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### **Gypsy Feminism: An interview with Laura Corradi**

In the Nordic countries we have a long historical presence of Roma minorities and culture, not least in Finland where the Finnish Romani/Finnish Kale, originally deported to Finland from Sweden in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, received full and formal citizenship rights with Finnish Independence in 1917.

That being said, Romani peoples and immigrants across Nordic countries are made subjects of racism, othering and *subordinated inclusion* (see Loftsdóttir *et al* 2012; Kuokkanen 2007; Mulinari & Neergaard 2004). In a similar vein it would seem that much research on Roma peoples and cultures are done from the standpoint of white privilege and results in the reproduction of othering and victimization (see also Helakorpi *et al* 2019; Helakorpi 2018). My own encounter with “roma questions” in mainstream media and policy discourse has always been one of misery stories, social problems, crime, patriarchal oppression, exclusion, racism and stereotypes. Very seldom, if ever, have I encountered stories of agency, resistance, pride and the reclaiming of Roma history. This is why I was entirely intrigued when I first came across sociology scholar and feminist activist Laura Corradi’s book *Gypsy Feminism: Intersectional Politics, Alliances, Gender and Queer Activism*. This is a book that, in my opinion, is timely and highly relevant for those interested in feminist intersectionality and decolonial thought.

Shortly after the publication of *Gypsy Feminism* in 2018, I met Laura at the International Sociological Forum Conference in Toronto, Canada, where she was presenting her work. Some months later I met her again on Skype for an interview about Gypsy Feminism, what it is, why it is important.

On her blog, [bodypolitics.noblogs.org](http://bodypolitics.noblogs.org), Laura describes herself as “a traveler, a scholar, an activist involved in feminist, queer and deep ecology movements, against racism and wars, for health and

social rights.” Laura received her PhD in 1995 from the University of California, Santa Cruz, and currently works as a Lecturer and Senior Researcher in Sociology at the University of Calabria in Italy. In what follows I hope to give an impression of the personal experiences and thought that made Laura write the book. We moreover speak about the politics of words and history writing, of how she aligns indigenous and gypsy feminism in the aim for decolonizing feminism, of what constitutes gypsy agency and knowledge, of what queering the gypsy might mean and the role of halfies. I hope this will inspire to take up this agenda in a Nordic context.

**Laura:** I became familiar with Gypsy culture when I was travelling in India, but also because I lived for many years in an auto camper as a traveler. I lived a nomadic lifestyle, moving between three continents, getting in touch with many peoples, cultures, perspectives. Moreover, my life and experiences have been shaped by holding very different jobs, ranging from working in a factory to working as university lecturer. So all these things together, have, I think, made it easier for me to understand gypsy epistemology. A multiple and ever shifting point of view.

**Rebecca:** To me, your writing signals a very strong connection between activism and academia. It is very refreshing to read. Was the intention with your book to make it for academics as well as activists?

**Laura:** Of course! I am glad it comes through, because I never wanted to write just for academics.

**Rebecca:** How is the ambition of connecting academia and activism, how has your own community responded to that?

**Laura:** It’s difficult. It’s a constant challenge, also because the Italian academic context, has always been based on cooptation, it is nepotistic, classist, and very white. Belonging to a particular family lineage, a church, or political parties still counts. This, not least, becomes clear for somebody who is an outsider to those institutions, who doesn’t come from the academic caste but lives in an auto

camper, walks the streets, is a feminist. I remember years ago when I was doing critical feminist work on domestic violence, a colleague was asking me “how dare you challenge the family institution, the family is a protective nest ...” and “This is not sociology, it is just an expression of your personal problems.” I was made pariah by some colleagues for a long time, and held a ‘precarious’ position in the academia until age 43. However, the connection to my students has remained very strong throughout and they have always been supportive of me and my work. Moreover, being an activist never damaged my scientific production or collaboration with scholars internationally. The damage was in terms of career path, recognition and financially. But I believe the most important is to keep your integrity, to avoid being corrupted by the system, and to be a role model for young feminists. Show that it is possible to be in academia without being affiliated with a group, a party, a church, without sleeping with someone who has power over you, without coming from an upper-class family, even if that means that you won’t reach professorship.

**Rebecca:** What motivated you to write *Gypsy Feminism*?

**Laura:** I ran into writings by gypsy feminists when I was contributing to a book on Roma women in Italy. I started investigating literatures from Eastern European roma feminists, and then, because Spanish is my second language, I moved on to Spanish gypsy feminists, finding networks and writings by Gitana women. I thought I wanted to highlight this phenomenon and give more strength to it. But it has been difficult to write this book. Explaining some bits of history was necessary for those who don’t know anything about Gypsy, Roma and Travelers in Europe. But also the unspoken histories are important. For instance related to the Holocaust, it is very rare that we speak of the persecution of Gays and gypsy peoples. This year, 2018, for the first time at my university, on the occasion of the International Roma Day on April 8<sup>th</sup> we will commemorate the Roma and Sinti peoples who were killed by nazis in Auschwitz Birkenau [see also the online portal <http://www.sintiundroma.org/en/> which was launched on April 8<sup>th</sup> 2018]. So highlighting the history is important. But, I would also emphasize, the “*politics of words*” which means taking into

account that there is no such thing as a neutral definition, a neutral knowledge. Everything is related to a specific standpoint, so I openly disclose myself, my standpoint and my perspective on this issue. I am a non-Roma woman, but I can communicate with Roma women on a different level than say white middleclass woman might – because of my experience as a traveler, and living roadside in a camper caravan. I believe my own standpoint and specific background makes a difference in the relation. I also believe, and that's another big reason for writing this book, that *global feminism can learn a lot from gypsy feminism*.

**Rebecca:** How?

**Laura:** Because feminism needs to be de-colonized. Black feminists have done a great job at that, and also Indian feminists, Indigenous, Native, Maori feminisms have given great contributions. Gypsy women can play a role in the decolonization of feminism. From deconstructing prejudice towards Roma, Gypsy and Travelers, but also teaching things that are specific to gypsy feminism. Being the most persecuted group of peoples in the world today, alongside indigenous peoples. I make connections between Roma feminists, Gypsy Feminists and Traveler Feminists in my analysis. But also I try to make connections between the Roma, Gypsy and Traveler consciousness and struggles, with those of Indigenous and Native peoples. Because their problems and conditions are very similar.

**Rebecca:** Can you explain how those feminisms are similar?

**Laura:** These feminisms are similar because of many reasons: they try to combine the respect of culture and traditions with the anti-patriarchal struggle – something white feminists often have a hard time in understanding. These feminisms are similar because they are born in “subaltern cultures”. Their standpoints come from different margins. Gypsy feminism is multifaceted, since women come from many different countries and cultures who have experienced surviving genocide in the past, and the last accepted forms of explicit racism - ziganophobia, romaphobia, anti-gypsism

– today. But this topic deserves a book of its own .... Basically it boils down to a capacity for resilience and alliances, adaptation and connecting points, communicating across languages, learning as much as possible about white cultures, understanding what the reproduction of power in everyday life means, in order to defend the community. This is a capacity you can also find among Indigenous women and it is reflected in agency and struggles, in the specific type of feminism it sprouts. I am thinking about the Zapatista feminism and the Kurdish Jineology alongside the Roma Gypsy Traveler feminists.

**Rebecca:** Can you give me an example of what forms of knowledge are being produced based on Roma women's agency and activism?

**Laura:** It is a transversal form of knowledge, based on non-dichotomous views of reality: it comes from the body as a place of knowledge and resistance. It is a knowledge that is grounded in the experience and a proud freedom of theorizing, borderless, and highly subversive. It is not surprising that gypsy bodies are seen as trespassers and as out-of-place anywhere, even in politically friendly contexts. The knowledge of multiple forms of discrimination and resistance can be brought into a larger struggle against neoliberalism and against interlocking forms of oppression. These are forms of knowledge and experience that cannot be seen by women who live in houses with heating and running water. You probably may recall a reading from the ISA conference in Canada, where I described a Roma lesbian couple finding paper and plastic to cover their barrack. How they were collecting water and boiling it. Last week, the Italian government's racist and anti-gypsy polices led to twenty houses built by well off Sinti people, in the outskirts of Rome, being destroyed. The Sinti were evicted and their houses torn down. 600 police officers were sent in. Surviving eviction and having your home torn down, would be an example of an experience and knowledge that most people in the global north fortunately wouldn't have to go through. Similarly, Native women have described living in precarious conditions and catching fish, because they could not afford to buy food in the supermarket. Here we are once again talking about capacities for survival that most

people in the global North do not have to acquire. It's located knowledge, shaped by living in the periphery and under extreme hardship. This includes knowledge about human limits under poverty and suffering. It is well known, for instance, that you can never lie to a gypsy ... This is very far away from the privilege of academic work and academic feminism. The forms of knowledge produced by gypsy women's agency and activism is important for a much needed self-reflection among other (non-gypsy) feminists. We cannot claim to be equal. Gypsy feminism is a perspective developed from a nomadic and shifting standpoint, a capacity for survival and to find solutions. All that being said, there are, of course, features of gypsy experience that cannot be generalized because they are specific to different peoples, languages, cultures and countries and there will be differences.

**Rebecca:** You distinguish between several Roma cultures in your book. Could you clarify the distinction between Roma feminism and Gypsy Feminism?

**Laura:** I am using Gypsy Feminism as an umbrella term. The word Gypsy has historically been laden with negative connotations and considered an insult, but I seek to re-appropriate, re-signify, reclaim the term. In the struggle against anti-gypsism it is very important to overturn and invalidate all despotic signifiers .... Most European institutions distinguishes between Roma, Gypsy and Travelers - the Gitanas of Iberian peninsula, the Roma peoples of Eastern Europe, and Travelers in the English and Irish contexts. We have a lot of other people, for instance in France, Gens du Voyage – or the Camminanti (walking people) of Sicily now sedentary. The Roma people in Romania are different from those in Greece or in Italy for instance, where there are at least three 'waves' of Roma people . Those who arrived in the early 1900, after the Balkan wars in the 1990's, and more recently. Those who came 80 years ago now live in houses with heating and their grandchildren are attending my classes at university. Those who came as refugees after the Balkan wars still live in precarious settlements. And those who have been arriving more recently from Romania live in even worse conditions, barracks of plastic. Between these three groups of Roma

people there is almost no communication; they have different languages, cultures and religions. Of course the roots of the language is the same. They do not necessarily have much in common in terms of the particular struggles they face.

Now you will ask, of course, whether it is not problematic that I squeeze them all in under one umbrella term. But it's the same when we talk about indigeneity and the *politics of indigeneity*, referring to a beautiful book by Sita Venkateswar and Emma Hughes [2011]. We know the situations of indigenous, aboriginal and native peoples are very different across the globe. But when we talk about the politics of indigeneity we look for the *common denominators*. That is the common experience of racism, the common struggle for access to land and access to rights,

**Rebecca:** How to avoid essentialising Roma culture and women?

**Laura:** In the same way you avoid essentializing all types of Indigenous feminism. A good friend of mine, Native American from Alaska, Athabascan woman, told me about her friend's grandmother. The grandfather was gone and the family had no food, they were basically starving. So one day the grandmother went out hunting in the morning. A full day passed by and they thought they would never see her again. But in the evening she came home with a bear. She knew how to hunt.. It is not a result of genetic predisposition, but the result of social relations, not least developed in the face of colonialism. I recently read an article about traditional forms of conflict resolution in the Roma culture. There are similar styles of conflict resolution in Native American cultures and in Maori cultures with the *marae* [a communal sacred space for religious and social purposes]. You do not leave the place before the conflict has been resolved. It is a social contract that we live together and struggle together, as per Kurdish feminism. Generalizing would not work of course, but there are common features across Native and Roma cultures, which should be taken into account.

**Rebecca:** In your book you speak to the idea of Queering Gypsy. Can you tell me what it means to do that and why it is important?

**Laura:** That's another challenging question, a double-faced issue. On the one hand, Gypsies have always been considered "queer", out-of-place. That is part of the Gypsy experience. On the other hand, the Gypsy persons who are also Queer don't get accepted: they are silenced and excluded, in their communities. I am trying to bring experiences and voices from different studies into consideration, in order to signal that there are such issues in the Gypsy realities. On the other hand, the queer movement has not overcome roma-phobia and anti-gypsism. My book is an attempt at contributing to the decolonizing feminism, but also to the decolonizing of the queer movement, to address the question of racism in both feminism and the LGBT movement, and the issues of trans/homo/lesbo-phobia in the Roma, Gypsy and Traveller contexts.

**Rebecca:** In your book you speak of the importance of "halfies", in terms of building knowledge and engaging in political activism against oppression and inequality. You also mentioned earlier that you are not yourself Roma, but that you connect with Roma people through your personal experiences and nomadic lifestyle. Can you explain to me what a *halfie* is and what it is they can do?

**Laura:** That is a very interesting question, because I am not a Roma, I am not a Gitana, but I am a Traveler, having lived the lifestyle of a Traveler for decades. Next year will be 60 years old. I am a *halfie* in the way Lila Abu-Lughod [1991] explained - because of my nomadic life style both in my country and in the world, and for the different insights and experiences that I embody. Halfies are those people who can belong to different worlds and sometimes can help communicate between worlds. Roma feminists are *halfies*, because they are born into their culture, and who through the appropriation of another knowledge, e.g., black feminist writings - from reading Angela Davis, Patricia Hills Collins, Kimberle Crenshaw, and from interacting with other feminists as well - they can engage collectively and critically with their culture.



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DOI: [10.1080/00313831.2018.1485735](https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2018.1485735)

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