Affective Politics and Alliances in 'Queering the Gypsy' and Facing Antigypsyism in the LGBT Milieu

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CRS **Critical Romani Studies**

Abstract

This essay engages with issues of homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Romani/Gypsy/Traveller (RGT) communities. A lack of acceptance, marginalization, and at times expulsion of Queer people from RGT communities is a source of suffering for individuals and their families – with political consequences in terms of solidarity and alliances. Sexual minorities within marginalized ethnic and non-ethnic RGT minorities, when excluded, can be regarded as a threat to the social cohesion of the group and to internal social ties based on common struggles for economic and cultural justice. Acceptance for Queer people in RGT communities may also improve relations with social movements' alliances, a sensible and necessary step – primarily in the anti-racist and feminist arenas, movements for social rights, i.e., jobs and housing.

The paper discusses social (mis)representations of the 'Gypsy Queer' vs. self-representations emerging from activists' experiences. In light of 'affective politics' – s conceptualized by Sara Ahmed – experiences of Homo-Lesbo-Bi-Trans-phobia in the RGT communities and 'soft' anti-gypsyism in Queer communities are addressed. In conclusion, affective politics are viewed in the frame suggested by Judith Okely around Roma-Gypsy-Traveller cultural identity "constructed through opposition, not isolation"; through the mirror of Jasbir Puar's theory of identity created in the constant and aware, individual and collective, *assemblage* of parts of self; and as an element of 'travelling activism' – practice of "mobilizing hybrid forms of expertise and knowledge across space and difference" contesting both territorialization and ethnicization, as in Van Baar.

Introduction

This work can be considered a position paper advocating in favour of alliances contrasting antigypsyism in society and in the academic world (Corradi 2018; Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2018), and to strengthen Roma/Gypsy/Traveller (RGT) communities, by offering a better understanding of affective politics and positive attitudes toward LGBTIA-Queer people. In the following pages I mostly use the umbrella term 'Queer' coined by Teresa De Lauretis (1991), unless indicated otherwise by the authors I am referring to; and explain the meaning of this word as proposed by Halprein (1997). I will engage with issues surrounding the existence of homophobia, lesbophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Roma/Gypsy/Traveller communities. A lack of acceptance, marginalization, and at times expulsion of Queer people from RGT communities is a source of suffering for individuals and their families – with political consequences in terms of solidarity and alliances. The exclusion of sexual minorities within marginalized ethnic or non-ethnic minorities can be regarded as a threat to the social cohesion of the group, since it weakens internal social ties and the common struggle for economic and cultural justice. The lack of acceptance of Queer people also undermines relations and possible alliances between RGT activists and social movements such as broad feminist and anti-racist arenas; urban movements for social rights, health, and environment; and local mobilizations for land occupations and squats in houses (Maestri 2019).

As Dezső Máté pointed out, there is a plenty of literature about Roma and even more about non-heterosexual people – but very little on the intersecting social group of both identities. In fact, the RGT Queer is "surrounded by a lack of awareness and taboo – and is therefore invisible" (Máté 2017). Being part of two ostracized communities, Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Trans and Gypsy-Roma-Traveller people still happen to be considered deviant and dangerous – symbolically or materially – and get easily stigmatized and 'inferiorized' in media, science, and institutions. Dezső Máté underlines how the phenomenon of Roma Queer have *multiple dimensions* (still to be fully investigated) none of which has being taken seriously in the mainstream media or social media, but mostly oriented to spectacularized RGT people, as we will see in the next section.

As an introduction I want to reveal my positionality in respect to the topic, and a feminist intersectional standpoint[1] which I have adopted over the last three decades. Positionality is a methodology requesting researchers question themselves on their own privileges and reveal their viewpoints. "Academic rigor" is often mistaken as impartial and nonaligned research or theories, yet no knowledge is neutral: all production of data, facts, or experience is always "located" in terms of gender, sex, class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, culture, language, status, age, and geopolitical background. In other words, the researcher's awareness and work is always affected by his/her/their standpoint (Harding 2004). So is mine: I identify

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1 The intersectional approach teaches how systems of inequalities are characterized by multiple hierarchies; in order to overcome sexual and racial subjugation (of women, men and all those who do not recognize themselves in the binary opposition male/female), other traits also need to be taken into account: class, status/cast, colour, culture, religion/spirituality, sexual orientation, disabilities, and geopolitical background. All these 'interlocking categories of oppression' have to be addressed *simultaneously* (Davis 1981; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Hurtado 1989; Hill Collins 1990; Yuval- Davis 2006, 2012; Lykke, 2010; Hancock 2007; Walby 2007; Bitu, Vincze 2012; Jovanović, Kóczé, Balogh 2015; Collins, Bilge 2016; Corradi 2018).

as a Mediterranean Indo-European cis-woman Traveller, working-class academic, Queer eco-feminist – deeply influenced by the politics of indigeneity and nomadic thinking, active in decolonizing social movements. From this *located knowledge* (Haraway 1988), which is relevant for the topic, I am going to offer a non-Romani Gypsy perspective, being self-reflective of the social and political privilege I enjoy as a fair-skinned person, and aware of the debate around critical whiteness (Fremlova 2018). I will proceed on a reasoning path, from surface to depth, from margin to center (hooks 1984). The methodology of this work is qualitative and intuitive, based on different state of the art sources of scholarly work; in other words, I try to combine personal perceptions, sociological imagination, and insightful readings: a non-dichotomous (*advaita* in Sanskrit) viewpoint.

Section one looks at social representation of the Gypsy Queer through a simple search on Google; section two deals with discrimination based on literature regarding sexual orientation within the RGT community and the social invisibility of the Gypsy Queer in everyday life; section three addresses antigypsyism in the Queer community both in terms of soft-racism and the lack of political attention around this relevant type of racism, the only one still admitted in Europe; section four introduces the reader to the concept of 'affective politics', emotions around sexuality and ethnicity, and possible alliances between Gypsy and Queer people; and with other indigenous 'stateless collectives'. Alliances are also discussed in the conclusion as a process deeply combined with critical identity construction and the decolonization of western internalized assumptions.

1. Social Representations of the 'Gypsy Queer' on the Web

Social representations of reality are culturally and historically determined; they are based on bodies of ideas and practices that are socially constructed (Durkheim 1912; Moscovici 1961; Berger and Luckman 1966; Goffman 1979) and can be seen as a barometer of the unequal distribution of power, both mirroring and reinforcing social hierarchies of class, race/ethnicity/colour, gender, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation (Corradi 2012). In this section I will first describe and analyze three examples of social misrepresentations of the Queer Gypsy, corresponding to main stereotypes. One proposes a sexualized form of a conventional gay male; another makes fun of Gypsy traditional culture around marriage, and the last is a case of plain cultural appropriation. Second, I will turn to good practices of autonomously produced social representation.

Ten years ago, while surfing the Internet for the keywords 'Queer' and 'Gypsy', nothing could be found. Today, the search offers a variety of soft 'Gypsy porn' attributed to 'Gay Gypsies'; websites such as Top Gay Gypsy Boys show a number of pictures among which are fake sunglass ads, 'metrosexual' young men in sexy poses, and stereotypical bodily displays of expensive status symbols. Unsurprisingly, this website on supposed Gay Gypsy Boys published in 2010 did not become popular; it only received one 'like', by the same author of the video, who signed himself off as 'Gypsy Fag Report'.[2]

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2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwEU1BANwYI.

The notorious six-season series 'My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding' did not forgo its own 'Queer Gypsy' title to attract new viewers. The video description has: "A [G]ypsy bride-to-be [who] finds herself caught in a love triangle with two potential suitors – and a bridesmaid from hell". Since the series is known for reinforcing heteronormativity and gender roles, one would wonder about which type of 'queerness' is going to be offered – in this case an unreal spicy 'triangle'. The video clearly displays its intention of deriding the Traveller lifestyle and the traditional importance of marriage. Its implausible narrative is based on the groom's scorn. Far from being credible, it is merely a series of dialogues in which a husband-to-be acts out a jealous scene concerning a supposed 'cell-phone relationship'. Both characters, bride and groom, are infantilized and seem ridiculous in order to make fun of this fake tragic event and add contempt as a stereotypically dramatic way of expressing discomfort.

Another video I want to analyze is 'Gypsy Queen' by Chris Norman. Although the title recalls Drag Queens, it does not deal with Trans-life in RGT communities – despite what one would expect. Instead, it displays an all-white women's group line-dancing in a gym – to the song 'Gypsy Queen' as its soundtrack – again raising the problem of cultural appropriation of Gypsy music, clothes, jewelry and stories in the entertainment industry, as well as in fashion and handicraft markets (Corradi 2018). In a neoliberal world, where even plants and seeds are patented, indigenous populations are constantly robbed of their resources, lands, cultural products, and freedom; this process also effects RGT, often considered 'the last indigenous peoples of Europe'. This type of dispossession continues because of endemic antigypsyism, the inferiorization of the Gypsy body, and a lack of recognition that has been highlighted by Roma activists, of which the group 'Gallery 8' posits:

> The social assignment of Roma Bodies to an underclass is an historical construct that has multiple origins, rooted in the institutions of both slavery and mass media. It theorizes how race is enacted in the moment of the gaze, and how this spectatorial surveillance complicates social relations because of how it is historically and inextricably woven into the European collective consciousness and the European cultural ethos via popular media (2015).

The reappropriation of ethnic signs and the struggle against the trade of bodies and cultural products in the all-pervasive market are political struggles of indigenous and nomadic people all over the world. This is particularly true of Aboriginals, Adivasi, First Nation, and other Native populations, among which it is important to mention the Maori of New Zealand/Aotearoa, who have been remarkably successful in asserting their own reality as *Kaupapa* (knowledge) over which they own natural rights. However, RGT epistemologies, realities, and emotions still go largely unrecognized and are subjected to looting by the fashion world, mass-media, and the advertising industry.

In the context of ethnocide and dispossession, the bodies and sexuality of indigenous people has also been colonized for centuries, during which "a narrow view of sexual relationships was imposed on indigenous societies, a process that was facilitated by the dominant influence of Christian missionaries" (Hutchings 2007, 17). For indigenous and marginalized people, the "understanding of our sexuality today is heavily influenced by the historical understandings passed down to us by our ancestors. Gradually, as we uncover the truth about what our ancestors believed and peel back the veneer of colonization, it becomes clear that the sexuality of indigenous people is vastly different from the dominant Western paradigm that has been applied around the world" (*ibid*).

At this point I would like to offer two positive counterexamples of online social representations. Both do not arise in virtually manufactured settings but in real political circumstances. In the first, a traditional Romani leader expresses solidarity with LGBTQ people, while the second regards the participation of Travellers in an historical Gay Parade. These can be seen as cases of enacting *voice* (Hirshman 1970) and political agency toward the reappropriation of the Gypsy body image. They also serve as grounds for alliances, representing the outcome of the activities by two different groups of Gypsy Queer activists. A self-representation of the Gypsy Queer milieu is offered by QRTV Europa, featuring pictures of a public demonstration called 'Gypsy Queer Happy',[3] a public event held in Hungary since 2015. The introduction to the website refers to the Prague Declaration:

> LGBTQI Roma, Gypsy, Sinti and Travellers across Europe face multiple marginalization and discrimination at the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and/or sexual orientation. It is an issue that has not been recognized and/or addressed yet by the international human/Roma/LGBTQI rights community (Prague Declaration, ARA ART, 2015).

In the video reporting the first edition of the event, the main organizer of the Pride floats, László Farkas (whose DJ name is Gypsyrobot) spoke about social problems and international movements among Roma LGBTQI people. In his speech, he addresses Roma LGBTQI people who are still struggling with their own identities:

> LGBTQI-Roma in Europe face multiple discrimination due to multiple identities such as ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. It is an issue that has not received sufficient attention in the society and media. Our goals with the Roma-LGBTQI float are to support Roma people, who are struggling with their identity of being 'different'. As a Roma, it can be harder to reach self-acceptance because of the fear of the unknown (lack of information about homosexuality) and the prejudices they already face.[4]

The float is meant to find political cohesion and alliances – with a warm "welcome to join the float, independent of racial, sexual and other background!" – and to outline a programme of action with the following goals: to empower Roma LGBTQI people to accept their identity and eventually "come out of the closet"; to raise awareness of "Roma and non-Roma communities of the importance of acceptance vis-à-vis the LGBTQI community"; to show that "Roma and non-Roma can work together on issues like equality" and to commemorate Milán Rózsa, the LGBTQI and human rights activist whose work in Hungary was crucial for the movement. The clarity of political aims, by using an intersectional approach, is effective in inviting horizontal alliances; while the analysis of the problems, in terms of multiple discrimination, should interpellate and question those European institutions which addressed the issue (par. 14, Dir 2000/43/CE) with little success twenty years ago.

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3 https://qrtv.eu/en/qrtv-baxtaroam-2018-gypsy-queer-happy/#

4 Also the activist Jenő Setét – talks about gay rights as a Roma man https://qrtv.eu/en/as-roma-we-must-speak-out-also-for-the-rights-of-gay-people-interview-with-jeno-setet

Other recent initiatives have similar political features. On 7 July 2018, the 'Gypsy Queer Happy' group took to the streets and participated in the 23rd Budapest Pride march under the banner "Roma-LGBTQI people, heterosexuals and non-Roma marched together for equality, diversity and freedom." The leader of the *Idetartozunk* [We belong here] Association made a declaration about the situation of LGBTQI people in Hungarian Roma communities. An activist (also known as Brada) confirmed the solidarity of his association toward LGBTQI people and said: "I don't believe in a country where anyone can be humiliated or beaten up, just because they belong to a group. And I don't believe either that I don't have anything to do with it, even if it's not directly about my group. *Te is a nemzet resze vagy* (You are also part of the nation)."[5]

In the UK, the Travellers LGBT+ mobilized in June 2019. The participation of a delegation of Queer Gypsies at London Pride was very successful. Activists taking part in Traveller Pride included Showmen, Gypsies, Irish Travellers, New Travellers, Roma, and Bargee/Boaters. For the first time ever, Roma Gypsies and Travellers took a public stand in the main LGBT+ event in the UK and were recognized as part of the larger community. The physical presence was marked with a 'Traveller Pride' banner; a good number of Queer Gypsies wearing red 'Traveller Pride' t-shirts; the Romani flag as well as our voices and smiles, together with awareness of being part of an historical moment. Thousands of stickers distributed in the million-people annual march were not a drop in the ocean; they were the missing salt in the Pride event: from now on our voice can make a difference in this social movement. As Travellers' Pride organizer Tyler Hatwell commented, it took 47 years, but we are here to stay; the press welcomed the event: "Travellers are making history."[6]

Media representations (particularly around identities in social movements) are a sensitive indicator of change and resistance to change. They play a pivotal role in two contrasting ways: first, by reinforcing the colonial gaze of white supremacy and heteronormativity, legitimizing prejudice towards sexual and cultural minorities; and second by proposing and spreading new ideas, behaviours, experiences, and politics oriented toward liberation. Alliances that mobilize resources in communication can have a strategic impact in combatting antigypsyism, enabling unforeseen possibilities of action, amplifying social influence, and strengthening solidarity ties across communities and borders.

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5 There are two different meanings for this word, as used in queer nation or gypsy nation – without reference to a specific land to conquer or defend, no state, no army. More on Idetartozunk Association and the Budapest Roma Pride Day in https://idetartozunk.eu; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j95C1e4wvqs; with subtitles on Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/312383267

6 Indira Warnes, "The Travellers making history at the Pride", https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2019/07/travellers-making-history-pride; Mike Doherty, 'Travellers make history in the London Pride Parade' July 11th, 2019 'https://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/news/travellers--london-pride-parade. Photographs by Joseph Mitchell (www.josephmitchell.org). Traveller's pre-pride event at King's College https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/traveller-pride-event-celebrating-gypsy-feminism-tickets-63420786279. See also the report of the RGT Lgbtqi Conference held in Wales, august 2019 https://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/news/2019/08/historic-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-lgbtqi-conference-wales-downloadable-full-report

2. Fighting Homo-Lesbo-Bi-Trans-phobia in Gypsy Communities

In this section I will discuss literature by scholar/activists about discrimination based on gender and sexual identities. Fiore Manzo, Romani student, poet, and activist, wrote a final paper about the status of sexual minorities in his Romani community, after interviewing a small number of people and finding evidence of exclusionary practices and painful discrimination. As reported, at times the 'diverse' person had to leave the place and go elsewhere. The very fact of talking with a 'faggot' – as someone who does not conform to homosocial rules – made people subject to marginalization and mockery. Over the last decade this topic became part of theoretical and empirical research by several authors who pointed out the existence of homophobia, lesbophobia, bi-phobia, and transphobia in Roma/Gypsy/Traveller communities, and how the problem should be addressed (Horvath 2010; Okely 2010; Fremlova and Georgescu 2014; Baker 2015; Dunajeva, Kóczé, and Cemlyn 2015; Máté 2015).

Dezso Máté (2015) recognizes that Queer people are also afflicted by homophobic attitudes in the Romani community and writes in the context of five different types of oppression suggested by Marion Young (exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural dominance, and violence) played out on those who have non-heterosexual orientations or express gender identities socially perceived as gender 'non-conforming' because of the binary dominant paradigm. The 'identity-development stages' reported by Dezso Máté indicate the different phases individuals go through: shame/shock, anger/denial, proof, reconciliation, and pride. Such steps are comparatively analysed as they manifest among the Roma and in the Queer milieu:

> The starting points for both communities are the same. Both communities are faced with harm (false portrayals, harassment and discrimination) and try to ward off the negative impacts of this. This is an independent and defensive emotional mechanism in their personal development. After recognising their own vulnerability, the individual experiences wrath, anger and self-hatred (Máté 2015, 96).

The main differences between Romani identity and Romani LGBTQ identity, concludes Dezso Máté, are based on approaches to the level of the 'pride' related to the extent of self-acceptance and community support. In his qualitative research, significant parts of the interviews are discussed; I found it quite surprising that Romani LGBTQ individuals' partners are (in 12 cases out of 15) foreigners who belong to the majority society – which is probably an indicator of the absence of a Romani Queer community where members can regularly meet, nationwide and across borders, and develop political ties, friendships, and relationships.

Such needs for a safe space are expressed by Vera Kurtic, in her book *D ž u v l j a r k e,* where she discusses the situation of Romani lesbians in Serbia, who "suffer from multiple forms of marginalization, forced to live an invisible existence, and as such remain vulnerable to all possible forms of discrimination and violence." Kurtic's work wants "to ensure that when lesbian existence is discussed, the conversation opens a path leading to the empowerment of these women, who are, at the moment nameless and invisible and

remain objects of shame and victims of multiple forms of violence and discrimination." Similarities in the exclusion of Queer and Romani people are mentioned in her study.

> The *community of those who do not belong* represents a new political voice whose historical position is in total opposition to the position of patriarchal dominance, capitalism and colonialism and who, from such a position, can construct an identity of their own, comprised of respect for the other and our diversity. The Roma community can be a part of this, as it shares the experience of not belonging to the majority, the same as the LGBTIQ communities (Kurtic 2012, 92, *author's emphasis*).

Kurtic's narrative is very useful to social sciences for at least three good reasons: first, it enables an understanding of the nuances of cultural/ethnic Romani activism as fashioned in relation to women – whose traditional values as mothers are still predominant in these communities.

> There are a number of examples where Roma activists, or those who identify themselves as such, attempted to address, or raise awareness about 'Romani women's issues,' however, these attempts usually centered on organizing folklore events, which were aimed at preserving and promoting 'tradition.' Other efforts actually perpetuated gender roles, by focusing solely on reproductive health issues among Roma populations.

The second reason relates to her decision to disclose her experience of patriarchal resistance to change among male activists.

> In fact, there has been strong resistance coming from the mainstream, male-dominated Roma Rights movement to solely discuss Romani women. I myself have received instructions from some Roma activists that I am only 'allowed' to speak publicly about Romani women's oppression within the context of forced sterilizations perpetrated by state institutions in the region, and I have also been warned that I should never mention the arranged marriages or bride sales which occur in my own Roma community.

The third reason I found her work helpful is that it confirms problems – already mentioned by Ethel Brooks (2012) – in alliances with *gadje* women: Kurtic pins down different ways in which mainstream feminism pays so little attention to Romani women – which, in so doing, makes negotiation toward shared ground in the gender struggles agenda harder.

> When it comes to the mainstream, majority society women's movement and women's civil society groups generally, Romani women's rights have been and remain an area of little interest, and for most feminist organizations there is neither time nor space on their political agendas to think or act either on behalf of or together with Romani women.

An important distinction made by Vera Kurtic is between Romani lesbians and Romani feminists, often assimilated in the public discourse; in fact, "not all lesbians are feminists or activists". At the same time, she makes a distinction between women's groups and feminist groupsm for "not all Romani women

activists are automatically feminists". Kurtic denounces inferiorizing discursive practices around how non-Romani (Gadje) women complain about being *fed up with Romani women and their demands* – an irritation with a racist and classist undertone. "As a lesbian," Kurtic states, "I can say that a similar dialogue takes place regarding sexual orientation. The experiences of Romani lesbians living in Serbia are a clear example, illustrating the intersecting burdens of gender, race, nationality, class and minority sexual existence" (2012, 4).

The social invisibility of people bearing both stigmas as Queer and Gypsy results in a relational absence: if nobody knows about Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Trans and Intersexuals in the Romani, Gypsy, and Traveller communities, they *do not exist*. And simultaneously they undergo processes of 'phantomization' which take place where socially undesired qualities are attached to the unknown, transforming the marginals, the poor, the 'diverse' into shadows; 'imaginary' subjects and are found guilty and thrown to the last level of social exclusion (Corradi 2018). In a study edited by Lucia Fremlova and Mara Georgescu, we find some examples of caste-based exclusion which emerges as specific feature in the hetero-normative Romani community, adding issues of purity differentials to the known types of discrimination; according to Czech Roma LGBT activist David Tiser,[7] Romani LGBT people are the most vulnerable group who face triple discrimination: as Roma, as LGBT people, and as LGBT people in the Romani community.

> In the case of young Roma LGBT living in ghettos, there is a fourth ground for discrimination: exclusion. (…) Some traditional Roma in the Czech Republic and Slovakia still maintain the concept of caste reflected in the Roma tradition of ritual purity, according to which some people in the Roma communities cannot take part in the preparation of food. Similarly, in some families, LGBT people are still perceived as unclean. If they touch a plate or other items, everything has to be thrown away after they have left because it is unclean, or they have their separate plates and cutlery (Fremlova and Georgescu 2014, 22–23).

While discriminatory practices are still common, there are cases about how loving families and intra-communal solidarity can facilitate social processes of recognition and approval, and where subjects can rely on one another, shaping situations where young Queer Roma are not excluded. A couple of women living together in a camp in Serbia achieved recognition as a family during the relocation process and were assigned a house together (Fremlova and Georgescu 2014).

There are good practices where Queer Gypsies are accepted in the peer groups and in the clan, sometimes even when they are in positions of leadership. To do this, taking public stands in favour of the acceptance of sexual diversity, 'coming out' sessions, and debates are happening. As reported in *The Travellers' Times*, Isaac Blake, the Romani director and founder of the Romani Cultural and Arts Company attended the 23rd international LGBT conference promoted by ILGA-Europe in Prague, Czech Republic (23–26 October 2019) to celebrate 50 years of Stonewall, considered the starting point of the contemporary

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7 David Tišer is the Director of the non-profit organisation ARA ART, and author of the first comprehensive study on Roma LGBTQ in the Czech Republic entitled 'Homosexuality in the Romani Community'. He holds a degree in Romani Studies from Charles University, Prague.

LGBTI movement. Jeremy Miles, a Welsh Assembly Member, underlined the importance of allocating resources to allow Isaac Blake's participation in the Conference: "The movement towards greater LGBT equality over the past 50 years cannot be taken for granted as we look ahead. Isaac's scholarship to attend the conference on behalf of the LGBT Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Community enable him to make an important contribution to the discussions about how we take forward the journey for LGBT equality in all our communities, in all parts of the world."[8]

3. Addressing Antigypsyism in Queer Communities

In this section I will address discrimination in the Queer community both in terms of soft-racism, and in the deficiency of political attention to a relevant type of racism: antigypsyism, which is still socially tolerated in contemporary Europe. Once nomadic cultures, all Gypsies in the past were perceived as 'queer' types of people, mirroring both the fantasies and anxieties of sedentary people and estate proprietors. Through bans, slavery, persecutions, and genocides, Gypsies have come to embody all forms of otherness and difference. Among the many conceptual interpretations of what is 'queer', I found the one proposed by David Halperin politically useful, for in his words,

> Queer is, by definition, whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing, in particular, to which it necessarily refers (Halperin 1997, 62).

As Lucie Fremlova pointed out, critical whiteness is 'queer' by virtue of being counter/normative in relation to whiteness – not to be understood just as a *colour* but as a social norm: white-normativity. "The use of self-reflective queer, feminist, and critical whiteness methodologies means that reflective and reflexive researchers conducting research 'with,' 'for,' and 'on' Roma do not 'have to be' Romani in order to participate in knowledge production on Romani communities" (Fremlova 2018). We can also apply her concept to sexualities: a critical self-reflective researcher may be queer, and by challenging heteronormativity is enabled by his/her/their methodology to carry out research 'with,' 'for,' and 'on' Queer people.

By demarcating a positionality that avoids fixed roles and rules, the activity of 'queering' identities and spaces opens up to freedom and invention: the subversion of the normative happens simultaneously at different levels, not just around sexualities and gender identities. If the Queer movement does not intertwine with feminist intersectional methodologies and the decolonial approach (Smith 1999), there is a risk of being domesticized and subsumed and becoming just another fashionable commodity around sex and sexuality. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) and Gurminder Bhambra (2007) pointed out, the cooptation of feminism and Queer theory/practice within the paradigm of western representative democracy is an ongoing de-powering process.

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8 https://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/news/2019/07/romani-arts-company-director-go-international-lgbt-conference

There is a lack of research evidence and specific literature on the topic of antigypsyism in the transnational Queer community. A brief exploration, in which I engaged through informal dialogues with activists in Italy, made me aware of the lack of reflection and participation in mobilization around the topic of RGT human rights, which are routinely violated. While some Queer activists are concerned about the association between Homo-Les-Bi-Trans-phobia and antigypsyism in the dominant right-wing discourse, they do not seem yet ready to plan any collaborative political praxis or alliances with Romani people to jointly contrast anti-Gay and anti-Gypsy neo-fascist and xenophobic rhetoric in some political parties and media. The Queer milieu may have Gypsy-friendly attitudes, compared to the rest of society; at the same time the struggle against Roma-phobia and antigypsyism are not given due importance in Queer spaces, which lack political interest and initiative on the topic. Some activists and groups are politically present in the solidarity pro-migrant movements, but the main focus of these groups' activism is to grant a status of 'refugee' to those who are escaping from authoritarian regimes known to persecute sexual minorities. Antigypsyism usually is not on the anti-racist agenda despite the fact Islamophobia – another far-right flag – has undergone critical debate and public protests. Antigypsyism (at times referred to as Romaphobia or antigypsyism) and islamophobia have several features in common; the first still considered as "the last acceptable form of racism in Europe" (McGarry 2017) , the second a rising type of "respectable racism" (Wolfreys 2018). Hopefully the anti-racist movement will start to link these kinds of discriminations – and them with others.

Training about the intersectional approach in the Queer community and in general among groups of activists for social change are useful in order to sensitize social movements about the reality of dealing with often unrecognized multiple discriminations. Jokes or gags with antigypsy undertones usually are seen as a teasing way to convey acceptance. RGT social lives and traditions are perceived as funny; romanticization and exotification are underestimated instead of being deconstructed as a form of 'soft racism' and represent an easy way out for gadje's embarrassment over their privilege.

An intersection between Gypsiness and Queerness is narrated by Kata Horvath through the story of Rebeka, who is frustrated in trying to conceal both her poverty, as a cave dweller, and her ethnicity as a Roma. She finds in self-exotification a strategy for being accepted, in a context of white[9]-dominated societies, where fair skin is a synonym for beauty and femininity. Rebeka is dark, and in the peer group, her skin colour equates to ugliness. But during Gay Parade in Budapest she tells a story about being originally from Cuba – and suddenly the negative visibility she suffers because of being 'black' becomes a positive hyper-visibility. Her skin colour gets eroticized: in 'the carnival-like representation of sexuality', concludes Horvath 'for a few hours the blackness of Rebeka could become the performance of femininity' (Horvath 2010, 130). The "passing" strategy enacted by Rebeka is different from the usual one (i.e., trying to look white) since she chooses to expose her 'negritude' as an identity camouflage. Rebeka masks as a black Cuban *to hide the stigma of being a Roma*. The enactment of her *passing* strategy is evidence confirming how, as a Gypsy, you are never safe, not even in Queer spaces. During a Gay Parade you still cannot be fully proud of what you are and feel at ease with your identities.

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9 See on whiteness Vajda Violeta (2015).

In general, *passing* strategies are double-sided social practices, equally enabling and constraining. "Both Gays and Gypsies have historically been well placed to employ strategic 'passing' with self-protection or ease of passage determining when and where to pass as straight or non-Gypsy" (Baker 2015, 88). Passing "can offer safety from attack" on one hand, while on the other "passing not only hurts ourselves but also the communities in which we live, which don't reap the benefits of our authentic participation," states Baker. The price to pay, to live openly as Gay, is that of losing ties with the ethnic community and family. To keep life running without choosing self-exile, one has to pass as non-Gay in the Gypsy community, and as a non-RGT person in the Queer community: a sort of identity dislocation that implies life-long concealment.

> To maintain full integration into Gypsy communities one has to sacrifice the open expression of sexual identity, and conversely in order to explore an openly Gay identity one's integration within the Gypsy community is compromised to a significant degree (Baker 2015, 91).

While the Queer Gypsy is trapped between two identities perceived as mutually exclusive, both associated with internalized inferiority and self-hatred, the mostly white Queer Community must be willing to go out of its ghetto-like comfort zone, cross invisible boundaries to reach out and welcome the challenge represented by the presence of Gypsies in its ranks. The struggle against antigypsyism needs to be addressed in all political environments, while attitudes of classism, white supremacy, and soft racism should be recognized in our relationships. The emotional and political safety of Roma, Gypsies, and Travellers in Queer spaces is crucial – and not just a matter of 'inclusion', which is a top-down type of perspective (Maldonaldo-Torres 2016; Corradi 2018). Making space for Queer Gypsies calls for much needed decolonization of Feminist and Queer theories and praxis.

4. Affective Politics and Alliances

Overcoming homophobia and Gypsy-phobia means political action and will not happen without dedicated and competent efforts. These feelings of disgust and hatred toward Queer and Gypsy persons are centuries-old. All emotions have an 'affective' power; while seeming to be spontaneous or 'induced', they are always a social construct, and historically and culturally determined. Our emotions embody relationships of power, based on gender, race/ethnicity, class, religion, status, and geopolitical privilege. Emotions deeply influence our lifestyle, ideas, and politics and when fueled by hate speech, can instigate racist, sexist, homophobic, and violent antigypsy practices. Emotions situated between ourselves and what we perceive as the material 'external' world (Ahmed 2004). The social channeling of emotions at election time is a key factor leading us to mobilize and vote for a certain party. In the construction of social and political identities, emotions can be largely hetero-directed; whereas the power system manipulates sentiments through its institutions and media and can even manufacture popular feelings (Basso 2010; Corradi 2012). Feelings can also be self-directed, for example, by social movements through acts of change or resistance, in collective politics and alliances. The quantum of agency is indicated by the amount of freedom and self-determination expressed in the choice of emotional expressions.

The repetition (*Japa* in Sanskrit) of words, concepts, and signs, produces and reinforces emotional responses with an oil splash effect – as in the case of slogans during a rally; verses by rappers; group mottos; and the diffusion of wall graffiti via cultural contamination. Words generate meaning and can be re-signified by social movements – as in the case of terms like Gypsy and Queer, once derogatory, then successfully reappropriated. Words, as all signs, are tools to change reality. They can be used for *détournement* – to divert an offensive attack – or to resist with semiotic guerrilla actions (Corradi 2018): *no one can insult us without our permission*. A close analysis of the political implication of emotions, as proposed by Sara Ahmed (2004) may help us build alliances based on self-reflective solidarity; as Jekatyerina Dunajeva, Angéla Kóczé, and Sarah Cemlyn wrote (2015) "Lgbtqia often share the same emotions as we [Roma] do, and thus they could be *natural allies*" (*author's emphasis*).

For such an alliance to become real, several steps need to be taken. The first may be related to the recognition of differences and privileges among us – often avoided and perceived at times as a taboo topic. Romani feminist Alexandra Oprea powerfully explains it as:

> It is only through recognizing our privilege, whether it be white privilege, male privilege, class privilege, light skinned privilege, or heterosexual privilege, that we can challenge hierarchical relationships. It is essential (…) male activists acknowledge their male privilege as a first step to challenging patriarchy (Oprea 2004, 39).

Emotions are always public issues, the public is 'emotive' – we know how empathy can be controlled/maneuvered by mass media, and how consent gets manufactured. Ahmed analyzes negative emotions such as pain, hate, fear, disgust, and shame; she also looks at positive feelings around love in the context of queer theory and feminism.

Distaste and hate related to racial/ethnic belonging, cultural lifestyle, gender orientation or sexual preferences, are socially constructed emotions and are to do with power and hierarchy. As Indian activist and writer Arundhati Roy pointed out, religious and ethnic minorities ranging from Armenian (and Kurdish) people in Turkey to resisting peasants in India are made objects of entomological metaphors to mark difference from an ethnic majority, a dominant religion, the middle class and 'them.' Expressions such as 'clean-up' or 'disinfestations' of their places; and 'eradication' of their presence, with annihilating or suppressive representations are common (Roy 2008). Feelings of disgust are related to emotions of shame; in Sara Ahmed's elaboration they are deeply combined:

> Shame in exposing that which has been covered, demands us to re-cover, such a re-covering would be a recovery from shame. Shame consumes the subject and burns on the surface of bodies that are presented to others, a burning that exposes the exposure, and which may be visible in the form of a blush, depending on the skin of the subject, which might or might not show shame through this 'colouring' (Ahmed 2004, 104).

Ahmed's statement on shame recalls an early essay by Ervin Goffman (1956), on *embarrassment*: These are normative types of feelings, functional to the reproduction of dominant values and cultures. Ahmed looks at social processes of "othering" – which hit both the RGT communities and Queer people, having much

in common in terms of exclusion and creation of categories of bodies allowed to different levels of *access to space*. As Jasbir Puar pointed out, some bodies are socially perceived as 'trespassers' or 'space invaders' (Puar 2004). Both Gypsies and Queer people are immediately identified as such: bizarre, uninvited, out-of-place; improper and ill-behaved; unfitting, indecent, unbecoming; causing everybody discomfort in the space they own, inhabit, or have colonized. The feeling of being unwelcomed is intersubjective and related to the shape of the social structure itself, as a sedentary, gadje, (hetero)normative classist world that despises the poverty it creates.

> One feels better by the warmth of being faced by a world one has already taken in. One does not notice this *as a world* when one has been shaped by that world, and even acquired its shape. […] Queer subjects, when faced by the 'comforts' of heterosexuality may feel uncomfortable (the body does not 'sink into' a space that has already taken its shape) (Ahmed 148).

Even though sexuality and ethnicity apparently differ as concepts and categories, both underwent the same type of scrutiny. As pointed out by Daniel Baker in 'The Queer Gypsy', there are several lines of comparison between the two identities: 'Ethnicity and sexuality mirror each other within cycles of concealment and revelation' (Baker 2015, 88). In the past, ethnicity and sexual orientation were perceived as 'natural', while they are the product of negotiations, influences, redefinitions, and survival strategies: both Gays and Gypsies were targeted by the Inquisition in the Middle Ages. This persecution resulted in medicalization and inferiorization processes in European sciences and societies over the following centuries, especially in the colonial era. Baker's interviews with four Gypsy gay males pinpoint emotional and physical detachment from their families and communities as a common experience. One of the issues raised by Daniel Baker, based on his research findings, regards the similarities between Gay invisibility and Gypsy invisibility.

> Even though all seem essentially proud of their Gypsy roots, all make it clear that their detachment occurred mainly through a difficulty in combining Gayness and Gypsiness (Baker 2015, 89).

State political emotions tend to manipulate social feeling to oppose solidarity and functionally create "others" – in this case a shameful double otherness of Gayness and Gypsiness. By lining up some bodies and granting them the privilege of being society's insiders, others are singled out and pushed to the margins (a well-demonstrated and useful practice as a preliminary to scapegoating). As regards movements, a new identity politics is necessary to build alliances; it should be able to reclaim words loaded with shame and to use them as weapons (Corradi 2018); it should be able to challenge the rigidity of race and 'ethnic' belonging, as a source of exclusionary behaviours.

> The intercultural terms Gypsy and Queer are both used to describe globally linked collectivities of identity rather than fixed identity positions. This 'un-fixity' relates not only to the range of possibilities within each identity position but also to the persistence of community and cultural values independent of geographical territory (Baker 2015, 88–89).

As 'stateless collectives', both Gypsies and Queers have no fixed boundaries, no country, and no army. Gypsy flags, as well as Queer flags, deeply represent places of the soul (Corradi 2018). Political theories about *overcoming the state* as an historical obsolete form have gained ground, in favour of federations of different ethnic and religious communities, such as those which recently emerged during the struggle by Kurdish people in the liberation of Rojava in Syria (Öcalan 2016). Such ideas, combined with a practice of direct democracy and self-government developed by Kurdish (historically nomadic) societies, surfaced during dramatic resistance in the north and east of Syria against the attacks of the Islamic State (of Iraq and the Levantine – Isil) supported by the Turkish government's genocidal politics to eliminate Kurdish cultures and grab their land. International interest in the Democratic Federalism in Rojava can be explained by its emphasis on interculturality, interreligiosity, and a commitment to overcome race, class, and gender inequalities, by a constitution. In fact, the 'Rojava Social Contract', signed by all ethnic groups in north and east Syria, calls for cooperation, women's rights, ecology, and the valorization of diversities; it may become an inspirational model for all nomadic, indigenous, and GRT stateless communities – toward the development of self-government and transversal alliances (Corradi 2016; Öcalan 2016).

It is interesting at this point to comparatively look at how 'othered' bodies, persecuted groups, and marginalized societies are dealing with such issues; for instance, the solutions that are blossoming from the 'margins' in war zones and refugee camps, seem practicable for all. In the last three decades of research and activism I found deep connections in the dispossession and oppression faced today by Gypsy, Native Americans, Palestinians, Kurdish, Maori and Aboriginals – who have in the past been subjected to ethnocidal and/or genocidal politics (Connell and Corradi 2014; Corradi 2018).

An open dialogue on common political solutions is, in a globalized world, strategic to face old challenges – aggravated by ecological and health emergencies – and new ones, such as the pressure of cultural assimilation and cooptation, with pernicious forms of political/academic 'domestication'. Such processes are not unavoidable disasters; they can be deactivated through critical attention, decolonization practices, and the valorization of subaltern epistemologies together with collective and transversal processes of knowledge construction, elaboration, and social action (Smith 1999, Smith Hingangaroa 2012).

Conclusion

'Political-correctness' is concerned with surface, i.e., it acts on appearances, lacking the substance of the problems of sexism, racism, and the roots of the inferiorization of Gypsy and Queer communities. In our communities we should not allow behaviours that indulge in derogatory contents, such as sexist stereotypical assumptions; homo/lesbo/bi/trans-phobic jokes; soft-racist comments; anti-gypsy or exotifying *boutades*; or body-shaming and gags based on self-hatred. It is not a matter of banning some words as 'bad'; offensive terms and images should not go unnoticed or be feared: they need to be made socially impracticable – or *uninhabitable* as Roma feminist Maria Bogdan proposed. She creatively applies deconstruction as a process 'going inside the image (the stereotypical image) and exposing it from inside'. Such a practice results in opening up stereotypes and 'making them uninhabitable'

(Bogdan 2015). The negative work of decoding and exposing the underlying sexism, racism, queer-phobia, antigypsyism of images and concepts should be combined with the creation of positive representations – an ongoing process today's young people are engaging with, by using social media, affective politics, and visual arts (Corradi 2018).

Insulting epithets cannot be banned, they should be resignified and reappropriated, used in semiotic warfare aimed at liberating our bodies from white supremacy, internalized gadje-ness, hetero-patriarchy, and other forms of normativity. At stake is the reduction of the power that stigmatizing concepts still retain, and the decoding of some emotions still functioning against ourselves and so reinforcing the dominant discourse. Acting upon social feelings is a relevant issue that re-dignifies our political agency and enhances possibilities of alliances (Corradi 2018). The elaboration of different and more dynamic concepts of our individual and collective identities, with the renegotiation of our egos and cultural traditions, are current concerns for the GRT Queer community. The diaspora weakens the idea of identity as essential or absolute; and disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity: "[diaspora] stages the dynamic processes of identity formation in a specific manner, accentuating the power that people enjoy to create themselves and their distinctive cultures where this cannot be openly acknowledged" (Baker 2015, 89).

Identity construction is a collective endogenous process, which happens through resistance to assimilation and a conscious selection of inputs coming from the outside. As Judith Okely suggests, "Gypsy cultural identity is constructed through opposition, not isolation" (Okely 2010, 53). Collective self-reflection and social and political agency are all ingredients of such a change. Identity is also created in the constant *assemblage* (Puar 2007) of parts of self, in the making of a Queer Theory able to be propositive around affective politics. Awareness of the power we have in choosing, and building our identity is vital to understand alliances among diverse subjectivities and communities. 'Travelling activism' may be one of the elements of such a process.

> My examination of travelling activism explains how activist expertise travels through disjunctive circuits, and how the diverse forms of coalition building that arise from these activities can serve as a productive source for developing new kinds of policy in domains such as education, anti-discrimination, and de-segregation. (…) *Travelling activism in the Romani movement is related to mobilizing hybrid forms of expertise and knowledge across space and difference and thus aims at contesting the territorialization and ethnicization* (van Baar 2013, *author's emphasis*).

Travelling activism may be opening unprecedented spaces of dialogue and direct democracy.

> Importantly, they do not simply enter existing public debates, but try to contribute to establishing the problems the Roma face and the rights they have as public issues and collective responsibilities. Through the claiming of rights, including the right to participate in public and policy debates as subjects with their own voices, those involved in travelling activism contribute to the enactment of citizenship as participation (*ibid*).

As a conclusion to my reflections around affective politics, identity construction, and alliance in the Gypsy and Queer milieu, I quote the following from Vera Kurtic's work, where she challenges the fixity of identity politics and addresses the issue of otherness in a self-reflective way.

> We are now faced with the challenge to publicly come out as 'different' in a society where it is, to say the least, not very popular to be different. We are threatened with rejection, ridicule, blame and harassment over the phone or online, as well as with physical violence and intimidation. In addition to perpetuating our isolation, normative heterosexuality and forms of patriarchy have an impact on how we set standards for engaging in any other relationships. The negation of women's lives as well as the negation of lesbian lives within Romani communities is a manifestation of deeply rooted misogyny, homophobia and racism (Kurtic 2013, 90).

As Kurtic states, the "omnipresent homophobia and heterosexism in majority and Romani communities" make life particularly difficult for lesbians; she wonders how many of our grandmothers, aunts, and female neighbours "have lived without men?" and denounces the lies and the effort to ignore lesbian existence and make their lives invisible.

> Being subversive is a reflection of our ability to strengthen ourselves by accepting the fact that throughout our entire lives, we have perceived ourselves through the eyes of others; others who have told us what is beautiful, normal, acceptable and desirable (…). The necessity of deconstructing concepts of identities and subjectivity that originated within the western science tradition and policy, racist capitalism governed by male dominance, progress and adopting nature as the resource for culture production (Kurtic 2013, 91).

Both in the gadje society and in Romani communities there are some categories of people considered to be 'different' – which always implies the existence of a majority that is not 'different' and holds the superior status of 'normal'. We look at our bodies, our feelings, relations and emotions through the mirror of what is considered socially acceptable, as if hierarchies, behaviours, and conventions were 'natural' and our conflicts around them unchangeable. The identities we feel so attached to – be they gender or sexual identities, ethnic or cultural identities – should be seen as the product of Western dychotomical constructions, born within and against hetero-patriarchal, colonial, and capitalistic relations, which, of necessity, must be deeply decoded, decolonized, and subverted. Those who strive for alliances need to walk this path together.

Acknowledgements

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