

Foreword

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Ana Belén Martín Sevillano received her BA and PhD in Hispanic Philology from Universidad Complutense de Madrid, specializing in Latin American Literature and Culture. Her research focuses on issues related to *diaspora*, “race”/ethnicity, and gender in Spain and Latin America. In 2014 she received an endowment from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to work on her project *The Emergence of the Hispano-Romani Literature: The Writing of Ethnicity, Diaspora and Citizenship*.

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Oksana Marafioti is the author of *American Gypsy: A Memoir* (2012) and *Donatti's Lunatics* (2018). Her writings have appeared in *Rumpus*, *Slate*, and *Time* magazines, and in a number of literary journals and anthologies. She has presented lectures at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and CSPAN's Book TV. Oksana was the 2013 Library of Congress Literary Award Recipient and was the 2020 recipient of the Picador Excellence in Literature Award from the University of Leipzig, Germany. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing and teaches at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.



Exploring Romani Literature: From Theory to Practice

The 2019 Critical Approaches to Romani Studies Conference – held at the Central European University – included a panel on Romani literature that was the kernel of this issue. The regular presence of literary scholars in Romani studies forums and conferences suggests that literature, whether oral or written, is indeed a very important dimension of past and present Romani culture. What was unusual in the abovementioned panel was the presence of an author, Oksana Marafioti, whose presentation reflected on the very act of writing. Occasionally, writers are invited to read their work during academic conferences, either as keynote speakers or during special sessions, but in this case we had the unique opportunity to seamlessly discuss how literature is a spheric production in which the processes of writing, editing/publishing, and reception – both by general or critical readership – are intertwined and feed each other in complex ways.

When Oksana Marafioti and I were invited to put together this special issue on Romani literature, we soon agreed that it would offer a more compelling critical view if it were to include creative writing, which is rarely published in academic journals. The *Critical Romani Studies* editorial committee gracefully approved our plan, and for the last year we have been working with the authors and anonymous reviewers in putting together this collection of stories and critical articles that offer a glimpse of what Romani literature might be. Oksana and I are very grateful for the hard work and effort the contributors to this issue have made. The anonymous reviewers involved in the double-blind review process that the academic articles followed should be explicitly praised; their comments and input greatly helped authors to improve their initial work.

This *Critical Romani Studies* special issue explores the notion and practice of Romani literature through scholarly papers and creative writing. As any other cultural product, literature is shaped by social and historical circumstances; literary practice and theory change over time, adjusting to new ideological and aesthetical contexts. In the case of Romani literature, the ethnic dimension that it entails poses an additional layer of complexity, not only because the Romani peoples are diverse and scattered, but also because ethnicity as an identity marker can be experienced in different, often contradictory, ways. At the same time, not all Romani writers explicitly reflect on their ethnicity in their writing; certainly, considering all the works authored by Roma as ethnic literature can play down their depth and artistic value. Still, and as the pieces in this issue convey, identity is a critical question in texts authored by Roma. If for any minority the challenge of preserving its cultural identity is of great consequence, for Roma, a historically oppressed group, it is vital. Yet, what is Romani identity (or any other national or ethnic identity for that matter)? This is a question with no straight answer. Each one of the individuals who self-identify as Rom might have a different understanding and experience of what it means to be Rom. Hence, this special issue explores how authors are addressing from their positioned experiences the dimensions of ethnic identity through creative writing and literary analysis.

The astounding development of Romani writing in the last few decades is undoubtedly linked to the development of a Romani ethnopolitical movement through a network of civil organizations. At this time in history, we can trace a transnational Romani literary activity in which individual, group, and

national values or experiences are pieced together with those of the broader diasporic group. The ideological commonalities that exist among a diverse array of written texts reveal the building of a diasporic consciousness that emerges from the credo of the International Romani Union and other ethnopolitical instances of representation.

In the last decades, and in parallel to the emergence of the Romani literature, studies on Romani literature have considered its diasporic, hybrid, and multilingual character (Toninato 2014; Blandfort 2015; Zahova 2016). Three of the critical articles in this issue build on those seminal studies, explicitly addressing the benefits and the pitfalls that the tag of “Romani literature” might entail. More importantly, they offer theoretical tools in order to effectively sort, categorize, and analyze Romani literary production. In particular, Ileana Chirila builds on studies on Jewish literature, equally diasporic, extensive and geographically spread as the Romani one, borrowing the concept of “literary complex” (Miron 2010), and applying it to the analysis of *Je suis Tzigane et je le reste* by Anina Ciuciu and *Rien ne résiste à Romica* by Valérie Rodrigue. Similarly, Martín Sevillano’s article departs from the notion of “ethos” (Reynolds 1993; Baumlin and Meyer 2018) in order to establish the existing ideo-esthetic cohesion among literary narratives written in different languages and national settings: *Camelamos Naquerar* by José Heredia Maya, *Goddamn Gypsy* by Ronald Lee, *Dites-le avec des pleurs* by Mateo Maximoff, and *Fires in the Dark* by Louise Dougherty. This series of critical papers on the notion of Romani literature closes with Marina Hertrampf’s work, which weighs the extent and traits of Romani literature assisted by Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “minor literature,” offering as an example a descriptive overview of French and Spanish authors and texts.

The fourth critical article in this issue, “Tackling Negative Representation: The Use of Storytelling as a Critical Pedagogical Tool for Positive Representation of Roma” by Georgia Kalpazidou, Dimitris Ladopoulos, and Theofano Papakonstantinou, serves as a bridge between literary theory and literary practice by focusing on the pedagogical dimension of storytelling. The authors consider how this literary practice can be used as a teaching/learning tool to counteract the negative social representation that affects Roma and has a profound impact on children and young adults.

Finally, the critical section closes with an article that focuses on visual culture, connecting in meaningful ways with some of the topics addressed in the pieces devoted to literature. Éva Kovács’s “Black Bodies, White Bodies – ‘Gypsy’ Images in Central Europe at the Turn of the Twentieth Century (1880–1920)” offers a sophisticated analysis of the subtle ways in which oppression, perception, and representation intertwine.

The three reviews that follow are pertinent to this special issue in that they reveal the actual development of Romani literature and Romani studies. Laura Tittel’s piece critically describes the participation of Romani literature as a distinct entity in the 2019 Frankfurt Book Fair, which reveals the current momentum of Romani arts and cultures in the international scene. Mariana Sabino Salazar offers an organized account of the history, content, and current state of the Romani Archives and Documentation Centre (RADOC), one of the most salient elements of Dr. Ian Hancock’s academic legacy. Finally, Deniz Selmani offers a descriptive account of a significant recent addition to the field of Romani studies: *The Roma and their Struggle for Identity in Contemporary Europe*, edited by Huub van Baar and Angéla Kóczé.

The Arts and Culture section of this issue is devoted to creative writing and reflections on the reoccurring themes of family and memories and the roles both play in the construction of a literary Romani identity. The collection is a peek into the depths of the Romani literary production, and it proffers a generous start point for scholars and writers interested in exploring the multidimensionality of Romani narratives.

Oksana Marafioti's foreword examines the damaging effects of the practice of Romani identity as a caricature embedded in non-Romani literary and scholarly discourses, before establishing the vital role classical and contemporary Romani authors play in Romani literary activism movements that seek to re-establish Romani characters in fiction and non-fiction.

In Jorge Emilio Nedich's "Gypsy Identity" a young boy learns the rules of survival from Romani parents caught between the yearning to build a good life and the hard realities of wandering outcasts. During the process of writing essays and memoirs, authors often become the keepers of vital and, in equal parts, personal and cultural histories, as can be seen in the three creative non-fiction pieces by Jessica Reidy, Frances Roberts-Reilly, and Katelan Foisy. Reidy's "What We Will Not Burn" brims with attention as a grandmother passes to her granddaughter not only precious family heirlooms but also life-tested advice about grit. In Roberts-Reilly's "Who Was John Sampson Really Protecting?" the author's birthday road trip through Wales runs parallel to intrigue and a historical mix-up about the life of a well-known Romani ancestor. Foisy's "Roots" considers the idea of rootedness as transgenerational history of Herbalism. A case of cultural appropriation takes centerstage in Galina Trefil's "Gypsabee Dilemma." In the final two poems, Diana Norma Szokolyai evokes a world spun from the familial imagery and generational connection to culture so integral to our understanding of Romani identity.

As editors, we are aware that the articles and stories here can only offer a partial open-ended account of what Romani literature, in theory and in practice, is or can be. It is precisely this fluid and flexible texture that we would like to underscore as a distinctive trait of Romani literary activity.

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