



**Critical**  
Romani Studies



**Roma LGBTI, Feminist Movement and Scholarship**

**VOLUME 4 • NUMBER 1 • 2021**

# Foreword

## Roma LGBTI, Feminist Movement and Scholarship

### Dezso Mate

Guest editor of the thematic issue

dezso.mate@kwi-nrw.de

Academy in Exile Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities,  
Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut (KWI), Essen, Germany

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4602-9939>

Dezso Mate holds a PhD in Interdisciplinary Sociology from Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. He is a former Advanced Research Fellow of the Romani Studies Program at the Central European University. He was a Visiting Research Associate at the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research, University of Sussex and a Junior Research Fellow at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Dezso worked as an international consultant at the Open Society Foundations, where his work focused on the intersectional challenges in public healthcare settings faced by Romani LGBTI people.



In 2022, Romani women are still objectified, sexualized, and forcibly sterilized; Romani transgender people are raped, abused, and excommunicated; Romani people who live with disability(ies) are dehumanized and marginalized; Romani LGBTI<sup>[1]</sup> people are victims of LGBTI-phobic motivated hate crimes and discourse in racist heteronormative non-Romani society and within Romani and LGBTI movements, respectively. Romani LGBTI people face and resist intersectional oppression, internalization, normalized public shaming, and scapegoating. They are violated and excluded intersectionally because of their identities and/or characteristics, as people with disability(ies), social class status, intragroup differences, gender identities, sexuality, age characteristics, or any other intersections of these (Bitu 2009; Brooks 2009; Jovanovic 2009; Matache 2009; Kutic 2013; Baker 2015; Mate 2015; Tiser 2015; Carmen 2016; Fremlova 2017; Corradi 2018; Mate 2020; Fremlova 2021).

When we critically reflect on the development over the past fifty years (1971–2021) of the international Romani movement, we note that Romani LGBTI people and feminist visibility were rarely addressed. However, this does not mean that Romani LGBTI people and feminists were not part of the mainstream Romani movement. Romani LGBTI people consistently have been influential members of the movement for Romani human and political rights emancipation; they had a decisive role in the Romani movement. As the first generation of Romani activists, they resisted together for the first cultural and identity representation of Roma from the 1940s until the 1970s, promoting visibility, equality, and dignity for all. They fought for the autonomy and freedom of Romani arts and culture in particular, as well as for overall Romani emancipation, and leadership (Kallai 2000; Marsh 2007; Junghaus 2014). From 1971, Romani cultural identity politics, with a second generation of Romani intellectuals and resistance as its engine, transformed into an institutional political movement which, by the 1990s, led to the emergence of Romani civil rights activism (Mate 2020; Marton 2021). In the 2000s, a third generation of Romani activists and scholars focused on analysing and resisting antigypsyism, anti-Romani racism,<sup>[2]</sup> and LGBTI-phobia, with knowledge production, cultural representation, human rights recommendations, and protections (Mirga–Kruszelnicka 2018; Fejzula 2019; Rostas 2019; Rovid 2021).

Until the 2010s, due to socially normalized antigypsyism, LGBTI-phobia, and structural social, institutional, and academic oppression, Romani LGBTI people as well as feminist activists and intellectuals lacked voice, visibility, and representations in mainstream (white, middle-class, majoritarian) movements and scholarship. In the early 2000s there was a turning point in Romani history, as physical resistance (demonstrations, hunger strikes, and so on) shifted to intellectual resistance in the field of knowledge production (Bogdan, Ryder, and Taba 2015; Costache 2018).

---

1 LGBTI refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex; Queer, Asexual, and Pansexual identities.

2 The terms *antigypsyism* and *anti-Romani racism* both refer to special forms of racism against Romani people. However, they are not interchangeable. Some scholars argue that the root of *antigypsyism* (Gypsy) is a racial slur and insult, therefore they prefer the terms *anti-Romani racism* or *Romaphobia*. Others argue that *antigypsyism* denotes more than anti-Romani racism. It goes beyond the scope of this footnote to summarize this debate.

The intellectual resistance is based on “*talking back*”, i.e., confronting systemic normalized antigypsyism, anti-Romani racism, and LGBTI-phobia (Mate 2020). In the 2010s, Romani LGBTI and feminist voices were increasingly recognized in academic and activist discourse. Romani LGBTI and feminist movements and scholarship tackle issues of personal freedom and collective emancipation (Kocze 2009; Daroczi and Jovanovic 2015; Heljic 2017; Mate 2017). They contribute to social sciences, policymaking, and community services. Their present recognition is the result of struggles by pioneering Romani LGBTI activists, scholars, and supportive allies (Corradi 2018).

When, on the 12th of October 2014, Vera Kurtic, David Tiser, Jelena Jovanovic, Joci Marton, and myself met at a workshop<sup>[3]</sup> in Budapest, I am not sure whether we were aware of our leading position and power in international Romani LGBTI and feminist activism and scholarship. Before this, each of us had worked separately, mostly at the national and grass-roots levels. We realized that our voices and efforts must unite and support each other, no matter the cost. By 2015, at the first International Romani LGBTI Conference in Prague, (we) the representative participants declared that our intersectional identity ought to be celebrated and protected, and we must build reliable and supportive alliances to minimize oppression within and between our communities. Romani LGBTI people are facing intersectional social oppression and violations between and within their own communities (Romani, LGBTI) on a daily basis. It is essential to openly manifest our community’s lived experiences and to combat intersectional antigypsyism, anti-Romani racism, racialization, exclusions, intolerant attitudes, and hate crimes together. We, as activists, artists, curators, community and political leaders, and scientists, are responsible not only for our own statements and actions but also for the development of future generations’ identity, visibility, and self-esteem.<sup>[4]</sup> Ever since the mid-2010s, our movement has experienced ups and downs: its members shared sensitive emotions, debates, and disagreements. Some members got hurt, some caused harm; some became more visible, others stepped back. Our community is intersectionally vulnerable.

Based on the last decade’s Romani LGBTI- and feminist-lived experience and scholarship, it is appropriate to critically discuss and challenge intersectional antigypsyism and anti-Romani racism across Europe. It is crucial to critically reflect on the controversies of human rights protection, movements, and scholarship. Our present recognition is the result of struggles by pioneering Romani LGBTI activists, scholars, and their supportive allies. To challenge the status quo is a collective aim where Romani, LGBTI people, people of colour, racialized communities, feminists, sex-workers, stigmatized communities with AIDS and HIV, and people with disability(ies), must stand together and demand back - not asking their- our fundamental human rights.

---

3 Roma Research and Empowerment Network – Nothing about us without us? Workshop on Coalition building and transforming the Romani movement: Feminism, LGBT rights, trade unions. Roma Research and Empowerment Network (wordpress.com), 12 October 2014.

4 Prague Declaration – First International Roma LGBTIQ Conference (13–14 August 2015), ARA ART, o.s. Prague Declaration final (araart.cz)

## Resilience and Resistance

Being a founding member of the current international Romani LGBTI movement and scholarship is challenging both mentally and physically. The cost of all our work, efforts, and actions is paid in our health, personal security, and relationships. We are targeted, labelled, dehumanized, stigmatized, and exiled on a daily basis. Is it really worth it? I can categorically state that an increasing number of Romani LGBTI people and supportive alliances continue to join our movement with pride and dignity mean, so yes, it's worth it!

We are vulnerable but resistant and resilient. This period is a critical landmark in Romani her/they/hi(s) story due to physical resistance that has transformed into intellectual resilience.

Before continuing, let's circle back because resilience and resistance are popular but frequently misused terms. The notion of *resilience* appeared in the early 1970s in ecological terms; it was then adopted in a socio-ecological context. In the 1990s it was observed and noted in social-psychology, education, and development studies. In 1991, Hispanic children who lived in the United States were observed, despite their low socio-economic status and a discriminatory institutional environment, to achieve outstanding results at school when mentored by a supportive educator. These students were known as invulnerable (Alva and Padilla 1991). In the European context, Edith H. Grotberg came to similar conclusions when she was examining trauma in early childhood lived experiences. Grotberg's research results and observations verified resilience as well. Students examined by her went on to achieve outstanding performance in their careers, and the assumed motivation was their compliance and conformity to the majority. She named these children resilient (Grotberg 1995).

*Resistance* not only denotes social action by people but silence, too, as well as various forms of arts, cultural, and knowledge production, representations, and symbols. It correlates with the material environment, through which people are able to physically challenge the status quo in different places and spaces such as walls, buildings, streets, squares, institutions, or even an entire country. An act of resistance transforms and strengthens identity politics. To sustain resistance and disempower social structures, the actions must be constantly repeated, evaluated, and re-considered.

Resilience refers to inner balance, maintained despite the forces of oppression. It is a flexible adaptation which is able to regain its previous solid state when facing unexpected psychological or physical shocks and/or violations. Resilient people are part of the resistance movement. Resistance is mostly associated with visible places, whereas resilience is an inner flexible ability, therefore resilient people are the foundations of movements. Resistance and resilience complement one another: one cannot exist without the other (Mate 2020; Selling 2021).

## The Politics of (Mis)Representations and Alliances

The ideology of antigypsyism and heteronormativity was generated by external non-Romani, cisgender, heterosexual, privileged discourse, which often presents a racialized, classist, sexist, and objectified conceptualization of intersectional LGBTI people. These dehumanizing stigmatizations excluded our own narratives and representations, limited our access to knowledge and its production; i.e., the needs, visibility, representations, and lived experiences of intersectional LGBTI people. Romani and LGBTI persons, people of colour, sex-workers, and people with disability(ies) face similar structures of oppression, unspoken violations, and harassment. Repeated struggles form lines around those who now enjoy absolute rights and freedoms in today's movement, politics, and alliance. Having our allies' engaged support is more important than ever. The theory of collective action states that cooperation, ideally, promotes common good for all. It could generate a solid commonwealth via group cooperation and reliability (Mancur 1965). Only through open cooperation can dominant groups and the subaltern enjoy the results of collective action (Spivak 1995).

Taking pride as a Romani LGBTI person, but recognizing my privileges as a cisgender man, I was delighted to find that there are coalitions in the cross-movements which preserve a safe space and place, even though we share similar forms of social exclusion, oppression, and violation. Although there are tensions between academic and activist positionalities in the Romani, and more specifically in the Romani LGBTI movement, our joint aim is to promote social change. However, ethnic (Romani vs. non-Romani) and gender identities, sexuality, social class status, and life experiences shape the movement's drives, expectations, and results. We have to appreciate and respect each other's identities, characteristics, and boundaries, not to hurt, shame, or violate one another, nor reinforce the structures of social oppression.

In order to critically analyse the Romani LGBTI movement's leadership, representation, and visualization, it is essential to acknowledge Romani LGBTI members' academic, cultural, and life experiences. The embodied position of allies – even with supportive intentions – risk to (re)colonize the representation of the Romani LGBTI and Romani feminist movements. Non-Romani LGBTI voices and knowledge can undermine our visibility and the movement. The politics of recognition and epistemic justice requires the privileged *not* to direct the representations and knowledge production of the vulnerable, for the simple reason they have never experienced the reality of Romani LGBTI people or Romani women.

Alliances must recognize when they suppress community members' representation and leadership, and try not to create more harm and inequality than reliability and support. If a single person is hurt by such an alliance in the movement, then the whole community falls victim to epistemic violation. On the other hand, personal and social privileges must be mobilized to promote and strengthen our communities for the collective good. Common or shared identities are not sufficient to assume leadership in any movement, especially in the Romani LGBTI movement. Self-centred power practice damages those who are invisible, vulnerable, and powerless. Egocentric competition creates oppression and misrepresentation for hidden members of the movement. The position of the oppressed via such "puppet" power can easily shift to the oppressor, with no acknowledgment or acceptance of subconscious self-colonization. Acting in solidarity requires an understanding of whom the individual is acting in solidarity with, and why. Alliance building faces two challenges: first, the role of allies in the conceptualization and deliberation of

the values of emancipation. Second, the position and power of allies within the movement, concerning issues of visibility and representation.

Academic and activist discourse – even with good intentions – often reproduce “othering” images of Roma. Narratives of “underclass”, “ethnic minority”, “disadvantaged group”, and “catching up” play this role. Critical self-narratives are necessary to analyse the social and historical embeddedness of such categories and distinctions as “Roma/Gadjo” and “Gypsy/Peasant”. In cases where scientific “discourse” is about the underclass, the poor, the minority, the disadvantaged, catching up, or ethnicity, everyone clearly knows that the subject is “the Gypsy”. These positions are currently still at odds with what practitioners of privileged science call “suffering discourse”. However, in order that forward-looking social change and mobility take place, scientific self-narrative and objective reflection are necessary.

Romani LGBTI people are not simply “commentators” or “members of activism”. Vanishing our knowledge, representation, and visibility, is epistemic violation.

WE ARE THE MOVEMENT!

### **The Present Thematic Issue**

This special issue arose from the “Romani LGBTQ Movement and Gender Politics” panel which was part of at the Critical Approaches to Romani Studies conference held at the Central European University on 15–17 May 2019. By organizing the panel my initial intention was to bring public attention to how Romani LGBTI and feminist narratives and academic knowledge is part and parcel of society’s day-to-day reality. The panel included three papers. Vera Kurtic from Serbia presented her academic narrative on the Romani Lesbian Movement and Existence. David Tiser gave a political-activist speech on the Roma LGBTIQA Movement and the Role of ARA ART, the pioneering organization he founded in the Czech Republic. I gave a paper on Romani LGBTQ Intersectional Marginalization and Social Distances.

The thematic issue begins with Laura Corradi’s new-wave paper discussing social (mis)representations and identity politics of the “Gypsy Queer” versus self-representations emerging from activists’ experiences. Following Corradi’s article, Arman Heljic provides a critical intersectional analysis of the theatre play *Roma Armea*. Heljic addresses the preconceptions and representations of Romani queer and feminist identities by examining individual narratives and the self-envisioning of queer and feminist Romani entertainers.

Justyna Matkowska offers an excellent overview of Romani woman representations in contemporary Polish and Romani literary texts. Her research demonstrates how the perception of Romani women influenced artistic imagination and literary discourses. Ahmad Al-Kurdi’s article gives a precise analysis of intersectional inequalities faced by queer Roma women, where economic and symbolic inequalities are similarly intertwined. The last academic paper is David Szoke’s essay which examines the violations of the Pro Juventute organisation against the Yenish minority community. In his essay, Szoke analyses how state power intended to “stop vagrancy” and, from 1926 to 1970, purify Swiss society from the “genetically degenerate”. During this period almost 2,000 children were forced from their families and

placed in psychiatric institutions, prisons, or given to foster families, where they were exposed to mental and physical abuse.

The thematic issue includes two book reviews. Silvia Cittadini offers a profound overview of the autobiography of Mikey Walsh's *Gypsy Boy. My Life in the Secret World of the Romany Gypsies*. Erika Bernacchi undertakes a deep and much needed review of Laura Corradi's *Gypsy Feminism. Intersectional Politics, Alliances, Gender and Queer Activism*. Both books and their reviews provide insight into a world of intersectional oppression.

In the Arts and Culture section Daniel Baker presents the narrative and background of the "Altered States: LGBTQ-R" flag, which became the symbol of the international Romani LGBTI movement and scholarship. The cover of the current special issue is elevated by Baker's artwork and generous contribution. In terms of narrative record and cultural memory, the journal includes the speech David Tiser delivered at Central European University in 2019. Tiser is the executive director of ARA ART, a Czech association which focuses on artistic creation and organizes national and international cultural events, amongst other cultural and social activities. A unique mission of ARA ART is to support Romani LGBTI people, raise awareness, and offer advocacy and identity development.

Isaac Blake is the executive director of the Welsh Romani Cultural & Arts Company (RCAC) and previously studied and worked as a choreographer and professional dancer. In his work with the RCAC, Isaac has developed arts and performance programmes with communities living on Gypsy and Traveller caravan sites, in housing and in accommodation, working with children, young people and adults. Blake's arts and culture narrative, offers a unique overview of Romani arts, dance, and advocacy in action.

The thematic issue is the result of more than two years of intensive work. I believe its academic results and narratives will contribute to future Romani LGBTI generation's pride and critical knowledge production.

I would like to sincerely express my gratitude to journal contributors, to all the anonymous double-blind peer reviewer scholars, journalists, and arts and cultural professionals.

Keep on being resilient and resistant!

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the Advanced Research Fellowship of the Romani Studies Program at the Central European University from which I benefited in 2019/2020 and the ongoing Academy in Exile Fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities at Kulturwissenschaftliches Institute in Essen, Germany, which allowed me to edit this thematic issue.

## References

- Alva, Sylvia Alatorre, and Amado M. Padilla. 1991. "Academic Invulnerability Among Mexican Americans". *Journal of Educational Issue of Language Minority Students* 15, Winter.
- Baker, Daniel. 2015. "The Queer Gypsy". Nothing About Us Without Us? Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production. *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre* 2: 87–93.
- Bitu, Nicoleta. (2009. "The Situation of Roma/Gypsy Women in Europe", *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women's Journal* 1 (1): 222–233. Summer.
- Bogdan, Maria, Andrew Ryder, and Marius Taba. 2015. "The Roma Spring: Knowledge Production and the Search for a New Humanity". Nothing About Us Without Us? Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production. *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre* 2: 33–37.
- Brooks, Ethel C. 2009. "(Mis)Recognitions: Romanies, Sexualities, Sincerities". *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women's Journal* 1 (1) 21–29. Summer.
- Corradi, Laura. 2018. *Gypsy Feminism. Intersectional Politics, Alliances, Gender and Queer Activism*. Routledge, London.
- Costache, Ioanida. 2018. "Reclaiming Romani-ness: Identity Politics, Universality and Otherness Or, Towards a (New) Romani Subjectivity". *Critical Romani Studies* 1 (1): 30–43.
- Daroczi, Anna Csilla, and Jelena Jovanovic. 2015. "Still Missing Intersectionality, the relevance of feminist methodologies in the struggle for the rights of Roma". Nothing About Us Without Us? Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production. *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre* 2: 79–83.
- Fejzula, Sebijan. 2019. "The Anti-Roma Europe: Modern Ways of Disciplining the Roma Body in Urban Spaces", *Revista Direito e Práxis* 10 (3): 2097–2116.
- Fremlova, Lucie. 2017. "The Experiences of Romani LGBTIQ People: Queer(Y)(Ing) Roma." Doctoral Thesis, University of Brighton.
- . 2021. *Queer Roma*. Routledge, London.
- Gheorghe, Carmen. 2016. "Envisioning Roma Feminism". *Analyze: Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies* 7: 15–18.
- Grotberg, H. Edith. 1995. *A Guide to Promoting Resilience in Children: Strengthening the Human Spirit. Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections* 8. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- Heljic, Arman. 2017. "I Am Not Sorry for Being Different: The Hate Speech Monologues". *The London Reader Summer*, 37–39.
- Junghaus, Tímea. 2014. "Roma Art: Theory and Practice". *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 59 (1): 25–42.
- Jovanovic, Djordje. 2009. "The Difference That Makes a Difference; We Need More Guts!" "Multiple Discrimination" Issue, *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre* 2: 41–47.
- Kallai, Erno. 2000. "The Roma and Research on the Roma". In *Caught in the Trap of Integration: Roma Problems and Prospects in Hungary*, edited by Jenő Boszormenyi and Marta Józsa, 54–58. Budapest: Bureau for European Comparative Minority Research.
- Kocze, Angela. 2009. *Missing Intersectionality. Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Class in Current Research and Policies on Romani Women in Europe*. Budapest: Central European University.

- Kurtic, Vera. 2013. “*Diuvljarka: Roma Lesbian Existence*”. European Roma Rights Centre Gender Research Fellowship, Nis: European Roma Rights Centre – ERRC.
- Mancur, Olson. 1965. “The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups”. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Marton, Jozsef. 2021. “*Owning the Game: Intersectional Self-Representation in the Roma LGBTQ+ communities*”. RomaMoMA Blog, European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture e.V.
- Marsh, Adrian. 2007. “Research and the Many Representations of Romani Identity”. *Perceptions. Roma Rights: Quarterly Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre* 3: 17–30.
- Matache, Margareta. 2009. “Gender Equality, Sense of Belonging, Both?”. *Nevi Sara Kali: Roma Women’s Journal* 1 (1): 45–59. Summer.
- Mate, Dezso. 2015. “Faced with Multiple ‘Values’ – From the Perspective of the Roma LGBTQ Community”. Nothing About Us Without Us? Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production. *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre* 2: 93–97.
- . 2017. *The First Sparks of the Romani LGBTQ Movement*. Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER), School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex. pp. 1–6.
- . 2020a. “Framing Romani LGBTQI Equality Emancipation and Intersection”. *Mijn Verhaal, Mon Historie, My Story*. Faber Publishers, Belgium, ERGO Network, Balkan LGBTQI 128–131.
- . 2020b. “*Generational Changes of the Romani Intellectuals Life Paths. The Effects of the Social Resilience*”. Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) Faculty of Social Sciences Doctoral School of Sociology Interdisciplinary Social Research Programme. Budapest: PhD Dissertation.
- Mirga-Kruszelnicka, Anna. 2018. “Challenging Antigypsyism in Academia: The Role of Romani Scholars”. *Journal of Critical Romani Studies* 1 (1): 8–28.
- Selling, Jan. 2021. “*Romani Resistance and the Struggle for Historical Justice in Norway and Sweden*”. In *Re-thinking Roma Resistance*, edited by Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka and K. Dunajeva. Berlin: Eriac.org.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1995. “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. In *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 24–28. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rostas, Iulius. 2019. *A Task for Sisyphus: Why Europe’s Roma Policies Fail*, Budapest & New York: Central European University Press.
- Rovid, Marton. 2021. “From Tackling Antigypsyism to Remedying Racial Injustice”. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2021.1972126
- Tiser, David. 2015. “They Become Stigmatised in Their Own Family”. Nothing About Us Without Us. Roma Participation in Policy Making and Knowledge Production. *Roma Rights: Journal of the European Roma Rights Centre* 2: 99–100.