

Contesting Stereotypes through Self-Representation? A Review of the Romani Exhibition Stands at the 2019 Frankfurt Book Fair

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Abstract

Romani literature was exhibited at the Frankfurt Book Fair at specific stands and events for the first time in 2019. This article reviews the presented literature and authors and discusses advantages and disadvantages of establishing the category “Romani literature” within the context of the Frankfurt Book Fair. It argues that the category provides a new platform for Romani authors as well as for Romani identity politics and was set up with the aim to fight existing racism against Roma. Making oneself visible as a diverse minority at such an event can help to break up stereotypes and constitutes a success after centuries of underrepresentation. At the same time, the article uncovers the danger of feeding into essentialism through the label “Romani literature” and reflects on the limitations of emancipatory politics when participating in a predominantly commercial event.

Keywords

- Diversity
- Essentialism
- Frankfurt Book Fair
- Identity politics
- Romani literature
- Visibility

Introduction

The Frankfurt Book Fair takes place once a year in October and is the largest book fair in the world, with more than 7,000 exhibitors from over 100 countries. In the 2019 edition, Romani literature was featured by itself for the first time, holding two exhibition stands and a number of events, such as book presentations and discussion panels, which I will comment on in this review. The first stand was organized together by the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma (Central Council) and the Documentation and Cultural Center of German Sinti and Roma (Documentation Center), while the Finland-based International Roma Writers' Association (IRWA) was in charge of the second stand. Both stands displayed carefully selected contemporary Romani literature – mostly from Germany and other European countries. The fruitful discussion panel “Sinti and Roma Literature in Germany and the World,” which brought together authors and scholars invited by the three abovementioned organizations, took place at the Weltempfang Center – a venue for discussing politics, culture, and literature funded and managed by the Frankfurt Book Fair in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office.

1. Book Presentations

At their stand, the Central Council and the Documentation Center aimed to provide a stage for literature authored *by* Sinti and Roma instead of literature *about* Sinti and Roma – showing a wide array of self-representation practices. They invited a variety of authors to present their works, which belong to literary genres like autobiography, prose, and poetry, as well as academic publishing. These were written either in Romani or in the national languages of the authors' countries of residence.

The books presented during the fair addressed crucial historical issues, such as the suffering that Sinti and Roma experienced under National Socialism, a taboo subject in post-war Germany. A number of literary works had delved on these issues since the 1980s, compensating for the lack of official recognition that victims experienced and, at the same time, supporting the growing civil rights movement (Zwicker 2010). The Holocaust survivor and civil rights activist **Zoni Weisz** – from Dutch Sinti descent – presented his worthwhile autobiography *Der vergessene Holocaust. Mein Leben als Sinto, Unternehmer und Überlebender* (The forgotten Holocaust. My life as a Sinto, entrepreneur, and survivor).^[1] During his presentation he recalled his childhood and talked about the strategies he resorted to in order to survive Nazi occupation.

Likewise, the book *Ede und Unku – die wahre Geschichte* (Ede and Unku – The real story), by **Janko Lauenberger** and **Juliane Weidemeyer**, was presented at the fair stand. This book evokes the children's novel *Ede und Unku* (Ede and Unku), written by the communist writer Grete Weißkopf under the male pseudonym Alex Wedding. Published in 1931, the original novel explored the friendship between a working-class boy with a Sinta girl during the early twentieth century, and it was widely read at schools in postwar East Germany. Lauenberger and Weidemeyer examine the real historical events that Unku's family experienced. Labeling them as “Gypsies,” the Nazis deported Erna Lauenberger – Unku – and

¹ This is the German translation from the original in Dutch, which was published in 2018 by the publishing house dtv.

her relatives to concentration camps. Along with many other Sinti and Roma, she was examined by the “racial scientists” Robert Ritter and Eva Justin before being killed in Auschwitz in 1944, at the age of 24. Janko Lauenberger, a German Sinto, is one of her few descendants, and together with his co-author, the journalist Juliane Weidemeyer, they discussed their book in a lively, open panel.

The authors **Nizaqete Bislimi** and **Jovan Nikolić** addressed another important subject for Romani communities, that of escaping oppression and migration. They both had to flee their countries – Bislimi migrated at the age of 14 from Kosovo to Germany in 1993; and Nikolić escaped from Serbia during the Kosovo War in 1999, settling in Germany. In her autobiography – *Durch die Wand – von der Asylbewerberin zur Rechtsanwältin* (Through the wall – From asylum seeker to lawyer) – the sympathetic author Bislimi reflected on her experiences as an asylum seeker, who succeeded in becoming a lawyer and who now helps other refugees to claim their asylum rights. Nikolić processed his experiences in several literary works, both in poetry and prose, such as *Zimmer mit Rad* (The room with a wheel), *Weißer Rabe, schwarzes Lamm* (White crow, black sheep) and *Käfig* (Cage). At the fair stand, he presented his debut novel *Seelenfänger, lautlos lärmend* (Soul catcher, silently noisy) from 2011.

Issues with language and translation were also a concern discussed in some of the fair events. The civil rights activist **Ilena Lagrene** presented a poetry anthology that her recently deceased husband, Reinhold Lagrene, had produced. With the title of *Djiparmissa – Klassische deutsche Gedichte auf Romanes* (Djiparmissa – Classical German poems in Romani), this book is a bilingual (German and Romani) edition of poems authored by major German poets, such as Goethe, Schiller, Mörike, Hölderlin, and Fontane.

The young Austrian author **Samuel Mago** presented another bilingual book, which he wrote together with his brother Károly Mágó: *Glücksmacher – e baxt romani* (Happiness-maker – e baxt romani). It contains 13 “short stories from the world of the Roma” as the subtitle specifies. Samuel Mago has won several literature prizes in recent years – among them the Roma Literature Prize of the Austrian PEN club.

In contrast to these personal experiences, **Radmila Mladenova** offered a scientific perspective to the program with her recently published study *Patterns of Symbolic Violence. The Motif of ‘Gypsy’ Child-theft across Visual Media*, the first volume of a new series by the Heidelberg Research Centre on Antigypsyism. In her study, she focuses on the color-coding of bodies and the racialized representation of Romani characters in film, usually marked as black or dark. She points to the existing parallels between the forms of racism that the Black population experiences in the United States with those that affect Sinti and Roma in Europe. Her presentation stood out from the program as it focused on the image of the “Gypsy” rather than on actual experiences of Sinti and Roma.

2. Panel Discussion about Romani Literature

The panel “Sinti and Roma Literature – In Germany and the World” offered a compelling overview on the problems faced by Romani authors. The literary scholar Beate Eder-Jordan stated that the number of Romani publications has increased in Europe the last 35 years. She pointed out that, while during the 1920s and 1930s, flourishing Romani literary scenes existed in Romania and the Soviet Union, these

scenes were erased during the Second World War through a systematic destruction of cultural life and through the persecution of Sinti and Roma. Thus, it has not been easy to re-establish them, as Sinti and Roma continuously have had to fight the spread of discrimination.

Romani writers Ruždija Sejdović and Veijo Baltzar, head of the IRWA, considered the many challenges that Romani authors face when they try to publish their literary work. Both talked about their first-hand experiences in finding a suitable publisher willing to publish Romani literature. They pointed out that Romani writers encounter difficulties to publish in their corresponding national languages due to the lack of a specific Romani literary tradition, which would involve established networks. This difficulty increases when authors try to publish in Romani, a language without a standardized spelling and that consists of many different dialects. In the last decades, different groups have put forward proposals for standardizing Romani languages, some aiming for regional codification, others for a universal standardization.^[2]

Finally, Erika Hornbogner the fourth participant in the panel, discussed her experience as head of the Austrian publishing house Drava, one of a handful that works with bilingual or multilingual literary works. While translation is an expensive undertaking, especially for literary niche products, Drava is a positive and meaningful example of the complex situation that multilingual authors face when wishing to write either in Romani, a language with a small market, or in more than one language due to migrant experiences. Drava has so far published Romani-German poetry collections from the Serbian-Austrian-Romani author Ilija Jovanović and the Swiss-Yenish author Mariella Mehr and several Romani-German editions of Romani fairy tales. Mišo Nikolić has translated Mehr's German poems into Romani and has published his own autobiographical texts in German with Drava. Jovan Nikolić's work was published in the original Serbo-Croatian versions as well as translated into German. The authors have benefitted from individual solutions and bilingual editions.

3. Towards Social Recognition as a Minority

In order to discuss the social and political meaning of the event, it is important to consider the specific context of the Frankfurt Book Fair. The fair has a long history and, related to the rise of the modern printing press in Europe, took place for the first time in 1454. Nearly five centuries later, after 1948, it was established in its current form as a place for public book marketing, trading, and discussing publishing rights and licenses (see Niemeier 2001). As a public fair, it connects the sphere of cultural production with the economic sphere, addressing the different financial stages that affect authors, publishers, and consumers. For small and alternative publishing houses, the opportunity to exhibit their products at the fair may have important repercussions, as it can provide access to a wider market. However, to rent a stand at the book fair is an expensive enterprise, which is a significant obstacle for the participation of small publishers and non-profit organizations. In 2019, the Central Council and the Documentation Center received funding from the Freudenberg Foundation, a private organization. Therefore, the presence of the Romani exhibition stands depended on the financial support and willingness of foundations sponsoring

2 Among these groups was IRWA, and projects like "Translation Romani."

anti-racism and pro-democracy causes. The funding largely has been beyond the control of the Romani organizations that participated in the 2019 fair. Attendees also find economic barriers: the first three days of the event are reserved for trade visitors, who pay high prices for their tickets; the weekend is open for the general public for a fee.³ Hence, the book fair, in general, is part of a global economy that reproduces exclusion and social inequality.

Nonetheless, as we have already seen, the Frankfurt Book Fair provides many opportunities for exhibiting and discussing social topics. The Central Council, a prominent active social agent in Germany, chose the Frankfurt Book Fair as an opportunity to increase the visibility of a new wave of Romani literature and the many ways of contemporary Romani life. One of the goals is to address politics with this concern, and this was achieved partially when the German Minister of State for Europe at the Federal Foreign Office, Michael Roth, visited the exhibition stand.

Romani literature had not been completely absent from the book fair in previous editions, since some Romani authors have been publishing participating firms. What is new, though, is the exhibition of Romani literature under the very label of “Romani literature.” This provides a different kind of platform, with new opportunities, but also with certain risks, both for authors and for the development of Romani identity politics. Authors publishing without ethnic adscription have the opportunity to be considered as individuals rather than as representatives of a community. However, this might neglect the specific social experiences shared by many Sinti and Roma today. Across Europe, Sinti and Roma are disproportionately disadvantaged when it comes to social equality and political representation. Therefore, Romani literature might benefit from being understood as the production of a sparsely visible and underrepresented minority. In this context, representation at the book fair can be an important step towards social recognition, both for an ethnic group and for its individual members.

The Romani presence at the Frankfurt Book Fair might very well be the effect of the growing visibility that Romani literature has achieved in literary and cultural studies over the last decade. Initially, progressive literary studies focused on the representation and stereotypes of “Gypsies” in mainstream works (Solms and Strauß 1995; Hölz 2002; Saul 2007; Solms 2008; Hagen 2009; Bogdal 2011; Brittnacher 2012; Patrut 2014). More recently, Romani literature (and Romani art more generally) has become an independent category that is in the process of being shaped (Djurić 2002; Blandfort 2011; Toninato 2014; Blandfort 2015; French 2015). These two approaches are concerned with different issues. While the former deals with mainstream literature and the representation of Sinti and Roma and others perceived as “Gypsies,” such as homeless people or vagabonds, the latter considers literature written by Sinti and Roma and their self-representation, as well as their contribution to challenging mainstream, often stereotypical representations of Sinti and Roma in literary and cultural production, thereby actively creating new representational spaces in the domain of culture. Nonetheless, both categories of literature as well as the scientific approaches have emerged from social practices and resort to the same mechanisms of knowledge production. Thus, stereotypes and prejudices that are analyzed within the domain of the first

³ The trade visitor ticket for one day costs EUR 69–75. A regular one-day ticket for members of the public during the weekend costs EUR 22 (concessions EUR 15).

set of studies can certainly be found in those works that the category of Romani literature comprises.^[4] Therefore, Romani literary studies have to deal with issues that pertain to the internalization of practices and standards that feed into social discrimination. A critical social theory might help to identify the reproduction of social mechanisms of exclusion.

For Romani authors, the framework of “Romani literature” can open up different possibilities of (self-) representation. However, the label might convey a false idea of homogeneity, enabling stereotypes that have supported social discriminatory structures for centuries. In this sense, the Central Council and the Documentation Center took certain precautions, as many of the invited authors are civil rights advocates, either in cultural or educational domains. The various book presentations shed light on different and sometimes still common experiences, such as the persecution of Sinti and Roma under National Socialism, migration stories, bilingualism, and discrimination. From an emancipatory perspective, this depiction of common experiences through individual voices is one possibility to provide a necessary balance in order to contest stereotypes and achieve social awareness.

Another problem of representation of “Romani literature” at the Frankfurt Book Fair are the boundaries given within the sphere of cultural production and thus the sphere of economy. From an economic perspective, literary pieces that offer stereotypical representations might sell better than those presenting more alternative and distinct drawings of Romani identities. Thus, even raising awareness of stereotypical thinking largely depends on the intentions of both authors and publishers – they have to be explicitly critical of the mainstream discourse and withstand market mechanisms in order to challenge underlying tendencies of exclusion. Moreover, many of the mechanism of exclusion are structural phenomena of our societies and do not only appear in depictions, but in socio-economic practices. They cannot be solved within the context of the book fair and social awareness alone will not change the underlying socio-economic and racial structures that produce and reproduce exclusion. Still, it is commendable that the Central Council and the Documentation Center invited many politically active authors who also engage in other societal contexts. The study of Romani literature can neither be oblivious to market mechanisms nor to economic constraints nor the fertile ground for racialized and stereotypical thinking that authors and works face within society. Thus, aiming at establishing a certain niche in the book market and in the field of literature has drawbacks and consequences.

The presence of the Romani exhibition stands at the 2019 Frankfurt Book Fair is the result of the political activism that many Sinti and Roma have undertaken in the last decades. This achievement provides a space for self-identification and for building community awareness, and can (but may not necessarily) draw a counter-image to traditional, stereotype-based representations. Offering singular, distinct experiences by individuals that identify as members of a marginalized ethnic minority can contest stereotypes and encourage reflective thinking about societies that are built on Manichean world views. Still, the perils of essentialism have to be considered both by authors and literary critics. The Romani literature presented can be seen together as a cultural expression of specific experiences and as a practice of socio-political activism.

⁴ For a broader discussion on the interaction of both strands, see Saul and Tebbutt 2004.

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