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Female Empowerment Through Literary Overwriting of Stereotypical Images of Romani Femininity. An Exemplary Analysis from Spain: Sally Cortés Santiago' Novel *When the stars are silent* (2018)

Abstract

The article explores the extent to which female empowerment can be articulated in the medium of literary narrative by overwriting stereotypical images of Romani femininity without actually being part of committed literature. I would like to exemplify this form of “popular” involved literature with the novel *When the stars are silent* by the Spanish-speaking author Sally Cortés Santiago.¹

1. Sally Cortés Santiago as an Example of the Spanish Romani Literary Scene

Like in all European countries, written Romani literature is a fairly recent development in Spain, emerging only at the beginning of the 20th century.² Even if a certain turning point can be seen from the 1990s onwards, Spanish-writing Roma who, as mediators, deliberately cross cultural-ethnic boundaries between the surrounding society and their own group, continue to be the exception to this day.³

Among the few Spanish Romani authors, it is, however, very striking that they are always politically engaged: while this phenomenon already applies to Joaquín Albaicín, born in 1965 and undoubtedly the best-known and most productive Spanish Romani author of the present

¹ The novel examined here, *When the stars are silent*, has so far only been published in the original Spanish under the title *Cuando callan las estrellas*. All text quotations are my own translations.

² Cf. Hackl (1987), Hertrampf (2011 a und b).

³ Cf. Hertrampf (2011a and b), (2019),

day, it is a peculiarity that applies almost without exception to Spanish Romani authors of younger generations, especially to Romnija. Whether NÚria León de Santiago, the first female Romani author writing in Spanish, or Sally Cortés Santiago, both consciously present themselves as Romani women in the Spanish media and are committed to demanding social, ethnic, and gender equality in the Roma community and within Spanish society.

Sally Cortés Santiago is a modern-day Romani woman who was born in 1984 in Alicante, Spain.⁴ She is mother of three children and has been working in different NGOs to break stereotypes on Roma insofar as her main goal is to increase the visibility and acceptance of Roma. In doing so, she uses a wide variety of artistic media as vehicles for promotion, visibility, and empowerment of Romani culture. Actually, she is a strong defender of Romani women's rights and currently works as a social mediator in the Romani women's association Arakerando. In fact, Romnija are the main protagonists and backbones of all her social and literary work. She is the author of plays such as *Caminos rotos (Broken roads)* (2015) and *Memorias de una gitana (Memories of a gypsy woman)* (2016), which have been performed by "Romís Arakerando", the theatre company of Arakerando. Her debut novel *Cuando callan las estrellas (When the stars are silent)* was published in 2018 and was followed in 2021 by the fantasy novel *Alas (Wings)*.

2. *When the stars are silent: An Empowering Women's Novel Between Dystopia and Romani Mythology*

The novel is a rather unusual mixture of political dystopia, socially critical novel, and "chick lit," that is, a piece of popular fiction targeted at younger women who narrate about romantic relationships of young contemporary female protagonists living in metropolitan areas. In fact, we find all the following situations in the novel: young women have their first love experiences, become jealous rivals, and worry about their appearances; the action takes place in a big city and the protagonist gets into the circles of the beautiful and the rich via her photography job as well as into the milieu of fashion; and, finally, the novel makes a plea for true love that defies all rules. *When the stars are silent* is therefore a

⁴ Cf. Bermúdez (2022).

women's book in more ways than one: it is the book by a female Romani author who tells of a strong and self-confident Romni. Actually, only Romnija appear in the story, so the Romani community here is focused on its female members.

The group's internal auto-criticism that is practised is particularly interesting, because the protagonist, as the author's alter ego, appeals to young Romnija to live a modern life as a self-determined woman, but without denying her own cultural identity and breaking with moral ideals:

My personal opinion about *gypsias* was that our life consisted of a constant renunciation, as a consequence of our customs and traditions that we had maintained for centuries. We were always different from the rest of the world, and most of the things that a young girl of our age would do, we could not do, unless we did them by hiding and lying. Most of us gave up studies, gave up many jobs, gave up friendships, and gave up love, if it meant jeopardising your integrity as a *gypsia*. But to this day, I've never had to worry about anything like that because I never went against my grandmother or any other *gypsio*. (Cortés Santiago 2018, 31)⁵

In fact, the first-person narrator also emphasises that, contrary to all prejudices, she, her sister, and her grandmother are extremely bookish (cf. 49), but she does not conceal the fact that this is not viewed in an unrestrictedly positive light within the Roma community—we know this criticism of the written literature of the majority society, for example, from the biography of the Polish Romni poet Papsza (Bronisława Wajs), who published her works: “Éramos de las pocas *gypsias* en el Ghetto que habíamos conseguido, pero no sin esfuerzo y críticas por parte de nuestra propia gente.” (52)⁶

⁵ For all following quotations from this edition, only the pages are given. “Mi opinión personal referente a las *gypsias* era que nuestra vida consistía en una constante renuncia, a consecuencia de nuestras costumbres y tradiciones que manteníamos desde hacía siglos. Siempre fuimos diferentes l resto del mundo y a eso se le sumaba que la mayoría de las cosas que solía hacer una chica joven con nuestra edad, nosotras no podíamos hacerlas, a no ser que lo hiciéramos escondidas y mintiendo. La mayoría de nosotras renunciábamos a los estudios, renunciábamos a muchos trabajos, renunciábamos a amistades y renunciábamos al amor, si podía suponer hacer peligrar tu integridad como *gypsia*. Pero hasta el día de hoy, nunca me había tenido que preocupar por algo así porque nunca llevé la contraria a mu abuela un a ningún otro *gypsio*.” (31)

⁶ “We were among the few gypsies in the Ghetto that had made it, but not without effort and criticism from our own people.” (52)

Another striking element of the novel is that Cortés integrates magical elements of oral Romani narrative literature. In fact, the legend of the founding myth of the Romani people is central to the understanding of the novel and explains the title. When the stars are silent, the Roma are silent; after all, the novel poses the question of who can really succeed in silencing the Roma, despite thousands of years of attempts by whites.

The book begins with a prologue in which the central theme of alterity of the Romani people, whose members Cortés calls “gypsios” and “gypsias”, is prominently addressed. What is interesting here is that the legend, which is orally passed on intergenerationally, is marked as deeply unrealistic, but at the same time also strengthens group membership. The fact that the grandmother tells the children the legend again and again to go to sleep in view of the difficult living conditions shows that it has a self-assuring and strength-giving effect:

Cuando éramos pequeñas y nos íbamos a dormir, mi abuela María siempre nos contaba una antigua leyenda gypsia para que pudiésemos dormir tranquilas bajo la luz de las estrellas y que nosotros sueños volaran hasta llevarnos tan lejos como nuestra imaginación nos permitiera. La historia narraba cómo aparecieron los primeros gypsios en la tierra, una historia fantástica, demasiado increíble para ser cierta y poder créela, pero que s nosotras nos encantaba escuchar cada noche, acurrucadas bajo un lío de mantas, haciéndonos soñar hasta sumergirnos en lo más profundo de la historia y desear formar parte de ella. (9)⁷

The mythological interpretation of the people’s origin as descendants of the stars reflects the positive self-image. Ultimately, the legend explains the non-acceptance experienced from the outside on the one hand and the self-perceived foreignness in this world via the cosmic origin of the Roma on the other. In this way, the stigmatisation as ‘others’ is countered by a positive reinterpretation as self-confident others:

⁷ “When we were little and went to sleep, my grandmother Maria always told us an ancient gypsy legend so that we could sleep peacefully under the starlight and our dreams would fly away to take us as far as our imagination would allow us to go. The story told of how the first gypsios appeared on earth, a fantastic story, too incredible to be true to be believed, but one that we loved to listen to every night, curled up under a mess of blankets, dreaming ourselves into the depths of the story and wishing we were part of it.” (9)

Y de ese amor entre estrellas caídas y humanos fue que apareció una nueva raza, los gypsios, o como posteriormente los llamaron, zíngaros, gitanos, cigány o roms. Una raza que nació con la marca de una estrella dorada detrás de la oreja, para recordar su procedencia. Un pueblo que nunca se sintió de este mundo porque, en realidad, pertenecía a dos; que nunca llegó a ser aceptado porque, en verdad, desprendía un algo tan diferente que no era de este mundo. Una mezcla de lo conocido con lo desconocido de las estrellas, así decían que era el interior de los gypsios, todo un universo sin conocer. Aún dicen que en los ojos de muchos podemos encontrar restos de esa luz tan característica y mágica, pero solo es eso, una bonita leyenda, que supongo que fue inventada por los antepasados gypsios para dar una historia a su historia. Un pueblo que en realidad nunca supo de su procedencia, de dónde venían o hacia dónde debían dirigirse. Un pueblo que, para su desgracia, durante siglos fue perseguido y despreciado, despojado a la fuerza de sus costumbres, su lengua, su magia. Siempre fueron diferentes, siempre fueron iguales. (11)⁸

The setting of the novel is Gran Capital (Big Capital) located in south-eastern Spain. The city is subdivided into different socially and racially segregated sectors. This spatial conception already shows that the novel's plot is situated in a society that is massively marked by racism and exclusion. Indeed, the politically fascistic system of rule in the post-war world depicted in the novel is reminiscent of Nazi fascism, in which Jews and Roma, among many other social subgroups, were persecuted and exterminated.⁹

⁸ “And it was out of this love between fallen stars and humans that a new race appeared, the gypsios, or as they were later called, zíngaros, gitanos, cigány or Roma. A race that was born with the mark of a golden star behind the ear, to remind them of where they came from. A people who never felt they belonged to this world because, in reality, they belonged to two; who were never accepted because, in truth, they had something so different that they were not of this world. A mixture of the known with the unknown of the stars, that was what they said the interior of the Gypsies was like, a whole universe unknown. They still say that in the eyes of many we can find traces of that characteristic and magical light, but it is just that, a beautiful legend, which I suppose was invented by the Gypsies' ancestors to give a story to their history. A people who never really knew where they came from or where they were supposed to go. A people who, to their misfortune, for centuries were persecuted and despised, forcibly stripped of their customs, their language, their magic. They were always different, always the same.” (11)

⁹ The deportation of the Roma is indeed up for consideration in this dystopian world as well: “Si alguna vez los rebeldes políticos consiguieran su propósito de deportar a los *gypsios*, ¿adónde nos mandarían? Por desgracia no teníamos lugar de procedencia, como en el caso de las demás razas, no teníamos ni idea de cuál

In Gran Capital, Roma are only allowed to live in strictly controlled ghettos. Largely deprived of personal rights, movements of Roma are meticulously monitored and regulated:

Estábamos rodeados de redes localizadoras, y más los ciudadanos que vivíamos em el extrarradio de la Gran Capital, o como los capitalinos decían, en el nuevo Gueto. Era una manera de controlar nuestras entradas en la Gran Capital, puesto que todos los habitantes del Gueto teníamos toque de queda para estar en nuestra zona y si lo cumplíamos, nos metíamos en serios problemas, a no ser que tuviésemos permisos especiales firmados siempre por algún habitante del planeta de los ricos [...] (16)¹⁰

Apart from the obvious borrowings from the great literary dystopias of 20th century—we think of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)—, Cortés creates another reminiscence of the inhuman perversity of the Nazi dictatorship via the founding myth. If wearing the sewn-on yellow Jewish star was supposed to stigmatise Jewish people in the Nazi era, in Cortés' novel all members of the minority carry a magical innate bodily mark that marks them as *gypsios*. The above quote, for example, contains the reference to the golden star behind the ear that all *gypsios* have (cf. 11) and in fact, all *gypsios* try to hide this sign to prevent racial discrimination: “[...] soy muy consciente de cómo intentáis ocultar la marca para no tener problemas por la Capital [...]” (50)¹¹

The exact temporal setting of the novel's story remains vague, but it is clear that the plot is set in an indeterminately distant future that is char-

era nuestra procedencia y las estrellas quedaban un tanto lejos [...]” / “If the political rebels ever succeeded in their aim of deporting the Gypsies, where would they send us? Unfortunately, we had no place of origin, as with the other races, we had no idea where we came from, and the stars were a long way away [...]” (112).

¹⁰ “We were surrounded by locator nets, especially those of us who lived on the outskirts of the Big Capital, or as the capital's inhabitants called it, in the new Ghetto. It was a way of controlling our entry into the Big Capital, since all the inhabitants of the Ghetto had a curfew to be in our area, and if we complied with it, we got into serious trouble, unless we had special permits always signed by some inhabitant of the planet of the rich [...]”(16)

¹¹ “[...] I am well aware of how you tried to hide the mark so as to avoid getting into trouble in the Capital [...]” (50)

acterized by the consequences of a devastating Third World War that had ended 15 years before as well as by the consequences of climate change:

A causa de innumerables cambios climáticos y aumento del nivel del mar, la mayoría de los continentes habían perdido grandes superficies de tierra, quedando sumergidas en el fondo del mar, la mayoría de los continentes habían perdido grandes superficies de tierra, quedando sumergidas en el fondo del mar y enterrando así centenares de ciudades enteras. Todo ahora era muy distinto, puesto que ahora todos los continentes se dividían entre las nuevas Capitales – donde solamente vivían los ricos y poderosos – y los Guetos – donde solo habían gente humilde, con muy pocos recursos, y cómo no, nosotros, los gypsios. (15)¹²

When the stars are silent is narrated from an autodiegetic narrator,¹³ that is from the point of view of the main protagonist Serena Vargas, a 22-year-old Romni. After the murder of her parents by radicals during the Third World War, Serena had become the main support for her sixteen years old sister Lola and her grandmother María. The novel begins with the first day that Serena works as a trainee assistant in a photography studio. With this new job, she becomes a permanent border-crosser, because from now on she commutes every day from her self-identified “ghetto” to the main sector of the city. Following Juri Lotmann’s spatial theory, the transgression of the border between two disjoint semantic spaces, which is difficult to pass, already points to a particular event that has a lasting influence on the plot. In the unknown world of the “whites”, Miguel Duarte, the photo studio’s manager, who takes care of Serena despite her ethnic and social alterity, becomes her mentor. In contrast to

¹² “Due to countless climatic changes and rising sea levels, most of the continents had lost large areas of land, submerging them to the bottom of the sea and burying hundreds of entire cities. Everything was now very different, since all the continents were now divided between the new Capitals - where only the rich and powerful lived—and the Ghettos—where there were only humble people, with very few resources, and of course, us, the Gypsies.” (15)

¹³ However, there are some passages in which the autodiegetic perspective switches to Marcos (you have not defined who Marcos is yet; you first talk about him on the next page; clarify here who he is), so that we also experience his emotional world and evaluation of the events. This procedure illustrates the inner conflict of both protagonists in view of their socially forbidden love for each other in a particularly vivid way and intensifies the sympathy for ultimately both characters (cf. 69–77, 99–101, 155–158, 172–174, 185–186, 247–249, 271–275, 335, 331–334, 375–381, 383–388, 395–400).

the vast majority of inner-city residents, Miguel proves to be a humanist who rejects any racist or social exclusion and advocates the unconditional idea of equality: “Yo no tengo ningún problema con que seas gypsia, te respeto, y además fuera de esa pequeña marca y costumbres diferentes a las nuestras, eres persona como yo.” (50–51)¹⁴ Moreover, as the story progresses and Serena and Lola face increasing racist hostility, Miguel, as an adjutant, encourages her on her journey through life and speaks to her of courage: “Serena, estarás preciosa, debes tener más confianza en ti misma y no compararte con las demás, cada persona vale por sus propias virtudes y tú tienes muchas, te le aseguro.” (213)¹⁵ Together with his friend Darío Colussi, a renowned Argentinian photographer, Miguel becomes an advocate for the Roma. In an exhibition, photographs of Serena are to show her natural beauty as well as her talent as artist. In a way, this didactic impetus recalls Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s celebration of the *bon sauvage* as the individual of integrity, not morally degenerated by an excessive civilisation:

[...] es exactamente lo que queremos enseñar, la diferencia entre la belleza de la Gran Capital, que es una belleza absolutamente artificial en su mayor parte, y la belleza del Gueto, una belleza pura y sin alterar, ¿no estás cansada de estereotipos? Pues es la manera de demostrar al mundo lo que valéis y lo que sois capaces. (211)¹⁶

On Serena’s first day in Gran Capital, Miguel invites her to dinner at the seven-star luxury hotel Gran Hotel Silver. There, she has a decisive encounter with Marcos Mulier, the heir to the Gran Hotel Silver. This unexpected encounter electrifies Serena and affects her physically: “Esa mirada me atrapó de una manera extraña que nunca había experimenta-

¹⁴ “I don’t have any problem with you being a gypsia, I respect you, and besides, apart from that little mark and customs different from ours, you are a person like me.” (50–51)

¹⁵ “Serena, you will be beautiful, you must have more confidence in yourself and not compare yourself with others, each person is worth their own virtues and you have many, I assure you.” (213)

¹⁶ “[...] that’s exactly what we want to show, the difference between the beauty of the Big Capital, which is an absolutely artificial beauty for the most part, and the beauty of the Ghetto, a pure and unaltered beauty, aren’t you tired of stereotypes? Well, this is the way to show the world what you are worth and what you are capable of.” (211)

do y me produjo una corriente eléctrica desde las piernas hasta la cabeza, pasando por mis brazos hasta llegar a la punta de mis dedos.” (21)¹⁷

The meeting, which is quite erotic for Serena, is deeply unlikely not only because of the exclusionary racist system of the dominant society, but also because of the traditional rules of behaviour within the Romani community, where young women do not leave the house unaccompanied by a (male) relative:

No estaba acostumbrada a ruborizarme con tanta facilidad, pero la cercanía de aquel hombre me hacía sentir una electricidad por todo el cuerpo, por segunda vez en aquel día, que no antes había experimentado y que me ponía de los nervios, y para qué negarlo, las gypsias no solíamos estar en estos aprietos, siempre estábamos acompañadas por algún familiar que no lo permitía. (22–23)¹⁸

If the encounter between Serena and Marcos is already very improbable, this also applies to Lola, who meets Marcos' younger brother Izan by chance and falls in love with him. The tender love story between the younger siblings serves as a reversed mirror image for the main plot. Unlike his brother and father who are sympathetic to a group of white supremacists, Izan is full of respect and regard for others and is longing for a world of freedom for all people regardless of their ethnic belonging. It is interesting that the comparatively superficial amorous relationship is much more light-hearted than that of Serena and Marcos. This is not least due to the fact that they meet in a heterotopic space in-between, in reference to Michel Foucault.¹⁹ This “Calita Mágica” (“Magic Cove”, 107)

¹⁷ “That look caught me in a strange way I had never experienced before and sent an electric current from my legs to my head, down my arms to my fingertips.” (21)

¹⁸ “I was not used to blushing so easily, but the proximity of that man made me feel an electricity throughout my body, for the second time that day, that I had not experienced before and that made me nervous, and why deny it, we gypsias were not usually in this situation, we were always accompanied by a relative who did not allow it.” (22–23)

¹⁹ Cf.: “There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places-places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society-which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are out-

where Lola and Izan meet is a space of peaceful coexistence and thus a utopian space in the midst of the dystopian world of racist segregation:

En realidad no pertenecía ni al Gueto ni a la Capital, era una zona completamente neutral, donde solo iba la poca gente que la conocía y no tenía ninguna clase de prejuicios de compartirla ni con los del Gueto ni con los de la Capital. [...] La verdad era que en aquel lugar no había ninguna clase de diferencia entre los del Gueto y la Capital, todos parecíamos iguales. (105)²⁰

Serena, on the other hand, does not know this magical place of humanity, and she constantly crosses borders of different semantic spaces that vary socio-politically as well as culturally, from both an external and internal group perspective.

Although Marcos' adherence to white supremacist ideas, a love affair develops between the *gypsia* and the white hotel heir. Thus, their romantic relationship expresses the disagreement between two factions distinguished by ethnicity, phenotypic characteristics, and socioeconomic status. These differences bring them closer and further apart, and finally generate confrontations that even endanger Serena's life.

Actually, this mutual physical attraction is inexplicable for both of them and brings them into massive inner conflicts. Marcos is involved with red-haired Aria, whose name is, of course, telling: "Aria" comes from Persian meaning something like "the noble" and "the pure", and, at the same time is reminiscent of the term "Aryan" as a designation for the "white race". Marcos compares Serena, whose name means "cheerful, friendly", to the jealous Aria. In his racist-essentialist worldview, all *gitanas* are easy girls: "nunca haría algo así, y no puedes compararla con

side of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias." (Foucault 1986, 24)

²⁰ "It didn't really belong neither to the Ghetto nor to the Capital, it was a completely neutral area, where only the few people who knew it went and didn't have any kind of prejudice to share it neither with those from the Ghetto nor with those from the Capital. [...] The truth was that in that place there was no difference whatsoever between those from the Ghetto and those from the Capital, we all looked the same." (105)

mujeres como vosotras, ella es una mujer de verdad [...] vosotras no sois más que simples gypsias insoportables y bastante vulgares.” (60)²¹

Serena bravely and confidently returns this racial prejudice and, in contrast, emphasises the moral integrity and sincerity of Romnija.²² Furthermore, she uses the (equally unacceptable) prejudice against red-haired women—a clear attack on her rival Aria—, and thereby beats him with his own weapons, so to speak:

Si supieras un poco más de los gypsios, en vez de dedicarte exclusivamente a odiarnos porque te da la real gana, sabrías que ninguna gypsia se acuesta con un hombre porque sí. A saber si las que se dedican a quedarse embarazadas a traición son mujeres explosivas y pelirrojas que van casi desnudas [...] y fíjate, son justo las que te van a ti. (60)²³

As far as the group-internal transgressions are concerned, however, it is important to emphasise that Cortés proceeds very cautiously with regard to sexual relationships. She exposes Serena’s sexual desires without disregarding the moral standards set by the arbiters of good manners. She appropriates the capacity to eroticize through language, expresses pleasure without apparent censorship, and refers to the bodies of those who love each other in an organic way. In doing so, Cortés tries to detach herself from the stereotyped images of Roma in general and Romnija in particular created by literature and the media.

At times, however, Cortés also reuses, entirely in accordance with the principle of the stereotype cycle,²⁴ images and motifs that have emerged

²¹ “Aria would never do such a thing, and you can’t compare her to women like you, she’s a real woman [...] you are just unbearable and rather vulgar gypsies.” (60)

²² In the end, Cortés also makes a strong case for the fact that only true, sincere love counts and that this is also valued as more important than pure convention. This is shown, for example, when Serena separates from her fiancé from the ghetto and the grandmother shows understanding: „[...] ella también estaba de acuerdo en que sin amor nada duraría eternamente.“ „[...] She also agreed that without love nothing would last forever.“ (149)

²³ “If you knew a bit more about gypsios, instead of just hating us because you feel like it, you would know that no gypsia ever sleeps with a man just because she wants to. You’d know that the ones who get pregnant by betrayal are explosive, red-haired women who are almost naked [...] and look, they’re just the ones who go for you.” (60)

²⁴ Cf. Dreesbach (2005), Rez (2006, 63).

(not only in Spanish literature) since the early modern period to describe the gitana in the literature of the majority society and have been persistently used and perpetuated ever since. A prominent example of such images are the eyes of the *gitana*, which are, as often portrayed in majority literature, as fascinating as they are captivating, as found in Prosper Mérimée's description of Carmen or in Emila Pardo Bazán's presentation of a graceful young gitana in the novella "La maldición de gitana" (1898).²⁵ Serena's gaze has the same fatal effect on Marcos, who is attracted to her against his will. In an internally focalised passage, Marcos reflects on the enchanting effect of Serena's eyes on him:

Pero es que esa mirada enigmática, ese cuerpo, ese pelo negro y esa boca, me estaban volviendo loco ya no sabía cómo sacármela de la cabeza, era como si su cuerpo llamase al mío y este no se pudiera resistir. [...] Estaba seguro que había magia en sus ojos porque hasta el día de hoy nunca me había pasado algo parecido, y menos con una gypsia. (70–71)²⁶

Cortés, however, links the stereotype of the sexually-erotically fascinating eyes of Romnija, which is especially widespread among white non-Roma men, with the self-characterisation of the *gypsios* as "children of the stars". In this way, the physical particularity from their own perspective becomes a positively perceived alterity that distinguishes the Roma as special people from the 'normal' people: "Buscaba ese brillo especial que mi abuela siempre nos aseguraba que teníamos las gypsias. Ella siempre nos decía que cuando una gypsia era feliz o estaba enamorada de verdad, ese brillo o luz aparecía, como si fuese una especie de heren-

²⁵ Right at the beginning of the novel, Serena refers to this power of the gaze: "It was very common among Gypsies that our eyes attracted the attention of people who were not [...]" (24)/"Era muy común entre *gypsios* que nuestros ojos llamasen la atención de la gente que no lo era [...]" (24)

²⁶ "But that enigmatic look, that body, that black hair and that mouth were driving me crazy, I didn't know how to get her out of my head, it was as if her body was calling out to mine and I couldn't resist. [...] I was sure that there was magic in her eyes because to this day nothing like that had ever happened to me, and even less with a gypsia." (70–71)

cia que nos quedó de las estrellas de la leyenda [...]” (20)²⁷ And indeed, Serena makes this power her own in order to become the agent of action herself. In fact, it is Marcos who first takes what he wants from Serena by first humiliating her verbally and then kissing her passionately. Serena counters this bodily appropriation, which mirrors social power relations, by reversing the erotic power relations with the power of her magical gaze, thus proving that she is just as self-determined a woman as Aria:

Su mandíbula se tensó al ver que miraba hacia sus labios, era obvio que se encendió algún interruptor de alarma entre ambos. Esta vez fui yo quien lo pilló con la guardia baja y, con un impulso que no sabía decir de dónde lo saqué, lo besé. Quería demostrarle que yo no tendría tanto dinero, pero podía ser tan mujer como Aria a pesar de ser una gypsia despreciable para él. (61)²⁸

With time, the two grow closer, and Marcos manages to love Serena without using the perfidiously selfish strategy of verbally humiliating her, which he had initially used to combine his feelings for the Romni with his racist mindset. A decisive turning point is reached when he caresses her with the words “mi *gypsia* preciosa” (“my precious gypsia”) (143). The term, however, is ambiguous: the adverb means “beautiful; precious”, but it also evokes the intertextual reference to Miguel de Cervantes’ “La gitanilla” for his protagonist Preciosa. If we bear in mind that Preciosa only grew up with *gitanos*, but is in fact of noble origin, Marcos’ hidden wish that his great love is actually only a supposed Romnija seems to resonate here. Thus, we cannot speak of real acceptance of her being Romnija, but merely an endearing term that ultimately belittles her.

In the long run, the burden that this true but “forbidden and impossible love” (cf. 92) places on them in both public and family life is so

²⁷ “I was looking for that special glow that my grandmother always assured us gypsias had. She always told us that when a gypsia was happy or really in love, that glow or light would appear, as if it were a kind of inheritance left to us from the stars of legend [...]” (20)

²⁸ “His jaw tensed when he saw that I was looking at his lips, it was obvious that some alarm switch was turned on between the two of us. This time it was me who caught him off guard, and with an impulse I couldn’t tell where I got it from, I kissed him. I wanted to show him that I might not have as much money, but I could be as much of a woman as Aria despite being a gypsia despicable to him.” (61)

crushing that they drift apart again. Serena tries to keep her wits about her and her attachment to Romani costumes. Consequently, she realises that it is very unusual for a young Romni to be unmarried in her early 20s (cf. 288), and thus she decides to get engaged to Andrés, whom she genuinely values (cf. 78–79) but does not love. Earlier, she wants him to be a platonic friend, a concept, however, that does not exist within the Romani community (cf. 137).

In the end, the engagement to Andrés is only a retarding moment, as it shows Serena all the more clearly how much she desires Marcos. For this love she is prepared to cross all boundaries and even neglect her Romani customs that would not accept a marriage to a *gadjo*, a non-Rom; when she sees Marcos again after a period of absence, she realises: “En ese momento no existían Andrés, ni mi abuela, ni su familia, ni los rebeldes, ni Lola y Izan, solo nosotros.” (111)²⁹

But her relationship with Marcos is still full of twists and turns. Marcos becomes increasingly aware that he, too, only really loves Serena, and he increasingly shows himself publicly with her, which only fuels the jealousy of Aria, from whom he eventually also breaks up. And yet he betrays Serena by having sexual relations with Aria and Zoe, Miguel’s new white co-worker. Only when Serena, who has been receiving hate and threatening messages for some time, is kidnapped and life-threateningly injured by the right-wing extremist Ian, does Marcos realize his moral debt to her. In keeping with the romance genre, the happy ending includes a surprising twist: Marcos’ parents, of all people, urge him to marry Serena. While Serena, who, on the one hand, is looking for true and sincere love, but, on the other hand, feels obliged to her Romani origins, still hesitates, her grandmother as governor and intergenerational mediator of the Romani heritage encourages Serena to marry Marcos. The grandmother María justifies the legitimisation of this “forbidden and impossible love” with the founding myth: Luna—like society with its rules and laws—tried to prevent the love between the earthly boy of the night and the fallen star, but their love gave birth to the Romani people. Thus, María gives her blessing: “La vida es difícil, pero es evidente que

²⁹ “At that moment there was no Andrés, nor my grandmother, nor his family, nor the rebels, nor Lola and Izan, just us.” (111)

las estrellas se empeñan en uniros, vuestra historia quedará escrita allí arriba, de eso estoy segura, acabe bien o acabe mal [...]” (402)³⁰

Serena feels empowered by this story and blessing as a woman, and even more so as a Romni. In a statement that can also be understood in a metaliterary way, which establishes a connection to storytelling as well as to the novel’s title, she makes clear her self-efficacy, her power over cosmic fate, and the concerns of her fellow human beings: “Las estrellas podrían escribir lo que quisieran allá arriba. Donde todas las historias de amor eran creadas, pero yo [...] yo las haría callar.” (406)³¹

The novel ends with an epilogue by the grandmother, who reflects on the fate of her granddaughter. She once again makes reference to the cosmic origins of the Roma and thus concludes by emphasising once again the plea to live true love with self-confidence despite all the obstacles and impasses of life:

Cada vez que una estrella fugaz aparecía, sabía que una nueva estrella había bajado a buscar un amor como lo hizo la primera estrella, un amor, como el que yo también encontré, un amor, como el de mi nieta Serena y su Marcos, a pesar de que aún no hubiesen aceptado. Las estrellas siempre nos movimos por impulsos y el amor era uno de los que más nos impulsaba a hacer las locuras más bellas.

La vida no era fácil, en eso la Luna tenía razón, pero no por eso debíamos abandonar aquello que nos empujaba a vivir día a día, aquello en lo que creíamos, y necesitábamos apostar por ello, a sabiendas de que no siempre se ganaba, pero tampoco siempre se perdía.

La necesidad de vivir, simplemente, la vida que nos negó (409).³²

³⁰ “Life is difficult, but it is clear that the stars are determined to bring you together, your story will be written up there, of that I am sure, whether it ends well or badly [...]” (402)

³¹ “The stars could write whatever they wanted up there. Where all the love stories were created, but I [...] I would silence them.” (406)

³² “Every time a shooting star appeared, I knew that a new star had come down to look for a love like the first star did, a love, like the one I also found, a love, like that of my granddaughter Serena and her Marcos, even though they had not yet accepted. We stars were always moved by impulses and love was one of those that drove us to do the most beautiful crazy things.

Life was not easy, the moon was right about that, but that did not mean we had to abandon what pushed us to live day by day, what we believed in, and we needed to bet on it, knowing that we did not always win, but we did not always lose either.

The need to live, quite simply, the life that was denied us.” (409)

3. Conclusion

Much more could be said about this popular novel, but regarding the initial the purpose of my study here, I have shown how Sally Cortés Santiago, in the mode of a mixture of dystopia and romance novel, manages to critically question stereotypical images of Romani women. With Serena, Cortés creates a protagonist who does not allow herself to be intimidated by hatred and discrimination. She defies pejorative prejudices and shows that she can advance professionally and privately without denying her identity and pride as a Romni. Although the plot—even in the dystopian genre—is decidedly improbable and—ultimately in keeping with the genre of “chick literature”—sometimes simplistic, if not kitschy, the novel is an expression of a strong will for female Romani empowerment.

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