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Oksana Marafioti: Translating Identities

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Abstract

Language use is the consequence of certain dynamics in people's lives. It is obvious that translation implies, even etymologically, movement, mobility, exchange. These phenomena are more topical than ever nowadays, in the age of globalization. In the present essay, I analyze the translation of identities in the work of Oksana Marafioti, a contemporary writer of Roma origins who emigrated from the Soviet Union to the United States of America. Her memoir *American Gypsy* is an effort to trans-late towards a multiple, volatile, fluid identity where the languages spoken by Marafioti lead to belongings and rejections. The author records, in exquisite wording, the painful process of translating from a culture to another culture, from a language to another language.

Keywords: translation, identity, culture, language, Soviet Union, the United States, Roma, Gypsy

Translation is not only a linguistic activity. This is not a new truth, but the present globalizing world poses the problem of translation in a more inevitable way (cf. Hirschberg and Hirschberg). We already know from Humboldt and Schlegel that translation exists between cultures as well although some specialists stubbornly refuse to accept this. André Martinet, for instance, considers that cultures are untranslatable because they have a coherence of their own which cannot be permuted without destroying the culture altogether (cf. Katan). A more nuanced perspective belongs to the famous Slovak scholar Anton Popovič who competently discusses the difference between linguistic and cultural untranslatability in his famous *A Dictionary for the Analysis of a Literary Translation*.

Our perspective on translation, in this essay, is basically existentialist. It is obvious that translation implies, even etymologically, movement, mobility, exchange. But the translation is not only movement from one language to another. In this article, we associate language use with a certain dynamics in people's lives. In the age of globalization when people frequently move from country to country both for pleasure and out of necessity, translation is a reality, a necessity, an obligation, even.

In the present essay, we analyze the translation of identities (and languages) in the work of a very interesting contemporary writer from the United States of America. We shall analyze *American Gypsy*, the memoir of Oksana Marafioti, a writer of Romani origin, living in the USA.

Marafioti grew up in the Soviet Union in a family of performing artists. Her mother was Armenian; her father was a Russian Roma. Marafioti presents her experiences in the Soviet Union, insisting particularly on the conflict between the private and the public spaces, the way she had to trans-late back and forth from her Roma identity (in the public space of the family) to an imposed Soviet identity (in the public space of society). At the beginning of the 1990's Marafioti and her family immigrate to the United States. Here she has to undergo a translational process towards a new identity in order to blend in the whirl of American multiculturalism.

Marafioti identifies herself as a representative of a very little known ethnic minority: Roma Americans. According to the last census, there are about 1.5 million Roma people living in the USA and almost as many in Canada. Still, there is very little research available about this ethnic group. The Roma simply appear in official censuses, and that is all. They have not been visible in the American public life for a long time and they are certainly not one of the very vocal ethnic minorities in the USA.¹ Among the few books on the Romani communities in the USA, mention should be made to *The Hidden Americans*, a study by Ann Sutherland, published in 1968. In this well documented and singular piece of scholarship, the authors insists on the invisibility of the Roma in American culture and society. It is a form of invisibility that Roma Americans cultivated themselves in order to protect their culture and traditions. Namely, for a long time they have preferred to be confused with Mexican Americans by

the outsiders and it is only when they are among themselves that they openly identify themselves as Romani people.

The question arises, how did the Roma get to America? A significant wave of Roma immigration to the United States and Canada took place after the 1850's when the Roma who used to be slaves in Eastern and Central Europe were manumitted. Aspiring for a better life as free individuals, some of them immigrated to the West. This immigration wave reached not only Western Europe, but also the United States, New Zealand, and Australia. This does not mean that sporadic immigration from Western European countries did not happen before this date. For instance, according to Jimmie Storrie, an Australian researcher of Roma culture, there were four Roma on the first ship taking convicts to the penal colony of Botany Bay in 1788, which will become the kernel of colonial Australia. Undoubtedly, more Roma must have followed as already during the Tudor dynasty the English authorities recommended the surveillance of the Roma, marginalized individuals who were often convicted (cf. Kenrick). If the Roma immigrated to Australia, it is logical that they might have immigrated to the New World as well even if documents are still absent in this respect. The invisibility of the Roma in official records does not mean that they did not exist.

The Roma Americans became visible in American mainstream life in 1976 when *King of the Gypsies* by David Maas was published. The novel was a thriller that soon became a bestseller. In the novel, the (Gypsy) King was the leader of a Gypsy gang who had committed a lot of crimes. This book angered the Romani American community. Many Roma in the United States came out, sent letters to newspapers or TV or radio stations protesting against this biased portrayal of Roma Americans. It is in the wake of this popular protest that for the first time, Roma Americans ran for seats in municipal or county councils openly identifying themselves as Roma Americans.

Marafioti is the first American writer who chose to talk about her life as a Roma woman in the United States. Actually, Marafioti is of mixed identity: her mother was Armenian and her father was of Russian Romani descent. When her mother and father got married, her mother's family kept the news a secret. The mother was considered to

have dishonored the family. Ironically, Marafioti notices that “love of superstitions was the biggest thing they had in common” (92), i.e. the Armenians and the Roma in Russia. From a traditional Romani point of view, this act of miscegenation makes Marafioti less “Gypsy”. Mixed marriages are still problematic in the traditional Romani community. Still, Marafioti stubbornly and consistently identifies as Roma. During her childhood and adolescence, Marafioti studied the piano in a musical school in the Soviet Union. After immigration, she studied at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas. Then she took up cinema before moving into writing. In 2010 Marafioti made her debut with a short story included in *The Perpetual Engine of Hope*, an anthology featuring stories written by seven Las Vegas writers. In 2012 *The Fairy Tale Review* published her story “Krivoye Lake.” Marafioti’s memoir *American Gypsy* was published in the same year. It describes her experiences in the former Soviet Union and her perspective on emigration. She was a fifteen-year-old girl when she came to the United States, just before the breakup of the USSR. Since *American Gypsy*, Marafioti’s writings have been published in the *Slate* and the *Time* magazines and have been anthologized in *One World, Many Cultures*. Her latest work is a fantasy entitled *Donatti’s Lunatics* which she published under the pseudonym Ana Mara in 2018.

In an interview conducted with Adéla Gálová in April 2017², Marafioti says that writing is exceptionally important for her. It is an existential self-discovery. “For me, writing is a way to find out who I am at my core. Writing is a constant discovery for me.” The fact that life forced her to make constant new encounters of other cultures and lives turned her into a trans-lator of herself and for herself.

Since childhood Marafioti had to face discrimination, a certain inferiority complex was imposed upon her. “When I started first grade, my parents without much explanation, told me not to mention that I was part Roma. I was Marafioti Kopylenko, the Ukrainian, because all Soviet last names ending with *nko* traced their roots to Ukraine” (7). But this does not help much. At school she hears that Gypsy girls “start having sex at ten and then they can’t stop” (34). Her colleagues also fantasize that Gypsy girls “grow boobs and curly hairs faster than normal people” (34). In other words, from early childhood it is inculcated in Marafioti that her

identity must have some dark, discreet aspects. On the other hand, earlier sexualization is part of the fascination of the outsiders, the so-called *gadje*, with the Roma and their feared power over the so-called normal people.

Marafioti chose the form of the *memoir* in order to present the stages of her individuation as a woman and her transition from the Soviet Union to the United States. A vivid and funny *memoir* about growing up Gypsy and becoming American, this book continues the American tradition of the self-made (wo)man as Marafioti becomes what she is in spite of her family. Nevertheless, Marafioti is aware of the cultural traditions she carries within, across the Ocean, through her heritage. Behind the narrative texture of this book there lies the author's strong belief that she can become who she is by individual efforts (an American feature) but she is also a member of a community with certain traditions and the ties with her Romani community will never be cut.

Fifteen-year-old Marafioti is a Gypsy in the Soviet Union in the first part of the *memoir*. As the *memoir* is written for an American readership, Marafioti feels the need to trace some comparisons. "The USSR was like the modern European Union only with one ruling nation Russia" (224). Such translations are very superficial. Imperial Russia/Soviet Union was the result of military conquests. The European Union is a structure where countries applied to belong of their own free will. More successful seems to me the comparison between the Jews and the Roma living in the Soviet Union. Prejudice obliges people to masquerade the dominant ethnicities. "Like Romani, many Jews masqueraded as Russians, and if they could not be that, then Ukrainian, or at the very least Moldavian. We were all branded by our identities" (225). In the Soviet Union, there was a kind of hierarchy of ethnicities: the Russians were on top, then followed the other Slavs, and then other ethnicities. The Jews or the Roma were tolerated ethnicities in spite of the egalitarian official discourse.

Marafioti's parents and paternal grandparents are artists who make their living touring the Soviet Union. Marafioti travels with her family band from the Mongolian deserts to the Siberian tundra. This life style means getting to know the Soviet Union and satisfying, in some way, the

nomadism that was her paternal ancestors' way of life. Marafioti talks extensively about enduring sneering racism from every segment of Soviet society. Marafioti, the daughter of traveling professional musicians, studies piano but is bullied at her Moscow school for her heritage. Luckily, says Marafioti, "whenever I could, I joined my parents on the road. The hectic life never allowed much time to dwell on school politics" (13). Love is in the air and Marafioti has a more-serious-than-usual teenage romance with Ruslan. Her father disapproves of this love story. Finally, Ruslan decides to go to Romania to fight for Romani rights. "I'd heard of rallies going on in Romania at the time. Romani all over Europe told stories about women being sterilized without consent; there were rumors that no Romanian Gypsy could get documents in order to work. Some of the younger Gypsies were becoming restless" (63). Marafioti combines here news about the Romanian events in December 1989 and in June 1990,³ and information about the forced sterilization of Roma women in former Czechoslovakia during the 1960s. She is not a historian and her subjective memory creates a new chronology according to a poetics relying on two tropes: the general revolt against injustice and the angered Roma rising to defend their rights all over the world. While in Romania, Ruslan is beaten to death in a fight with the *gadjees*⁴, which makes Marafioti ready to move away from Russia and begin a new life. Everything seems to be preordained according to an implacable fate in which the Roma believe, in fact. It is exactly at this moment that Marafioti's family gets the chance to move to a new and different world.

Marafioti's father is determined that his girls should lead a better, freer life. Where but in America?! "He knew that no matter what, he'd always be Rom, but that at least in America, nobody cared" (47). Just before the USSR broke up, Marafioti's family immigrated to the USA. The father had big plans. He wanted to play the guitar with B. B. King and cure cancer with his personal magnetism! All of this he confided in the woman at the American embassy, who inexplicably gave the family the long-desired visa without too much trouble. Inexplicably or maybe knowledgeably! She might have known that the Roma were not viewed favorably in the Soviet society. Yes, their music and dances were appreciated but there was also the suspicion that they are thieves,

criminals, dishonest people. The desire to leave was so overwhelming that the family did not even envisage the possibility that the New World might not exactly be paradise on earth. "In their desperation to leave they didn't pause to consider the difficulties they might encounter across the ocean. They just knew that it would be better in America" (6). This constant mobility that Marafioti has experienced since childhood makes her intimate to Adéla Gálová, "I don't view 'home' as a physical locality. For me, it's something I carry inside irrespective of where I happen to be living. My home is the common heritage that determines who I am. In that sense, home is any place where I feel happy." The internalization of home and its dependence on family and those close to the writer distinguish Marafioti from other writers of hyphenated American minorities.

Marafioti offers a vivid description of the double life (leading to double standards) that the Soviet system forced people to adopt. The little girl remembers one such episode. "When the ticket agent at the Moscow central station found he was dealing with Gypsies, all the good tickets mysteriously sold out. We were stuck riding in the back, where everything swerved and rattled and swayed from side to side like a shark's tail" (30). On the other hand, the Roma were also quite rich and well connected. When Marafioti says rich, she means they had gold and jewelry, a tradition in the Roma community where one invests his money into family jewels and then proudly exhibits his wealth. Compared with the almost monastical paucity preached by the Soviet authorities, this looked like wealth.

The author also indicates the existing diversity among the Roma themselves. For instance, Russian Roma were looked down on as sellouts by the Lovari, "Roma artists of Hungarian descent" (54). In a sad symmetry of mutual prejudice, "most Lovari considered Tzigane to have sold their soul and their culture to the Soviet government. The majority of European Roma clans considered our dialect of the Romanes language to have been watered down by Russian, a threadbare blanket with too many holes" (55). The Roma community is seen in its complexity, with its hierarchies and its boundaries that allow or forbid crossing lines, depending on the circumstances. Boundaries exist but practical life may turn them into porous liminal spaces. Marafioti does not idealize the

Roma community. She also talks about the Roma's acute awareness of the difference between insiders and outsiders, about Roma beggars, Roma poverty, Roma machismo or abuse. In a highly relevant episode, Marafioti and her friend meet a group of Roma women begging in front of the church. "[W]e knew that most likely they had husbands back home who'd beat them if they didn't return with enough earnings for alcohol and cigarettes. We'd also give the change in our pockets to the Roma kids begging near churches. We knew where the scratches and the bruises on their skinny arms came from" (101). She notices women's role in passing on the patriarchal traditions and hierarchies. "Romani boys are pampered first by the grandmothers, then by their mothers, then sisters, wives, and eventually daughters. They're passed on from one to the other like a suckling pig on a golden tray" (272).

As Marafioti travelled a lot with her family all over the Soviet Union, she was aware of the ethnic diversity of the Soviet Union. It is interesting that on the one hand, she talks about the negative stereotype imposed upon the Ossetians (a people living in the Caucasus). They are considered to be a people of gangsters. On the other hand, Marafioti's only description of the Ossetians in her memoir is of stereotypical gangsters armed with curved daggers who fight with her father. Has she become infected with the same virus that she complains about?

Marafioti's crossing the Atlantic is a complex and multiple process: a new translational process. "I will leave me here and find me on the other side" (72). Back in the Soviet Union she used to keep a diary. It becomes "an abandoned land mine" (72). The metaphor allows for the hope of returning to writing. An abandoned mine can be opened if circumstances call for it, which is exactly what happened to Marafioti. In the New World she had to learn how to negotiate her identity as a Roma teenager and become an American. Marafioti spends hours in front of the mirror looking for her new self and trying to have conversations with herself "in a language that still felt like a pair of new shoes" (76). Linguistic translation is a significant and necessary stage in her new life.

In the Soviet Union she had to endure sneering racism. In the USA, her family's first friend is Rosa, a Mexican American who teaches them to scavenge from the garbage. Marafioti signals here some kind of solidarity

of those who are not perceived as whites. The dreams of the newly arrived immigrants have to take the test of reality. Surprise, surprise: America is not only the land of the rich. The family's first apartment in Los Angeles is among poor Mexican-Americans. Marafioti implacably writes down. "We tried to make it a home over the next several days, all the while wondering if we had actually moved to Los Angeles or had somehow landed in a third-world country" (24). The apparently benevolent curiosity of the American neighbors and of the family's new friends hides a more refined reification process: exoticizing the Roma. On this side of the Atlantic, the Gypsy is given the Hollywood make-up and "it's not seen as a stigma or even a race but a lifestyle choice" (114). Marafioti writes minutely about the American ignorance of other peoples. For instance, the Gypsies are thought to be belly dancers, although this is an Arab cultural practice. Apparently, this makes it easier for the Roma to integrate. Nobody pays too much attention to what ethnicity one belongs to. At the magnet school for performing arts where Marafioti is admitted, nobody mentions race or ethnicity as a reason for putting on good or bad labels. Most of the American students "were uninformed of life outside their own country; and yet they seemed more accepting than any other of kids I'd ever met. They didn't know enough to judge me, and their ignorance provided me with a road map to individuality; I could take any direction I wanted" (223).

Marafioti is soon to learn that this freedom also means loneliness. The harsh race for survival does not give the individual too much time to look at one's neighbor unless such contact is required by bureaucracy, everyday tasks or religion (in case of the believers). The Western need for show and performance make the authentic Gypsy un-authentic because s/he does not respond to the American fantasies about an exoticized being. Hence even if America is the country of freedom, it is better to keep the information about being half Roma hidden, at least until you get to know the others better. Marafioti ironically calls it "the 'Beauty and the Beast' syndrome" (122).

The image of the mirror re-appears in this part of the memoir as a confrontation between the public self and the hidden self. "So every morning after that first day of school, I'd chant into the bathroom mirror.

‘If anyone asks what you are, you must tell the entire truth.’ My reflection seemed determined to comply, chin lifted and eyes sparkly, but every time the question came up she scurried into hiding” (126).

Marafioti’s memoir records the painful process of translating from a culture to another culture, from a language to another language. Language acquisition is a very important element in the process of her Americanization. The traces of the old language are feared. Marafioti confesses, “your only worry is to keep your heavy Eastern European accent from making you sound like Count Dracula” (168). She takes the example of her Armenian mother who came to Russia as a married woman and “recreated herself” (133). Marafioti “would master English, shed the old one, and become a brand-new, all-American Marafioti” (133). The metaphor of “shedding” language conceals a hierarchy. Exactly as the old skin becomes useless for the lizard, Russian the old language, is supposed to become useless. In fact, as Marafioti’s interviews show, the process is much more complex and much more difficult. When asked by reporter Gálová about her language, Marafioti answers, “As a child I learned to speak Armenian, Romanes and Russian at the same time. My mother is not Romani, so after my parents divorced, no Romanes was spoken at home, and unfortunately I soon forgot most of what I had learned. My children, fortunately, are determined to learn ‘Romanes’. They even want us to learn it together!” There is, therefore, a gap between her affirmed identity “Roma” and the language she uses to express it. On the other hand, her preference to be a writer of English language is expressed without any hesitation. Her message would have more resonance in this global language, not to mention the pressure of the book market. In the interview given to Chuck Sambuchino, Marafioti talks about her beginnings as a writer and how she met her literary agent. She is adamant about touching upon the difficulties and the necessity of translating from language to language, from culture to culture. “Since English is my fourth language, I was very nervous about my abilities to express my thoughts clearly. In the back of my mind I kept wondering if my foreignness would show like an open fly.” Her situation reminds one of the Native American writers who also write in English, and not in their native languages. The best known Native American writers worship their

native language but use the language of the much hated colonizer. The nuance is that the love-hate attitude does not exist with Marafioti. The Roma writer's choice is more influenced by the desire to reach the American readership.

During the first part of the *memoir*, Marafioti briefly mentions the language choices that the Roma had to make back in the Soviet Union. In tough moments, her father would always turn to Romani language. "Like most Russian Roma, Dad's primary language was Russian. But when it came to swearing, he'd often make an inadvertent switch to the language of his ancestors, as if that somehow authenticated his complaint" (14). Although highly acculturated, Russian Roma still use the Romani language when they have to express something very personal, an emotion deeply ingrained in their soul.

While they lived in the Soviet Union, Marafioti and her sister, Roxy, knew of the United States only what they learned from the MTV. This did not quite prepare them for the challenges of immigration. Nobody told them the rules of the new country, they had to discover them by themselves. Are the small soap bars in motels really free? How do you protect your nice new boyfriend from your opinionated father, who wants you to marry decently, within the clan as in the mother country? Marafioti's family imagined the United States to be a kind of paradise of the free people but they do notice the discriminating incidents their Mexican American neighbors get involved in. The father was an optimist. "If everything goes well, we'll be rich by spring. I had a dream" (82). But things do not work out quite like this. The reference to Martin Luther King's famous speech "I have a Dream" is highly ironical. America is not what these Roma immigrants imagined it to be. They wanted to translate, they have to translate. Failure in translation is failure in the adjustment/integration process. Marafioti understands this fully well:

I was born in the former Soviet Union, which almost makes me a relic in a sense that this memorable event took place in a country that no longer exists. I could tell you more about my life, but it's been rather average, I think, so I'll sum up. A stage family, a childhood touring with Romani (Gypsies), moved to America at fifteen, went to Hollywood High Performing Arts Magnet School, dad opened a psychic shop and became an exorcist, mom moved to Las Vegas on a whim and became a change

girl. For the unabridged version filled with awesome adventures and heroic deeds (well, it felt that way when I was a teenager) please see my *memoir*, *American Gypsy*. (3)

In this witty, affectionate, and hilarious *memoir*, Marafioti cracks open the secretive world of the Roma and brings to the surface the absurdities, the miscommunications, and the unpredictable victories of the immigrant experiencing a new life. Almost immediately after their arrival to the New World, Marafioti's parents split up. This separation is the sign of their dismemberment from their previous life: "we started to ever so slowly drift apart" (150). It is a consequence of immigration, it is the price of immigration. A bond that used to be so powerful in the Soviet Union, no longer functions in the United States. Freedom and individualism take their pledge upon the family in America. Marafioti's Armenian mom succumbs to alcoholism and her Roma father marries Olga, a much younger Roma woman whom he brings from Russia. The new couple will, then, dive into the occult. It is paradoxical that in America, the father, instead of looking towards modernity, returns to the practices of Baba Varya, his grandmother. She was "a notorious *magicker* who performed spells in addition to being a healer and a midwife" (88). The marriage to Olga and the preference for the Gypsy occult are a reaction of defense to the difficulties of adapting to the American lifestyle, a refusal to admit failure in the process of adaptation. The syncretic aspect of Olga and her husband's home indicates the survival of pre-Christian beliefs among contemporary Roma. Walls were covered with "symbols of protection. The most important was a circular carving with a six-petaled rose in the middle, called *gromovoi znak*, or the thunder sign. It belonged to Rod, a pagan god of light and creation. Inside the house, a candle burned next to an icon of Jesus set high on a shelf. A large hand-carved cross hung over the threshold, and from it dangled a number of talismans in the form of gems and dried-herb sachets" (88).

Ironically, Marafioti wonders, "Had our family really traveled all this way just to lose one another?" (21). The child cannot make up her mind which parent to choose and this is even more painful as ethnic belonging takes its share in the family conflict. Marafioti feels being a strange, almost a monstrous breed.

Growing up, I suffered from what I now call a split nationality-disorder, never quite sure if I was Romani or Armenian. I was an impostor: a half breed, trapped between two vibrant cultures, never allowed a choice without guilt. My parents' breakup was feeling eerily familiar. I didn't know whose side to be on, and they made sure I couldn't choose both. (80)

On the other hand, Olga, a Roma woman of many traditional beliefs, tries to cultivate Roma pride in her little step-daughter. She tells Marafioti, "Darling, you're no more American than a pizza. Your father is Rom, and that makes you one, whether you like it or not. Be proud" (98). The implacable nature of identity is contrasted here with the postmodern perspective that one's identity is a voluntary construct. The comparison with the pizza is extremely interesting. Pizza has become a global meal thanks to the American Italians and Marafioti's identity problems are also the result of the global contemporary movements of migration.

The three of them – Marafioti, the father and the stepmother – practice white magic and are convinced that there is another world, the world of the spirits that doubles this one. Humor is deftly used in order to release the tension created by this almost Gothic part of the memoir. In the secular American society, the stepmother's occult strategies put the two women in awkward and humorous situations. One night, the step-mother forces Marafioti to help her steal graveyard dirt for a spell. After the theft, they get stopped for high speed. The police officer who investigates their traffic crime suspects they have committed some crime. He doesn't believe a word when they tell him that the suspicious bag in the car is full with dirt! The traditional Gypsy magic is viewed by Marafioti with a lot of intelligence and understanding of the needs of human psyche. Olga and Oksana have an illuminating discussion about the survival of magic. "Everybody wants to believe that something else controls their lives. That way, we don't feel responsible for what happens to us" (91). In other words, magic makes life more bearable. When Marafioti mocks at the paraphernalia used in witchcraft, Olga responds that the effects are not in the objects used but in faith. The step-mother believed that "every person had a bit of the magic inside them – some had the ability to apply it, for others it stayed dormant forever" (178). So to use this force is no deceit, rather, it is something fully justified and justifiable.

The Roma girl thus learns that there is continuity between the spiritual and the physical reality which one must respect. In the Roma mentality, God and the Devil are equally powerful and the Tarot cards Olga uses for divination illustrate this. "Cards are part good, part bad. God and Devil, all in one" (94).⁵

In spite of the predicaments that make this initiation into American culture look like a roller coaster with its heights and depths, Marafioti embraces the opportunities of her new country. She learns English by reading romance novels and is accepted at a performing arts magnet school. The *memoir* displays the usual immigrant tensions between tradition and the new culture. It is when she falls in love with Cruz, a non-Roma boy, that tensions with her father build up to an unsustainable level. In the end, Marafioti will separate from her boyfriend. The separation occurs not because she has decided to obey her father, but because Cruz wants to marry her and turn her into a very tame American housewife.

Marafioti's stepmother is eager to marry her off with someone from the Roma community and her father views her as insufficiently free-spirited when she gets into the performing arts school (which he equates with the Soviet arts system). The father considers that she should learn from her family as generations of Roma musicians did. The problem is that he doesn't take her seriously enough as a musician to teach her, because she's a girl. An oedipal conflict is sketched here because however independent Marafioti wants to be, she still needs, "chases" for her Dad's approval "like a dog after a bone" (171). The animal comparisons are both ironical and compassionate, full of empathy.

In the end, Marafioti succeeds in finding a balance between rebelling against sexist traditions and valuing her mother culture. She realizes that the solution is not to become a real American, but to become herself. In this process, she feels close to the Hispanics because of their racial visibility. "I liked the idea of their darkness in the face of color-coded normalcy" (265). Marafioti does not insist too much on the idea that the Roma could be identified as black. There is one discreet exception. Marafioti and her family go to a wedding to a Roma family from Los Angeles. Jokes are made about the racial aspect of the bride. It is known that Roma boys prefer "a porcelain doll" (294). Whiteness is

valorized in a superior way. Natasha, the bride, responds without any inhibitions, "It's common knowledge that the dark-skinned *tsiganochky* (Gypsy girls) are better in bed" (294-295). The sexualization of the Black Gypsy girl is not only the work of the outside society, the Roma themselves think that Black women, in general, are more prone to sex. This internalization of the racial prejudice is the result of centuries of oppression and marginalization of the Roma themselves.

Marriage is an important moment in one's life. It is an act of translation with enormous existential consequences. The Roma like to show off when they get married. A lot of money is spent on decorations, expensive clothes, and food. The guests dance in the street in front of the bride's house and the whole neighborhood witnesses the event, people looking enviously and avidly at these very visible newcomers. When the newly-weds refuse to display the bloodstained sheet, the mark of the bride's virginity, most of the guests are outraged. Marafioti notices the ridicule of the situation. The guests quarrel over the breach of a century-old tradition while the young couple depart on their honeymoon. It is only then that Marafioti realizes that "oppression can come from within as easily as from without" (298).

She dreams that one day she will become an artist and be a self-made woman, on her own feet, not an appendage to a man although she sincerely loves the South American, Cruz. Still, she prefers to go to school and study, and "stay as carefree as the weather" (216). Freedom and independence are not only priceless but they also demand a price.

In order to understand Marafioti's translating between identities and languages I would like to trace a comparison with a Canadian Roma *memoir*, Ronald Lee's *Goddam Gypsy*.⁶ Lee was born in Montreal, in 1934. He is a writer, activist, and linguist. Lee's father was a Kalderash musician who immigrated to Canada, married in this country and took his wife's name. When Lee was eighteen years old, he started to travel with a Kalderash family from Europe. Ronald Lee relives ten years of his life as a Canadian Roma in his autobiographical novel. The wealth of Gypsy lore and the individualistic and powerful characters set this novel apart in the rich production of Roma literature all over the world. This is an honest,

non-apologetic account of the outsider among outsiders, of the marginalized by the marginalized, of a special subaltern type.

The author tackles the inevitable poverty in the Roma milieus as the police close up the fortune telling joints, which the author admits, rely on tourists' naivety. Mention is made of the mafia taking over the used car dealings and eliminating the Roma people's sources of economic support. Ronald Lee does not offer us any lachrymose literature, his book is rather the brutal telling of truth about the Roma community as the author sees it while society pushes the Roma to the edge.

From an artistic point of view, this autobiography is more than the story of an individual self, it is the story of a community. Diaristic strategies are used in order to convey more verisimilitude to this, ultimately, fictional account of fight and resistance to prejudice and discrimination. Lee's text is a very interesting combination between the verbal text and the visual text represented by the Tarot figures naively drawn by an uncle of the author's. The tarot figures mix/ mate with the deities that survived the religious acculturation of the Roma. Representative in this respect is Mundro Salamon, the Roma hero, who overcomes his enemy simply by turning the greed, ignorance or carnal desires of the enemy back against him" (I). Mundro Salamon is represented as in a mirror. His left hand holds "the magic wand of illusion" (I) and his right hand "points to the earth" (I). This is contrary to the Gypsy religious beliefs who consider that the left is evil and the right is blessed. This mirror-like, deceitful representation is meant to protect Roma true and secretive identity from indiscreet non-Roma glances. The Roma should never tell the truth to the non-Roma, a whole history of discrimination and prejudice takes its toll in this attitude.

For Ronald Lee, nomadism is one of the most important values of Roma identity. Nomadism presupposes existential (even linguistic) translation, mobility, change. Ronald Lee meets, in this respect, in spirit, of course, the essayist Bruce Chatwin who also cherished/ even idealized the values of nomadism and its contribution to culture and civilization. In *Anatomy of Restlessness*, Chatwin mentions the importance of movement in human evolution. The human being always walked long distances. This "'drive' was inseparable nervous system ... [W]hen warped in conditions

of settlement, it found outlets in violence, greed, status-seeking or mania for the new. This would explain why mobile societies as the gypsies were egalitarian, thing-free and resistant to change..." (27).⁷ An insider of the Roma community, Ronald Lee still appreciates nomadism, but without so much glorification as Chatwin. For Lee, the Roma is, forever, "the elusive and eternal Gypsy. He remains aloof, a child of former age of nomadism, long before sedentary man foolishly allowed himself to create a society in which he was either one of a privileged handful of rulers or one of a mass of ruled and exploited" (I).

With both authors, Roma identity becomes the result of a *bricolage* process where the kitsch, the authentic, the extravagant, the violent, and the carnal combine in a specific and unique way that tells us a survival story and a very special gradient of abomination and humanity. Lee's narrative is linear – influenced by the picaresque *peripeteia* – namely, a collocation, a string of episodes that convey an impression by accumulation. With Lee, the Gypsy goes through the usual picaresque experiences: the road, prison, sex. His existence is framed by the same coordinates as the *picaro*'s destiny: the fatum, the economics i.e. money, the quest for a job or for a social placement. Besides all these classical characteristics, the Gypsy *picaro* has a very firm ethnic determination and he also evolves in parallel with another modern *picaro* – the Beatniks, the hippies of the twentieth century. Both the Gypsy and the hippy are characterized by their amazing mobility which is a defiance of the static bourgeois world fearful of change and movement. Their migration is an experience of existential trans-lation. Both the Gypsy and the Beatniks live on the margin, in a perennial fight to value the moment and forget about duration because under duress. The difference between the Gypsy and the Beatniks is the long tradition of nomadism for the Gypsy and the novelty of this condition for the latter. This different historical framing creates traditions which lack for the hippy. The Gypsy are a tradition. The hippy are a tradition-in progress. The road is existential for the Gypsy and a challenge for the hippy, "the leather-jacketed motorcycle enthusiasts" (1).

All in all, Marafioti's evolution pays much more attention to the stability of family life, she does not travel so much as the narrator of

Goddam Gypsy. The translation, in her case, is much more internal, psychological, and emotional. Marriage, as a possible life solution is very much insisted upon. The feminine condition takes its toll in spite of Marafioti's desire for independence. As Marafioti declares in an interview to Gálová, "[t]o be a Roma woman is, for me, the same as 'being an author'. It means knowing who I am."

Marafioti's *memoir* is an effort to translate towards a multiple, volatile, fluid identity where languages (English, Russian, Romani language) shape belongingness and rejection. However, her belief that "[i]f you think you are something, that's what you become" (226) shows to what an extent Marafioti got contaminated by American voluntarism. She forgets that it is not enough to believe you are something; you must also make the others accept what you want them to believe you are. Towards the end of her memoir, Marafioti tries to justify her insistence on being Roma although her knowledge of the Romani language is scanty. At the wedding party she attends in L.A. with Olga and her father, she is not able to sing the traditional Roma songs like her elders. She finds a justification in the American way she has enthusiastically adopted. "I would learn it is similar to the experience of many Americans born into a multilingual family: even if they are taught the language of their parents sooner or later English becomes the language of choice" (297). Still, her interviews show that her linguistic allegiances are not so easy to explain. Burning her diary is the symbolic act that marks the end of transition towards a new identity. The mirror shows a new image. "My own reflection in the dresser mirror was that of a young woman with fewer shadows in her heart" (343). But adaptation is accompanied by some alienation. Marafioti can look at herself only through the mirror. Graduating from the university brings Marafioti closer to becoming an American. She is not married but realizes that she has neglected her own family. Before starting her own family, she must learn to appreciate what she already has. Her parents do not come to her commencement and this translates a rupture in her destiny as a Roma woman. But what can one do? "Life is made up of sentiment yoked to flashes of recollection" (358). You must have recollections with your family, otherwise emotions,

feeling cannot emerge, cannot survive but you must also learn how to migrate/ translate towards your own destiny.

Both Lee's novel and Marafioti's *memoir* are important testimonies for the translation of Roma identities in the New World. And the most important thing for both these Roma in the New World is that they never lost themselves. Translation, therefore was an enrichment, and not a distortion. Both Lee and Marafioti "improved upon the old design" (368) they "happened to be part of" (368). In the final analysis, translation reveals itself as change, not only of a linguistic, or cultural order, but also of an existential one.

Notes:

¹ Even a personality, such as Ian Hancock, professor of Romani Studies at the University of Texas in Austin, refers mostly to the plight of the Roma from Europe and their history. He makes little mention (if ever) of the Roma minority in the USA. On the other hand, after 1990 the number of Roma in the United States has been growing thanks to the liberalization of travel and overseas movement in Eastern and Central European countries.

² In 2017 Marafioti was invited to the Czech Republic. Her visit was organized by the American Embassy in Prague. This is the moment when the Czech journalist Gálová took her an interview.

³ In June 1990 there were clashes in downtown Bucharest (University Square) between the police and the people who rallied against a possible return to Communism.

⁴ Non-Roma.

⁵ The Roma hover on heresy from the point of view of Christian theology. Like the Bulgarian Bogomils or the Cathars from Southern France, they believe that God and the Devil are equally strong. The influence of Gnosticism, probably even Indian Gnosticism, is clear.

⁶ For a more ample discussion of Ronald Lee, see Mudure's article.

⁷ It is true that Chatwin uses the past tense but even so the qualifications "egalitarian", "thing-free", "resistant to change" are not entirely justified.

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