salty, but you can also put meat. So that's their traditional pastries. They use the European meat products, butchers that have very fresh meats. That's very, very important to them. The ones that are Muslims will go to Halal butchers in the area as well, to get certain kinds of meats that are slaughtered in a certain kind of way. If you go into the grocery stores along Hughes Avenue and Belmont and so on, you can see products from Macedonia, from Serbia, from Bosnia. They actually import European products. They have Turkish coffee, what we call feta cheese they call sir or sirene, all of these specialized products--dried sausages, those that are eating pork, it's kind of blended meats that are very, very important. So the shopping is very, very important to them. In fact, I was interviewing a family on Allerton Avenue in the Pelham Parkway area, which is really close to Co-Op city and you can go to (inaudible). They can go to Costco in New Rochelle and those places. And I said--they had just picked me up and they had all this stuff in the car--where did you go shopping? They said, "Arthur Avenue. We just like it there. It's really good to shop there for specialized products." Also in the neighborhood are gift shops that have the kind of gifts that they give at weddings and other events like--what would we call it--a set of espresso mugs, cups. Those kinds of things that are imported now maybe from China, but used to be from Italy. They drink Turkish coffee, so those kinds of things. Or baby sets. When they do a *sunette*, which is a circumcision, they buy clothes for a young boy, sometimes dress him like a king, you can find those kind of outfits in that area. There are video stores that sell music from the Balkans--it used to be cassettes, now its CDs, pirated DVDs. Even the grocery store has a little video car. There are video videographers who have shops in the Belmont area. I haven't met any Roma that run those, but they're Bosnians and Albanians. So you walk into the store, you can engage somebody to videotape your wedding. You can get five, fifty shots, 8x11 shots at the end, you order your package. But these

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are Balkan people who know what to videotape at the wedding. If you hire an Anglo-American, they're not going to know the customs well enough to know that at the front of the line, everyone gets a chance to lead the dance line, these kinds of things. So videographers are quite common in that community. And what I've seen also, again I haven't been in a few months, the Albanian newspaper used to be there, I think it moved to Brooklyn now. There are different ethnic newspapers that you can buy. So you can walk down the street, people are gathering in the street, they meet each other. They might not be living there anymore but they come. Now as Ramadan, people gather at the mosque, the men are outside, the women are inside, and they break their fast at sunset.

OL: One of the things that interests me is the types of social inequality that permeate the consumer sphere. So the consumer sphere is not just about how much money you have, but the access to goods and services, how you're perceived by others sometimes affects how much access or the type of access you have. You mention that they have celebrations, weddings, other events at this hall where you used to go to Bat Mitzvahs. As they try to have all of these kinds of public festivities and events, do they encounter discrimination where people do not want to serve gypsies or don't trust that they'll pay--

CS: Yes, absolutely. I was at a New Years party at Eastwood Manor, and it ended in a huge fight. The police had to be called. That doesn't happen very often, but many people do think that gypsies are rowdy. And after that event, Eastwood Manor would not rent to them anymore. So even the families that have nothing to do with the violence there, or families that tried to prevent the families--

OL: Right, it becomes "gypsies are violent."

CS: "Gypsies are violent." Absolutely. So then they moved to the Royal Regency in Yonkers, and they were using that for a while. They used the Crystal Palace in Astoria. And then after awhile, Eastwood Manor needs the business, too, so they're back at Eastwood Manor. But yes, there have been incidents like that, absolutely. Banquet halls that refuse to rent to them, or one on Morris Park Avenue that they had to deal with. Very often they'll just say they're Turkish or Macedonian to prevent that. But yes, they have to negotiate when they're going to be proud. They're very proud of their ethnicity but they know what doesn't work very often in American societies. As I was saying, some of the younger people really want to proclaim their ethnicity, but they're afraid, until they're secure in their jobs, to say things.

OL: Yes, that notion of being proud of your ethnicity but also knowing when is a good time to assert it is something that I find with West Indians. When I have talked to my undergraduate students about that kind of adolescence who sometimes will assert a West Indian identity and other times assert an African American identity, students will say, "Well isn't that disingenuous? They're not being themselves all the time." And I say, well you're different with me than with your friends, for example. It's certainly not disingenuous, it's knowing if your teacher is going to discriminate against you because she thinks you're African-American, it might be advantageous to speak in a West Indian accent.

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CS: I think for Roma in the Balkans, they always negotiated multiple identities as well. It's not that they could hide being gypsies in the Balkans, but still, they were working in socialism, they were integrated into the planned economy more so they had people side by side. They had to know when to assert which part of their ethnicity. They have always been multilingual as well. And also certain people, even in the Balkans have passed. People who have, for example, wanted to succeed in education careers sometimes just totally disconnected from their communities, and will pass as Bulgarian or Macedonian, and later on if they became activists they were accused of abandoning their community, they have to relearn the language. But the only way they succeeded was to become a sociologist or something like that was to leave home. So there have been various strategies out of necessity, because it's challenging, they can't do what they might want to do, just be yourself. You can't just be yourself. And being yourself is also--everyone has multiple identities. I think that they're more aware of them though and can strategically choose among them.

OL: Well I had a final thing I wanted to talk about, bridging your research and your life, but first I want to give you the opportunity to share anything else with me about your research on Roma.

CS: Well, I think it's important that they are part of the Bronx history. It's not only a recent phenomena. The first Roma that came to the Bronx came in the '60s as part of the guest worker policy from Yugoslavia, where the country of Yugoslavia sponsored anyone who wanted to go to Australia, Turkey, and the United States, in order to send back remittances. And so they actually came legally, with papers. Most of the residents are legal residents in America. They either came through spousal programs or this early program, but unfortunately there were a few families who came without documentation and have overstayed, and they really suffer, just like all undocumented people. They can't get driver's license or get on a plane, things like that. So I believe that this is an ethnic group that is a very, very important part of Bronx, at least recent history. It's a growing community. I should mention that not only having three or four, or two or three children per family, so they're not shrinking. But in order to get spouses, they go home either to Macedonia or Frankfurt or other diasporic locations, and bring brides and grooms here. So this is a destination.

OL: And it's a transnational--

CS: It's a transnational destination. So people here not only have relatives in pretty much every West European country and in Macedonia, but they also visit them and stay in contact with them, and when its time for their daughters and sons to get married, that entire diasporic community is the possible pool of spouses, not only here.

OL: And these are arranged marriages?

CS: Well that's an interesting thing of how arranged they are--in the earlier generation they tended to be more arranged by the parents. Now one of the patterns is taking a young person back to Macedonia for a month or two in the summer, having them look around, pick their own spouse, and then bring him or her over. But looking around never means independent dating, it means our relatives there will tell us what they think those families are like. And this is something I'm actually studying very carefully now and interviewing young girls about it. The

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stress involved in the trip home, what exactly it's like. Okay, so one month is gone and I have two days left, now what do I do? And some of these successful examples and the unsuccessful examples, and there are some. And of course they compare them to other challenges--well you could fall in love in the Bronx and it doesn't work out too. Or you can marry someone who's Puerto Rican and it really does work out, even though your parents are against it and have disowned you so those kinds of things, really on the forefront of young people's minds. They discuss a lot of this among themselves. I'm trying to capture some of their voices in my project.

OL: That's really fascinating. The other thing that I thought of as you were talking about their kind of legal status as immigrants, and some being illegal. Are any involved in local politics at all? Do they have political leaders who are--?

CS: Not really, except for the first time that I heard that the mosque, being a registered non-profit, I don't know exactly their status, I'll find out today, but they've been in the mosque as a community and religious organization, has been invited to certain retreats that Bronx politicians or community leaders are organizing, and the mosque has been asked and is more involved in local elections than ever before. Because Roma historically have not seen macro-politics as benefiting them. Whatever side it's been has never benefited them, whether this party gets into power or that party, everyone is anti-gypsy.

OL: I see, that's not surprising--

CS: So their own local politics, meaning who's reputable in our community, is more important to them than the macro-politics. However, since 1989, in Europe there are Romani parties. When I did my research in Macedonia in 1990, two or three of the first political parties were forming in this large neighborhood outside of Scopia. That's one of the things I studied. So now Romani politics in Europe is pretty big. But there is no Romani politics that intersects macro-politics in the Bronx, as far as I know. In the community there are several male leader types, the president of the mosque for example is a very well-respected person, then the secretary and treasurer are in their 20s. They are emerging leaders. One of them is at Manhattan College, studying and also working, because he can get that kind of tuition break.

OL: Oh, right. Well the thing that I was thinking about, kind of looking at all the things you told me about different parts of your life in the '70s when you were coming back home and your neighborhood was changing and the city was becoming more violent and the Bronx becoming more dangerous and your mother and neighbors would say, "Don't go on the subway, don't take this route," you kind of did it anyway and found a way to do it. It sounded like you had the same kind of *chutzpah* when you were coming up with your research, when people said, "Oh, don't go talk to the gypsies, it's dangerous," you kind of were like, "I'm going to do it anyway." So it sounds like you had that kind of *chutzpah* to negotiate life in the Bronx and then research this relatively unknown group of people. Do you think that's something that serves you well? Do you think it's your upbringing in the Bronx that makes you determined to be an activist in this way? Have you reflected that?

CS: I've never thought of it that way, but other people have said, "Well, growing up in New York has given you the skills to actually navigate more European ethnicities that are more in

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your face and so on.” So yes, I live in Oregon now and people always say, “Oh, you’re such a New Yorker.” I’m a New Yorker wherever I go. I do feel like European ethnicities and a New Yorker kind of, you just do what you have to do, you say what’s on your mind. Don’t take any insult personally. Somebody shoves you--whatever, they’re having a bad day. [Laughter] Whereas politeness is really big in Oregon, and I’ve never been one on superficiality. So I would guess, yes, growing up in New York did actually prepare me, I think, for the kind of interethnic research I do, and the more strategic ethnicities. Yes, I had never thought of it in those terms so thanks for finding it out.

OL: That kind of seemed so apparent to me as you were telling those stories. I was also thinking about what you miss being in Oregon about the Bronx and coming back here. The experience for me, for example, having grown up in Brooklyn and going away to college and grad school, and working at Fordham, I have friends who live in other parts of New York but not in the Bronx, don’t live or work in the Bronx. And they say, do you like working in the Bronx? And I say, the thing I like about the Bronx without romanticizing it is when I go to work in the Bronx, I feel like I’m in New York, the New York that I grew up in. It feels very “authentically New York.” There aren’t that many Starbucks, there aren’t that many kind of mass chains. The type of shopping on Fordham Avenue is like shopping on Flatbush Avenue when I was growing up, so I feel very comfortable in the Bronx because I feel like I’m in the old New York. Do you have that experience? What do you miss when you’re in Oregon and then you come back here?

CS: Oh, I miss a lot in Oregon. I miss the multi-ethnic environment, food, noises, music. It’s just pretty quiet. I mean, it’s beautiful and it’s a great place to raise children and I would not trade living there, but I do have to travel to get my kind of hit on inner-city life and just one ethnic group right up against the other, the kind of excitement of different neighborhoods. Of course that’s true in Manhattan, too. I lived in Manhattan and Brooklyn. But the Bronx has a kind of working class, it hasn’t been yuppified quite yet. I really think--I look around me and I say,, “Oh, this is going to be yuppified in 10 years.” You can just predict it. Some people will benefit, some people will lose in that process. But there’s a lot of struggling people, people keeping their culture alive, people in the economic midst of betterment. So I enjoy coming back to the Bronx, sometimes I come into New York and never even go into Manhattan, which is odd. But I love the theater, and other things that you can’t get in the Bronx.

OL: Well, do you have anything else you want to add that I haven’t asked you about?

CS: I don’t think so. I guess just to get some of those names to help some of the folks in this contiguous neighborhood, to Fordham, to encourage the students to go to college here, I assume you have good scholarship program, good mentoring programs, and maybe through the mosque, to use that as a kind of node.

OL: Yes, definitely. We’ll definitely talk about those connections. Thank you so much, Carol, this was a wonderful interview.

CS: Thank you.