

Chapter 3

Ronald Lee: Discovering Romanestan between Canada and Europe

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The writer and educator Ronald Lee was one of the most prominent activists fighting for the civil rights of the Romani diaspora in North America. His life story and his voice – committed, belligerent and iconoclastic – allow us to explore Romani participation in the social and political movements of the explosive 1960s. He dreamt of a fairer world from which – as the UN urged in its resolution 2106 (XX) of 1965 – all forms of racial discrimination would be eradicated.¹ With this target in mind, he joined the battle to reform his native Canada as an inclusive, multicultural country, and even though he failed in the attempt, he did not give up. There was still Europe, a continent with nearly 500 years of Romani history. He decided to go into voluntary exile and took up residence in London, where he collaborated with the British Gypsy Council and the Communauté mondiale gitane [World Gypsy Community] in setting up the First World Romani Congress (1971). Lee’s involvement sheds light on the collective effort, spanning two continents, to achieve an organizational framework – under the umbrella of the United Nations – that would protect the Roma as a nation without a territory (1978). Indeed, he was credited with a key role in the imagining of *Romanestan*: a space that the Roma could call their own, one that was

1 “International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination”, adopted and open for signature and ratification by the General Assembly resolution 2106 (XX) of 21 December 1965, which came into force in 1969.

more political and emotional than geographical.² It was a vision that he never stopped believing in after the age of utopias came to an end. His Romanestan was not just an idea to be thought about or a feeling that was felt; it was, above all, an action to be performed. In 1997, he helped set up the Roma Community Centre in Toronto, whose main purpose was to assist immigrants from Eastern Europe. A firm advocate of education as an instrument for the empowerment and preservation of his cultural heritage, Lee was the author of the dictionary *Learn Romani – Das Duma Romanes* (2005) and its later enlarged edition, *Romani Dictionary: Kalderash–English* (2010), which is notable for including American and European linguistic variants.³

The life story of Ronald Lee, therefore, is a privileged vantage point from which to observe the Romani revolution as it unfolded – like so many others – during the radical decade of the 1960s. Lee’s particular journey between two continents also allows us to evaluate his activism in terms of capacity for agency, starting with the very imagining of Gypsy Power and then as he interacted in spaces of transversal social and political struggle where there was dialogue and cooperation with non-Roma. Two aspects of his activism can be highlighted: first his ethnic militancy, as he conceived it from the standpoint of the Canadian national scene, and, second, his creativity in contributing to a Romani political project based on European identity, but universal in scope. These two elements converge in the radical, often contradictory, discourse of a social warrior with two different names, one *gadje* and the other Romani: Ronald Lee and Yanko. The first was born in Montreal in 1934 and the second during the traumatic deconstruction of the Canadian nation in the 1960s.

A Stranger in His Own Land

Ronald Lee provided several versions of his origins in the course of his lifetime. One of these was that his father was a Kalderash musician who had emigrated to Canada in the interwar period when things became difficult on the old continent. There, he married and settled permanently in European, bohemian Montreal after the Second World War. But the Lee family always retained an identity and way of life that Ronald himself described, in retrospect, as genuinely Romani: “I began my life as a Rom”.⁴

2 Donald Kenrick, *Historical Dictionary of the Gypsies (Romanies)* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 218.

3 Ronald Lee, *Learn Romani: Das-Duma Rromanese* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2005); Ronald Lee, *Romani Dictionary: Kalderash–English* (Toronto: Magoria Books, 2010).

4 Taken from the interview granted to the Romani activist Hedina Sijerčić, editor-in-chief of *Romano Lil*, by Ronald Lee in his capacity as Director of Advocacy in

As a teenager, he was a seasonal worker at carnivals and fairs, following in the family tradition. However, it was not until he reached adulthood that he became aware of his personal background, which would – at one and the same time – distance him from and bring him closer to many of his fellow Canadians. It all began in the 1950s, when he decided to accompany a travelling Kalderash group that was offering its services to repair cars and household appliances around the provinces of Quebec and Ontario.

This period of his youth on the road would shape his thinking about what being a Romani meant from the point of view of diversity, with a sensitivity alert to linguistic and cultural differences between various groups that he would cultivate for the rest of his life. These differences had their roots in Europe, but they were also the result of the relations established with Canada and its local population. The Vlax Romani community comprised Machvaya from the United States and Kalderash from Eastern Europe and the strategies they used to adapt to Canada illustrated the syncretic diversity of that idiosyncrasy and would be reflected in Lee's own personal experience.⁵ Living in the midst of these groups taught Lee that his people, who had embraced Pentecostalism in Toronto and adapted to the demands of Canadian life, had nevertheless managed to resist abandoning their language or giving up working with metal as itinerant economic activity or institutions that rule the community such as the Kris Romani, the traditional court used by the elders to govern and resolve disputes in their *kumpanias* [groups].

Consequently, Lee's travelling experiences in those years, which he combined with attendance at night school, revealed another Canadian world to him, one that was everywhere and nowhere, both invisible and chameleonic.⁶ His people could live camouflaged as English and/or French speakers, as whites and/or Indians and in rural environments and/or big cities: *Roma le Romensa thaj Gadzhela Gadzhensa* [Romani among Roma and non-Roma among outsiders]. Paradoxically, those 25,000 people with the ability to be everywhere at once were only ever seen through the lens of the cliché "Gypsy" (which was as anti-Gypsy as it was steeped in ignorance).⁷ In the best of cases, they were seen as people who lived in clans and earned a living in shifty activities, fortune telling and dealing in second-hand

the Roma Community and Advocacy Centre, Toronto in 1999, <http://www.oocities.org/~patrin/righthandpath.htm> (accessed 13 November 2019).

5 Matt T. Salo and Sheila M.G. Salo, *The Kalderas in Eastern Canada* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1977).

6 Rena C. Gropper, *Gypsies in the City: Culture Patterns and Survival* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1975). Cf. Anne Sutherland, *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1986).

7 Twenty-five thousand Romanies is the figure supplied by Lee. The total population of Canada in the 1960 census was 17,870,000: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/98-187-x/4151287-eng.htm> (accessed 13 November 2019).

cars; in the worst of cases, they were simply regarded as crooks from the slums. Furthermore, since the 1930s, during the Great Depression and the subsequent process of renegotiating the Canadian constitution with a more centralized federal system promoted from Ontario, certain groups also became police targets. It was during that period that regulations penalizing those who worked as unlicensed musicians and itinerant fortune tellers in Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal started to proliferate.⁸ On his journeys, Lee witnessed the police harassment and administrative obstacles that prevented his people from earning a living from their professions.

The common perception of them in majority society was that they were an immigrant group. They were considered to be strange individuals and a potential danger to the Canadian “lawscape”.⁹ Gypsies were one of the classes of individuals recognized as “undesirable” and included in North American migratory regulations between 1880 and 1914.¹⁰ But the Roma were just one migrant people in a country created by immigrants, and many, like Ronald Lee, had in fact been born in Canada. Some groups had arrived in territories like Nova Scotia even before the Westminster Parliament had passed the British North America Act (1867), giving the official seal of approval to the British union with Canada as “one Dominion under the name of Canada”.¹¹ However, nobody remembered the relationships between Roma and non-Roma families that were so necessary for survival in the difficult world of the pioneers, carrying out such valuable activities as midwifery, natural medicine or horse-trading with the Indians. This latter business was placed at the service of the Canadian expeditionary forces during the First World War.

That initiatory stage “on the road” forced a young Ronald Lee to open his eyes not only to the painful reality of a Romani homeland without a territory that was threatened by repressive laws, but also to the marked social, economic and political contrasts with his other homeland, the one into which he had been born.

8 For police repression in the United States and Canada, see one view in Ian Hancock, *Danger! Educated Gypsy: Selected Essays* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010), 205–09.

9 Emma Patchett, *Spacing (in) Diaspora Law: Literature and the Roma* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 2–6.

10 Adèle Sutre, “Are You a Gypsy?” L’identification des tsiganes à la frontière américaine au tournant du XXe siècle”, *Migrations société* 52, no. 26 (2014): 57–73.

11 In 1862, according to a reference contributed by Cynthia Levine-Rasky, *Writing the Roma: Histories, Policies, and Communities in Canada* (Manitoba: Fernwood, 2016), 32.

An Explosive Cause to Fight for

For a generation of Canadians, the iconic television footage of the centre of Montreal on 17 May 1963 showing Sergeant-Major Walter Leja, his face disfigured, body covered in blood, together with the remains of a letterbox shattered by the bomb left by the Front de libération du Québec [Quebec Liberation Front], were a macabre metaphor for the idea of a nation that had also been blown sky high.¹² Revolution was inevitable and it could no longer be a “quiet” one, as Jean Lesage’s French-speaking bourgeoisie would have wished.¹³ There were too many second-class citizens at war with a certain idea of the Canadian nation. It was around that time that Ronald Lee’s literary alter ego in his semi-autobiographical novel, *Goddam Gypsy*, at nearly 30 years old, self-taught, with a short-lived marriage to a non-Romani woman behind him, would face the eternal dilemma of the Romanies: the *gadje* road or the Gypsy one?¹⁴ He could have chosen to pass himself off as a member of mainstream society. He knew what he had to do: hide the fact that he was a Romani. But he chose not to. Far from hiding his identity, he embraced it to be recognized as a son of that Canada in disarray.

Among the rest of the emancipatory causes in Canada during the traumatic sixties, Lee’s fight was the most marginal and least conspicuous in the vast sea of those aggrieved for reasons of class, gender and ethnicity. The rich, urban, white Canada of Ontario lived alongside another poor, rural, White Canada, a slum-dwelling Black Canada and a Red Canada condemned to ostracism on the reserve. It was precisely so that the Romani struggle would not run aground among so many different causes that it was imperative for it to find its own discourse and voice amid the noise of the Canadian revolution in the sixties. The inspiration would come from Europe.

Lee captured his experience as an activist in *Goddam Gypsy*. The pages of this “saga of a Canadian-born Rom” take us deep into a difficult personal exorcism, but they also provide us with a complete, reliable picture of an entire historical period.¹⁵ For his fictional alter ego, it would be a chance encounter with Juanito from Spain, or Kolia (his Romani name), in an all-night eatery on the highway that showed him the true road: *Rom sim tai Rom merava* [A Gypsy I Am and a Gypsy I’ll Die]. That European

12 See this picture for Canadians of English-speaking culture in Michael Ignatieff, *Blood & Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (London: BBC Books, 1993), 111.

13 The “Quiet Revolution” is identified with the liberal francophone project of Jean Lesage, who came to power at the beginning of the 1960s, opposed to the reactionary conservatism of the Union nationale of Maurice Duplessis.

14 Ronald Lee, *Goddam Gypsy* (Montreal: Tundra Books, 1971); reissued, significantly with a different title, as *The Living Fire* (Toronto: Magoria Books, 2009).

15 Katie Trumpener, “A ‘People without History’ in the Narratives of the West”, *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (1992): 843–84 (here 883).

Romani offered him a way of life that was much more exciting than a boring office job. He gave him a new identity, Yanko, the Romani name that “old Doikitsa” baptized him with: “I had left one life to look for a different one, but I hadn’t figured to run into an ambulant European Gypsy on the Montreal–Ottawa highway. This ought to be interesting”.¹⁶

As far as Lee was concerned, in terms of self-representation, the Canadian Roma were suffering the consequences of having been separated for so long from the true path, the one followed by his people on the old continent. Despite the disparate origins, professions, religious creeds and lineages in the Canadian group, its members thought of themselves as collectively distinct from the Europeans. They knew nothing of the Kalderash camps on the outskirts of Paris, or the Gitano basket weavers in Spain or the Sinti horse breeders in Italy and Germany. They had never heard of Yanosh, crowned King of the Roma in Poland in 1937, nor had they experienced the Nazi genocide, or been forced to assimilate through the communist policy of sedentarization, which lay behind the first migratory wave of Roma people from different countries of Eastern Europe, particularly Hungary, in the 1950s.¹⁷ The survival strategies in the North American context, where they were represented as an eccentric minority ethnic group that nobody understood, had ended up diluting them into nothing.

Lee would be fascinated by Ionel Rotaru, who had been crowned King of the Romanies in 1959 in France as Vaida Voevod III, and enthusiastically embraced Rotaru’s organization, the Communauté mondiale gitane. In 1961 he became the editor of *O Glaso Romano*, the Canadian supplement of the organization’s journal *La Voix mondiale tzigane*, which was notable for its belligerent activism and multicultural philosophy. From that same Montreal platform, he spearheaded the crusade in support of the Irishman Grattan Puxon, who was arrested in Dublin in 1964 on a charge of possessing explosives. Puxon’s problems with the law revolved around the international campaign in favour of the Irish Travellers, led by the Evangelical pastor Clément Le Cossec and Rotaru himself. British politicians, such as the Labour MP Norman Dodds, and well-known sympathizers of the stature of Nobel Prize winner Bertrand Russell, were also committed to the cause and took part in the campaign.¹⁸

Although Ronald Lee’s activism was tied to the Romani movement

16 Lee, *The Living Fire*, 3.

17 For Romani creativity when forging pan-nationalist historical myths, see Ilona Klímová-Alexander, “The Development and Institutionalization of Romani Representation and Administration: Part 3b: From National Organizations to International Umbrellas (1945–1970) – the International Level”, *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 4 (2007): 182–83.

18 Thomas Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change: The Development of Ethnic Ideology and Pressure Politics among British Gypsies from Victorian Reformism to Romany Nationalism* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 156.

in Europe, he was aiming for results in Canada. From 1965 onwards, he began to work with Russel Demitro, “a great man” and leader of the Roma in Montreal. Demitro belonged to one of the historic clans established in the eastern provinces of the country. His brother Frank had defended his people, “rifle in hand”, when a few miners had tried to massacre them in June 1935 while they were camped on Cape Breton Island. That sad event was commemorated by the Canadian Roma in the song “Kheza, de ma ki katrinsa te kosav o rat pa mande” [Kheza, Give Me Your Apron to Wipe the Blood from Me].¹⁹ Through his collaboration with the Demitro clan, Ronald Lee acquired deeper knowledge of the workings of the Kris Romani, which he would use later in writings of an ethnographical nature about his people in Canada.²⁰ During the next two years with Demitro, he would invest most of his time and effort in campaigns to build bridges of understanding between the Roma and majority society. On the one hand, he lent his voice to petitions for the abolition of regulations in Montreal that made it difficult to carry out certain occupations; they should be regulated, but the priority of the regulatory framework should not simply be to repress, but to make it easier to obtain licences in activities such as second-hand car dealing and fortune telling. On the other, he worked tirelessly to combat stigmatizing prejudices and their dissemination in the public media.

Knowledge was the best way to defeat the ignorance that fed prejudice. Between 1967 and 1969, Ronald Lee published three profiles in the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* entitled “The Gypsies in Canada: An Ethnological Study”.²¹ He pointed out in advance that his intention was less to explain with data than to illustrate “the spirit and the philosophy of the modern Romany as I have found him in North America”:

He is a strange man, this modern Gypsy, so basically honest that he would not even steal a box of matches, yet he exists to beat the system which is out to beat him: a chameleon, master linguist, Jekyll and Hyde character, half occidental and half oriental. You know nothing about him, he knows much about you. Always on the prowl, he looks for that one loophole in the staid and super sophisticated society around him that will enable him to make a fast buck ... he is invisible and he has many weapons: you have a name but he has two: one you never know

19 Levine-Rasky, *Writing the Roma*, 38.

20 Ronald Lee, “The Rom-Vlach Gypsies and the Kris-Romani”, in *Gypsy Law Romani Legal Traditions and Culture*, ed. Walter Otto Weyrauch (Berkeley: California University Press, 2001), 188–230.

21 Ronald Lee, “The Gypsies in Canada”, *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 46 (1967): 38–51; *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 47 (1968): 12–28; *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 48 (1969): 92–107.

and one he is always changing. Today he is Tom Jones, yesterday he was William Stanley and tomorrow he might be Adam Strong.²²

This passage resulted in a contradiction since Lee sounded like the familiar kind of Gypsylorist ethnologist while aiming at doing a different kind of scholarship. In using the *gadje* knowledge platform *par excellence*, this ostensibly ethnological work was actually a declaration of intent about the agency of a new power: Gypsy Power.

Mundro Salamon Carries on the Fight from the Dignity of the Ghetto

The figure that embodied Gypsy Power as Ronald Lee envisioned it was Promethean man, a revolutionary, someone capable of the most audacious acts, like himself when he chose to follow Vaida Voevod III's path from France.²³ That Gypsy road would not only reveal the path of hope for his people but would intuitively lead to universal redemption. That was what the real power of Romani agency was all about. Its symbol could well be Mundro Salamon, the Gypsy tarot card personifying the Romani hero who "can converse with both God and the Devil" and whose wisdom on occasion "manages to save people from the clutches and lures of the Devil".²⁴ Hence, once he had found the discourse for his own cause, Gypsy Power, it was not only possible but his duty to form alliances for his epic struggle on the Canadian front.

As Katie Trumpener has pointed out, what Lee's autobiography actually tries to do is "to create itself as precisely what Canada is not: as a utopian Romanestan, as a polyglot, dialogic space in which travellers with different languages and cultural experiences can interact freely with each other".²⁵ The scenario, strategy, weapons and allies were determined by the counter-cultural approach of his struggle, since Mundro Salamon, as well as Yanko and Ronald Lee, would, in reality, be defined by his actions as anti-hero in *Goddam Gypsy*:

I wanted to fight back, somehow, to form an army of all those who had wanted to be Canadians, to help build a great country, but had been shut out, branded "Negroes", "Indians", "Gypsies", "radicals", "crackpots"

22 Lee, "The Gypsies in Canada", *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 46 (1967): 38.

23 For Rotaru's utopian European formulation, see María Sierra, "Creating Romanestan: A Place to Be a Gypsy in Post-Nazi Europe", *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2019): 272-92.

24 Lee, *Living Fire*, 3.

25 Trumpener, "People without History", 883.

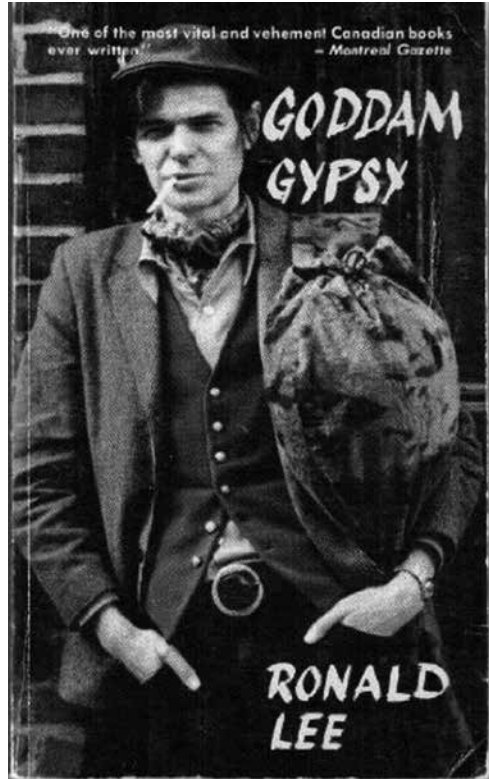


Fig. 8 Cover of *Goddam Gypsy*, by Ronald Lee (Montreal: Tundra Books, 1971). (with permission of the publisher)

and “commies” in a Canada, where the only true Canadian must be white, English Christian, and to believe in Easter Bunnies, tooth fairies, football and one white man being worth twenty of any other kind.²⁶

Lee’s alter ego was a Romani but also a beatnik, a social pariah who had deliberately chosen the term “Gypsy” to assert himself before the Anglo-Saxon majority society. The “passion, creativity and rebelliousness and, too often, violence” behind his ethnic militancy is represented in literary form as a “living fire”, one that crackled to the same irregular rhythm as the entire Beat generation. His journeys in *Goddam Gypsy* are, to some extent, reminiscent of the young Americans in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) who turned their coast-to-coast trips into a way of life.²⁷ Nevertheless, Lee’s journey, both the fictional and the real one, was not like that of the

26 Lee, *Living Fire*, 161.

27 A manifesto of the disenchantment of a whole generation of North Americans inspired by the imagination of a *canuck* (French-Canadian) emigrant: Jack Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac. La Vie est d’hommage: textes inédites*, ed. Jean-Christophe Cloutier (Montreal: Boréal, 2016).

main characters in Kerouac's novel, Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise, who referred to "holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road".²⁸ The purpose of Lee's journey was to defeat the relentless process of "Canadization":

Soon, there would be no more talk about Gypsies in Canada's slums; soon "Gypsy Power" would cease to be an issue. The age-old myth of the violins, the caravans, the earrings, blazing campfires and the savage knife fights over the tribal virgin would come back into its own on T.V., in novels and in the movies, while the real Canadian Gypsies were becoming hoodlums, dope addicts, prostitutes and alcoholics following the natural process of the Canadization of off-white minority groups.²⁹

In *Goddam Gypsy* the world of the underground, identified with Yanko and his stigmatized group of European Romanies, was recreated in a language that was as brutal as it was supportive of those who accompanied him on his descent and pilgrimage into the underworld of Montreal, Toronto and Ottawa. Indians, immigrants, revolutionaries and criminals resisted a hostile Canada transfigured into police violence by painfully surrendering to the nihilistic search for meaning in meaninglessness, and a life without inhibitions full of alcohol and wild vindictive sex with white women whom they used and then despised.

Lee's aggressive discourse against "Canadization" would certainly have been influenced by nativist and Marxist proclamations against Anglo-Saxon colonization and the culpable complicity of the elites in Quebec. The French-speaking nationalists, on the one hand, condemned the conservative leader Maurice Duplessis as a *roi nègre*, while the moral shock of the war in Algeria (1954–62) and the rise of the anti-Vietnam war movement, at its peak in the late 1960s, on the other, were only making the contradictory, culturally combative climate in Montreal even tenser.³⁰ At the same time, as songs like Raymond Lévesque's *Quand les hommes vivront d'amour* [When Men Live on Love] were becoming anthems of peace, articles like those of André Laurendeau in the newspaper *Le Devoir* [Duty] or Raoul Roy in the *Revue socialiste* [Socialist Review] were giving vent to explosive belligerence.³¹ From this side of the ideological barricade, it is not surprising that Ronald Lee's subversive imagination should feed on the philosophy

28 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 237.

29 Lee, *Living Fire*, 223.

30 André Laurendeau, "Maurice Duplessis à l'Assemblée nationale: la théorie du roi nègre", *Le Devoir*, 18 November 1958, in David Meren, "An Atmosphere of *Libération*: The Role of Decolonization in the France-Quebec Rapprochement of the 1960s", *The Canadian Historical Review* 92, no. 2 (June 2011): 263–94 (here 276).

31 Meren, "An Atmosphere of *Libération*", 274.

of authors like Albert Memmi, Aimé Césaire and especially Frantz Fanon, with his emblematic work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

Nevertheless, Lee's *Gypsy Power* was rather more than a phrase, than a pale reflection of the Black Power Movement. In his autobiographical novel, the subaltern nature was influenced by a world of emotions, the doors to which were opened for him by his second wife, who belonged to the First Nations. He had met Marie in a bar in Ottawa while he was on the road. This new sentimental union brought Lee into contact with the drama of the indigenous populations, who were as forgotten in the tribal system of the reserves as they were vulnerable to racist federal policies, some as terrible as the ones that had been defended in the past by the Toronto League for Race Betterment. For that reason, members of the Red Power movement also roused themselves at that time and started their own journey, which would end up exploding in 1974 in cities such as Kenora (Ontario); indeed, the social hygiene movement would cast a very long shadow over the Indians.

This was demonstrated by the fact that the end of the federal veto on the First Nations' land claims (1951) and recognition of their right to vote in federal elections (1960) were accompanied by the Sixties Scoop, government programmes that prioritized the adoption of Indian children by white families. It was a transracial adoption policy that sought assimilation to "white middle-class norms" to shore up the ethno-cultural hierarchy established a century earlier.³² It was no coincidence that state-supervised adoption in the experience of the main character of *Goddam Gypsy* should constitute an issue in the development of the plot. As with almost everything that happens in the novel, it was a topic that transcended personal circumstance. Neither was it a coincidence that the first of the seven illustrations included in *Goddam Gypsy* should be Mundro Salamon, the tarot created by Louis Thomas, the author's uncle, who gave it to Marie as a gift.

Romanestan Is Where My Two Feet Stand

After the 1967 International and Universal Exposition, or Expo 67, in Montreal, Ronald Lee decided to leave Canada to start a new life in London with his family. The organization of that event had enabled the country to display the pageantry of its centenary celebrations to the world while also proudly showing its new flag with its 11-point maple leaf. For Lee, however, this was only an illusion, a facade to hide the true face of Canada. It was precisely his job at the Expo as curator of a thematic pavilion on Canadian wildlife that increased his contempt for the hypocrisy of a country that

32 James Rodger Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 336–61.

could so smugly display the richness of its natural ecosystems yet conceal and repudiate the diversity of the human beings who had been born there. In the novel, his children would suffer the consequences of the ethnic legacy of their parents, being doubly discriminated against for their entire lives in that country. Moreover, Lee was disillusioned with his invisible struggle in Canada, where he had not managed to change the laws “to find recognition and equality in the land where I was born” and Europe once again offered him an incentive, a goal.³³ His Romani brothers, with whom he also shared a homeland, were over there too, waging the same war.

Lee had been in correspondence with one of their leaders in particular, Grattan Puxon, and had taken a keen interest in the steps being taken to organize the struggle in the United Kingdom. The Gypsy Council was formally established in December 1966 and the slogan “Travellers of the World Unite” had resounded loud and clear in Canada. To support that initiative, Lee even recorded an impressive speech that he sent to his companions, a speech celebrated for the mythic expression: “The ground at my feet is Romanestan”. A young non-Romani sociologist committed to the movement, Thomas Acton, interpreted these words as exemplifying the pan-nationalist, territorial profile of Lee’s political activism inspired by Zionism after the Second World War. As Acton says, Lee was “one of the most determined advocates of the foundation of a Gypsy nation-state in an actual territorial homeland”.³⁴ Nonetheless, Lee’s words only anticipated the journey that lay ahead. His baggage, so to speak, was the same as it had always been: his personal experience of the Canadian-Romani Vlach community, their linguistic and cultural differences, and his long-standing intuition that it was not possible to define the nature of his people in a territorial sense. He would later reiterate his earlier intuition with a slightly modified version of his iconic expression: “Romanestan is where my two feet stand”.

Two factors turned out to be decisive in convincing Ronald Lee that London should be the new general headquarters from which to carry on the fight. The first was the need for urgent supportive action concerning the brutal evictions that were being carried out in the West Midlands between 1967 and 1970.³⁵ In these evictions, the treatment of the Gypsy Council had become “a kind of ‘ideal type’ of local authority harassment”.³⁶ It called for a full-scale war against the forces of law and order. The second factor was the expectations generated by the British Parliament’s passing of the Caravan Sites Act in 1968, an exciting prospect that soon turned to disappointment. Being visible also meant being exposed. The extreme

33 Lee, *The Living Fire*, vi.

34 Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change*, 234.

35 “Test Case for Strasbourg”, *Romano Drom*, April 1970: 1.

36 Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change*, 175–78.

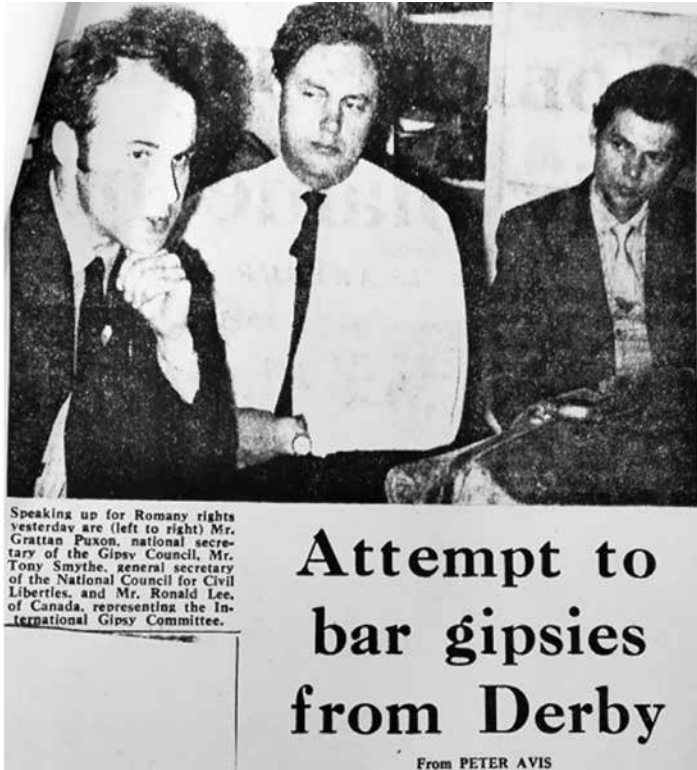


Fig. 9 Ronald Lee among Romany rights activists, May 1969.
(The National Archives, Kew, London, AT 25/101)

right would rise against the spaces of public visibility that had been won by Romani activism. The populist discourse of fear inciting racial hatred was politically very profitable. According to right-wing speeches, the do-gooders in the Labour government were responsible for expelling the white Anglo-Saxon: “In this country in 15 or 20 years’ time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man”.³⁷ In April 1968, Enoch Powell, a leading Conservative MP and an ultranationalist, delivered this line in his famous “Rivers of Blood” speech to a meeting of the Conservative Political Centre in Birmingham. It was a tirade riddled with apocalyptic and racist references directed at the Race Relations legislation passed between 1965 and

37 Enoch Powell’s so-called “Rivers of Blood” speech was delivered to a Conservative Association meeting in Birmingham on 20 April 1968: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09zo8w3> (accessed 3 July 2020). See also Richard Ritchie, ed., *Enoch Powell: A Nation or No Nation? Six Years in British Politics* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1978).

1968 that outlawed discrimination on the grounds of colour, race, ethnic or national origin.

In the electric political climate following the social and student protest movements that shook 1968, Ronald Lee began to develop his activism in London. There he wrote *Goddam Gypsy*, the stinging account of his Canadian failure, and he combined his work as a model-building engineer with the “making” of Romanestan, in which his role became increasingly important during 1969. At the end of May, for example, he took part in various meetings, alongside Grattan Puxon and Tony Smythe of the National Council for Civil Liberties, to guarantee the historic rights of the Romanies on Epsom Downs during Derby Week. The attitude of the racecourse organizers was reminiscent of times past: in 1936 a group of Roma who, over the years, had entertained racegoers with fortune telling and sold trinkets were banned from setting up camp at the races even though the public very much enjoyed their presence. Bernadette McAliskey (a young activist and MP from Ulster, who won her seat in Westminster when she was only 21 years old) eventually took up this high-profile cause.³⁸

Romano Drom: London, Strasbourg, New York

In 1950 the Council of Europe had adopted the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the first of the modern treaties based on the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which established an ethical obligation for member countries to guarantee these rights, and not just for their own citizens. That protocol, article 14, in particular, explicitly prohibited legal discrimination. This had two implications: first, it would open up a space that would make it possible to legally fight for the civil rights of the Roma at a European level; second, it would lend momentum to a formal political declaration of the Roma as a nation without a state. Ronald Lee had followed the various campaigns arising from this normative framework as the Canadian delegate of the *Communauté mondiale gitane* and would now have the opportunity to take an active part in them.

In June 1969, Lee was responsible for editing the first issue of the journal of the Gypsy Council, *Romano Drom* [Romani Road]. Its editorial line reflected the claims that the Roma group put before the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. The delegation that had attended that meeting with European members of parliament in January of the same year was backed by associations in 14 countries. As well as a 200-page dossier with information and complaints compiled by the movement, they provided graphic material shot in England by Granada TV (ITV). The problems of evictions and police brutality that the Romani population had to face were the main

38 The National Archives, Kew (TNA), AT 25/1010.

topics. In Paris, 200 families were resisting eviction from the camp in La Courneuve. The protests were led by the Evangelical pastor Steve Demeter, Charles Reinhardt, a cousin of Django, and Matéo Maximoff, the author of the celebrated novel *Les Ursitory* [The Ursitory].

Furthermore, the recent visit to the United Kingdom of the secretary of the Commission on Social Affairs of the Council of Europe, Marc Sand, had also put the local authorities on the spot in the heated battle over the Walsall evictions in the West Midlands.³⁹ In his article “The Gypsies and Civil Rights” Lee focused on systematic breaches of the conditions of the Caravan Sites Act and on the pressure that the Roma lobby brought to bear at the Council of Europe. The image of the British government, in particular of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MHLG), was at stake in the eyes of continental Europe.⁴⁰ It was a hard-hitting editorial in which Lee invited the administration to cooperate, but at the same time anticipated a very difficult autumn of mobilizations:

The Gypsy Council have no wish for further confrontations with the authorities which have resulted in ugly battles with council men and police over the past winter. But until the authorities concerned are ready to act like reasonable and humane people, the protest movement will continue and grow ... The issues at stake – the basic right to a place to live and education for our children – can no longer be considered as local affairs. It is not a matter of a few trailers parking “illegally” on some piece of waste-land set aside by a planning committee for development “sometime in the future”. The Romanies of Britain are part of the great international Romany Community. We have sought representation at national level, through the Gypsy Council, and have raised our complaints at international level at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.⁴¹

Lee used every rhetorical weapon available to him, such as criticizing the British government for imposing economic sanctions on African apartheid regimes: “Our rights, as a minority, are guaranteed under the United Nations Charter. It makes a mockery of this charter when Britain fights for the right of people in other countries and neglects a minority group that has lived for 500 years in this island”.⁴² It seemed that hypocrisy was not the exclusive preserve of his native Canada nor were the territorial, national and ethnic hierarchies of majority societies.

39 “London Gipsy Problem under the Microscope”, *Evening Standard*, 17 April 1969, in TNA, AT 25/96.

40 Council of Europe. Commission on social questions Gypsies. Register File, Reference Number 266/69, TNA, AT 25/96.

41 *Romano Drom*, 1 June 1969: 1.

42 *Romano Drom*, 1 June 1969: 1.

In September 1969, the Council of Europe adopted its landmark resolution 563 (report by Daniel Wiklund of Sweden) with the recommendation to the Social Commission of the same organism that it should “take all steps necessary to stop discrimination, be it in legislation or in administrative practice, against Gypsies and other travellers”.⁴³ With such international backing for its cause, the movement set about organizing the First World Congress, which opened in London in the spring of 1971 with the Yugoslav delegate, Slobodan Berberski, as President and Puxon as Secretary. The congress approved the pan-national symbols of the movement, such as its own national day (8 April became Roma Nation Day), a flag (green and blue, symbolizing the earth and the sky, with a red cartwheel in the centre representing the Romani road and freedom) and an anthem, “Gelem, gelem”, composed by Žarko Jovanović as a tribute to the victims of Nazi genocide.

Work was divided into five major areas (education, social problems, culture, war crimes and reparations, and language).⁴⁴ Although Lee decided to return to Canada in 1970, he sent a voice recording to the Congress reciting his poem “Angla Mande Dui Droma”, which was “about the agonising dilemmas of the educated Rom”.⁴⁵ Thomas Acton recently recalled “the awed silence as his sonorous, absent voice echoed around the school dining hall in which the congress was held”.⁴⁶ Indeed, education had been one of the major fronts that Lee opened up in his London period. In 1969, together with Vanko Rouda and Matéo Maximoff, he attended a meeting to present a series of proposals on the subject to the British Minister of Education. It was necessary not only to guarantee that children had access to the education system, but also to promote their education in Romani. From this came the project to create the first Romany School close to a camp in Ilford. The project was publicized in *Romano Drom* by another activist, Frederick Wood, and received the support of the Hollywood actor of Roma origins, Yul Brynner, and the French guitarist Manitas de Plata. The congress in London, therefore, was an opportunity to take stock of everything that had been achieved after the frenetic activity of the previous decade.

Nevertheless, the task that still lay ahead was even more daunting. An agenda had to be agreed that would translate the principle *amaro Romano drom* [in our own way] into specific objectives under the umbrella of the

43 For a sceptical view of the impact of the resolution, see Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change*, 178–83; for a contrasting opinion, see Jean-Pierre Liégeois, *The Council of Europe and Roma: 40 Years of Activity* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2013).

44 Grattan Puxon, “The Romani Movement: Rebirth and the First Romany Congress in Retrospect”, in *Scholarship and the Gypsy Struggle: Commitment in Romany Studies*, ed. Thomas Acton (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2000), 94–113 (here 107).

45 Thomas Acton, “Ronald Lee RIP”, <https://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/news/2020/01/ronald-lee-rip> (accessed 11 March 2020).

46 Acton, “Ronald Lee RIP”.

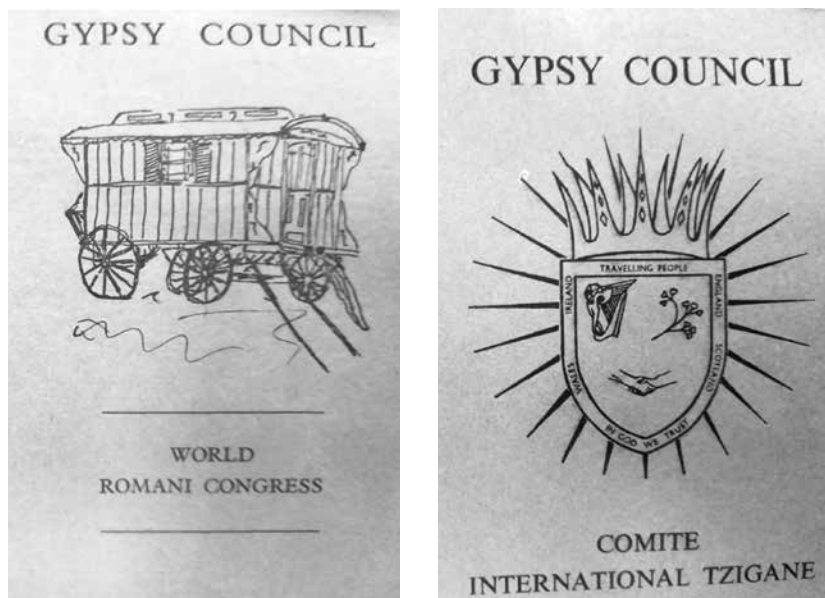


Fig. 10 (a and b) Gypsy Council membership card. (The National Archives, Kew, London, AT/153)

new organization International Romani Union (IRU) in the late seventies. One of the consequences of the London congress had been to expose Ronald Lee's difficult relations with the Council, which he had left because he disagreed with them over strategy. Political management of the principle "our state is everywhere where there are Roma because Romanestan is in our hearts" was quite a challenge for a parent organization that included groups from a dozen countries, each with very different sensibilities. Ronald Lee's views on the movement were actually more in line with those of a young scholar in the United States, Ian Hancock, who had lived for a while in Canada, and Yul Brynner, who would later be designated honorary president of the IRU. This was how Lee recalled it much later:

The dream was that the IRU would be an umbrella organization that would take all the problems of Roma in the different countries they lived in to the United Nations. What happened?

Roma leaders from Europe got too concerned with local issues. There has been too much in-fighting between leaders who represent Roma, *Sinti*, *Manouche*, *Kaale* and *Romanichels* who don't want to unite as Roma.⁴⁷

47 Interview with Hedina Sijerčić, 1999.

During the internal rivalries of the 1970s, doctrinal contradictions and blatant power struggles sprang up, both in the Gypsy Council and within the IRU.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the IRU was swinging towards the East European group while conflicting views of organizational schemes arose. It was precisely at this juncture that there was a shift in Ronald Lee's own view of the opportunities in Europe and the organization of the movement.

Lee started to look at Canada again and at the strategy in North America. Nevertheless, even in that difficult period of the 1970s, which was dominated by Lee's personal situations and the complications of organizing the movement in contrast to the imaginative ferment of the previous period, a great moment still lay in store for him. In 1978, together with Yul Brynner, Ian Hancock and the Boston activist John Tene, Lee was part of the IRU delegation that presented the United Nations with a petition requesting the recognition of his people by granting the Romani Union the status of an NGO. In Manhattan, Lee carried "the first Canadian Romani flag" made by his daughter, Diana "Johnny" Lee; it was a day that he would always remember with emotion and a feeling of triumph.⁴⁹ There is no doubt that this success was a collective effort, but also a personal one, after the long road that he had travelled since 1951.

O Drom si baro [The Road Is Long]

O Drom si baro
 Hay zhal dur
 Si amen, tan te zhas
 Hay zhanas kana arezas
 Serel amen o tan katar tradilyam.

[The road is long
 It goes far
 We have a destination
 And we'll know when we get there
 It will remind us of the place we left]

Ronald Lee opened *Goddam Gypsy* with this poem written in Romani dedicated to Marie, his second wife and companion on the road at the

48 Thomas Acton and Ilona Klímová-Alexander, "The International Romani Union: An East European Answer to West European Questions?", in *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Will Guy (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2001), 157–226.

49 See the photograph with which Ronald Lee recalls this moment on his personal website, <https://kopachi.com/highlights/with-yul-brynner-at-the-un/> (accessed 13 November 2019).

time. Many years later, in 1999, in an interview with the Romani activist Hedina Sijerčić, from Sarajevo, Lee explained that what he was trying to express in those lines of verse was the tragedy of the Romani people. The “road” symbolized their eternal fate, to be condemned, without right of appeal, always to discrimination:

What it basically means to me, is that the road symbolizes the life of the Roma. Wherever you come from, you leave prejudice, persecution, stereotyping of the Roma behind. Nobody sees you for who you really are. But it doesn't matter where you go because when you get there, you will run into what you thought you had left behind.⁵⁰

By that stage, Lee was a member of the management team of the Toronto Roma Community Centre, founded in 1997. By an ironic twist of fate, the geographical, intellectual and emotional journey that he had undertaken four decades earlier in his Promethean rebellion against that metaphorical “road” had also taken him back to his point of departure: Canada. Lee had resumed collaboration on the ground with George Demitro, Russel's son, and the expatriates Zoltan Hering and Dule Jovanović, with whom he would work welcoming Romani immigrants fleeing the ruins of the Soviet bloc. Lee, who had first-hand experience of the legal discrimination against his family as migrants as a Romani child in Canada, was extremely sensitive to the social and political issues involved. But neither his personal circumstances nor those of the country were the same. His involvement in the Romani movement during the 1970s and 1980s and his subsequent drift had left him disappointed, but he had also learnt something. Many of his intuitions, views and proposals had been tested by the ideological and structural weaknesses of the associative network at the international level. Europe as a political, legal and, to some extent, emotional space had also disappointed him.

In 1985, with John Tene and Grattan Puxon, among others, he was part of a Romani delegation that went to a meeting of the US Holocaust Memorial Council in Washington, DC to protest because there were no representatives of their group among its members.⁵¹ This historic demand would be satisfied under the leadership of Ian Hancock during Bill Clinton's presidency. The forceful figure of Hancock, the IRU delegate in the United States and Professor of Romani Studies at the University of Texas, became the reference point for a North American movement that no longer looked to Europe when it came to calling for power through its own agency and

50 Interview with Hedina Sijerčić, 1999.

51 Ronald Lee, “The Roma Civil Rights Movement in Canada and the USA”, at <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/roma-civil-rights-movement/roma-civil-rights-movement-canada-and-usa/> (accessed 13 November 2019).

taking credit for its results. The Pan-American Association of Roma NGOs (SKOKRA) was founded in 2002 and was joined by Jorge Bernal, Ronald Lee and Ian Hancock. Lee, who opted to take a back seat at the time, saw Hancock as an inspiring figure not only in the sphere of political activism but also in the creation of a Romani academy, two factors that could not be separated in his understanding of knowledge as an activist: “Roma nationalists and intellectuals are doing what is necessary to create a Romani nation and a Romani history and like Zionists, some of us want to see our people survive with pride in their origins”.⁵²

For that reason, when Lee moved to Kingston (Ontario) in the 1990s to lead a quieter life, his philological and historiographical work gave him the opportunity to continue the task of “making” Romanestan. His literary output, often produced in collaboration and within the framework of publishing initiatives championed by Hancock, was openly combative. Nevertheless, his studies of the diachronic evolution of Romani, the different dialectal variants in Europe and America and the history of the Romani diaspora brought him recognition in educational institutions such as the University of Toronto, where he taught a spring seminar on the Romani Diaspora in Canada from 2003 to 2008.

The truth is that not even the recognition he achieved as an activist and Romani intellectual in white Anglo-Saxon Canada, against which he had rebelled half a century earlier, toned down Lee’s belligerent opposition to social and political injustice. After that, his main cause was the defence of the Geneva Convention and its application to Romani immigrants from Eastern Europe, especially Czechs and Hungarians who asked for humanitarian asylum in Canada in the 1990s. When the anti-Gypsy discourse of criminalization started to intensify in the media in Toronto and Vancouver, the social warrior went back into action from Kingston: “It’s time to get off my arse, go to Toronto and kick arse”.⁵³ For many Romanies, the European Union had failed when it came to protecting them and guaranteeing their physical and moral integrity after the collapse of the communist system, but they still had an opportunity in Canada. The Roma Community and Advocacy Centre in Toronto, together with the Western Canadian Romani Alliance in Vancouver, made sure of it by advising and representing them before the Immigration and Refugee Board and the Canada Border Services Agency. It is not unreasonable to think that the activity undertaken in this area influenced the decision of Queen’s University in Kingston when they decided to award him an honorary Doctor of Law degree in 2014.

52 Ronald Lee, Patrin email discussion list, 17 August 2000, cited by Yaron Matras, “The Role of Language in Mystifying and Demystifying Romani Identity”, in *The Role of the Romanies: Images and Counter Images of “Gypsies”/Romanies in European Cultures*, ed. Nicholas Saul and Susan Tebbutt (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), 53–78 (here 73).

53 Ronald Lee, “The Roma Civil Rights Movement in Canada and the USA”.

Ronald Lee passed away in January 2020, but his legacy as an activist lives on. His “making” of Romanestan will continue. The study of Lee’s personal biography brings us closer to the rich, diverse journey of the international Romani associational movement, constructed on the experiences of generations and individuals marked by the disparate geographical and political contexts in which they were forged. The specific case dealt with in this chapter refers us to an assertion of identity from the countercultural powder keg of Canada in the 1960s, but it also shows us an American perception of European identity and public space, either as something to be aspired to or as a disappointment. One of the reasons why the creative efforts of Romani activists like Lee have been accused of a lack of originality is precisely because they have tried to adapt to the different ideological currents prevailing in the twentieth century by borrowing many of their ideas. The Romani revolution is a rich and colourful puzzle whose pieces often do not fit together properly.⁵⁴ This, however, is not unique to the Roma project, nor is eclecticism in itself politically negative. On the contrary. In this particular case it demonstrates, on the one hand, the ability of the Roma people to survive the strong political and cultural tides that were unleashed in the traumatic aftermath of the Second World War and, on the other, it provided the elements for Ronald Lee to carve his own path through life as a subject able to make a positive contribution to transforming unjust political and legal environments. This, at least, is the conclusion that may be drawn from the highly personal yet universal journey that Lee started out on in the 1950s. Proof of this is the success of his best-known work, *Goddam Gypsy*, which has been translated into Spanish, German, Czech and Japanese, among other languages.

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54 Michaela Mudure, “Ronald Lee – A Canadian Roma Writer”, *Language and Literature: European Landmarks of Identity/Limbă și literatură. Repere Identitare în Context European*, ed. Alexandrina Mustățea (Pitești: Editura Universității din Pitești, 2009), 306–12.