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*Romany women and ethnic barriers to institutionalized education: a case study of Brazilian Romany communities in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo*

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### **Introduction: Why mix feminism with Romany rights activism?**

Romany study experts such as Donald Kenrick, Ian Hancock, Thomas Acton, Jean Pierre Liégeois, Leonardo Piasere, Anne Sutherland, Angus Fraiser, Judith Okeley, and numerous others denounce the repeated expulsions and frequent persecutions of Romany people [often misnamed as Gypsies] along their historic trails, especially in Europe, including their enslavement in Romania since the fourteenth century until 1864, and genocide in several European countries during the Holocaust. In Brazil, descendants of Romany people who fled the Holocaust often hide their ethnic identity so as to avoid a possible repetition of the discrimination experienced in the past. This is

not unlike the Romany people's voluntary ethnic invisibility in the United States, where Romany people are largely unknown to the majority population, yet regularly targeted by the police and other law enforcement authorities.

Past experiences with discrimination and racism are the main reason why Romany parents dissuade their children, girls in particular, from attending public institutions such as schools. Thus, despite ethnic invisibility and reduced exposure to racism and discrimination in Brazil, Romany girls and women still experience ethnic-specific gender inequalities, which must be addressed by bringing women's rights into discussion along with Romany cultural rights and recognition. As radical feminist Willis states, "In basic ways, women's subordination crosses class, racial and cultural lines, and it was a strength of radical feminism to insist on that reality" (Willis 122). This analysis draws inspiration primarily from the United States second-wave feminism, a movement known for having created a basic vocabulary with which to address the "personal as political" as well as to insist on "consciousness raising" in this sense. Although radical or second-wave feminism has been criticized for being reductive in its tendency to universalize patriarchy, it is still relevant when discussing circumstances where patriarchy continues to discriminate against girls and women to present day. Even in such circumstances, however, there is hope that, as radical feminist Millet suggests, "a sexual revolution would bring the institution of patriarchy to an end, abolishing both the ideology of male supremacy and the traditional socialization by which it is upheld in matters of status, role, and temperament" (Millet 62). The Romany

people have yet to undergo a formal “sexual revolution” - to use Millet’s terms. This critical discussion is based on qualitative ethnographic data concerning learning, childhood socialization, gender roles, honor and shame, as observed during two years of fieldwork among the Romany in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, and shows that continued emphasis on female virginity at marriage and arranged early marriages dissuade girls from continuing their formal education beyond gaining literacy.

### **Romany women’s honor ‘versus’ formal education**

Romany values control girls’ and women’s sexuality through the cult of female virginity until marriage, insistence on arranged early marriages, and family pressure for girls in particular to drop out of school soon after achieving basic literacy to ensure their ‘purity’ at marriage. Female offspring are considered to be girls until marriage and gain adult status upon through the marital rite of passage. Only through a proper marriage their full membership to the community will be acknowledged. Thus, membership to the extended family depends upon an honorable marriage according to parental arrangements: with a proper bride-price, family feast and the loss of virginity usually demonstrated by the girl’s mother-in-law by parading on the second-day of the wedding feast with the girl’s blood-stained nightgown. Prior to marriage, boys may attend schools regularly, yet girls are usually kept at home for a few years before marriage. Female absenteeism begins right after becoming literate in order to avoid possible affairs with Gaje boys, and also so they may learn and practice housekeeping

and fortune-telling. Once a girl gets her first menses, she becomes eligible for marriage, according to Romany customs.

In Brazil as much as elsewhere, Romany culture emphasizes independence from non-Romany or Gaje institutions, including schools, in favor of teaching a strong adherence to Romany honor and shame laws, as well as the Romanes language, found in a variety of dialects all derived from Sanskrit. Gaje [pl.] or Gajo [sg.] is the common word used to indicate all non-Romany people and things. The Gajo world is associated with moral impurity and danger to the minority's boundaries and cultural coherence. Gaje institutions such as public schools are often avoided in order to resist social pressures towards assimilation (cultural loss) or acculturation (cultural change). While boys remain in school a few years longer, Romany girls are kept at home to avoid their moral 'corruption' and their decrease in social and symbolic capital at the level of the community. The Romany institution of the bride-price asserts the glorification of female virginity at marriage. Dissent results in a sense of spoiled social identity, moral impurity, and a decrease in the woman's social worth. As Sutherland suggests, the girl's bride-price can be dramatically reduced or eliminated (231). Stigmatization and expulsion are common punishments for girls or women who elope, who marry a Gajo, who commit adultery, who divorce, and who remarry (232). The double standard is clear since tolerance is much higher for men who commit similar acts. Thus, Romany culture limits women's lifestyle choices as a mechanism for controlling reproduction and perpetuating the Romany minority as distinct from the Gaje. Mary Douglas

describes cultural concepts of “otherness,” “dirt,” and “danger” as “matter out of place” and sources of anxiety about socially accepted meanings (2002). Similarly Romany women’s sexuality is considered potentially chaos creating, and their offspring with Gaje men are excluded - like “dirt” - from the community. In addition, the Romany value system continues to treat women’s lower body as marimé or “impure” and “contagious,” and prevention against “contagion” normalizes many gender-segregating practices that reinforce patriarchal beliefs in male superiority. Although in Brazil there is a reduced elaboration of marimé bodily purification rituals, they still exist and although they may not be practiced in one’s private home, they certainly appear at the level of regulatory discourse about right and wrong ways of carrying oneself in the Romany community.

The Romany notion of marimé roughly translates into English as “sullied,” and points to a state of moral impurity, as opposed to faltering hygiene. Marimé is also defined in reviewed literature as the perceived condition of those who fail to obey the Romany laws (Weyrauch 1993; Sutherland 1975). Thus, Romany women face greater moral obligations than Romany men, having to perform daily cleaning tasks so as to prevent from spreading their “inherent impurity,” such that women become guardians of the moral order in their community. However, according to Okeley, “Gypsy men are innately pure, almost by predestination, whereas the women have to aspire to an elusive purity by good works” (76 & 83). Yet most Romany women proudly take on the moral burden offered by their cultural laws, which supports radical feminist Millet’s

argument: “it is interesting that many women do not recognize themselves as discriminated against; no better proof could be found of the totality of their conditioning” (43). Peristiany also describes this phenomenon in his studies of Mediterranean honor and shame cultures (1974; 1992). What is unique about Romany culture is that it has resisted cultural loss or assimilation into majority cultures, despite the estimated thousand years of travels, persecutions and social marginalization, thus pressures to conform. This cultural persistence is partially due to the ethnic minority having consistently identified schools as dangerous to moral purity as defined by the Romany laws. Group endogamy, enforced primarily through female virginity at marriage and arranged early marriages ensures the reproduction of the Romany groups in a way that defies the outsiders’ expectations and even desires for Romany cultural dissolution.

### **Fortunetelling as a lucrative female occupation**

Failure to pursue an education results in the Romany girls’ increased necessity to practice fortunetelling like their mothers, grandmothers, and so forth. Romany men tend to gain profit only sporadically through real estate, car services and resale, and other autonomous commercial activities. However, in an environment of religious syncretism like Brazil, the women’s ‘traditional’ occupation is a thriving source of profit, which demonstrates that ‘tradition’ becomes redefined or reinvented based on particular circumstances in the present. In fact, Brazil has recently legalized fortune-

telling and offers an official *carteira de trabalho* [in Portuguese] or work card as proof of coursework completion in subjects such as cartomancia or card reading, Reiki, numerology, and astrology. Most Romany girls and women have yet to take these courses in order to obtain legal protection for their occupation, in case of lawsuits. Nonetheless, Romany women in Brazil are the main income producers in their families which adds complexity to our discussion, so we can criticize the limits of radical feminism along with Bordo:

Subsuming patriarchal institutions and practices under an oppressor/oppressed model which theorizes men as possessing and wielding power over women – who are viewed correspondingly as themselves utterly powerless – proved inadequate to the social and historical complexities of the situations of men and women, and many different foci of criticism emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. (23)

On one hand, it can be said that many Romany girls and women in Brazil indeed have economic power, in the sense that they gain significant profits from the psychic reading services they provide. On the other hand, they do not have economic independence since they become responsible for sustaining their extended families, including their husbands, children, children's families, older relatives, and so forth. However, one may observe a dynamic process of cultural change amongst the Romany. Before fortune-telling became lucrative, Romany women accepted their husbands' infidelity as long as the mistresses were not Romany. Nowadays, women with lucrative psychic reading shops often do not accept their husbands' affairs. Men now become

constrained to either abandon having affairs or, rather, to keep them secret. According to my male informants, men's absolute fidelity is rare, yet divorce is also rare. Thus, marriages have changed from acceptance of male infidelity to theoretical monogamy for both men and women, along with the secrecy and denial necessary to protect marriages from disputes and divorce. Therefore, Romany women's present-day financial empowerment correlates with their willingness to financially support their whole family, in exchange for rejecting the previously accepted male infidelity. However, this trade-off is hardly gender equalizing. Analysis strongly suggests that Romany females should be encouraged to pursue a formal education as well as gender equality and political representation both in their communities and at the national and international conventions for Romany rights.

### **Gender struggles for political representation**

Today, Romany culture in Brazil continues to show a significant bias against Romany women and girls, as well as a moral bias against non-Romany women, who are viewed as shameless, promiscuous, morally inferior, and unworthy of respect. Along with Romologists like Reisman and Tong, we should question the Romany perception of all Gaje as 'impure' and dishonorable, and we should also consider the problem whether the Romany violate human rights because they treat half their population as inferiors for most of their lives (335). It seems, however, that women are often complicit with patriarchal values, which they internalize. Gropper says: By the time the women



are sufficiently powerful to influence their groups, their own self-interests militate against any changes, for now they are wives of Big Men (*baro, shato*), mothers of adult sons, and therefore mothers-in-law commanding a corps [pronounced kor] of daughters-in-law, who must be kept compliant. (176) In fact, older women are the guardians of “traditions,” and they carefully discipline girls to abandon school, to marry as young virgins, and to follow attentively their cleanliness rituals, and so forth. Thus, as Bordo suggests, most Romany women do cherish “the belief in the robustness of their own self-respect, self-confidence, and ‘purity’” (8-9). I expect most Romany women will resist feminist cultural changes.

Political representation is usually left in the hands of a few most respected men in the community. They form the *kriss* or Romany tribunal, which makes the final decisions for punishments and retributions in case of elopement, adultery, and other infringements. In the fight for political rights and representation at a national level, women rarely speak for the Romany communities. One such pioneering female representative, whom I will call Dalida, is currently involved in a great polemic with the Romany Union of Brazil. Born to a Romany mother and a Gajo father, Dalida is not considered to be Romany, yet she declared herself “Queen of the Romany people in Brazil.” As a lawyer, Dalida debated her way up to President Lula and convinced him to declare May 24<sup>th</sup> the National Romany Day or *Dia Nacional dos Ciganos* in Brazil. The male-ruled Romany Union of Brazil has repudiated her claims to speak for the community. The Union president complained:

She was not elected nor appointed by anyone, she just proclaimed herself as queen, and she's not even Romany. Even if she were, who has ever heard of Romany men to accept a woman speaking for them, representing them? I will not allow for women's leadership over our culture, for her putting a skirt over our heads... We will not do this. Romany men will never even accept the leadership of a single man: there is no king and no emperor among us. We are equal. Even as the president of the Romany Union, I was nominated to speak for the community, not to lead. (Interview with Union president, 05/24/2008)

Through her own reinterpretations of Romany personhood, Dalida is dangerous to patriarchal ideology on several accounts: she is more highly educated than most Romany men; she claims Romany identity despite having a Gajo father; she married a Gajo when she was 32 years old; she is a woman with an active political role and a position of authority in Romany representation at the national level; and she declares herself 'Queen of the Roma in Brazil.' Despite the political fallacy of declaring herself *rainha* [queen in Portuguese] which suggests another hierarchy, Dalida could be a positive influence on the next generations of Romany girls if they would be taught to look up to her, and to pursue higher education, a career, freedom of choice in marriage, and a political voice.

## Theorizing Romany social pressures

Romany boys and men, just like girls and women, struggle to obey 'traditional rules' and occasional dissent reflects that struggle. A boy also gains his status as a man and member of the community through marriage. Adult males who are unmarried are considered to be dangerous and eventually may be expelled from the community. Usually, a young male must consent to marry the young woman of his parents' choice. Eloping with a different girl can bring shame to himself as well as to the girl, and to both of their families. A young male must also stop attending public schools in order to engage in commercial activities along with his elders. Males are not allowed to practice fortune-telling since it is considered a strictly female occupation. In addition, men who are disrespectful to other men and to older women can meet social sanctions. In the scenario where men who have affairs with other Romany men's wives, those found guilty can meet their death, as I have noted in several cases. In addition, a man whose daughter is discovered not to be a virgin at marriage is shamed for not educating her properly in the ways of the community, and he is often asked to pay a hefty price to the disappointed groom and his family. Any shameful act perpetrated by his kin can bring a man shame and dishonor as well as social expulsion. Social expulsion was summarized in practical terms by one of my informants as follows: "one ceases to be considered Romany when one loses his seat at the table," meaning when one is no longer invited to weddings, funerals, baptisms, anniversaries, and so forth.

Thus Romany men also feel tremendous social pressure. However, customs do allow for men's dissent to be judged less harshly than women's dissent. In general, Romany women suffer much greater punishments for disobeying the laws of their community, similar to women in other cultures and societies that operate on the honor and shame system of status evaluation. In previous centuries, Romany women who lost their virginity before marriage or who committed adultery used to be stoned to death. Nowadays, this particular punishment has been replaced with milder ones, the most common of which is exclusion from the community and payment of fines. In order to understand women's inequality among Brazilian Romany people, I investigate the codified rules developed from oral interpretations relayed trans-generationally as well as dissent from such rules (Gropper 84-85). I investigate *marimé* as a cultural ethos and as an existential worldview produced, communicated, and challenged through discourses and practice. The internalization of socially mandated ways of being, as well as the ways in which emotions, the body and everyday life become politicized, has been discussed in relation to the body-self and the phenomenology of perception by French (1996), Jenkins (1991), Lutz (1988) and Pitcher (1998). I look specifically for Romany women's internalization of patriarchal notions of morality.

Although several middle-aged and senior Romany women shared with me that they had suffered from domestic violence in their marriages, present day Romany life as I observed it in Brazil does not include such brutal practices in order to enforce its cultural laws. This does not mean patriarchy is not at work. On the contrary, I agree

with Millet that, “We are not accustomed to associate patriarchy with force. [...] it scarcely seems to require violent implementations. Customarily, we view its brutalities in the past as exotic or ‘primitive’ customs” (Millet 43). Instead of focusing on brutality, I focus on other ways in which cultural norms become individuals’ internal subjectivity. Primarily, I observe communications ranging from informal everyday commentaries to the formal adjudications of the *kris*-Romany which has been described in various ethnographic accounts as “a Gypsy Court” (Lee 345; Sway 52); “Romany trial” (Sutherland 12), “justice” (Gropper 205); “the tribunal or hearing which is part of the internal legal system amongst Roma” (Hancock 335-336). The *kris* addresses the justice needs of a *kumpania*, where the “*kumpania* is the public unit of moral, social, and political behavior which comes under the authority of the *kris* Romany” according to Sutherland (33). The *kumpania* differs from the *vitsa*, which is a “category of kin and not a spatial grouping” (33). *Vitsas* do not have the authority to make decisions with regards to the Romany laws, since the inherent kin relations induce biases in favor of relatives. As Sutherland explains: “Any scandal that arises in the *kumpania* requires that the offender (and sometimes the offended as well) leave town. An illegitimate pregnancy, a wife who leaves her husband, a case of adultery, or any such breach of morality will result in a re-sorting of the families in the *kumpania*. A person who becomes *marime* (rejected) will almost certainly leave town until his case is sorted out or his sentence completed” (Sutherland 51). Punishment by the *kris* is interpreted as bad luck or *bibaxt*, and may take the form of public shaming, stigmatization as *marimé*

or “polluted,” social isolation or “rejection,” and a damaged reputation. The Romany people imagine their good luck or *baxt* to depend on their obedience to behavioral rules which are perceived as traditional and mandatory, and, thus, their sense of wellbeing depends on group compliance and belonging. According to Romologist Ian Hancock:

To live properly is to abide by a set of behaviors collectively called Romanypen, Rromipe or Rromanyja, and this entails maintaining spiritual balance. This Ayurvedic concept, called karma in India (and in Romany kintala, or in some dialects kintari or kintujmos) is fundamental to the Romany worldview. Such a dualistic perspective groups the universe into pairs, God and the Devil, Romanyes and non-Romanyes, adults and children, clean and polluted – even the stages of life are two in number: adulthood (when one is able to produce children) and, together, childhood and old age (when one is not able to produce children). // Time spent in the non-Romany world (the jado) drains spiritual energy or dji. [...] One’s spiritual batteries can only be recharged by spending time in an all-Romany environment – in the normal course of events, in family homes. It is in this area of spiritual and physical wellbeing (*baxt*) that the Indian origin of our Romany people is most clearly seen. (Hancock 75)

Pollution taboos indicate that bad luck or *bibaxt* as well as illness or *nasvalipen* can be attracted even by socializing with people who are polluted or *marimé*, such as the non-Romany, or Gaje (Carmichael 276; Lee 353; Sutherland 255). According to Ian Hancock, “it is particularly the factor of ritual cleanliness and ritual defilement that has

helped maintain Romany separateness – and as a result Romany identity – for so long” (76). However, my ethnographic data among the Romany of Brazil accounts for several cases of dissent, cases where group ideology and social reality do not correlate. Romany power structures are community based and informal, unlike the formal state or institutional types studied by Foucault. One way in which Romany bodies in their everyday contexts become signifiers of belonging and order is through feelings of shame, which “constitute a compulsion to check one’s own behavior, and to enforce a conformity on oneself with what the subject feels to be appropriate standards” (Lyon, 49). On the other hand, I consider Romany people’s bodies as sites of dissent, dissonance, and contradiction as well as innovation, which Moore would describe as “the multiplicity of alternatives and meanings within each, which may accommodate a range of manipulation, interpretation and choice” (Lock 141 & Moore 233).

I situate my theoretical discussion within considerations of the honor and shame complex from literature based primarily on Mediterranean and Japanese cultures which revolves around themes such as social norms and evaluations, kinship solidarity, gendered behavior, hostility and hospitality, sense of the sacred and meaning, and the effects of wealth and anonymity on the decline of the honor and shame complex in urbanized cultures. In the introduction to “Honor and Grace,” Peristiany defines honor as a “matter of moral conscience and a sentiment,” “a fact of repute and precedence, whether attained by virtue or birth, power, wealth, sanctity, prestige, guile, force, or simony” (5). Honor, he argues, must be achieved, asserted and vindicated, even when

inherited, through performing socially sanctioned behaviors; thus, “honor and shame are two poles of evaluation” and they are used as “standard measurement” or as “the type of personality considered as representative and exemplary of a certain society” (9-10). This discussion is also relevant to the Romany people of Brazil.

*Marimé* [in Romanes] can be conceived as the equivalent of dishonor or disgrace, a status that should produce an ethos of shame, to use an approximate translation of *lashaw* [in Romanes]. Shame or *lashaw* is usually felt upon lowering one’s status in the eyes of the others, due to socially unsanctioned behavior made public. Although Brazilian society circulates its own notions of shame or *vergonha* [in Portuguese], Romany people of Brazil express ethnic-specific feelings of *lashaw* vis-à-vis other members of their extended kinship group or *vitsa* [in Romanes]. Observing the cultural specificity of such ethos, theorizing shame must be grounded in ethnographic contexts, leaving room for contingencies, for slippages of meanings in actors’ interpretations of every-day discourse and practices, as well as for a variety of shifts in individuals’ positioning vis-à-vis social standards. I investigated Romany interpretations of women’s honor and shame, as well as psychological ambivalences and practices that do not always follow nor necessarily conflict with the social norms. Primarily, I found that slippages exist at the limits of *marimé* notions and social regulations among Brazilian Romany women, where by slippage I mean the individual failure to meet ideological standards of behavior, thus, the inconsistencies between normative ideals of honor and self-evaluations, between words and meanings, between self-images and projected



images within Romany communities. At the margins of Romany morality, I explored opportunities for women to transcend normative behaviors that would socialize them as a “second sex.”

Norbert Elias claims that the ‘civilizing of behavior’ consists of several changes induced from an early age, namely: the moderation of spontaneous impulses and emotions, “the tempering of affect,” “the extension of mental space beyond the moment of the past and future,” and the formation of “the habit of connecting events in terms of chains of cause and effect” (236). According to Elias, the child gradually internalizes the constant self-constraint and foresight, “like a kind of relay-station of social standards, an automatic self-supervision of his drives,” such that “a more differentiated and more stable ‘super-ego’ develops,” and the restraint is no longer at the level of consciousness (241). However, Elias also suggests that “major and minor disturbances, revolts of one part of the person against the other, or a permanent atrophy” of the personality may occur, making it more difficult for the individual to perform social functions (242). Analyzing such disturbances among Romany people, findings show that individual ambivalences persist even in instances of shamelessness. On one hand, one desires to respect honorable behavior codes, on the other, one experiences desires that come into conflict with that which is considered socially acceptable. Where one’s dishonorable behavior is discovered by the community and honor is lost, the individual is often excluded from the community or at a minimum, forced to pay a hefty fine to those

dishonored. Enforcement of fines is established by the Romany *kriss*, as previously discussed.

Bourdieu elaborates that shamelessness awards a certain immunity from social norms, at the risk of exile and social death: “A person for whom nothing is sacred (for example, the bachelor) could dispense with the point of honor because in a certain way he would be invulnerable” (218). On the other hand, Bourdieu suggests that social norms offer people a sense of sacred meaning, which produces ambivalence in people with respect to social rules and the need for consistent obedience. Bourdieu explains: “Doubtless the true miracle produced by acts of institution resides in the fact that they succeed in convincing those individuals whom they consecrate that they are justified in existing and that their existence serves some purpose. But by a sort of curse, the essentially diacritical, differential, distinctive nature of symbolic power means that the access of one distinguished class of Being has for its inevitable counterpart the decline of the complimentary class into Nothingness, or minimal Being” (Bourdieu 88). Thus, while following social norms can lead to a potential sense of sacred and meaningful existence, it does require individuals to become completely docile bodies, mirrors of social structures and constraints, despite individual agency, will, and ambivalent desires.

*Marimé*, with the power of sacred symbolism, designs a distinctive ethos and worldview for the Romany people. With regard to honorable status, it means showing everyday evidence of shame, such as respect for the codes of honor, for the elders, for

endogamy, as well as body-related moral purity (Weyrauch, 2001). Thus, the honor and shame literature is relevant in discussing masculine honor where it appears as authority over the family, defending one's reputation, refusing to submit to humiliation, and as virility and where female honor is believed to come from women's subordination, honesty, loyalty, discretion, concern for repute, and restraint, chastity or modesty in sexual matters, humility, reserve, and obedience of both social rules and their representatives (Baroja 87 & Pitt-Rivers 44-45). Thus, honorable subjectivity depends on the inscription of social rules and gendered roles on the bodies of both men and women, who must strive to fulfill their duties of family membership. "Men and women, then, struggle to attain these ideal modes of being and conduct. Where they fall too short in the effort of identification, honor is lost" according to Campbell - in Peristiany's collection of essays except if the potentially dishonorable act remains secret (147). In this case, public shaming can be avoided and social status remains honorable. In public, both Romany men and women strive to accept their roles according to social ideals, that is, to defer to public opinion as informed by the elderly, which indicates the generational power inequality inherent in Romany social pressure. In reviewed literature, shame is discussed as a fear of losing social status and being abandoned, while guilt is defined as the anxiety of being punished for having done a wrong behavior (Carroll 1985). Shame or *lashaw* as elaborated by Romany codes of behavior has a corresponding fear of rejection, since the highest form of punishment offered by the Romany *kris* is permanent social exclusion. According to Peristiany, "all societies

have their own forms of honor and shame” which represent the ideal standards of action upon which social evaluations are based (10-11). However, among Romany people this occurs with greater intensity and consequences because people tend to know one another well, since they live in smaller communities. As Peristiany insists: “Honor and shame are the constant preoccupation of individuals in small scale, exclusive societies where face to face personal, as opposed to anonymous, relationships are of paramount importance and where the social personality of the actor is as significant as his office” (11).

### **Conclusions: Should feminism be the new authority on Romany rights?**

Feminist theory has never become a new authority, as Bordo (1993) explains:

Its goal is edification and understanding, enhanced consciousness of the power, complexity, and systemic nature of culture, the interconnected webs of its functioning. It is up to the reader to decide how, when, and where (or whether) to put that understanding to further use, in the particular, complicated, and ever-changing context that is his or her life and no one else’s. (30)

Feminist agendas highlight the need for an understanding of cultural webs and for “individual freedom, choice, power, [and] ability – simply becoming more conscious,” since “changes in consciousness are changes in life” (Bordo 30). Therefore, my main objective is to raise consciousness about how Romany women internalize to a certain extent cultural limits to their life choices. I agree with Millet that, “As with the liberation

of any group long oppressed, the first priority was education,” (Millet 74). A specific goal would be raising awareness about the benefits of higher education (Csapo 1982; Liegeois 1989, 1998). For now, Romany women, a minority group within a minority group, continue to live in an environment where their freedom of choice is limited by two cultural patriarchies, the Romany-specific and the Brazil-specific, as seen in the national ban on abortion procedures. Romany women, like all women of Brazil, face a continued ban on abortion, which feminists have already successfully critiqued in the United States and in numerous other countries.

Therefore, this is a good point with which to start fighting for women’s rights in Brazil, whether they are Romany or not. As feminist Willis suggests: “You can’t create a perfect society in a microcosm while the larger society remains the same, and you can’t change the larger society if you spend all your time and energy trying to create a utopian microcosm” (Willis 138). Women cannot be easily disabused of the interiorization of patriarchal ideologies without an education and critical awareness actively encouraged by the national socio-political environment. Until then, we can echo radical feminists like Millet who wrote that, “Woman is still denied sexual freedom and the biological control over her body through the cult of virginity, the double standard, [and] the prescription against abortion” (54).

Yet, in an environment of religious syncretism as found in Brazil, the ‘traditional’ occupation of Romany women as fortune-tellers is a thriving source of profit. In addition, Brazil has recently legalized this career and offers an official work card as

proof of coursework completion in relevant subjects such as card reading, numerology, and astrology. Most Romany women do not have physical access to the Sao Paulo institution where these courses are available, and online education could help them obtain such a work card, which offers legal protection in case of lawsuits. Nonetheless, Romany women in Brazil are often the main income producers in their families. This article discussed whether being the breadwinner translates into female empowerment. Findings suggest that female economic empowerment produced an informal cultural change: whereas male infidelity during marriage was acceptable in the past, when men supported the household, women bread-winners now do not accept their spouse's infidelity. However, political representation both at the level of the community and at the national and international levels is usually left in to the male representatives. Therefore, this paper insists that female education beyond literacy should be promoted for pursuing gender equality and for nurturing political consciousness among Romany women in Brazil. The difficulties in trying to socially integrate the Romany into public schools are similar worldwide. On one hand, the mainstream societies' prejudice limits Romany students' desire to attend schools. On the other hand, Romany parents are themselves disinterested in sending their children to schools beyond alphabetization, and this is more apparent in Brazil where ethnic invisibility eliminates ethnic discrimination to a large extent. Parents prevent girls, in particular, from participating in public education because they consider that girls will be tempted to elope with non-Romany boys. Parents therefore prefer to keep girls at home in preparation for an early,

arrange marriage, since at home they may better ensure the girls' virginity at marriage, as well as apprenticeship in fortune-telling. In most communities all over the world, Romany childhood socialization prioritizes customs and Romanes language over mainstream education, in efforts to resist pressures of assimilation, defined as cultural loss, or acculturation, cultural change.

In order to increase Romany interest in institutionalized education, the government of Romania, country with the largest and poorest Romany population in Europe, has recently made available Romanes language and history courses in public schools. This paper proposes to make such coursework materials available online so that Romany children and adults can learn to read and write their own language, as well as understand their historical background and opportunities for developing cultural goods specific to their ethnicity. International Romany Union efforts should be invested into translating these Romanian-based textbook materials into other languages such as Brazilian Portuguese. Since a large number of Romany people in Brazil chose to live in ethnic invisibility and do not wish to have their language made available in public schools, this discussion further suggests that Brazilian cultural policies should create Romany cultural centers where ethnic-specific coursework and ethnographies would be available. Such 'Sunday schools' or cultural centers would not only minimize gender inequalities by providing a safe place for both Romany children and adults, male and female, but would also most likely increase interest in formal schools by demonstrating the benefits of education, slowly divorcing it from fears of assimilation.

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