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Source: *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (September 2012), pp. 11-21

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/665945>

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Romani Feminism in Reactionary Times

Alexandra Oprea

What do you call a Romani woman with a law degree?
A Gypsy (*țigancă*).¹

In November of 2010, I went to immigration court in downtown Los Angeles to interpret for a family of Romanian Romani asylum seekers. The asylum seekers' attorney, who was a white Romanian, saw me in the waiting area and asked if I was the "Gypsy interpreter." I responded that I wasn't; I was the *Romani* interpreter. He quickly retorted, "No, *Gypsy*." I tried to tell him calmly—though my blood was boiling by this point—that "Romani" is the proper way to address Roma, since the word "Gypsy," in all languages, including English, is pejorative and a misnomer.² To my surprise, he refused to refer to me as "Romani." In a splenetic tone, he claimed

¹ My inspiration for this epigraph is Malcolm X's question, "Do you know what white racists call black Ph.D.'s?" (Malcolm X 1965, 284).

² In Europe, the meaning is arguably more offensive than in North America. But the identity of the person who is uttering the word also matters. If the speaker is a European immigrant to the United States, even if he or she says the word in English, it still retains its more injurious tone because of the European point of reference. In Romanian, the word for

that this is a word that we, Roma, “made up” and is a “lie” (*frăjeală*).³ I tried to explain to him that “Roma” is indeed the proper word, that the European Roma Rights Center and numerous books and articles use the term “Roma”; I also told him that I am an activist and have a master’s degree from Columbia University and a law degree from UCLA in order for him to grant me some deference.⁴ It didn’t matter.⁵

The incident I’ve described is not an instance of some unenlightened individual, nor is it some vestigial discrimination creeping up on us from the past. In fact, this is an example of contemporary state-sponsored racism.

Reactionary politics and racist feedback loops

In December of 2010, the Romanian government proposed a law that would officially change the name Roma, which means “people” in Romanian, to the pejorative term *țigani*, a term many activists had assumed would fall out of use once Romania entered the European Union (EU) in 2007.⁶ Unfortunately, the anticipated disuse did not occur. As of this

“Gypsy,” *țigan* (pronounced “tsigan”), is especially injurious and is used to refer to anyone who is being rowdy, belligerent, rude, insolent, or exhibiting other negative characteristics. Take, for example, the following definition: “ȚIGĂN, -Ă, *țigani*, -e, s. m., adj. I. S. m. 1. Persoană ce face parte dintr-o populație originară din India i răspândită în mai toate țările Europei, trăind în unele părți încă în stare seminomadă [A person belonging to a group originating in India and that has now spread to almost every country, living a seminomadic life in some parts]. . . . *A se îneca ca țișanul la mal* = a nu reuși, a eșua într-o acțiune tocmai când era pe punctul de a o duce la bun sfârșit [To drown like a Gypsy in shallow water/at shore = to fail, to give up right when one is just about to succeed]. 2. Epitet dat unei persoane brunete [Epithet given to a brunette/dark-skinned person]. 3. Epitet dat unei persoane cu apucături rele [Epithet given to a person with bad habits]” (*DEX Online*, 2011, s.v. “țigan”: <http://dexonline.ro/definitie/țigan>).

³ This resistance to using the word “Roma” is also noted in the response of one of the students at the University of Bucharest who was surveyed by Shannon Woodcock (2007a): “Roma are not Roma, but *Țigani*. *Țigani* are thieves, criminals, pickpockets etc. *Țigani* are a migratory people who migrated here from India. They have no culture. They chose the name Rom to make associations with the word *Român* [Romanian]” (504).

⁴ I called him a racist and walked away, feeling hurt and humiliated. He later delivered a superficial apology, saying that he was sorry but that I too had “overreacted by calling [him] a racist.” He said, “How could I be a racist and represent these clients?” Money.

⁵ I, unlike his clients, was out of place, and he knew just how to try to put me in my place.

⁶ The meaning and implications of this defamatory initiative are unmistakable. Romania’s hatred of the Roma runs so deep that even sharing a couple of vowels and consonants with them is considered an intrusion, never mind sharing a country.

writing, the law had been approved by the Senate Committee for Human Rights (*Romanian Times* 2011). The word “Roma,” which we have used since time immemorial, only gained currency in Europe in the late 1990s as a result of the Romani civil rights movement; its aim was to replace the pejorative term *țigăni*. This is not just semantics. Words and language are powerful. They affect how we see the world, how we think. (This is why colonizers imposed their language on the peoples they colonized.) To control what a group is called is to control what is thought about that group as well as what that group thinks about itself.

Țigan/că is a value-laden word.⁷ Legally labeling a group by an epithet has symbolic significance. It reinscribes the negative stereotypes associated with the word *țigăni/că* back onto Roma; it fixes their inferior place in the racial hierarchy and reinforces the dichotomy of the Romanian versus the *țigăni/că*.⁸ It also has more direct effects on group members, causing psychological and emotional harm, especially to Romani children.⁹ Romania’s proposed law is bold on two levels: in its unabashed effort to legitimize racism through law and in its rejection of the little progress that had been made with regard to Romani self-determination. It is important to look at the catalysts for this law in order to understand how governments are responding to Roma in the twenty-first century.

The use of the word “Roma” has met with more success in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe. Therein lies the problem for Romania. The proposed law has been justified by the Romanian government as necessary to ward off confusion between Romanians and Roma, the latter of whom are supposedly giving Romanians a bad reputation abroad.¹⁰

⁷ *Țigancă* is the feminine form of the word *țigăni*.

⁸ Elsewhere I describe some of this in the context of Romani women and white Romanian women (Oprea 2004).

⁹ Richard Delgado (1982) explains this phenomenon in the context of minority children in the United States: “Because they constantly hear racist messages, minority children, not surprisingly, come to question their competence, intelligence, and worth. Much of the blame for the formation of these attitudes lies squarely on value-laden words, epithets, and racial names” (146). It is no wonder that Romani children react with such disbelief and disgust when they are told that they are Romani. Cristiana Grigore (2011) recounts a story that is all too common for Roma in Romania: “I remember the shock I felt when my mother first told me I was a Roma. I was about six at the time, and it was like she had told me I had a terminal disease.”

¹⁰ The argument is that many abroad are using the term “Roma” and “Romanian” interchangeably and are thus attributing the negative qualities of Roma to Romanians (Woodcock 2007a). French President Nicolas Sarkozy’s mass deportation of Roma in August 2010 probably reinforced this “embarrassment” for Romanians.

Since Romania joined the European Union in 2007 and even prior thereto, Roma have sought to escape Romania, seeking a more humane life in Western Europe.¹¹ But Western Europe has not received us with open arms. Recently, France has been in the news for its mass deportations of Romanian and Bulgarian Roma; Italy and other countries have engaged in similar activity as well (see, e.g., Faris 2010).¹² As racism in Romania gets worse, Roma go abroad. As Roma go abroad, Western European countries deport Roma (who have the right to freedom of movement in the European Union) and place pressure on Romania to take them back. Romania, in turn, laments that Romanians are sometimes confused with Roma and strives to implement a law legitimizing the use of an epithet against Roma so as to ward off confusion. And so, racism from Western Europe feeds racism in Eastern Europe, and Roma are left countryless. All of this during the Decade of Roma Inclusion. Thus, we are witnessing a rise in reactionary policies (mass deportations and legitimization of epithets) even in the decade. This is in part due to the economic crisis (ERRC 2009).

In sum, this is where we stand: not only is there no sign of substantive equality in sight, but we are also witnessing a move away from the minor gains we had made in the area of formal (symbolic) equality. We are witnessing attempts to (re)segregate Roma on the European level (by pushing them back to Eastern Europe) along with preexisting domestic segregation (in “special” schools, into ghettos).

In the midst of these reactionary policies, it has become harder for Romani feminism to demand a central place for itself. I have written elsewhere about the rigidification of minority culture in the face of racism (see, e.g., Oprea 2005a, 141); there is also a (superimposed) political hierarchy of needs (similar to that of Abraham Maslow); that is, it becomes more difficult to speak about the specificities of oppression faced by minority women in the face of increased racism that affects the group as a whole. At peaks of racial oppression—and this is what I believe we are experiencing—it becomes more difficult not only to speak about intracommunity oppression but also to speak in any gendered terms whatsoever. In this atmosphere, Romani women are encouraged to defend

¹¹ In Romania, Roma are pushed to the fringes in every way imaginable: no electricity, no potable water, no roads, no decent jobs or education, second-class treatment at hospitals, no physical security (see, e.g., Romani CRISS 2010; Colorful but Colorblind 2011).

¹² France deported about ten thousand Roma. The European Commission’s vice president for justice, Viviane Reding, compared it to the deportations during the Holocaust (CNN 2010).

harmful practices when these practices are used to legitimize racist attitudes about Roma.¹³ Alongside this reactionary patriarchy lies a reactionary homogenization of experiences. Presumably, talking about something that affects only a subsection of the group is seen as trivial, perhaps even preferential. This is the case with hate speech and mass deportations: engendering these debates, when the group as a whole is under assault, is considered breaking ranks.

The gender implications of (anti-Romani) epithets and stereotypes

Racial hatred is expressed through words and ultimately through physical violence. You seldom have the beating of Roma men and women (whether by private actors or by the police during evictions and police raids) without hearing shouts of “dirty Gypsy” (*țigan/că împruțit/ă*); they go hand in hand. The word itself is a verbal assault. Official state backing of this epithet amounts to inciting racial hatred and violence.

But I believe that there is a gendered difference in the vulnerability to and meaning of stereotypes and epithets deployed against Roma. I am not sure that, if I were a man, the Romanian attorney would have felt quite as comfortable putting me in my place. I know that if Livia Járóka, the only Romani member of the European Parliament (MEP), were a man, her value as an MEP would not have been discussed in terms of her beauty, nor would she have been compared to a prostitute.¹⁴ In short, she would not have been subject to sexualized racial harassment. The bulk of stereotypes we do share with Romani men: both men and women are considered lazy, belligerent, vulgar, unwashed, and criminal. They may even both be considered to possess a vulgar sexuality. Although both of us are hypersexualized, Romani women face the added vulnerability of rape, which is

¹³ One example of this is when child marriages are used to portray Roma as primitive and to reject pleas for equality as long as Roma “abuse the rights of their own people” (Oprea 2005b). There are also recent discourses where Romani “tradition” is blamed for Romani marginalization. For instance, a reader comment on an article by Romani feminist Letiția Mark (2010) reads: “Problemele grave ale țigancilor sunt în primul rând din cauza ‘tradițiilor’, fac copii de la 12 ani în loc să învețe. Pe țigani îi omoară ‘tradițiile’” (The Gypsies’ grave problems stem firstly from their traditions; they have kids at 12 years of age instead of going to school. Traditions are killing the Gypsies).

¹⁴ A Bulgarian member of Parliament commented on Járóka’s MEP candidacy: “In my country there’re tens of thousands [G]ypsy girls way more beautiful than this honorable one. In fact if you’re in the right place on the right time you even can buy one (around 12–13 years old) to be your loving wife. The best of them are very expensive—up to 5,000 Euros a piece, wow!” (quoted in Harvey 2006).

justified through these stereotypes surrounding the *țigancă*'s sexual appetite.¹⁵ The term *țigancă* is infused not only with racial hatred but also with misogyny, for the stereotype of the *țigancă* is not only one of racial inferiority but also of sexual availability. Furthermore, I hypothesize that Romani women are more susceptible to being identified as the proper target of epithets, as they wear their identities on their bodies. That is, even if a Romani woman is light-skinned and "passes," she likely wears a long skirt or perhaps even a *diklo* (headscarf).

It is thus worth exploring how the *țigancă* epithet and accompanying stereotypes play out in the lives of Romani women. First, a *țigancă* is not a woman, and she is thus not accorded chivalrous treatment. She is a nagging beggar, a foul-mouthed street sweeper. She's aggressive, pushy, and dirty.¹⁶ Even in her old age, she retains her masculine qualities.¹⁷ These are the stereotypes that allowed for her enslavement, and they are the stereotypes that justify state brutality toward her.¹⁸

¹⁵ Consider the following comment posted in response to Mark's (2010) article: "bunica mea are 4 clase, dar intelege sa se spele si sa fie decenta—in schimb femeile rome prefera sa traiasca marginalizate pentru ca asta le pastreaza LENEA si IMPULSIVITATEA (termen delicat)/pornirile primitive—toate gesturile pe care nu trebuie sa le controleze-a scuipa, a injura, a bea, a cauta doar satisfacerea instinctului: mancare, bautura, sexualitate vulgar" (My grandmother has four years of schooling, but she still understands that she needs to wash herself and be decent—however, Romani women prefer to live marginalized because that allows them to maintain their laziness and IMPULSIVITY [delicate term]/primitive behavior. All of the behaviors that they do not have to control—spitting, cursing, drinking, looking only to satisfy bare instincts: food, drink, vulgar sexuality); comment by Sonia, November 28, 2010; <http://www.mediafax.ro/social/femeile-rome-discriminate-nu-se-afirma-politic-din-cauza-complexului-elena-ceausescu-7755778/>. While Romani women are considered lascivious, gendered racial stereotypes construct Romani men as rapists and white women as victims (see, e.g., Woodcock 2007b; *ADN Kronos International* 2009), similar to stereotypes about African Americans in the US context. These stereotypes date back to slavery in Wallachia and Moldavia and were used to justify the rape of Romani women by slave masters.

¹⁶ I cannot help but think back to when I had the pleasure of working with a very educated Romani man, in 2001, who was visiting a prestigious university in the United States. While I was helping him draft a proposal, he sat next to me and said, "You smell good. I thought all Gypsy women smelled bad."

¹⁷ An old Romani woman is selling seeds for 5,000 lei, and a young man stops by every morning and gives her 5,000 lei but never takes a seed packet. One day she tries to tell him something, but he quickly rushes by saying, "You want to ask me why I never take a packet, right?" She says, "No. I wanted to tell you that the price went up to 10,000 lei per packet" ("Bancuri cu Tigani Romi," posted May 2, 2007, http://www.bancuri.haios.ro/listeaza_poza.php?s=bancuri&id_joke=3467&lang=en).

¹⁸ An example is the overrepresentation of Romani women in prison. Currently, there is only data on their overrepresentation in Spanish prisons (Barañi Project 1999), but I suspect the same holds true throughout Europe and in Romania especially.

Țigancă, and variations of it, is quite a popular insult, one used by the president of Romania.¹⁹ It makes it easier for the state to condone her marginalization and violence against her, to attend a celebration of her marriage at twelve years of age (Oprea 2005a). Her suffering is on display and is sometimes looked upon as entertainment. This is not unique to Romania. In 2008, Italians sunbathed calmly on a beach, undisturbed by the rotting corpses of two Romanian Romani girls alongside them. Not only are private individuals and the state apathetic toward Romani women's suffering, but they also actively perpetrate violence against Romani women (CNN 2008).²⁰

Take, for instance, a very public altercation between a Romani teacher and a Romanian policeman in February of 2010 (see *Ziare* 2010). The school called the police after receiving complaints that the teacher was "aggressive" with another teacher and with students. The events are unclear, but a video clip shows the policeman manhandling the woman (Audculori 2010); she pushes him away demanding that he take his hands off her; when he does not, she slaps him. The policeman, twice her size, then slaps her so hard that her head spins.

Public sentiment toward Romani women is extremely violent. Readers did not express sympathy for the Romani teacher; quite the contrary, many comments found it entertaining and said that they "laughed till they cried" (*răs cu lacrimi*; Audculori 2010). Nor did the commentary revolve around whether it was legal for the policeman to slap the teacher as opposed to restraining her; instead, it revolved around how "these types of specimens" should not be allowed to be teachers, how the downfall of the Romanian educational system is their fault and, most notably, how she deserved it.²¹ One comment says, "The police officer should have punched her 10 times and bloodied her face. . . . He should be promoted."²² Another comment says that she should have been "stomped on and her skull crushed," calling her a cocksucker, garbage, and a crow or *cioara* (a derogatory term for a Romani person).²³

¹⁹ Take, for instance, an incident from May 2007, when Romanian President Traian Băsescu snapped at a persistent journalist, calling her a "*țigancă imputită*" (filthy Gypsy woman). He was issued a warning by the National Discrimination Council (*Divers* 2007).

²⁰ *Petropolou-Tsakiris v. Greece*, application no. 44803, European Court of Human Rights, 2007.

²¹ "E îngrozitor că în învățământul românesc pot exista asemenea specimene" (It is awful that such specimens exist in the Romanian educational system); comment by Mihai on INconstantIN (2010), posted February 16, 2010.

²² Comment by Garcea on INconstantIN (2010), posted February 20, 2010.

²³ The exact quote is: "trebuie calcata în picioare zdreanta asta, capul ala zdrobit, politistul a fost prea politicos cu ea, cioara dracu, muista, zdreanta, asta e profesoara??? mortii mamii

Racism and (domestic) violence against Roma

When I say “violence against Roma,” pogroms, skinhead attacks, and police brutality come to mind. Sterilization might even be included on the list. But domestic violence is seldom thought of as violence against Roma. Similarly, when we think of violence against women, we seldom consider the police to be perpetrators (see, e.g., EWL 2010, 2011).

When I first visited the issue of domestic violence publicly, I wrote about the exclusion of battered Romani women from both feminist and Romani discourses (Oprea 2004). I mentioned how the filing of a complaint without access to free legal representation posed a barrier for Romani women, many of who are illiterate. I mentioned how police brutality against Romani communities and the fear of reinforcing racist stereotypes served as a deterrent to Romani women seeking to report abuse and how even when Romani women call, the police are unresponsive (Oprea 2004). I also lamented the lack of domestic violence shelters in general and how racism rendered the existing services—meager as they may be in Romania—inaccessible to Romani women. I revise this now by stating that racism not only impedes access to domestic violence shelters for Romani women but also impedes access to shelters for all women. It is not only as a result of patriarchy and low gross domestic product that Romania lacks domestic violence shelters. Racism is also a part of the reason.²⁴ One of the suspected reasons why more shelters are not built in Romania is the fear that they will be a haven for the homeless and *țigani*. White feminists ignore anti-Romani racism to their own detriment.

Feminist and antiracist politics in Europe are still by and large two separate struggles, and Romani feminists wind up in a separate, isolated sphere fighting on their own. Instead of a holistic incorporation of anti-racist politics into feminist politics and vice versa, what we often see are token inclusions or outright exclusions. In step with increased racism toward Roma, (white) feminism in Romania has sought to distance itself from “multiculturalism” (read Roma), both of which have been attacked by the Right under the banner of opposing political correctness (see Vlad M. 2009). On the EU level, there is no racial corollary to gender main-

ei de putoare!la puscărie cu ea ori va muri de mana cuiva!” (this lowlife needs to be stomped on, her head smashed in, the police officer was too kind to her, fucking crow, cocksucker, this lowlife is a teacher?! fuck her mother’s dead the lazy bum that she is! To jail with her or else she’ll die by someone’s hands!); comment by hutu on INconstantIN (2010), posted February 20, 2010.

²⁴ Only 10 percent of Romanians consider Roma to be “human, just like other people.” Seventy-three percent of Romanians surveyed thought that they had been harmed by the similarity of the word “Rom” to “Romanian” (Fundatia Alaturi de Voi Romania 2010).

streaming. In fact, many European countries have explicitly color-blind policies that prohibit affirmative action based on race. Many countries, Romania included, still fail to collect race-based data, which hinders the implementation of policies. Another impediment to addressing the marginalization of Romani women is the fact that national bodies are not equipped to deal with complaints of discrimination based on more than one ground. For example, gender and Roma national action plans fail to take each other into account (see Oprea 2005b). All are examples of top-down justice.

The Romani women's movement was never limited to the concerns of Romani women, particularly not at the expense of others. We never advocated the dismantling of shelters catering to white women in favor of constructing Romani-specific shelters or for white women to be placed in inferior segregated maternity wards or for the police to start beating white women. We never advocated that Romani women have the right to beat their husbands, nor have we advocated that men shoulder all the child-rearing responsibilities. There is nothing white women and Romani men face that we do not face. Our experiences and those of other women of color should form the starting points for race and gender policies in Europe. That is, our experiences should become the quintessential foundation for feminist and antiracist politics and policies, as opposed to being an afterthought, a footnote, or a special section. At the risk of stating the obvious, this also means that Romani feminists have to be the primary architects of these policies or at the very least systematically consulted. They should have leading roles in the government, in nongovernmental organizations such as the European Women's Lobby, and in the European Roma Rights Center. It is time that we have not just any "place at the policy table" but a central place at that table (NWP 2004).

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