

Representations of the Romanies in *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding*

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to trace the correlations between socio-economic status and stereotypes in the construction of the identity of the Romani minority. To this end the paper will focus mainly on contemporary representations of the Romani people in American media, in particular the reality TV show *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding* and other related shows, such as *Jersey Shore* and its British spin-off, *Geordie Shore*. In the analysis I will be interested mostly in how stereotypes are made to fit the general format of the show and, in the case of *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding*, repackaged as authentic ethnic culture. The aim of the comparison is to illustrate the fact that, though both *Jersey Shore* and *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding* claim to offer an insight into the everyday lives of a particular ethnic minority, both shows follow a similar frame that has little to do with their respective subjects' ethnic background and more to do with their social and economic background. The overlap between social and ethnic background can prove to be particularly problematic in the case of the Roma, since there is a distinct lack of counter-narratives and, historically, Romani cultural identity has always been tied to a particular social and economic class. Thus I will also attempt to integrate these representations into a broader historical perspective on the formation of Romani identity in order to better understand the problematic nature of contemporary representations of the Roma.

Little is known about early Romani history. What we do know comes not from within the community, but from outside of it. The most immediate contact non-Romanies have with the Roma is via media representations. In recent years, there have been attempts at

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renegotiating the relationship between the Roma and non-Roma, both at a local and global level.¹ However, in popular culture, the appeal of the exotic other oftentimes trumps nuanced discussions regarding ethnic identity. This paper analyzes stereotypical representations of the Romani minority in the reality TV show *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding*, while highlighting the relationship between Romanies' socio-economic status and the rhetorical construction of Romani identity in America.

In 1783, after comparative philology uncovered the similarities between Sanskrit and Romani, German scholar H. M. G. Grellman concluded that Romanies were of Indian origin (Achim 7). Romanies' presence only became noticeable to Europeans once they reached Europe, sometime between the ninth and the fourteenth centuries (Achim 8). Thus, the basis for a unified Romani identity has always been subject to the discourse of the dominant groups. As Bhopal and Myers note, for contemporary Romanies "the sense of 'belonging' and of sharing a 'oneness' with a single group who left India 1,000 or more years ago does not ring true, certainly not in the sense of being informed by an association to that place or those people" (5). Thus, for Romani people, there is no real sense of a common, shared identity. Therefore, the identity generated from outside the group is rarely counterbalanced with an account given from within.

In recent academic discourse, the notions of race and ethnicity are no longer perceived as natural categories, rather, they are, "the products of human perception and classification. They are social constructs" (Cornell and Hartman 84). However, when dealing with representations of ethnic groups, it is necessary to determine what elements appear important in the description, and therefore the perception, of a specific group of people.

¹ For instance, the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) has been moderately successful in opening up discussions on the issues faced by various Romani communities all throughout Europe, especially Eastern Europe. In recent years, the United States Holocaust Centre has also attempted to increase awareness regarding the thousands of Roma who died during the Holocaust.

In the case of the Roma, David Mayall identifies a few definitions. The first one casts the Romani people in racial terms. Taking their common origin as a starting point, this approach identifies several essential features of Romani identity such as language, customs, traditions and behavior and common physical traits (Mayall 6). According to Mayall,

Nomadism and an outdoor existence are usually seen as essential aspects of their culture and way of life and by referring to the Gypsy ‘instinct’ for travelling and ‘wanderlust’ and the inability to remain between four walls the impression given is that the practice of nomadism is inherited and in the blood. (6)

At the core of this account lies the belief that all of these features are the result of a biological inheritance, since it is presumed that these behaviors are transmitted genetically in some way.

The second definition combines “way of life with low socio-economic and social status” (Mayall 6). On the basis of this definition, the majority of the Romani population is usually portrayed as “a criminal underclass and as impoverished, unproductive vagrants and parasites” (Mayall 6). Other characteristics of the community are largely ignored. This representation still has a significant impact on the contemporary perception of the Roma. While there have certainly been some changes in the economic status of Roma families, according to Anca M. Pusca in, *Post-Communist Aesthetics: Revolutions, Capitalism, Violence*, “the majority of the Roma images that populate the internet are indeed depictions of extreme poverty” (122). While Pusca is discussing here just images present on the internet, this perhaps is a better indication of the larger perception of the Roma. Unlike TV or newspapers, media which are controlled by a relatively small number of people, and at the same time, reach a relatively limited number of people, on the internet users are free to post and repost images at will. Images on the internet have a chance to reach a greater number of

people than any other media, and the fact that these images still dominate the possible array of representations proves the fact that in common perception the Roma still remain those “impoverished vagrants,” regardless of the changes in economy. Thus, on a social level, the Roma are still seen as “poor,” with the implications thereof.

The third definition, the ethnocentric one, attempts to combine elements from the previous two. While it does admit the importance of a common origin of the Romani people, the ethnocentric view takes into consideration the socio-economic history of the people and their relationship to dominant cultures and the importance these factors bear on the construction of the Romani identity (Mayall 7). In a sense, the ethnocentric approach attempts to reconcile the previous two. However, since both race and ethnicity are ultimately social constructs, bringing these two notions together runs the risk of equating socially and historically determined practices with biological inheritance, since the definition will be tied to the necessities of the dominant discourse. This legitimizes discrimination and racism, as the negative image that the Roma have is believed to be justified by their “nature,” rather than being imposed upon them by a prejudiced mainstream society.

Ana M. Pusca, in her article, *Representing Romani Gypsies and Travelers*, argues that the new forms of representing the Roma in media come coupled with a series of “deeply entrenched stereotypes,” namely, “the myth of the ‘poor but happy’ Gypsies; the myth of nomadism; the myth of the lustful Gypsy women; or the myth of the singularity of Gypsy fashion or language” (329). Some of these myths were identified by Mayall as well. The first stereotype, that of the “poor but happy Gypsy” arguably works to, on the one hand, fix the social position of the Roma, on the other hand, to legitimize lack of action on the part of the majority society, by arguing that the Roma are happy in this position, thus no action can, or even should be taken to better their condition. The last two stereotypes have recently become more popular in the context of reality TV and other types of representation focused on

drawing in a large audience. The “lustful Gypsy woman” enables audiences to gaze at leisure at the oversexualized female body without guilt, since the myth implies, just as in the case of the myth of the poor Gypsy, that these women are the ones encouraging the audience to look.

The importance of defining what constitutes Romani identity is best commented upon by Mayall, “Historically, the treatment of Gypsies, and the legitimising of that treatment, is bound up in one or other of the definitions of the group” (12). He goes on to say that the way in which we label and represent a minority has a major impact on the positioning of that minority within the dominant society (12-13). What is also important to note in the relation between Roma and non-Roma is, “When we think of Gypsies as ‘others,’ we need to understand their status not only as ‘outsiders’ but as *white* outsiders” (Bhopal and Myers 92). Because they are not a “visible” minority, in the sense that they do not possess any physical characteristics that might identify them as Roma, the emphasis is laid on other ethnic characteristics, such as traditions and lifestyle, particularly nomadism. As Ian Hancock notes, “Here [America], being an immigrant country, you get people of all backgrounds, of all complexions and appearances [...] And so Roma don’t stand out as in opposition to white, in the same way. Which has helped to foster the idea that Gypsy is a behavior and not an ethnicity” (n.p.). This way of envisioning the essence of Romani identity forms the basis for the more damaging attitudes of non-Romanies when it comes to social issues. Because Romanies tend to be defined in terms of behavior, rather than other characteristics, almost inevitably any antisocial behavior will be pinned down to some innate characteristic of their culture. As Bhopal and Myers posit, “The dominant society’s perception of Gypsies is largely governed by a desire to mark out a boundary between the acceptability of the dominant culture and the unacceptability of the subordinate culture” (98). Even a superficial glance at representations of the Romani community in the press will often times reference the fact that they cannot be integrated or that they refuse to let go of their antisocial behaviors, because

this is the essence of their culture or that they are somehow naturally inclined towards these types of behavior.

Since they are not a “visible” minority, in order to create the “otherness” effect, media representations usually rely on a romantic, exoticized image of the Romani community. According to Bhopal and Myers, this romantic image is associated with a displacement in time and/or space (65). In the original UK series, *Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* (2010-2015), the intro sequence features Romanies sitting around campfires, riding horses, all scenes taking place against a rural background. The narrator accompanies this imagery with the statement “For hundreds of years, the traveller way of life was one of ancient traditions and simple tastes...Then their world collided with the 21st century.” The intro then cuts to various mishaps and outrageous scenes that will be featured in the episode. The implication of the intro sequence is that the Romani community is unable to let go of the past and that they are somehow not part of the 21st century but are somewhere at the edge of it. And their encounter with this “21st century” is a violent one. The soundtrack abruptly changes to Balkan music, while the accompanying images show people fighting, shouting, and falling over. It is also interesting to note that, though the title references *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), a popular romantic comedy about the marriage between a Greek woman and a non-Greek man. The theme of interethnic relationships will feature prominently in both the UK and US version of the show. The movie establishes a certain horizon of expectations when it comes to the narratives unfolding in many of the episodes that focus on the relationship between Romanies and non-Romanies. The producers opted to drop the “my” in the title of the series, further distancing the audience from the characters of the show and more easily suggesting that Romanies are outsiders.

The UK series also frequently employs the term “Gypsy” and “Traveller” interchangeably, which, according to Tremlett, “seems to signal a slippage into generic talk

about ‘the Gypsies’ or ‘the Travellers’ without acknowledging particular identities, cultures or histories of the different groups, something that is very common in discourses about such groups and contributes to essentialising core traits” (12). Ignoring the specific differences between these two groups betrays not only indifference, or perhaps ignorance. It also hints at the vagueness of the ethnic component in the mind of audience members in the constitution of these two identities, since these two groups appear to be easily interchangeable within the show.

The American version of the UK show retains many of the characteristics of the latter, including the Traveler/Gypsy confusion and a tendency to exoticize the Roma by focusing on their arcane practices. Though the intro sequence is changed to a montage of clips that will be featured in the episode, the narration is sprinkled with references to “Gypsy culture” and “Gypsy traditions.” Typically, an episode begins by introducing the families that will be featured in the episode, with references to either “the history” of the Romani people or some details about the history or heritage of that particular family. Almost every conflict that appears in the show is accompanied by some reference to Romani culture or Romani traditions.

In the framing of the “history” of the Romani people, there is one notable difference between the UK and the American version. While the UK series focuses on a kind of distant, idyllic past, the American series places this past within a historical frame, that is, it often mentions the arrival at the beginning of the 20th century of Romani immigrants from Europe. While arguably this is not altogether different from the pastoral past invoked by the UK series, since it still casts the Roma as a people coming from a different space and time. Placing the Romani community within the broader context of Eastern European immigration during the early decades of the 20th century, while not necessarily factually incorrect, does anchor their identity to the notion of an ethnic community that is defined by a working class

condition, as was the case with many groups that came to America at that time from Eastern Europe.

Episodes typically feature two or three families, each with their own celebration coming up. Each of these social events is usually tied with the issue of marriage. The focus on marriage, on the one hand, ties this show to the broader culture of reality TV shows centered on weddings, preparing the audience for a specific scenario, involving over the top dresses and parties, fighting and screaming. On the other hand, it provides a context for discussing apparently ancient traditions and customs. Parties are framed as good occasions for young Gypsies to meet potential partners. The narrator usually emphasizes this idea to the point where it seems that this is the only reason why Romanies come together. These events usually come with contradictory versions of what constitutes Romani tradition, seemingly in an attempt to bring together the notion of an “ancient people” that still fit the format of a reality TV show. To give an example, the show may focus on the fact that, in Romani culture, girls must be virgins and must keep to themselves before marriage. However, during these parties, the girls appear scantily clad, dancing provocatively in order to attract a potential groom, which constitutes another tradition in Romani culture, according to the show’s narrator. An episode typically begins with what appear to be case studies of particular families or individuals in relation to their families. However, their experiences are framed as examples of Romani culture in general. A typical episode will jump back and forth between these two perspectives with the help of commentaries provided by the narrator. Therefore, the audience will inevitably connect what are ultimately tropes of reality TV shows in general with Romani culture.

What sparks conflict is usually parents disapproving of their children’s behavior, pointing towards a clash of generations, between the old ways and the new. However, what precisely constitutes these ways is left for the audience to tease out from all these

contradictory statements. Ultimately, the audience is left with no clear image of what constitutes Romani ethnic identity, since the comments and images are often at odds. While there is nothing unusual in this fact per se, since identities tend to be fluid and change over time, the show does not attempt to provide a nuanced image of a diverse culture. All behaviors are framed as typical of Romani culture. What is visible is the image of a community with social norms that are beyond comprehension, according to the show.

In the case of weddings, generally one or both families of the couple disapprove of the union. In some episodes, the conflict is sparked by the fact that a Romani wishes to marry a non-Romani, who in most cases is a woman. Often the mother of the future groom will stress how important it is for her future daughter-in-law to respect Romani traditions and become part of the Romani community. In many cases, it is apparent that the non-Romani family disapproves of the union as well. However, their reactions are rarely presented on the show. Thus the larger social issue of discrimination that perhaps lies at the root of the tensions between Romanies and the majority population becomes solely an issue of Romani cultural identity. Discrimination is legitimized by providing evidence that the Roma simply cannot be integrated.

The show is clearly geared towards a non-Romani audience which has no prior knowledge about Romani culture. On their website, the TLC page describing the show starts with the sentence, “You've been watching *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*² and thinking that gypsies live in England, Ireland and other parts of Europe.” It then goes on to say, “But brace yourselves—there are American gypsies, and we've got access into their lives like no one else can show you” (www.tlc.com). The show's description proclaims to offer insight into their private lives, which presumably accurately portrays the experience of all American Roma. Moreover, the insight provided by the producers is unique and cannot be obtained

² When the UK series was featured in the United States, the “My” was added to the title.

anywhere else, for the community is incredibly secretive and refuses to share their culture with those outside it. In the intro to the first episode, the narrator begins with the statement, “It is a secret community,” immediately followed by a clip of a young man asking for the camera to be shut off, followed by the phrase, “One million strong.” The idea of a “secret community” will be reiterated throughout the show. For example, in the eighth episode of season one, “Blingtastic Baptism,” the narrator proclaims that, “Maryland is home to a secrete community of Romanichal Gypsies who came to America in the 1800.”³ The image of a large, hidden community that has managed to fly under the radar for such a long time makes the Roma appear to be a kind of secret organization, rather than a marginalized ethnic group. This manages, on the one hand, to keep audiences’ interest alive, by proclaiming to offer content one cannot find anywhere else, and, on the other, reinforces the image of the Romani as an ultimately unknowable, alien “other” culture.

It is also interesting to note that, though the show seems to follow a romantic version of the Romani identity, the use of the word “gypsy” seems to point towards the social understanding, as indicated by Mayall, “The second definition [which] combines way of life with low socio-economic and social status [...] typically adopts the label ‘gypsy’, rather than Gypsy, Rom or Romany” (7). In the show itself, the line between social and racial definitions of the Romani community are often blurred. Typically, the display of outrageous behavior is coupled with some comments made by the narrator about the Gypsy way of life or tradition, reinforcing the association between the two for the audience. Any reaction or event that is likely to stand out for audience members is presented either as an aspect of Romani culture or in relation to Romani traditions. However, the types of behavior presented are typical of most reality TV shows that follow this format, such as *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012). This slippage

³ *Romanichal* is the term used for the Romani sub-group living or originating from the United Kingdom.

from socially unacceptable behavior to Romani culture serves to reinforce the “boundary” described by Bhopal and Myers.

Usually, the Roma depicted in the episodes seem to live isolated from non-Roma; rarely are they seen interacting with others from outside their community. This apparent isolation reinforces the myth of the secretive society. The voice of the non-Romani is Sondra Celli, a fashion designer who creates outfits worn by people appearing on the show at various events. She is introduced in the first episode of season one as an expert, “no one knows this hidden world better than Sondra Celli.” Celli is usually careful to point out that she herself finds the clothing she designs over the top, presumably echoing the sentiments of the audience, yet explains that she must design them that way, lest she should make her clients angry. In fact, her very first comment on the show, in episode one, “Born to Wed,” is, “The first time I saw them, I really thought they were prostitutes... slutty, and skanky and sexy.” The statement is accompanied by clips of young girls dancing provocatively. She does go on to say “The truth is they really have high morals.” While this statement apparently demonstrates that she has moved beyond her prejudices, it does not actually deny the fact that they appear “slutty, skanky and sexy.” Moreover, this comment seemingly refers to all Roma, since it doesn’t really clarify whom Celli is talking about.

Their lack of social visibility, on which the entire premise of the show’s success rests, since it presumes the audience knows nothing about Romani culture, appears as a normal state of affairs, one that it is entirely due to the Romani way of life. Often the narrator comments upon the incomprehensible norms and customs of the Romani people. The external forces of social marginalization are turned inwards, as an issue coming from within the community. The show frames the non-Romani audience’s ignorance as a result of something pertaining exclusively to Romani culture and its secretive nature, not social marginalization. Bhopal and Meyers argue that on one level self-exclusion from the larger community “is a

useful opportunity for [the Roma] to maintain a cultural identity” (115). However, they do warn against the dangers of misreading this self-exclusion. Ignoring issues of historical hostility, discrimination and oppression, one assumes the Roma are entirely to blame for their exclusion, since it is a choice. Audience members are excused for not knowing about Romani culture and discouraged from understanding more, since this endeavor would certainly prove to be impossible.

The events that are presented in the episodes are in many ways similar to those of other reality TV shows, the most infamous of which is *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012). Both shows proclaim to offer insight into the lives of a minority living in America, in the case of *Jersey Shore*, the Italian Americans living in the New Jersey region, who often refer to themselves as *guidos* throughout the series. Audiences might be tempted to assume that what they are watching is indeed the experience of an ethnic minority. However, the format of *Jersey Shore* was quite successfully imported in the UK through its spin-off, *Geordie Shore* (2011-present). Geordies are not an ethnic minority in the UK, *geordie* designating the inhabitants of Tyneside in northeastern England. Thus the term *geordie* designates a social, rather than an ethnic minority. Likewise, the term *guido* encompasses not only an ethnic dimension but a socio-economic one as well. Other shows, such as *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (2012-2014), a spin-off of *Toddlers and Tiaras* (2008-2013), feature *white trash* communities. According to Hartigan, “white trash is a cultural figure and a rhetorical identity, it is a means of inscribing social distance and insisting upon a contempt-laden social divide, particularly (though not exclusively) between whites” (qtd. in Bhopal and Myers 93). *White trash* is a derogatory appellation used in relation to impoverished whites living primarily in the south of the United States. This rhetorical figure comes coupled with numerous stereotypes associated with impoverished people in general such as limited education, violence, boorishness. In this context, Roma identity is used to fill in a preexistent TV show format, one that relies on

displays of socially unacceptable behavior as a means of drawing in its audience. This slippage from socially unacceptable behavior to ethnic culture serves to reinforce the “boundary” described by Bhopal and Myers, in relation to Romani culture, though the observation can be readily extended to other ethnic groups.

Though obviously there are notable differences between these shows, the ultimate focus is the same, namely, offering the audience a spectacle which involves vulgar, over the top, outrageous reactions and situations. It is important that the audience remain at a comfortable distance from the scenes they are watching. The use of terms such as “guido,” “white trash” or “traveller” indicate an “other” that is isolated, or rather socially quarantined in the case of groups which could not be otherwise told apart from the majority.

Most of the Roma depicted in the show live in southern states. As such, audience members are inevitably going to identify markers of *white trash* culture as they appear in popular culture, such as a specific southern accent, or landscape. The “criminal underclass” described by Mayall earlier is thus translated into terms that would be more easily understandable by an American audience. By contrast, the narrator speaks with a generic American accent. Likewise, Sondra Celli’s Bostonian accent comes with an altogether different connotation, implying higher social status, good education and an overall positive social image. This seemingly neutral voice allows audience members to identify more easily with the voice of the narrator. At the same time, the narrator appears as an objective observer, since she is not part of the community and thus is not liable to be emotionally involved in the scenes.

The overlap between social status and ethnic identity misidentifies reactions and behaviors which are tied to a particular social and economic background as markers of ethnic, or rather, racial identity. In the case of the Romani minority, these depictions are perhaps even more damaging than in the case of other groups, for, according to Mayall, most non-

Romanians rely on media representations to form a basic idea of who the Roma are (15). And while in the case of other minority groups there is some variety in terms of representations, in the case of the Roma minority counter-narratives are few and even fewer have reached mainstream culture.

There is also a broader consequence in the popularization of such reality TV shows. On the one hand, there is a risk that, by presuming to foreground ethnic identity as the principal theme of the show, the different experiences of these diverse groups tend to be homogenized in the audience's perception, since ultimately, there is no clear distinction between, for example, *guido* culture or Romani culture. In this context, "ethnic" comes to be understood merely as "other," as different from the "norm." Most culturally specific differences are either ignored or relegated to the background. On the other hand, by framing social and economic issues as markers of cultural identity, they become exclusively the responsibility of the group in question.

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