Masks of Identity
REPRESENTING AND PERFORMING OTHERNESS IN LATIN AMERICA
Edited by Přemysl Mácha and Eloy Gómez-Pellón
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**CHAPTER FIVE**

**ANOTHER OTHERNESS: THE CASE OF THE ROMA IN MEXICO**

**FERNANDA BAROCO AND DAVID LAGUNAS**

**Introduction**

The Roma case, as an object of study, allows us to analyze, not only the situation of Roma and gypsy groups in a given time and place, but also the mentality of a moment in history and the political principles of Roma populated countries. In this chapter the Roma case will be discussed in different historical contexts but in one sole territory: Mexico and its former colonial form, New Spain. The purpose of this paper is to outline how this other, the gypsy, has been viewed and understood by society and the underlying policies applied to them in the history of this country.

In the Mexican context, this is not a common topic. To the contrary, inspite of their presence throughout Mexican history, the Roma do not represent either an academic or a political topic of relevance. Nor did they, as we will show, in the past five centuries.

The neglect of the Roma in the academia is a global phenomenon, akin to general racism and institutional discrimination, even though in the United Kingdom as well as France some formal studies are available. This relative absence of formal studies may be related to anthropology and sociology departments' perception that Roma research should be relegated to the domain of folklore, producing thus a savante denigration and an obscurity of the Roma's role in the construction of the national identities (Asséo 2008).

Stewart (2010: 4) notes that in the old days of the academic research Roma studies were marginal because many of the practitioners were amateur folklorists who considered the Roma as a vestige of a lost world, not as citizens of the modern nation-state. Even today two opposite attitudes remain: the understandable, sensible posture which appeals to the
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not as citizens of the modern nation-state. Even today two opposite
attitudes remain: the understandable, sensible posture which appeals to the
human rights of the Roma but that is intellectually weak; and the academic difficulty to approach a people who do not fit in the definition of a nation associated with a nation-state.

This appropriation was an extension of the political formation of the modern states which are centralized. Their existence was possible only through devices and mechanisms of cultural homogenization of the population they wanted to administer. From that point on, abnormal group criteria are established for social groups classified as cultural minorities, like the Roma, cultivating behavior and mental paths considered unacceptable for the state and the majority of its citizens.

The main proposal to rescue the “history of the Roma” comes from Henriette Asséo (1994, 2008) who vindicates a space where anthropology and history can work together to interpret the Roma situation from the inside. Leonardo Piasere (2004) noted that from their arrival to Europe various groups were identified as “gypsies.” They were portrayed as practitioners of atavistic and archaic customs, by non-gypsies known as Gadges, who no longer practiced them. According to Piasere, this is an ancient practice: the fact of being identified, recognized, perceived and nominated as “Gypsy” implied a relation to a series of outrageous practices by those who considered themselves non-gypsies.

Anti-gypsyism hides violent and conflicting emotions that are explained, in part, by the figure of the trickster. This character is present in many mythologies in the form of incarnated gods, spirits, humans or anthropomorphic animals such as ravens or coyotes and whose main characteristic is precisely not to have stable features. It is the representative of the non-order, which disobeys the rules and performs tricks and wonders (ibid., 172). This fits, in sum, the perception of the Roma since their arrival to Europe. The Roma have elicited the strongest emotions: hatred, hostility, contempt and fear. But also others which are contradictory, such as Christian piety, romantic admiration, sense of freedom and resistance to power, or the metaphor of the passions.

The history of the Roma people in Mexico constitutes a great gap in the field of historical and anthropological research. There are virtually no works on this matter, especially for the colonial period. This void is due on the one hand, to the limited amount of documents for the study of gypsies in New Spain, and on the other hand due to the preference that researchers have given to autochthonous ethnic groups, which have been seen as the primary focus of anthropology and as the effigy of the national identity.

Research on the Roma presence in Mexico should be considered a relevant and legitimate object of study whether it concerns gypsies in the sixteenth century, or the incipient Roma movement nowadays. Studies of the Roma should help to establish these groups as part of the cultural mosaic of the population of Mexico. And they should problematize the colossal myth of a single gypsy figure around the world.

Latin-American Roma?

A simple question must first be asked: has there ever been a Roma presence in Latin America? Well, in fact, PROROM (2005) identifies at least six periods in the history of the Roma migration to Latin America. The first is the Roma’s arrival to the continent legally, and on many occasions even forcibly as a result of attempts to solve the perceived problem of the Roma presence in European countries. The second includes illegal migrations reacting to colonial legislation, mainly from the part of the Spanish Crown, which prohibited the Roma staying in the colonies and mandated their deportation back to Spain. The third resulted from the wars of independence which led to the liberalization of laws once again permitting the entrance of Roma families to the continent. The fourth is associated with abolitionist laws in Eastern Europe that made it possible for Roma groups to enter the colonies, fleeing from slavery in search for freedom. And the fifth and the sixth periods are related to migrations caused by the world wars and the difficult economic situation in Europe.

Colonial Roma

PROROM (1999) points out that the oldest information about the Roma presence in Latin America comes from Brazil in relation the forced exile of gypsies from the Portuguese Empire in 1574. Nevertheless, Torbágyi (2003) notes the presence of four gypsies, known as Egyptians, in the crew of Cristobal Colon’s third trip in 1498, who exchanged their jail time for forced work in the galleys: Antón de Egipto, Macías de Egipto, Catalina de Egipto and María de Egipto (Boyd Bodman 1985: 171; Gamboa et al. 2000).

Torbágyi says it is most probable that in this period, the first large migratory wave of gypsy groups arrived to New Spain and to other American colonies due to the “royal provision” issued in June 1497 that

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1 Depending on the relationships of mutual hostility established with the majority and depending on the political and socio-economic position of the various Roma groups, Piasere (2004) identifies three types of relationships: 1. Spanish model: forced assimilation and ethnocide, 2. Western model: exclusion from society, and 3. Balkan model: slavery, but not demographic decay.

2 See for example the book of Paul Radin, The Trickster.
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banished criminals to the island of “La Española”\(^3\) (San Román 1986). However, this migratory flow must have been related to, or even motivated by, a long series of harsh policies applied by the Spanish Kingdom to basically all gypsies in those lands.

Queen Isabella I of Castile decreed the first Pragmatic Sanction\(^4\) aimed to eradicate the “gypsy problem” in 1499. It required the Roma population to give up their nomadic life, language, dress, customs and ways of organization; urging them to take up traditional trades or condemning them to exile. From here on, intolerance of the gypsy life style, nomadism and their customs intensified. Sometimes the Roma were also accused of witchcraft. The attitude of the chroniclers about their religious and moral situation worsens during the seventeenth century, expressing growing rejection and contempt, and even asking for the expulsion of the Roma from the country. At least until the brief change of 1633’s Pragmatic Sanction. However, some understanding of the Roma can be found in texts written by authors such as Cervantes (Sanchez 1988: 13-25).

It is estimated that between 1499 and 1812 approximately 459 laws were enacted to solve the economic, political and social conflicts caused by the presence of gypsies in Spain (Rodríguez 2011: 76). Hence, the famed George Borrow (1923: 107) said:

“Perhaps there is no country in which more laws have been framed, having in view the extinction and suppression of the gypsy name, race, and manner of life, than Spain.”

The analysis of these policies reveals an overriding interest in solving the economic problem that the Roma represented. For example, their constant mobility complicated the collection of taxes. Since they could perform only a small range of trades and refused to settle down and integrate definitively in terms of production to a given society, they were accused of unbalancing the local economy. However, this discourse could also be interpreted as an expression of an imposed stereotype with profound political consequences for the Roma. In fact this idea is old news. We know that the Western society built a long tradition of prejudice against non-Western peoples – or the other – as some sort of ethnic category that justified domination, oppression, exploitation, enslavement, and extermination of other peoples.

\(^3\) Hispaniola, now Haiti/Dominican Republic.

\(^4\) A pragmatic sanction is a sovereign’s solemn decree on a matter of primary importance and has the force of fundamental law.

The Spanish Empire had, in this respect, a number of institutions to monitor, arrest, punish, expel, and even execute them. None of this was unknown to other groups such as the Jews and Muslims, who were also subjected to similar persecutions. However, there are certain differences. Jews and Muslims considered Spain as their home, they grouped in large communities, they professed a distinct religion (recognized but rejected) and they also were consolidated in the social sphere. The gypsies, however were itinerant, therefore grouped in small autonomous communities, they were considered apostates and atheists, and their relations with the majority society were always mutually suspicious; not to mention that their economic status was so low they were often labeled as thieves and criminals.

Despite their differences, these minorities were subjected to the collective imagination, which gave them a perverse and distorted image. The cultural identity of all of them was interpreted as a foreign element that is incompatible with the construction of the Spanish national identity. Spanish society identified the other as a being that is essentially evil, akin to dark and demonic forces. It is not surprising then that the Inquisition served the empire as its right hand in charge of preserving the ideals of the Kingdom, with a special focus on difference, not only religious, but also cultural, confirming the perverse and diabolical nature ascribed to others that could only end with evil and inhuman acts.

The conflict between the Roma and the Spanish society was determined by models dictated by a state deeply obsessed with applying the precepts of the Catholic religion. The pragmatic application of inquisitorial persecution drove the gypsies to move slowly from cities to the countryside, where the population did not accept the Roma forms of social organization, which they considered contrary to the Catholic model of marriage and monogamy. Neither did they understand the Roma’s indifference to the monarchical and ecclesiastical authority, their independence, and autonomous roaming. Faced with these differences the majority society invented a gypsy identity, accusing them of incest, cannibalism, infanticide, and ritual practices with human parts involving demonic invocations, to name a few.

However, these minorities showed a strong attachment to their traditions. Their reticence was interpreted as an obstacle to the project of assimilation in the process of the construction of the Spanish identity based on the premise of being God’s chosen people. Therefore, conversion or exile became the modus operandi of the Crown when it came to dealing with the other.
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However, these minorities showed a strong attachment to their traditions. Their resilience was interpreted as an obstacle to the project of assimilation in the process of the construction of the Spanish identity based on the premise of being God’s chosen people. Therefore, conversion or exile became the modus operandi of the Crown when it came to dealing with the other.
But while these policies were effective for Jews and Muslims, the same did not happen with the gypsies. The first two opted for conversion, real or simulated, and in any case, most were expelled from the peninsula. So, why did the gypsies prevail to be the most important ethnic minority in Spain, even to this day? Well, in the words of Rodriguez (2011: 51):

“Gypsies, in their migration process had to replace the concept of homeland for the race [...] so that the community itself became the substitute for their original territory.”

Constant reintegration from one society to another enabled gypsies to become masters of adaptation. From this principle it follows that the strategies implemented by the gypsies were aimed at survival, but in a broader sense, to preserve their unity and cultural identity.

Therefore, the policies applied by the Spanish Empire failed to resolve the problem of the other because assimilation was impossible in principle. And their expulsion represented an ineffective threat for a stateless group. Consequently we can say the Spanish Crown understood otherness as an obstacle to the creation of the Spanish state.

This is due to two main reasons. The first is perhaps that these minorities were either useless or were considered detrimental to the Spanish economy. The second is due to the emerging characteristics of Spanish society and historical factors that placed Christianity as the dominant axis of Western culture.

It must be noted that although the Indian patronage (awarded by Pope Julius II in 1508) justified the emprise of the empire in the Indies, and the subsequent exploitation of the Indians based on ideological pretexts, the same thing did not happen with patronage on the peninsula.

The Patronage granted to the Spanish Crown in the fifteenth century, although intended to reinforce the divine power of kings, actually helped to ensure the establishment of recovered or annexed territories, and it could never function as an operating mechanism for religious minorities. Moors and Jews had already been inserted and placed in the social scale, and therefore their oppression or economic exploitation could hardly be justified. Perhaps one of the reasons why the Spanish Crown did not succeed in eradicating the other was the imperialistic pretensions of the kingdom, which were subsequently concretized and which quintessentially meant creating a diverse and heterodox state.

The conflict between Spanish gypsies and the empire came to a dead end, which, must be said, did not stop the state from continuing its efforts to resolve it. In the words of Angus Fraser (1995: 137):

“The authorities could not assimilate uprooted and master-less men, homeless and useless as labor: in his eyes that position was in itself an aberration, at odds with the established order, and had to be amended by coercion and shackles.”

The Catholic Monarchs’ policies were brutal in the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, where gypsies were urged to abandon the itinerant life-style, subject themselves to a feudal lord, adopt a craft and give up their language, dress and costumes, under penalty of being deported, sent to galleys, and in some cases even executed. Hence, many gypsies were expelled or fled to Africa and America, where their situation improved notably (San Román 1994: 19).

Martinez (2004) shows that despite the prohibition during the colonial times, the migration of gypsies fleeing to New Spain never stopped and even Philip II had to mandate a new law in 1570 to deport them back to Spain. With the accession of the first Bourbon King, Philip V (1700), repressive policies were revived and many gypsies were sent to prison. Several decades later, Charles III generated a heated debate about mass deportations of gypsies to American colonies, until the Pragmatic Sanction of 1783 which gave gypsies liberty of residence in exchange for assimilation.

In view of all this, what is notable is the almost unseen presence of gypsies in New Spain. It can be explained as a cultural strategy of “invisibility” to avoid accusations, deportations, legal matters, and so on. Thus, the existence of gypsies must be independent of their public acknowledgement, so to speak. There must have been gypsies in New Spain since the laws of Indies include a title mandated by Philip II in 1581, stating that gypsies had been noticed, and concerns had arisen for

“they are so harmful and its convenient that, because of the distances between one land and the other, they have a great occasion to cover up, dissimulate their thefts...”

and therefore they were to be sent back to the kingdom immediately (Paredes 1681: 284).

This may well have been the only law declared specifically for the gypsy problem in New Spain, but one must keep in mind that the laws in Spain were applicable to all of the kingdom’s territories, and so the laws of the Indies often only filled legal loop-holes and special cases that were not covered in the Spanish laws. Nevertheless it seems that the number of laws dictated in Spain and the Indies with regards to the gypsies were very different.
Chapter Five

But while these policies were effective for Jews and Muslims, the same
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end, which, must be said, did not stop the state from continuing its efforts
to resolve it. In the words of Angus Fraser (1995: 137):

“The authorities could not assimilate uprooted and master-less men,
homless and useless as labor: in his eyes that position was in itself an
aberration, at odds with the established order, and had to be amended by
correction and shackles.”

The Catholic Monarchs’ policies were brutal in the kingdoms of
Castile and Aragon, where gypsies were urged to abandon the itinerant
life-style, subject themselves to a feudal lord, adopt a craft and give up
their language, dress and costumes, under penalty of being deported, sent
to galleys, and in some cases even executed. Hence, many gypsies were
expelled or fled to Africa and America, where their situation improved
notably (San Román 1994: 19).

Martinez (2004) shows that despite the prohibition during the colonial
times, the migration of gypsies fleeing to New Spain never stopped and
even Philip II had to mandate a new law in 1570 to deport them back to
Spain. With the accession of the first Bourbon King, Philip V (1700),
repressive policies were revived and many gypsies were sent to prison.
Several decades later, Charles III generated a heated debate about mass
deportations of gypsies to American colonies, until the Pragmatic Sanction
of 1783 which gave gypsies liberty of residence in exchange for
assimilation.

In view of all this, what is notable is the almost unseen presence of
gypsies in New Spain. It can be explained as a cultural strategy of
“invisibility” to avoid accusations, deportations, legal matters, and so on. Thus,
the existence of gypsies must be independent of their public acknowledgement,
so to speak. There must have been gypsies in New Spain since the laws of
Indies include a title mandated by Philip II in 1581, stating that gypsies
had been noticed, and concerns had arisen for

“they are so harmful and its convenient that, because of the distances
between one land and the other, they have a great occasion to cover up,
dissimulate their thefts...”

and therefore they were to be sent back to the kingdom immediately
(Paredes 1681: 284).

This may well have been the only law declared specifically for the
gypsy problem in New Spain, but one must keep in mind that the laws in
Spain were applicable to all of the kingdom’s territories, and so the laws of
the Indies often only filled legal loop-holes and special cases that were
not covered in the Spanish laws. Nevertheless it seems that the number of
laws dictated in Spain and the Indies with regards to the gypsies were very
different.
There is also other evidence of the presence of gypsies in the Indies. There are, for example, inquisitorial cases against gypsies in New Spain. And although they are not as numerous as they are in Spain, these documents shed some light on the life and relations they established with Spanish authorities in the Indies and the larger society. Most of the cases deal with accusations of fortune telling and divinatory scams; and it is fair to say that practically none of those cases ever made it to trial or even an interrogation. This could be due to the easy mobility of gypsies and their successful invisibility strategies. As Bordigoni (2007: 88) points out, since the thirteenth century the Catholic Church in Europe condemned the act of predicting the future, since in their view this belonged to God alone. However, gypsy predictions were not meant to be taken as prophesy, but rather focused on the daily lives of men and women: their love, their children, and their health. Thus, they showed prudence and avoided serious accusations, such as witchcraft or the illegal practice of medicine. This made fortune telling morally acceptable to non-gypsies. Despite discrimination, the practice is monitored and tolerated by the Inquisition. The gypsies were the “other” who stayed in the margins, but somehow accepted.

None of these clues seem to represent a true concern of the authorities for the actual presence of gypsies in this territory. The real problem in Spain was the Kingdom’s obsession with homogeneity; to eradicate otherness. This does not seem to apply to the Indies, since the other had an actual pragmatic function, in an economic and ideological sense. For the most part, the number of gypsies compared to the indigenous population was so small that they never represented a threat. Furthermore, the cultural strategy of the Spanish Crown in New Spain was much more complex, since assimilation of Indians was never on the table to begin with and the mixed-races were so abundant that homogenization was simply an impossible task. We might therefore say that the gypsy “other” was subsumed or overshadowed in the complex mosaic of otherness in New Spain.

Nineteenth to Twentieth Century

From the first half of the nineteenth century incentive policies were introduced in Mexico to promote foreign migration to the country, influenced by the North American paradigm (IMEGI 1995: 18). The belief amongst intellectuals and Mexican politicians was that political stability, territorial expansion, and the economic wealth of the United States was achieved by immigration which promoted the immigrant-led colonization of large areas of the country. The argument was based on the idea that the economy of the country would progress due to the introduction of new capital, modern agricultural techniques and industry. Although this policy was a failure, Porfirio Díaz’s government kept on supporting it, both on paper and in practice, until the end of his rule. Because of this, many Eastern European Roma kept migrating to the Americas.

Armentazar (1998; 2001; 2005) shows that during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, voluntary and desperate migration of Roma groups to the Americas was constant, due to wars and racial persecution in Central and Eastern Europe. The flow of migrants began around 1890, when a large number of Hungarian families came to Mexico. This fact contributed to the mistaken denomination of several Roma groups in Mexico as “Hungarians” (IMEGI 1995: 21). A mistaken belief that America was the same as the US lead a group of families named Kwick, Clourn, Velezy and Mihailof to Mexico in 1925, within the framework of an open immigration policy that would stop in 1930. These families came from Poland and Hungary and crossed the Atlantic on the only two ships that carried out the route Mexico-France-Mexico, “Sierra Ventana” and “Cubai” (ibid.).

It is important to point out that in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century there is a concentrated migration activity linked to the specific situation in Europe. After the devastation caused by WWI a very intensive cross-border circulation of families was apparent. These Roma family groups, deeply connected with the horse trade, were set in motion in several European, as well as North and Latin American countries.

The Mexican Roma

In Mexico there is very limited anthropological literature available about the Roma. For example, David W. Pickett has written two texts about the Roma in Mexico. The first is based on a series of trips he made over the course of ten years during which he accompanied some Roma groups running a mobile cinema theater which they took to many Mexican pueblos (Pickett 1962). These Roma groups were designated as Hungarians

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5 Even though there is not an official census, many organizations think there must be around four million Roma living in America, mainly in Brazil and USA (a million in each) although there is an important number of Roma in Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Chile.

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His second work emphasizes the importance of gypsies (he uses this exact term) as a “living anthropology laboratory.” This idea is based on the difficulty to define who the Roma are. He criticized amateur ethnographers and linguists, positioning himself against generalized portrayals of these groups which he refers to as the “mystical Roma” (Pickett 1970). Pickett argues that it is possible to present a scientific definition of the features of Roma culture and get closer to its origins through a detailed study of their language. Despite the author’s theoretical weakness, shallow interpretation and North-American research perspective, both works provide ethnographic and linguistic data of great value.

Amongst more recent works, La lumea de noi (Pérez Romero 2001) stands out. In this book, Lorenzo Armendáriz and Ricardo Pérez Romero, both Lucar Roma, combine photographic work with biography to portray the modern history of this group, which migrated to Mexico from Bosnia and Romania in the late nineteenth century. These groups, in their first stages, dedicated themselves to street shows (acrobaties, fakirs, dance, and bears) and street markets until the 1930’s when they became pioneers of the mobile cinema in the country. After the downfall of mobile cinema in the 1980’s, some families returned to artistic activities which they had developed since the late nineteenth century, this time, turned into theatrical fair shows: a mix of circus, theater, ventriloquism, illusionism, and collective hypnosis (Armendáriz 1998).

The analysis of different national and historical circumstances in which the Roma are present is essential to gain an understanding of how their visibility is influenced by doctrines such as multiculturalism. This is an imported Anglo-Saxon doctrine that promotes concentrated ethnicity and may lead to political marginalization of groups that do not meet the criteria of the multicultural imagination. The process of ethnicization and cultural differentiation emerges in Western countries in the last few decades, and in turn has its origins in the differential management of nationalities practiced since the nineteenth century.

This model represents a structural inequality in the access to citizenship, and the Roma have become harbingers of a new re-organization of citizenship at the global level. In this regard, the discrimination and racism we see towards the Roma in the last 5 years represent a symptom of the de-nationalization and de-citizenship processes for these minorities, often considered stateless, and a subtle shift in the relationship model towards the Roma that is inevitably nefarious.

The public opinion about the Roma in Mexico is unstable. Hostility is felt from the majority society on an emotional level, rather than a cognitive one. This is frequently based on previous experiences feeding into the different nationally constructed stereotypes manifesting themselves in an everyday hostility felt in the subway, the store, the plaza, and the market. Facing such devaluation the Roma continue their own negotiation and self-construction processes with the surrounding society as an instrument of social inclusion.

The incipient political movements of the Roma in Mexico are seen as economic strategies adapted to work regimes. The self-organization of various Roma groups is headed in very different directions. The critical issue remains the political struggle against de-nationalization of the Roma.

Unlike other countries, Mexico does not show a political culture of inclusion or compromise towards the Roma. The political position of the Roma is practically null. The different Roma groups have not manifested themselves politically. The Mexican state has not created an open space for the political representation of ethnic minorities, resorting only to multiculturalist rhetoric that applies in general to all ethnic groups. Given that there is no political agenda to feed, an administrative vision or a general plan for the integration of the Roma, there is also no guarantee of a minimal standard of living for these groups.

The invisibility of the Roma for the Mexican state is certainly related to their invisibility for Mexican anthropology. The lack of cultural and political commitment to identify the Roma in Mexico strengthens in an unnoticeable way the risks and illusions of thinking the Roma have always been the same as well as promoting their invisibility.

This invisibility is related to a national political environment that does little or nothing to encourage the political representation of minority groups. But the Roma themselves cultivate their own invisibility as a result of the historical discrimination they had to face from the reign of the Catholic Monarchs to the twentieth century. The gypsies kept out of official records, in order to pass unnoticed by the majority society. This, of course, did not mean the renunciation of their cultural identity; on the contrary, they created a series of strategies that enabled them to survive culturally until today. The relative Roma invisibility in Mexico has become a strategy based on the following premise: when one specific
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cultural difference goes beyond what is regularly accepted on the difference spectrum, invisibility turns out to be the more prudent and successful strategy. This process may also be observed in Europe after WWII.

In Mexico the construction of the Roma identity is not part of the construction of the Mexican identity. It should be noted that the Mexican identity has still not come to terms even with the indigenous peoples living in Mexico. The Mexican identity remains still in the making and it has a long way to go before it will be truly inclusive in respect to the minorities living in the country.

One of the obstacles for the integration of the Roma is the idea that the Roma are not autochthonous, but rather they are considered an oriental element in the Americas or, more generally, a fragment of the Eastern culture in the Western world (Rodriguez 2011: 15). Something similar happened in Europe in the nineteenth century, when Hindu roots were discovered in the gypsy language. This abstraction process transforms into a positive and romantic myth that has nothing to do with anthropology.

Even though the process of cultural recognition in Mexico is gradually beginning, it is slow for several reasons, amongst them, the absence of an open participatory democracy in the country, lack of knowledge about the Roma and disinterest on both the academia and among politicians. Still, in the last decade, certain groups such as the Ludar Roma have become more visible through publications and autobiographical tales. And other Roma groups have tried to reach out to universities, artistic spaces, and the media. Although the Roma have barely begun to organize politically, this incipient process will most likely generate a struggle for emancipation in the near future.

**Conclusion**

The position of Roma communities has been characterized by *essentialization* and *ahistoricism* underlying the attitudes towards the Roma, the negative representation of their “ethnicity”, and the construction of a myth of one single Roma culture. We find these attitudes in academic writings, political discourse, and, most of all, in the popular imagination which fails to appreciate the historical complexity of Roma communities. The inability of the state to integrate the Roma is but a logical outcome of these attitudes and a constant in history.

The complexity of the study of the Roma in the Americas becomes apparent from the point of the first contact between the two continents and the resulting migrations to the New World. The strategies used by Roma groups to ensure their survival and social and cultural reproduction can only be understood within the history of persecution faced by this group in the Spanish and European context. However, the effectiveness of these strategies, the lack of a clear state policy, and the academic indifference towards the Roma have excluded them from taking part in the construction of the complex web of Mexican identity. The reconstruction of their history should serve to give the Roma people a place in today’s society and legitimize their presence as part of the national history.

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References


CHAPTER SIX

CONSTRUCTING THE OTHER
WHILE BEING THE OTHER:
The Zapata Movement
During the Mexican Revolution

JOËL GRAF

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges in dealing with “otherness” is the ambiguity of the concept. There exists, first of all, a general, methodological problem. As scientists we are constantly creating the other ourselves. We cannot look at our object of research without giving it an identity different from the rest. So, the other is everything beyond our object of research. But at the same time, our object of research is the other as well, since we want to emphasize its particularity to legitimize our work.

Alterity is therefore an integral part of our scientific system and talking too long about this phenomenon could easily sound simplistic. However, if we use “otherness” explicitly as an analytical category, more questions arise. First of all: What is the “other”? The difficulty of a definition lies in the inherent quality of the concept of “otherness” that defines itself by a counterpart. Before we clarify the meaning of the other, we have to know what this counterpart is. Existing research in the social sciences and humanities often refers to it as the hegemonic or the dominating protagonist. The cultural geographer Jean-François Staszak, for example, defines the other in the “International Encyclopedia of Human Geography” as a “member of a dominated out-group, whose identity is considered lacking and who may be subject to discrimination by the in-group” (Staszak 2009: 43).