

Outside the Frame: A Critique of Chad Evans Wyatt's *RomaRising*

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Abstract

Photographer Chad Wyatt's *RomaRising* is an extensive series of black and white portraits of middle-class European Roma who have a wide range of professional occupations. By constituting the Romani subject as middle class, the exhibit defies stereotypes about this maligned group. Two key questions may be raised about its implications: does *RomaRising* infer that acceptance of Roma in European society is conditional upon gaining admission to the middle class? And does the way in which the images are framed exclude their social context? Specifically, does it neglect the powerful barriers to Roma's class mobility caused by widespread anti-Roma racism in European society? When these questions are positioned in the foreground and analyzed, emphasis shifts from the content of the images to the social and political consequences of representing Roma through the photographic image.

Keywords

- Gaze
- Photography
- Representation
- RomaRising
- Social mobility

Introduction

Roma have been made into a quintessential photographic subject. Whether romanticized or vilified, historical or contemporary, the group is so customarily objectified, its exonym Gypsy crystallized so long ago, that it sunders the relationship between representation and lived experience. The rise of human rights organizations and the politicization of Romani people in Europe (see Vermeersch 2005; McGarry 2010a, 2011) have stimulated new approaches to their representation informed by social justice sensibilities. While not necessarily in accordance with the principle “Nothing about us without us,” some photographers have succeeded in producing images whose value have less to do with their mass popularity than with community empowerment, public recognition, and the assertion of rights-based claims in national and international forums. Diverse contemporary examples include Jeremy Sutton-Hibbert in Scotland; Nihad Nino Pušija, a Bosnian Romani photographer who works in Berlin; and perhaps the Montenegrin, Dusko Miljanic. Magnum, the renowned photographers’ cooperative founded in 1947, represented Josef Koudelka whose 1975 book, *Gypsies*, stands as a seminal photo-essay of the twentieth century.

Chad Evans Wyatt’s RomaRising falls into this category. The creative project of this American photographer, RomaRising is a series of black and white portraits of more than 300 Romani individuals from eleven countries in Central and Eastern Europe as well as Canada, the Netherlands, and the UK. Deliberately stripped of colour and set in ordinary poses with simple backgrounds, subjects’ names and occupations are posted alongside the portraits or obtained via a QR (Quick Response) code with a smart phone.

Premiered in June 2004 at the *Muzeum Romské Kultury* in Brno, Czech Republic, RomaRising has been shown in over thirty-five countries and is available in two books of photography (2000, 2005). In 2013 and 2014, Gina Csanyi-Robah, then Executive Director of the Roma Community Centre, Toronto, invited Wyatt to the city where he took a series of portraits and exhibited his collection. As part of my ethnographic research on Toronto groups (Levine-Rasky 2016a), I met the photographer in 2013. Over a period of six years, I was able to view and discuss the project extensively with him. In this critique, my aim is to interpret RomaRising by raising questions about its meanings, its social and political implications, and what it includes and excludes as its subject. I consider its possible effects on Roma, both those photographed and the many more who are not. With his permission, I draw liberally from Wyatt’s writings and remarks about his work, both published and unpublished.

Scholarship has produced a range of theoretical frameworks for visual methods. In this exploratory discussion, I first approach RomaRising as a cultural text, drawing from semiotics’ palette of analytic tools. Binaries, framing, gaze, and narrative are the concepts of sharpest relevance in analyzing the four images I sampled from the hundreds in Wyatt’s RomaRising portfolio. I then turn to critical discourse analysis for an examination of the latent politics of Wyatt’s work. Interpretation of the images reveals that what is hidden from view is as salient as what is displayed. My analysis specifies the invisibility of the European context for Roma as photographic subject. In doing so, it emphasizes not the content of the images but their purpose and their consequences. First, however, I provide an overview of Wyatt’s RomaRising project and the issues raised in this critique.

1. The RomaRising Project

The aim of the photo series is, in Wyatt's (2013b) words, to "reduce the psychological experience to its fundamental. An often-ordinary context is intentional." The photographic subjects gaze at the camera captured in a simple presentation of self, identified by a shared ethnicity but diverse occupations. Wyatt wishes to prompt a direct engagement between the photographic subject and the viewer. The "psychological experience" to which Wyatt refers is not that of his subjects but of the viewer. His aim is to disarm the, presumably, white European viewers of their prejudice through an honest encounter with the racialized Other.

Wyatt seeks to represent Roma in "a manner in which they are seldom presented in the media," that is, as "middle class and professional class." Through this approach, RomaRising advances a social justice agenda for world Roma by defying stereotypes about them as an abject underclass incapable or unwilling to engage the labour market beyond a very limited range of low-income and precarious work as entertainers, unskilled labourers, collectors of recyclable materials, and the like. Wyatt describes his purpose:

RomaRising has but one simple premise. If one's stereotype about the Roma is true, then who are these now more than 300 people, representing far many more... These are people mostly unremarkable, who achieve in life careers that society understands. In defying prejudice to accomplish the improbable, they demonstrate that human aspiration to achieve is not limited to any one ethnic or cultural group (Wyatt 2013a).

Achievement and aspiration serve as key themes in Wyatt's talk. Yet the artist, who often refers to his own mixed racial identity as Black and Euro-American, is wholly aware that racism functions as the barrier to Romani achievement and aspiration. Without inferring that racism exclusively defines Romani experience, it cannot be refuted that normalized racism in European society interrupts the fruition of Roma's formal rights under the law and prevents their substantive equality. RomaRising challenges anti-Roma racism head on by seizing the engagement with middle-class employment – a capacity, typically, in public discourse decoupled from what it means to be Roma – and exhibiting it in public spaces.

Accomplishment among the Roma, in business, law, historical and political study, medicine, literature, music and the plastic arts, especially by students in higher education, is obvious to open eyes. Dynamic Romani folk culture is universally admired. It also is a complex survival strategy... The fundamental societal creation today by an incipient middle and professional class will bear profound positive outcome for this transnational ethnic minority. RomaRisingV4 celebrates the aspiration and bravery of these achievers (Wyatt 2013b).

Wyatt's honourable intentions notwithstanding, it is instructive to step away from them and emphasize the implications of the RomaRising project. That is, it is important to move from the content of the images to their purpose, to the gaze, and to the political potential embodied in representing the oppressed in the photographic image. As Rose (2007) (and many others) advise, photographs do not reflect reality unaffected by interpretation. Images have their own visual effects that are not reducible to their content. They produce pleasure, outrage, and other emotions. They can galvanize viewers into action or lull them to quietude.

They can both reinforce and resist oppression (Azoulay 2008). While the study of images should be taken seriously in its own right, their effects mobilize ways of seeing reality. Productive of social difference, images are always affected by their context, and they are always subjected to viewers' interpretations. Photographs, therefore, are artifice, and they are a result of deliberate choices made by the photographer, who affects the subject matter by use of a camera, choice of location or background, lighting, pose, and the cultivation of the subject's facial expression to name just a few elements. The subject matter is affected by the photographer's purpose, history, values, and cultural norms. While reflecting the attributes of people, objects, events, relationships, or feelings that can otherwise be missed, in the end, photographs are a way of knowing the social world.

The effect of Wyatt's images is contradictory. They advocate for the irreducible equality of a maligned group, European Roma. But they also obscure the reason it is necessary to do so, a reason embedded in Roma's inferior social status produced by entrenched racism (see Levine-Rasky 2016b). Is RomaRising consistent with a liberal politics by urging viewers to curtail their prejudice and replace it with respect for Romani ethnicity? Or does it encourage a literal colour-blindness in which these Romani individuals' status has nothing to do with their having overcome systemic racism and everything to do with their life choices? These questions – provocative though they may be – obscure a critical observation: the wish for Roma to look like other Europeans and to have occupations with which other Europeans may identify. They imply the value of inclusion but on the condition of ignoring the powerful barriers to inclusion, diverting the locus of change away from anti-Roma racism to Roma themselves.

2. Pushing the Binary

European Roma are often depicted in a binary fashion. Regarded as outsiders to white European society, they are dark not light, uncouth not urbane, dark not light, uncouth not urbane, detriment not advantage. Binaries always confer a positive valence on one side; in the case of Roma, it is the dominant society. The qualities ascribed to Roma – natural, essential, fixed, causal – racialize them. Their underclass position is attributed to their culture rather than to their expulsion from dominant society. RomaRising is intended to disrupt binary-making because it introduces the Romani individual – hundreds of them – who, by straddling racialized class divisions, reside in a liminal space between categories. They are positioned in a middle zone of intelligibility, or perhaps they refuse the strictures of category altogether. They face Wyatt's camera and name themselves.

RomaRising frames the subject of Romani identity ambiguously. It is unclear whether it is emancipatory, by framing Roma as having the same potential as other Europeans (as the photographer often intends), or whether it is complicit with states that seek demonstration of their Roma integration strategies' alleged effectiveness (as per the gaze of some state actors/viewers). Without any trace of the consequences of anti-Roma racism, the portraits could furnish such states with "proof" that no institutional inequities against their Romani populations exist. This question implies the absence of any singular authoritative meaning of RomaRising images. Not inherent to the images, their meanings are made through the complex interaction between viewers in an increasingly fraught social space. Meaning hinges on gaze. For Roma, the power difference could not be more stark. The narrative told by RomaRising is also ambiguous. On

the one hand, it challenges the meaning conferred by the very category 'Roma' in the European common imaginary. It destabilizes the ideological foundation of that meaning by exhibiting Romani potential in unimagined ways: Roma in whom (white, middle-class) European neighbours can see themselves. But it also obscures the reality of the racism that impelled the creation of *RomaRising*. It is one narrative of some Roma, told at the expense of the narrative of many, many more.

The four images selected for analysis in this article are of two men and two women representing four Central and Eastern European countries and a range of middle-class occupations. Tibor Csanya (figure 1) is an Hungarian attorney; Erika Ptáčniková (Hornáková) (figure 2), a Slovakian author; Olga Rostášová (figure 3), a Czech endocrinologist; and Asen Manchev Slavchev (figure 4), a Bulgarian electrical engineer. On the one hand, they challenge the conventional binary of powerful white European versus the powerless racialized Roma. Their countenances, positioning of their bodies, faces, hands, and choice of location, props, and settings, suggest self-determination. Note Csanya's professional attire, his slightly raised left eyebrow, and the open white door in the background; Ptáčniková's demure smile and highly polished fingernails as she sits at her manuscript; Rostášová's lab coat and name tag as she sits by the window in her office; Slavchev's right hand posed to frame his face just as the abstract artwork above him frames the portrait. Given the small number of images included here, it is impossible to convey the diversity presented by the 500+ subjects in the assembled *RomaRising* folios. The emphatic impression is one of a multiplicity of identities, of communities, of social-class expression, and so on.

While deprived of public recognition and facing forms of discrimination other than poverty, *RomaRising* subjects are not excluded from society if exclusion can be defined in purely economic terms. On the other hand, the very use of black and white film affirms a stark, even absolute, contrast. For Wyatt, there is the colourful Gypsy, and then there is the austere Roma in black and white. The former occupies a negative position and the latter a positive position in a binary. Social status is divided on a larger scale as well. Belongingness to dominant culture is achieved through social mobility and professional accomplishment. Roma who are too downtrodden, too uneducated, or too disaffected are not represented at all. In the public galleries and halls where *RomaRising* has been exhibited, such as the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Washington, D.C., the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno, Czech Republic, and the European Parliament in Brussels, the gaze of the subjects meets the gaze of the viewer. What transpires? Who looks at Csanya, Ptáčniková, Rostášová, and Slavchev and sees something revolutionary? Who sees exceptionalism? Who sees the outcome of a meritocracy? Who is relieved and who is shocked? Whose narrative is told? And how is that narrative heard?

Wyatt describes his photographic approach as truthful, an antidote to the falsehoods produced by many others who are fascinated by the Gypsy romantic. Wyatt believes that he offers the authenticity of his subject, removed from the "Gypsy" narrative. In this excerpt from his introduction to an exhibition catalogue, he positions himself against other photographers who render their Romani subjects in mythical or stereotypical ways.

Consider the "gypsy" photograph as text. What are its usual elements? The first ingredient is exoticism, an "otherness" separating a group from its majority context. This style of photograph... produces a theatre of grotesque characters, unresolvedly different, without redemption, often emphasising poverty, unbridled ecstasy, rootlessness, irresponsibility...

But what if this received wisdom were only partly true, speaking falsely even of this partial truth? What if there were substantial parts of the Roma community, thought not to exist, who currently lead lives of accomplishment, on terms society can understand? ... This is the work of RomaRising, to discover and portray a significant number within this minority for whom family and education are of paramount importance. Who have risen to rank of attorney, doctor, teacher. Who have crafted businesses, met payroll, who have published works...

RomaRising strips away conventional portrayal technique of the Roma... Mostly those you find here are anonymous people who quietly, below the media's glare, are building brick by brick a middle and professional class, [an] answer to the historic outsider status of this suffering minority (Wyatt 2005).

In general, two narratives prevail in the traditional representation of Roma: a romantic view of Roma as wanderers with common roots and common traditions, and a pathetic view of Roma as eternal victims of degradation, exclusion, and persecution (Vermeersch 2008, 363). In film and literature, the image of the enigmatic Gypsy has endured for centuries. "In the sixteenth century, as today, the wandering, free, musical, thieving, lustful Gypsy appears at once as uncivilized, animal-like and predatory (and hence in need of punitive vigilance); and as generous and noble yet child-like (and hence in need of vigilant socialization and preservation)" (Gay y Blasco 2008, 298). The myth conveys the strange admixture of love and hate; desire for the exotic and rejection of the wretched, the Gypsy lover-dancer-fortuneteller versus the Gypsy thief-vagrant-welfare-abuser. Mythical imagery constructs Roma as the embodiment of Other.

Roma are understood in the public imaginary as being of a certain "kind", irrespective of the particularities of their experience, whether they are represented in European newspapers (see Kroon et al. 2016) or American television (see Schneeweis and Foss 2016). Even where representational frames may be pluralistic and even sympathetic (Kroon et al. 2016), social categories for Roma are highly restricted. Siren, mystic, beggar, crook, philistine, anachronistic (Matras 2014), they are offered up to a public eager for sensationalized reality TV (Richardson and O'Neill 2012). Moreover, the dominant framing and narratives of Gypsy bodies on reality TV always intersect ethnicity with class and gender (Tremlett 2014). Romani women, for example, are read not only as "sexually regressive and backward" (Jensen and Ringrose 2013 cited in Tremlett 2014, 327) but also as located on the wrong side of the class divide. They engender a particularly bad example of tastelessness in which bold is brazen and sexy is raunchy.

These images are ones that the traditionally constricted meanings of 'Gypsy' have filled. Wyatt challenges hegemonic representations of Roma by selecting one segment of their international population and portraying its heterogeneity. He desires to present a unique image of Roma, not an added dimension to a hackneyed image but one in which colour has been subtracted. Viewers are struck by the candidness of the subjects who seem to share something significant of themselves with the photographer. Wyatt's ability to draw out authenticity from each of these subjects – all strangers to him – seems extraordinary. The subjects' expressions, the way in which they entrust themselves to the photographer (and the way they connect, in turn, with the viewer) is the cog on which RomaRising turns. We meet fresh Romani faces that have always been among us but never quite this way. It is this "unfamiliar conversation" into which Wyatt wishes to draw viewers.

3. Problematizing Social Mobility

Anti-racist in intent and uplifting in impact, the purpose of *RomaRising* seems beyond reproach. Wyatt describes his purpose in liberal democratic, even humanitarian terms:

RomaRising makes visual the ideal that the human spirit can, despite prejudice and denial, rise to its level of ambition and excellence. Stereotyping causes us to overlook the dedicated among minorities, people of talent and courage, who succeed on society's own terms (Wyatt 2013b).

Despite its self-evident virtues, the photo series has drawn criticisms from viewers and reviewers alike. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2014), what questions may be raised about the project and what it does, or does not do, for its subjects? One frequent challenge to *RomaRising* is the problem of representation. Wyatt's participants comprise a tiny proportion of European Roma. These middle-class, educated Roma have embodied a mobility that is utterly inconceivable for the vast majority of Roma. The visibility that *RomaRising* confers upon one segment of Roma signifies the general denial of their visibility. Ironically *RomaRising* testifies to Romaphobia. Throughout Europe, Roma are the targets of a virulent public racism. To take one flagrant example, Neo-Nazi groups are the chief perpetrators of organized violence, but ordinary Europeans express their hostility with impunity. Ljujic et al. (2012) distinguish "Romaphobia" from other forms of racism due to the particular forms of persecution they have endured including slavery, forced sterilization, expulsion, profiling, and violence. From France to Ukraine, Roma are subjected to all forms of violence and discrimination, often with the support of the national police (European Roma Rights Centre 2018).

The ongoing violence – and racism in all its forms – exacerbates social inequalities. Research on national employment, housing, education, and healthcare for Roma indicate significant lags behind the majority. Consolidating research from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, the United Nations Development Programme, the European Commission, and the World Bank for twelve countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (2013, 27) confirms the precarious or substandard living conditions for Roma. Reports by numerous international and non-governmental organizations like Council of Europe (2012), Norwegian Helsinki Committee (2013), European Roma and Travellers Forum (2015), and Human Rights Watch (2013) describe enduring patterns of discrimination in housing, education, employment, and in public space. Human rights abuses of European Roma persist today. In a 2020 report, the U.S. Department of State notes high rates of evictions, camp demolitions, police harassment, sex trafficking, and forced labor as well as low levels of education, access to social services, and adequate housing in numerous European countries. The Council of Europe (2020) describes widespread antigypsyism that aggravates their economic and social deprivation despite ongoing efforts to eliminate it. The European Commission (2020) notes similar patterns of discrimination, antigypsyism, and socioeconomic exclusion for many of the continent's estimated 10–12 million Roma. This is the context in which most European Roma live, including those whose portraits are seen in *RomaRising*. Obscuring it promotes a silence around it, an invisibility of oppression, and a ready justification for state actors to limit their support for institutional initiatives for better practices.

Even though RomaRising subjects are exemplars of success, and even if they offer themselves to a public willing to set aside their prejudice in a moment of identification, this is not, Wyatt affirms, to be confused with their having overcome racism. Wyatt discounts any claim that RomaRising subjects are heroes in defeating systemic inequalities. The participants have not escaped racism, he urges, their successes notwithstanding.

There has never been acceptance of my subjects into the dominant society... Nothing could be further from the real. In fact, all have struggled, have had to be better than their majority counterparts, in order to gain their success... They have no illusions of acceptance... It is quite important to emphasize that all of those willing to come before my lenses exhibit a certain bravery... Just an example, one who posed for me was interrupted by a call: her daughter had been hospitalized by an attack on the street by skinheads. She didn't recover normal sight in one eye for two years (Wyatt 2016).

Wyatt notes that Roma he photographs are not protagonists of self-made success narratives. Racism of the most flagrant kind holds them back from further achievement, circumstances imposed upon them by systematic barriers to their integration in the mainstream labour force. Wyatt's subjects are overrepresented as workers in a labour silo that Wyatt (2016) calls the "Gypsy bubble," an industry of sorts generated by the network of NGOs and government projects funded by national and supranational agencies to address the social exclusion of Roma. In this, they – along with the other middle-class subjects of RomaRising – contribute to the emergence of an intellectual class and, in some cases, directly to the international Roma movement.

Despite Wyatt's knowledge of Romaphobia, RomaRising may be criticized for overlooking the systemic oppression of Roma by exaggerating the possibility of an improvement to their social status. While consistent with an emancipatory agenda for an oppressed people, RomaRising ultimately fails to expose the roots of their oppression. The rampant exclusion, institutional discrimination, and public marginalization of Roma go unchallenged. RomaRising neglects the powerful barriers to the class mobility of Roma that it celebrates. Safely diverting attention from the anti-Roma racism that is widespread in all sectors of European society, it takes the risk of commending the policy initiatives dedicated to improving Romani life despite their general failure.

Interpreting the photographs beyond their face value compels acknowledgment of the political work they do, work that is entirely unintentional. Wyatt acknowledges the problematic conclusions that viewers may draw: "This has been a hazard of the project. In fact, one curator/scholar in Budapest characterized the work as 'utopian.'" While the hope and pride that RomaRising inspires for some is crucial and cannot be dismissed, it is a false hope and an empty pride for most. If the purpose of RomaRising is to show the world what some Roma have achieved, then it directs attention to only a handful of individual exceptions. If it shows what Roma may become, it is silent about the contingencies in place that contributed to the success of such individuals, the resources from which they drew, and the process of accomplishment and setbacks in which achievement is just one phase. In short, it is silent about the social milieu in which all of the individuals in RomaRising circulate. If it is an act of advocacy aimed at policymakers who are being encouraged to improve opportunities for Roma so they may produce more achievers, is it successful? Or,

as Wyatt has indicated to me, do politicians see in RomaRising evidence of their success in integrating national Roma? Is it, in effect, an excuse for those with power *not* to do more?

On the question of whether the purpose of RomaRising is aimed at social change through policy reforms, Wyatt responds:

Given current stresses upon economies everywhere, and the recent chaos of the international refugee crisis, I have little hope for immediate impact in any general way for RomaRising... interest [in RomaRising] has once more become heated, and internationally... Does this portend use of the portraits to greater impact?... I don't know. [The images] certainly already have empowered a certain class amid the Roma. Questions of social change, even public education remain to those who might use the images (Wyatt 2016).

On the one hand, Wyatt has modest hopes for contributing to change, acknowledging the intransigence of economic downturns and new sources of social conflict. On the other hand, he notes the increased demand for RomaRising exhibits. If the measure of success is empowerment, Wyatt has reason to claim satisfaction at least for a "certain class" of Roma. As for policy sectors in which enduring change might be implemented, Wyatt cannot speculate.

One level on which RomaRising operates is that of emotional identification. In describing his work, Wyatt declares: "In addressing us with respect and dignity, we are allowed an authentic interaction." This interaction is between two parties – Romani subject and the (assumed) non-Romani viewer. But it is unclear whether the "address," and the "respect and dignity" it requires, flows in one direction or two. Wyatt suggests that since the nakedness of his lens honestly renders the subject's demeanor, the viewer may forge a previously unimaginable relationship with the Romani subject. Setting aside the assumption of a viewer as generically middle-class, white, and for whom such interaction with Roma has been non-existent, Wyatt offers a symbolic reciprocity between the viewer and the Romani subject based on shared characteristics. Aimed at closing the psychic distance between 'us' and 'them' that lies at the core of all racisms, this strategy has its merits. But it is impossible to say what everyone takes from the experience. Are 'they,' the subject of RomaRising, the exception and never the rule? Do they stand as proof of what an individual quest to dismantle a legacy of racism can do? Or is RomaRising proof of the absence of a problem? Other problematic questions follow: Does RomaRising imply that inclusion of Roma in European society is conditional upon gaining admission to the middle class? Does it say to Roma, "this is what you should strive for?" Only then, when they overcome formidable odds in their "aspiration to achieve," will viewers see them as equals. The implication is that 'they' are acceptable only if they look and act like 'us.' Is the accordance of dignity and respect to Roma conditional upon their abandonment of their identities, culture, and language, in short, to stop being Roma and to replace that biography with another: middle-class white European?

This line of criticism places the onus of social change upon Roma themselves. It implies that they are responsible for their own inequalities since all they need to do is choose to step away from those conditions. RomaRising suggests that Roma must seize opportunities and surmount daunting barriers to education in order to be accepted into European society. They must, in effect, join the RomaRising club.

Only those individuals warrant public attention, and only they evoke pride in their community. Emblems of integration, they are adopted as benchmarks for successful public policy, the signs of expenditures for programs well allocated. Inclusion, where it occurs for the scant few, looks like the portrait-sitters for RomaRising. But if the Romani individual in the photograph is someone who gains respectability by dint of their middle-class employment, it does nothing to eradicate the hostilities that remain towards the millions who stay unrespectable. No attention is paid to the “widespread failure” (Farkas 2010, 188) to effectively implement programs aimed at improving the quality of life for European Roma. The problem is removed from the level of policy and political accountability and shifted to the objects of policymaking, a group with only a nascent political voice and scant resources to lobby on their own behalf.

At this juncture, it is necessary to resist the implication that all Romani individuals’ experiences are the same, or that they all endure identical manifestations of anti-Roma racism in identical ways. European Roma are entirely diverse in culture, identity, language, religion, histories, and practices; experiences are unique. Individuals exercise agency in dealing with the barriers they face, in struggling against racism, and in managing the conditions of their everyday lives. Moreover, the gains made by international and non-governmental organizations like the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, the Council of Europe, and the Open Society Foundations, and Romani advocacy organizations like the European Roma Rights Centre, the European Roma and Travellers Forum, the Roma Education Fund, and the coalition Alliance Against Antigypsism cannot be overlooked. Initiatives generated by these organizations have profound and measurable effects on Romani lives. But until the proportion of middle-class and securely employed Roma in RomaRising is equal to that of their non-Roma counterparts in the dominant society, it is premature to regard the social context in which they live as extraneous to their social mobility.

Conclusion

RomaRising continues to exhibit throughout Europe in sites such as the Sládeček Museum of Local History in Kladno in Czech Republic, the Heidelberg Forum Für Kunst, and both the Bulgarian and Czech Republic embassies in Washington, D.C. Wyatt’s portraits appear in the RomArchive launched in 2019 to create “a reliable source of knowledge that contrasts perceptions, myths and stereotypes about Roma with counter-narratives that are told by Roma themselves based on established facts.” The site posts a short interview with the photographer (RomArchive 2018). Making no claim to function as a comprehensive portrait of international Roma, the collection represents one segment of this population – those who attained middle-class status. It stands as a powerful assertion of dignity, despite pervasive Romaphobia.

A semiotic analysis highlights the project’s radical challenge to the usual binary in which Roma are positioned. It tells a different narrative to the viewers who gaze at these faces that are rendered in black and white, faces that are familiar yet unfamiliar in this atypical frame. From one perspective, it is activist art pitched to a public caught unawares of the potential for meaningful connection to unwelcome compatriots. From another perspective, it promotes the status quo – systemic inequality interrupted by the occasional instance of Romani social mobility. Critics may even describe RomaRising as oppressive in its insinuation that the subjects’ acceptance into mainstream European society is conditional upon

their emulating non-Roma, a chance for which they are expected to be grateful. This position conflicts with the reality that some of Wyatt's subjects deliberately present themselves via Romani cultural forms, such as dress. Some occupy eminent leadership roles in various sectors where they dedicate themselves to promoting uncompromising Romani identities. Like any frame, the exhibit both includes and excludes elements from the broader picture. When its European context is summoned, critics are compelled to reconsider the purpose of the project and its consequences. It compels an obligation to act (Azoulay 2012). While abandoning the banal forms of Gypsy visuals, *RomaRising* contributes to a new narrative, some dimensions of which remain ambiguous and not all of which are innocent.

In an anthology in which Wyatt's photographs are published, Pusca (2016) avers that photography is always a political act that, in framing the subject, transforms it. By affecting the perception of persons and the perception of history, photography influences how we look at the world and how we look at others. But it is in "its ability to resist objectification and stereotyping by aesthetically transforming its narrow subject into something that carries a wider meaning and value" that photography is politicized. To what extent that Chad Wyatt's *RomaRising* resists the objectification of its subjects is a question that deserves deeper analysis, not only by non-Roma observers but also by Roma themselves. Its complexities notwithstanding, *RomaRising* has social and political effects that require sober reflection.

Figure 1



Tibor Csanya
Attorney (Hungary)

Figure 2



Erika Ptáčníková (Hornáková)
Author (Slovakia)

Figure 3



Olga Rostášová
Diabetes Specialist
(Czech Republic)

Figure 4



Asen Manchev Slavchev
Electrical Engineer
(Bulgaria)

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