

**NEVI SARA KALI**

**Roma Women's Journal**

**Revista Femeilor Rome**

**Romane 3uvleance 3urnalo**

ETHEL BROOKS

## ■ (MIS)RECOGNITIONS: ROMANIES, SEXUALITIES, SINCERITIES

■ *In this article, I work through autobiography as much as through academic norms to come to some reckoning and recognition of myself as a displaced Romani woman in the middle of the gaudje academy, and of the displacement of all Romanies worldwide. I also work to understand how it is that we move to be recognized – not as exotic others, useful objects of derision and desire, as problems to be solved, but as subjects, citizens, or even members of the same humanity as everyone else. Drawing from anthropologist John Jackson, I propose a politics of sincerity that is at once racial and gendered as a way to hold out for the possibility of recognition.*

■ *În acest articol utilizez atât propria-mi autobiografie cât și normele academice să ajung la o formă de înțelegere și recunoaștere ce țin de persoana mea ca femeie romă marginalizată din cadrul academiei gadjo dar și ca să înțeleg marginalizarea romilor din toată lumea. Totodată doresc să înțeleg traiectoria noastră spre recunoaștere – nu ca un celălalt exotic, obiect al batjocurii și dorinței, ca problemă de rezolvat ci ca subiecți, cetățeni sau chiar membri ai unei umanități comune. Pornind de la antropologul John Jackson propun o politică a sincerității ca modalitate de a susține posibilitatea recunoașterii.*

■ *Ande kado artikolo, si te sikavav maj buth sar ramomata pa mande pal mande sar romni mashkar e akademiko gajjie thj kodo sar si kodo tea vas prinjiarde na sar exotikura a vera, na sar butyia pe save asalpe thaj kamelpe, sar problema so mangelpe te aven lasharde, de sar manush, egalno kolaver manushenca andar jiekh them, vi sar manush sar kolaver manush andar e luma. Telearav katar o antropologo John Jackson, me mangavas jekh politika ciaci, orta, savi si rasialno thaj fialoski sar drom karing o prinjiarimasko.*

## Recognitions and Mobility

■ In 2005, I was in a bathroom at the Centro Comercial Vasco da Gama, in the Parque das Nações in Lisbon, speaking to my three-year-old daughter in Urdu about the dirtiness of the toilets. I was telling her that they were *chi* and that we would have to go to another stall. I was wearing jeans, a sleeveless top and silver jewelry; I had my hair in a ponytail. A woman in a long skirt and a considerable amount of gold jewelry came into the bathroom, heard me talking to my daughter, looked me up and down and asked “Where are you from?” I told her that I was from the United States, and asked her where she was from. She said “Portugal,” paused a moment and then added “Mais... eu sou cigana” (But... I am gypsy). “Eu também sou cigana,” (I am also gypsy) I responded, and then immediately qualified my response to say that I married out of the community, in order, without saying it directly, to deflect any judgment she may have made about my clothing (potentially shameless in its showing of my legs) and my hyper-mobility (cross-continental and for a holiday); my current class position, so different from that in which I was raised.

The woman in the mall bathroom and I immediately recognized each other, although through a series of perhaps mis-recognitions, and we both understood, or thought we did, the moral geographies that each of us inhabited. What responsibility, however, to my self, my community/ies, my parents—my mother—and my family (which, for Romani folk, slips into community) was I denying by declaring myself an outsider-by-marriage? Why did I need to do that in my conversation with my Romani sister when, in fact, I had not married out of anything, and had never been exempted from the community in which I was raised—but it was that very community that had disappeared with the takeover of our land, the deaths of our elders and the geographic isolation of the Romani folk in my generation of our extended family? What was I claiming in recognizing a common ethnicity/social norms, but qualifying my own place in community—not through my status as “parsh gaudji” myself, but through marrying out (to a Pakistani, at that)? What was my—our—sexual, racialized, classed and gendered place within the space of the Lisbon mall?

## Identification and Post-Auschwitz Difference

■ In a 2003 Op-Ed piece for the New York-based Jewish weekly *The Forward*, Ruth Weinberger, who works for a program that assists Nazi victims of medical experiments, wrote on forced sterilization of Romani women in Slovakia, comparing it to the medical experimentation carried out during the Holocaust. In her op-ed, “Then They Came for the Romani Women,” Weinberger was responding to a report by the New York City-based Center for Reproductive Rights that documented at least 110 cases of forced sterilization of Romani women.

## ■ (MIS)RECOGNITIONS: ROMANIES, SEXUALITIES, SINCERITIES

The Center for Reproductive Rights “report also documents extensive racism and verbal and physical abuse towards Romani women in public hospitals, including the denial of patient access to their own medical records and segregation in patients’ rooms, maternity wards, restrooms and dining facilities.” How do we understand this extensive racism and abuse toward Romani women seeking health care?

Weinberger is explicit in her comparison of these current practices to those of Nazi genocide. Weinberger states that, “Fear of increasing Romani population size was and continues to be a driving force in justifying reproductive rights violations against Romani women. Such fears and behavior are based on racist assumptions about Romani women’s sexuality, fertility rates and genetic worthiness”. This notion of genetic worthiness is an echo of the Nazi concept of “lives not worth living”, making Weinberger’s Op-Ed a specific call for solidarity from Jewish towards Romani women through a recognition of shared oppression. Weinberger ends the Op-Ed stating that “According to the... report, Slovakian doctors marked Romani medical files with a large capital letter ‘R.’ Do we first need to revert back to a large capital ‘Z’ – for the German term for Gypsies, *Zigeuner* – before we sound the alarm? Or do we need to wait until medical files are labeled with a large capital ‘J’ for *Jude* before we take action?”

This labeling of files is another attempt at recognition – one that is explicitly racist and genocidal, drawn from tactics employed by the Nazi medical establishment. (Cf., Lifton) This marking, with its goal to eliminate, is one that haunted my chance meeting and the moment of recognition in the Lisbon bathroom and haunts most of how we live in the world as Romani women. It is the everyday practice of the challenge raised by Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, when he points out that *Ethica More Auschwitz Demonstrata* (the ethics of death are demonstrated through Auschwitz). Here, I would take up that challenge in two ways: First, by adding to his axiom that the ethics of sexuality (as death? As racial marking?) are also demonstrated through Auschwitz; here, in the practice of forced sterilizations in eastern Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and elsewhere. Second, I take up Agamben’s challenge through my attempt to come to practices of recognition, stating of place and marking of self that call for a post-Auschwitz justice and that demand a respect for difference in the wake of genocide. In the case of this piece, I work through autobiography as much as through academic norms to come to some reckoning and recognition of myself as a displaced Romani woman in the middle of the gaudje academy, and of the displacement of all Romanies worldwide. I also work to understand how it is that we move to be recognized – not as exotic others, useful objects of derision and desire, as problems to be solved, but as subjects, citizens, or even members of the same humanity as everyone else.

## Codification and Bounded Sexuality

■ Can such justice been found in law, either in the form of legal recourse or the legitimation of law through its codification? Many of us hold out hope for human rights regimes as one way to claim rights in light of the

non-existent or second-class citizenship status many – most – of us hold. This hope in the law – which I share – is perhaps belied in the ways in which it is marked by myriad attempts at knowing – claiming expertise – on how Romanies organize our lives. To whom are we asked to explain our social organization – as if there were just one, or at least a handful of schools of thought and legal traditions within the Romani community? Walter Weyreuth's edited volume, *Gypsy Law*, brings together the best scholars and activists on Romani law, both Romani and non-Romani. I find this volume immensely useful, but worry how it is read and circulated (as I constantly worry with my own work). Does it work to freeze what is something that is constantly evolving, shifting and responding to contingencies, into eternal truth that can then be known and – ultimately – used to codify our difference? As with the codification of our language(s), I recognize the importance of – perhaps, for our survival, the necessity of – writing down living formations and taking linguistic and legal snapshots, but worry about this codification and its attempt at recognition as reinforcing eternal boundaries that are racial, gendered, sexual and national.

Does recognition depend, for Romanies, on constantly creating the Other through the writing down of living tradition? How do such codifications – in law, language, sexual mores and racial boundaries – have to say about a distant cousin of mine, now in her 70s, who is a gospel singer and lesbian (whose partner is a gaudji) and who was never shunned or expelled by the community? About my own openness in speaking about, writing about, even mentioning our community to gaudje audiences, academic or not? These examples, in fact, exceed the production of legal codes and linguistic boundaries. They cannot be accounted for or produced as knowable through the application of codified Romani law or linguistic formations.

## Productions and Liberations

■ What is the relation between recognition and modernization? Here I want to briefly discuss the power of modernization narratives with regard to Romani women, on the one hand, and Romani cultural formations, on the other. In her 2005 article, “The Arranged Marriage of Ana Maria Cioaba, Intra-Community Oppression and Romani Feminist Ideals,” Alexandra Oprea uses feminist intersectionality to analyze Romanian and international press coverage of the marriage of 12-year-old Ana Maria Cioaba (who is also Oprea's cousin) to a “King” of the Gypsies, and Cioaba's subsequent flight from the wedding. Oprea argues that “the coverage was severely problematic in that Romani culture was positioned against Romanian (*gadjikane*) laws in a ‘primitive’ vs ‘progressive’ binary construction where feminist ideals are portrayed as foreign to Romani women.” (3)

The coverage of Cioaba's wedding occurred in the midst of debates over Romania's succession to the European Union and its human rights record with regard to its Romani population. Oprea's article points to the press's fascination with the exoticism of Romani culture, and the barbarous treatment of young Romani women. This combined exoticism and barbarism falls neatly into, expands and reinforces racist and Orientalist tropes of Romani people. I particularly appreciate Oprea's discussion of the European media's fixation on

## ■ (MIS)RECOGNITIONS: ROMANIES, SEXUALITIES, SINCERITIES

consumer excess as marked by the wedding itself, the food served and the clothes, cars and jewelry that were central to the press coverage. Oprea points to the multiplicity of subject positions, activism, privileges and oppressions – one of Ana Maria Cioaba’s aunts, that make up the experiences of Romani women in the broader Cioaba family, and in the broader context of Romani culture – all of which is elided through the overdetermined narratives of oppression and subjugation that mark the dominant construction of Ana Maria Cioaba’s flight from an “arranged,” “child” marriage to a Gypsy “king.” This overdetermined oppression narrative is broken rhetorically by the complementary narrative of Cioaba’s attempt to “liberate” herself through flight – and, one can infer, rejection of Romani patriarchy and subsequent assimilation into dominant Romanian culture: the liberal feminist fantasy come to life.

## Performing Interdisciplinarity

■ A postcard was circulated to advertise a scholarly panel (chaired by a leading feminist) at the 2004 Modern Language Association, entitled “Interdisciplinarity in Action III: Performing Interdisciplinarity (Gypsies, Scientists, Activists).” The title of the panel was superimposed on a woodcutting showing an old (Gypsy?) woman, weathered face and tattered clothes, combing the hair of a young, beautiful (Gypsy) woman, with the light from the window highlighting the beauty, youth and desirability of the latter and the age, decrepitude and witch-like aspect of the former. I have yet to find the name or artist of the woodcut, and am not sure how the conveners of the panel came across it – or what, in fact, the illustration tells us about interdisciplinarity in the academy.

What do the figures of “Gypsy” women stand in for, what is the burden that this representation carries – even as it is reproduced through topic and illustration for an academic audience, where the presenters are, presumably, speaking about their own work situations? This is not the celebratory diasporic feminism that is often promised by the transnational women’s studies project; it seems to be, rather, another variation on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s definitive formulation of the colonial project with regard to women in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak points out the dynamics of colonial interventions as being marked by the attempt of “White men saving brown women from brown men.” (33) I think one could also point to another or similar colonial dynamic to Spivak’s original formulation, which is the quest of white men (and white women) to save young brown women from older brown women – to save, in other words, brown women who are “worthy” of respect from their traditions and their past.

## Fingerprinting and Productivity

■ State imperatives to make populations recognizable – visible, knowable – are exemplified by the proposal put forth in 2008 by the Berlusconi government in Italy for a census of Romani neighborhoods and encampments, along with the mass fingerprinting of Romanies living in Italy. As justification for the proposed policy, Italy’s home minister, from the ultra-nationalist Northern League party, Roberto Maroni, said, “This is not ethnic cataloguing, this is the ultimate safeguard of their rights”. (Moore) Maroni argued that the government “will take the children’s fingerprints in order to stop those occasions when parents send their children out to beg. It is a proper census to make sure that those who have the right to stay here can live in decent conditions”. (Moore) The proposal was denounced by the European Union and the United Nations, and has been accompanied by vigilante mobs burning Romani camps throughout Italy since Berlusconi took office in April 2008 (Moore). Also, late last summer, a similar attitude was shown in the indifference of beachgoers near Naples to the drowning deaths of two Romani girls, 16-year-old Cristina and 14-year-old Violetta, who had been begging on the beach. The girls drowned in dangerous tides around the Torrevaga beach, and, once their bodies were recovered from the sea, they were left on the beach for hours while people around them picnicked, sunbathed and enjoyed the warm summer weather –seeming indifferent to the corpses lying within sight. (Popham)

Some articles, from the human rights and labor press, asked about the circumstances around which the girls ended up in the water, how it was that nobody went to their rescue and why they would jump into the water fully clothed during their workday. (Malini) These kinds of questions should always be at the forefront as we engage questions of recognition, along with larger questions about what constitutes work, how are Romani people constituted as subjects, citizens and people who engage in the everyday just as the privileged beachgoers do. Such a recognition would entail a fundamental respect for the productivity of Romani subjects and citizens, for the ways in which Romanies have been central to production and reproduction – even as they are denied the rights of laboring citizens – and respect for, above all, the difference that marks our people because of how Romanies are racialized, gendered and marked by class hierarchies, and have been in perhaps shifting ways historically.

## The Politics of Sincerity

■ Recognitions, codifications, productions, performances, fingerprints: how do they account for the Romani subject positions, activisms, theorizations evidenced by my sisters (and brothers), comrades, colleagues who work to bring us together, to help us understand our history, to shed light upon the multiple oppressions – raced, gendered, national, classed, sexual – and the multiple activisms that mark us and form us? Although I have already cited her above, I want to again point to the work of Alexandra Oprea, here for her article “Rein-

## ■ (MIS)RECOGNITIONS: ROMANIES, SEXUALITIES, SINCERITIES

visioning Justice from the Ground Up”, which is an attempt at thinking through the articulations of postcolonial feminism within Romani women’s experiences.

I also want to point to the work of Enisa Eminova, who has struggled to create Romani women’s networks, give voice to Romani women coming together to talk about sexuality, and provide spaces in which people can come together to share, get advice and speak openly of sexuality and women’s bodies and against practices like virginity testing. Enisa has helped open up the kinds of frank discussions of racism, sexism and homophobia inside and outside of the Romani community that we desperately need to continue, expand and constantly engage.

I also want to celebrate the tireless work of Ian Hancock and Ron Lee, first in founding the International Romani Union nearly thirty years ago, and putting forth the possibility of us seeing ourselves as a people, but without the right-wing nationalism that often comes hand-in-hand with nationalist movements. I especially want to cite Ian Hancock’s 2002 manifesto, *We Are the Romani People*, which is a beautiful call for us to come together, recognize ourselves as a people and to understand our history and its relation to European (and other) oppressions.

These are the some of the sincere articulations that are informing, inspiring my own current attempts to write about Romani women through my experiences and those of my family in the US through the prism of feminism, Marxism, postcoloniality and other critical positions. They, along with the beautiful Romani women in my life – Charu, Sara, Cindy, Charlotte, Talley; my aunts, cousins, sisters, are what engages my attempt at alternative knowledge production, fraught as it is with my anxiety over how that which I produce will be taken, used and circulated.

It is in us –and in my hope for our future and respect for our past – that I ground my attempts to theorize my mother’s life before I was born, as she was living with the horses her family raced, traded and sold, in their stalls; the gendered labor of our Romani folki in the United States, fortunetelling, paving, peddling, horsetrading, basketmaking; my childhood memories of the taking over by the State of the collective lands owned by Romanies in Somerset, a town outside of Fall River, MA, through the process of eminent domain in order to make way for an apartment complex for the elderly. Our own elderly – my great-aunts and uncle – were taken out of their homes, while the land they had lived upon was taken over because it was seen as “vacant,” “unproductive” or at least “developable.” They were then moved into the apartments for the elderly until they died, but the centrality of that piece of land to the cohesion of our extended family and sense of community has no memorial, no marker, has been lost without a trace except perhaps in the memories of those of us still alive who experienced the vibrancy of Gypsy Hill.

For my work on Romani women, I have been engaging African-American anthropologist John Jackson’s notion of racial sincerity. In his book *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*, Jackson posits racial sincerity against the politics of authenticity and the search for “true” members of the community. I wonder whether we could begin considering a kind of feminist sincerity that is at the same time based on racial sincerity, a building upon the kinds of frank discussions that mark first-, second- and third-wave feminisms. Such frank discus-



sions would help us – me – to recognize Romanies, for example, since they would allow space to engage in misrecognitions. They would help me better theorize for myself and for you my encounter in the Lisbon mall, the bodily mapping of long skirts, gold jewelry and respectability; the possibility of mistaking Urdu for Romani; our engagements with – and dedication to – classed and sexual difference. The kind of racial – and feminist – sincerity I propose would help us engage debates over who we are in the midst of fighting against today's pogroms, of walls being built around and bulldozers running through our communities, forced sterilizations and sensationalized accounts of child marriages and Gypsy kings, the circulation of us seen as hags, whores, fortunetellers and victims needing to be saved by white men (and women) from various brown men and elderly brown women.<sup>1</sup> It is through the politics of sincerity – feminist, racial and national – that we can hold out the possibility for recognition, for a post-productivism that respects our labor, and for a post-Auschwitz sexuality/morality/justice for all Romanies.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am referring to Gayatri Spivak's definitive formulation of the colonial project with regard to women in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak points out the dynamics of colonial interventions as being marked by the attempt of "White men saving brown women from brown men." (33) Drawing from a conversation I had with Indrani Chatterjee, I think one could also point to another or similar colonial dynamic to Spivak's original formulation, which is the quest of white men (and white women) to save young brown women from older brown women.

## ■ (MIS)RECOGNITIONS: ROMANIES, SEXUALITIES, SINCERITIES

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■ Ethel Brooks is a Romanichel from the United States and an Associate Professor of Women's and Gender Studies and Sociology at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Unraveling the Garment Industry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), and is currently working on two projects: one, the possibilities of Romani post-coloniality; another, on Pakistani communities and the possibilities of a Muslim everyday. ■ Ethel Brooks este o femeie romă din Statele Unite și conferențiar la Facultatea de Studii de Gen și Sociologie de la Rutgers University. Este autor al *Unraveling the Garment Industry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), în prezent are două proiecte în desfășurare: posibilitățile post-coloniale ale romilor, și comunități pakistaneze și posibilitățile cotidianului la musulmani. ■ Ethel Brooks si jiekh Romanichel andar e Amerika, thaj Phangluni Sikiarni pala e Jiuveango thaj e Fialosko Sikimata thaj Sociologia kaj Universiteta Rutgers. Voi ramosardeas o lil O Pharadimos ande Gadengi Industria (Universiteta e Minnesotaki Presa, 2007), Kerel akana butyi pala duj proektura: jiekto, e posibilitetura e Romanes pala-o colonialismo; aver, pala e Pakistano komunitetura thaj e sfako gesenge posibilitetura e Mulimanenge (Horaha).