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Introductory Reflections on Romani Literature(s) as Engaged World Literature

I write
because of the flight of the black birds
which circle around us again and again,
because of the hidden sky,
because of the crying child.

I write to note our lives,
so that we may remember
with a spark of love
the scent of our existence,
so that together we may
describe the desolate places of oblivion.

So that we may revive the days gone by,
the sleeping souls,
so that we may remember
our ancestors.

So that we may rouse from sleep
the forgotten past,
that I carry in my chest.

– That is why I write.

Russo (2022, 30)

Ruždija Russo Sejdović's poem, originally written in Romani, is translated into Serbo-Croatian,¹ German, and English (see the print of all four versions following these introductory words) and shows the importance of translations for the circulation of literary works, as many Romani literary works remain hidden from people in the majority society.²

In the context of post-colonialism and globalization, the question of globality has become increasingly important in socio-historical and geo-

¹ The author translated his poem himself into Serbo-Croatian, the majority language of his childhood and youth in Montenegro, which was then part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

² On the author, see Zahova (2018).

political debates in recent decades. The idea of world literature, however, is a very old one, which can be traced back at least to Goethe and his famous letter to Eckermann of 31 January 1827. The notion of *Weltliteratur* (world literature), which the German writer conceived from the observation that the same texts circulate throughout the world, raises the question about the scope of history. It is indeed a notion that powerfully challenges the national framework that generally organizes the writing of literary history and that also allows other frameworks of thought, such as those of European literature, to be complexified and enriched.

David Damrosch, in his pioneering work *What is World Literature?* (2003) confronts the established canon of European “masterpieces” implied in Goethe’s perception of world literature. Rather than looking at world literature as a canonical body of texts, Damrosch presents world literature as a way of circulation, reading, and reception. Focusing on texts outside the European frame of reference, from the Sumerians to the Aztecs, and across historical and literary periods, from medieval to post-modern, he expands the concept of “masterpieces” to include established classics and new discoveries that move and intersect transculturally and transnationally.

Damrosch, unfortunately, does not include any examples from Roma literatures. And yet, Roma literature is per se transnational and transcultural: the fact that Roma literatures, like the Roma themselves, often refer to one and the same Indian “imaginary homeland” (Rushdie 1991, 10), but live diasporically (Hertrampf 2020), always gives their literature a transnational character. Transgression is thus an identity-forming element of a kind of literature that is multilingual and heterogeneous in every respect.

For Roma, writing is always a political act (Toninato 2014): a rebellion of the subalterns (Spivak 1995) who want to draw attention to the reality of their lives and the painful past of their ethnic group. Sejdović’s poem also bears witness to this when he writes of the flight of “the black birds”, referring to the oppressive feeling of exclusion, discrimination, and oppression and referring to the intergenerational trauma of the Porjamos, which is perpetuated primarily due to the lack of perception and reappraisal by the majority society, but also due to their own daily experience of discrimination and exclusion and stigmatization.

Roma literature is always socially and politically engaged literature. Its authors see themselves as the voice of their unheard community, ex-

plicitly addressing the majority society, as Anina Ciuciu does in *Je suis tzigane et je le reste* (*I'm a Gypsy and I Remain One*, 2013):

Ma vie et celle de mes racines furent, sont et resteront un éternel combat contre l'injustice et les préjugés [...]. Et si aujourd'hui je vis en France, pays des droits de l'homme, mon combat – mon sacerdoce –, comme celui de mes proches, est quotidien, pour gommer notre soi-disant différence avec les autres et pour que ce texte rédigé en 1789 par les Représentants du Peuple français soit respecté à notre égard. [...] Pour eux, pour le peuple rom souvent méconnu, mais tellement décrié, j'ai donc voulu raconter mon histoire pour que tout le monde comprenne que, dans nos yeux, il y a de l'amour et de l'espoir, que nous ne voulons pas être rejetés ou plaints, mais simplement compris. (Ciuciu/Veille 2013, 17–18)³

Thus, most works written by Romani authors express the strong ethical need for social responsibility and function as a non-polemic and non-propagandistic articulation of opinion, whether in the mode of consternation or in the mode of *prise de parole* (“speaking up”).⁴

The mid-nineteenth century has been considered as the beginning of modern original Roma literature (Zahova 2021, 11). Thus, tracing the history of written Romani literature is still a relatively young field, and Romani literatures are still being defined and consolidated. As of today, in almost all countries where Roma live, authors of Romani background have been producing books and other publications in various languages, including Romany. In the decades since 1989 the number of books that authors of Romani background have published has increased. Likewise, the usage of Romani in books, translations, and periodical publications by and for Roma has also risen. Romani literary pieces share features that go beyond the borders of any one country or region. These circum-

³ “My life and that of my roots was, is and will remain an eternal struggle against injustice and prejudice [...]. And if today I live in France, the country of human rights, my fight – my vocation –, like that of my family, is daily, to erase our so-called difference with the others and so that this text written in 1789 by the Representatives of the French People is respected in our regard. [...] For them, for the often misunderstood but much maligned Roma people, I wanted to tell my story so that everyone would understand that there is love and hope in our eyes, that we do not want to be rejected or pitied, but simply understood.” (Ciuciu/Veille 2013, 17–18)

⁴ On the topic of current engaged literature, see for example: Bouju (2005), Chaudet (2016), and Denis (2000).

stances allow us to speak of Romani literature, and even of Romani literatures in the plural form, as a heterogeneous and multifaceted, yet still a collective phenomenon.

One of the special features of this young literature is, on the one hand, that it is a multilingual diasporic world literature that very often could be characterized as engaged literature and tries to deconstruct different old stereotypes of the minority. On the other hand, it is striking that female authors play a prominent role: *Papusza* (Bronisława Wajs), a Romani woman, is generally considered to be the first Romni to make a name for herself as an author.⁵

It is conspicuously often female authors who achieve visibility with their texts on the national book markets. Some authors appear in their texts as committed feminists and/or human rights activists. For other authors, sexuality and gender play a less prominent role in their works. Additionally, women often also play a very central roles in texts by male authors.

Therefore, the aim of our volume is to explore the different facets of Romani Literatures in two interrelated axes. First, their status as transnational world literature will be discussed. Second, the significance of writing as a form of social engagement and self-empowerment will be examined. It will be shown that it is mainly women authors who speak out and stand up for their rights as women and Romnya. And when males do write, gender figures prominently as a topic.

Individually, the essays in the volume represent the wide diversity of topics, languages, countries, and authors that Romani literatures have assumed in the past three decades. The Roma writers and artists analyzed in the essays come from Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Poland, Spain, and the United States. The languages of the places where they create and disseminate their works are English, German, French, Finland, Polish, Romany, and Spanish. This breadth proves that Roma are not “country-less,” but rather, to borrow a phrase that Virginia Woolf applied to women, their “country is the whole world.” (Woolf 1938, 197) While the works of the Roma discussed in this volume often relate to the geographical area from which they originate, they also transcend the local in their focus on topics that will resonate with scholars and laypeople alike worldwide. Those topics range from narratives on autobiographi-

⁵ Recent research by Emilia Kledzik, however, has shown that *Papusza* probably did not write and market her verses herself (Kledzik 2023).

cal experiences, the role of the artist in the community, gender norms, witness testimonies of persecution during the Romani Holocaust/Porajmos/Samudaripren, and the “contact zones” (Pratt 2008) between Roma and non-Roma.

We are particularly honored to have the first essay be a piece of original literature by Oksana Marifioti, author of the bestselling novel *American Gypsy*. Having family roots in several geographical areas, she writes eloquently about the “borderlands” she has crossed into, by, and through and lived inside, outside, and beside. Her second sentence echoes Virginia Woolf’s sentiments: “My entire life I belong to every neighborhood I’ve ever lived in and to no country” (see page 23 in this volume). Marifioti articulately blends theoretical observations by Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa and Emma Patchett with honest reflections on writing about her family and Romani heritage. Her self-identification as “an *atlas*, a *patchwork*, a *tapestry*, a *land*” (see page 27 in this volume) offers the perfect segue to the essays that follow.

Ana Belén Martín Sevillano’s essay is, indeed, a fitting follow-up to Marifioti’s piece, presenting an analysis of *American Gypsy* along with Miky Walsh’s *Gypsy Boy* as important writings about the trauma that two young Roma face in their private and public lives, albeit in different geographical and social situations. After providing important definitions of the genres of autobiography and memoir, Sevillano gives an overview of representative Romani autobiographical accounts produced in western Europe by authors born in the first quarter of the 20th century. While the trauma these writers of an older generation suffered under National Socialism often figures prominently in their works, authors of the younger generation (born after 1970) explore “the diverse, flexible, and complex condition of being Roma, contesting mainstream essentializing representations that still reproduce stereotypes and prejudices” (see page 34 in this volume). Surfacing clearly in their works are conflicts related to the “contact zones,” a term coined by Mary Louise Pratt, summarized as “a shared space in which conflicting cultures clash but nonetheless, coexist and interact” (2008, 8).

Besides defining themes that occur in Roma literatures, literary scholars have also taken up the task of identifying aesthetic qualities that might characterize Roma literatures. Kirsten von Hagen’s essay looks at the way in which Roma writers toy with the stereotypes and prejudices against Roma at the same time that they challenge them. She has developed the particular term of “mythis bricolage” to describe the mixture of genres

that characterizes three works: Sandra Jayat's novel *La longue route d'une zingarina* (*The Long Road of a Zingarina* (1978)), Anina's programmatic self-quest *Je suis Tzigane et je le reste* (*I am a Gypsy and I remain one*) (2013), and Miguel Haler's autofiction *Les mémoires d'un chat de gouttière* (*Memories of an alley cat*) (2011). Re-writing, re-interpreting, and re-performing in varying genres become tools for dissolving cultural and aesthetic boundaries.

Writing as a political act for Roma comes to the forefront in Martin Shaw's pioneering article on Uriah Burton's *Uriah Burton "Big Just": His Life, His Aims, His Ideals*. The compromises that Uriah Burton had to make when fighting for private caravan site provisions for "Romanies, Gypsies, Travelers, and people of no fixed abode" in the United Kingdom epitomize the ways in which the "contact zones" that affect writers aesthetically and thematically also affect them politically. Shaw's concludes that Uriah Burton did make a difference regarding improved caravan sites, regardless of the personal attacks on his personality and the processes he used to reach his goals.

The biofiction of Núria León de Santiago's *El ángel de Mahler* (*Mahler's Angel*) (2014) as a "paradigmatic example of contemporary world literature" is the subject of Marina Ortrud Hertrampf's essay. Marina Ortrud Hertrampf first cogently defines the hybrid genre of "biofiction," as coined by French critic Alain Buisine, namely as a succinct fitting term for "fictional biographies" or "biographical fictions." The subject of Núria León de Santiago's novel—a famous Jewish-Austrian musician—along with the author's own background as a Romni author epitomize, as Marina Ortrud Hertrampf states, "a world dialogue about overcoming the timeless theme of the powerlessness of minorities" (see page 93 in this volume).

Emilia Kledzik also focusses on Mary Pratt's notion of "contact zone" to interpret the stunning work of Polish artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas. Most exciting for this volume is the bridge that Emilia Kledzik builds between Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's visual images, the textual images promoted under the aegis of "Gypsy Studies" in the 18th and 19th centuries, and world literatures. Emilia Kledzik shows how Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's visual work *Re-Enchanting the World* reinterprets pejorative visual and textual images created by European ethnologists and historians of "Gypsy Studies". Małgorzata Mirga-Tas reinstates subjectivity, dignity, and agency to Roma affected negatively by such images. Such a constructively critical approach to the historical and artistic heritage of Roma proves

necessary to advance the socio-political engagement that has become a defining feature of other Romani authors and artists.

The second part of the volume, which focus on women's overwhelming presence in the realms of Romani literary and artistic production, begins with Florian Homann's fascinating look at the important roles that women played in the production of flamenco music, not only as singers, but as lyricists. The significant connection that Florian Homann makes between music production, textual creation, and performance adds yet another dimension to identifying Romani literatures as world literature. Florian Homann looks at Romnja performers who have sung about historical atrocities, thereby rewriting official historical documentation.

The multimedial work of Romnja surfaces especially in the extraordinary work of German Sintezza Philomena Franz and Austrian Lovara Ceija Stojka. Paola Toninato provides a clear and cogent exposé of both women's creations as writers and activists. As the two first women to write publicly about their horrific experiences as children in concentration camps under National Socialism, Philomena Franz and Ceija Stojka represent the courage, resilience, and boldness necessary in the face of struggles for autonomy and self-expression. Their texts have become classics of world literature that break harmful stereotypes while promulgating images of hopeful social, political, literary, and artistic engagement for Roma communities.

Sidonia Bauer takes a close, unique look at the spaces that frame several texts by Sinti*zze/Manouche authors. In particular, Sidonia Bauer's analyzes the important gendered space that the horse-drawn living wagon assumed for these groups in the early 20th century. After presenting an overview of several texts, she focusses on those by German Sintizza Philomena Franz and the French Manouche Duville family. Although the wagon has in many ways become a stereotypical, overused image of the "wandering Gypsy", Romani perspectives on and descriptions of their wagons have received very little scholarly attention. Sidonia Bauer takes a sociopoetic approach based on theoretical writings of Lefebvre and Massey to analyze rich auto-representational literary texts.

Following Paola Toninato's and Sidonia Bauer's essays, Lorely French's essay analyzes in depth one particularly poignant story in Ceija Stojka's memoirs, namely, that of a "Kinderweihnachten" ("Children's Christmas Party") that occurred in 1944 in Ravensbrück concentration camp. In weaving together a close textual analysis of Ceija Stojka's story with sev-

eral other narratives by other women Ravensbrück inmates from several countries, French demonstrates the qualities of world literature that the stories possess. The piece shows the invaluable contributions that witness accounts by Roma offer and the necessity to listen to the voices of Roma, such as that of Ceija Stojka, and to consider the Romani concept of *baxt* when interpreting Stojka's interpretation of the event. French's article stresses the necessity of scholarship that combines precise historical documentation and close textual analysis.

The very act of writing is empowering, as Marina Ortrud Hertrampf's essay on the novel *Cuando callan las estrellas* (*When the stars are silent*) (2018) by Spanish author Sally Cortés Santiago demonstrates. It is especially gratifying to include the voices of younger generations in the essay collection, and Marina Ortrud Hertrampf's two essays in this volume complement each other in their interpretations of works by Núria León de Santiago and Sally Cortés Santiago. Whereas the subject of Núria León de Santiago's novel is a famous Austrian-Jewish composer, that of Sally Cortés Santiago is a young, strong, self-confident Romni. Sally Cortés Santiago's work thus seems more geared towards a popular readership, but, as Marina Ortrud Hertrampf successfully argues, that should not undermine the critical questioning of stereotypical images of Romani women that Sally Cortés Santiago accomplishes. One should also not ignore the empowerment that Romnja gain through writing works that reach the arena of world literatures.

The final essay by Viola Parente-Čapková on Kiba Lumberg's literary works encapsulates many of the thematic and aesthetic characteristics of Roma literatures that have surfaced in other essays in this volume. Kiba Lumberg has also worked in a multimedial arena as a writer, artist, and activist. Her texts represent a variety of genres and are highly autobiographical as they highlight topics of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and identity politics. Viola Parente-Čapková undertakes a multifaceted, intersectional analysis Kiba Lumberg's latest novel, *Irtiottoxxx* (2018). While the novel presents a highly critical view of the position of the artist, and especially the aging female artist, within cultural institutions and in society in general, it does end in a kind of feminist utopia.

With these descriptions of the individual essays, we want to describe the flow that moves from one to other. We do want to acknowledge, however, that working within the understanding of the disparate, diverse nature of the texts also raises particular editorial difficulties. A main concern that we editors had when preparing the final manuscripts

for publication relates to terminology. First, we use the term “Roma” to refer to the entire ethnic group, which includes many sub-groups, such as Lovara, Manouche, Sinti*zze, etc. In the spirit of diversity, we allow latitude in accepting what the individual scholars and authors wish to use, for example, Rom*nja and Sinti*zze, to show gender inclusivity. As Gadje, we strive to avoid what Margareta Matche identifies as “the use of fixed, racialized, harmful signifiers like *Tsigan* [...] and *Gypsy*, knowing that the Gadje imposed them on false and rigid symbols and markers” (Matche 2017). When such terms are used in historical contexts, we have thus used quotation marks to signify those contexts, as with the use of “Zigeuner” or “Gypsy” under National Socialism. In the cases of specific communities or sub-groups who prefer to employ this terminology, we have treated the terms as such and not, as Matche states “to advance a global *Gypsy* identity that is involuntary, reactive, and imposed” (Matche 2017). Likewise, we allow American and European scholars to conform to their own conventions of spelling and punctuation.

In the end, we want to recognize the fecundity of Romani literatures and accomplishments within the framework of Romani literary and artistic creation as the kind of shift that Matche identifies for Romani scholarly production:

We are, I would say, facing a stringent need to shift the frameworks of thought and Romani scholarly production from Roma vulnerability to white privileges, from participation and achievement gaps to opportunity gaps, from poverty to perpetual institutionalized racism, and finally from integration of the Roma to the means of liberating non-Roma from long-held racist *doxa* or commonly held beliefs. (Matche 2016)

As editors, we are most proud to present a volume of essays grounded in profound theoretical concepts, close textual analysis, and rigorous historical inquiry. We are thankful to all the authors for their enriching contributions. We also thank Hayden Christensen for assisting in editing the final manuscript, supported by a Summer Undergraduate Research and Creative Inquiry grant from Pacific University. We know and hope, however, that this is not a definitive, comprehensive collection of essays on Romani literatures. If anything, the essays prove that the sky is the limit when exploring the limitless world of Romani literatures.