

# Unity or Contiguity: Expanding the Field of Romani Literature

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## Abstract

Romani literature has an important role in challenging the predominant negative views about Roma, but its influence is lessened by the minimization of Romani cultural expressions, literature being one of them. In this paper, after a theoretical positioning of Romani literature, I show how contemporary Romani literature could expand its position of influence through a re-evaluation of what constitutes the literary canon, and by the promotion, by scholars and specialists, of a “Romani literary complex.” As a case study, I discuss here two Francophone texts, by a Roma (Anina Ciuciu) and by a non-Roma (Valérie Rodrigue), positing that, although not “literary” in the traditional sense, both of them could be considered part of an emerging Romani literary complex that, in turn, might accelerate the institutionalization of this literature.

## Keywords

- Anina Ciuciu
- Contiguity
- French literature
- Romani literary complex
- Romani literature
- Valérie Rodrigue

## Introduction

Western literature has played an important role in the othering of Roma, as for centuries “Gypsy”<sup>[1]</sup> characters have been depicted as outsiders in letters and historical documents produced about, rather than by, Roma. In the absence of texts written by Romani authors, the relentless portrayal of Roma as foreigners, thieves, abductors, or outcasts, from Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Hugo, to modern films and TV adaptations, has produced a body of imagery that, as Glajar and Radulescu underline in *“Gypsies” in European Literature and Culture*, has “shaped the individual and collective perceptions of people across Europe for centuries” (2008, 33). As a literary device, this type of exotic imagery about marginal communities or people may have been conceived as a narrative strategy for capturing readers’ attention, but exoticism was also the product of a specific philosophical and historical context, one concerned with the perception and description of difference, or “otherness,” mainly for colonial or imperialistic purposes, and always with a racist subtext. Functioning in the same parameters as tropes about other “exotic” subjects (such as “the African,” “the Arab,” “the Chinese,” or “the Indian”), literary exoticism about Roma rarely gave a truthful or realistic picture of Romani culture, or of Roma as fully dimensional human beings. Instead, it reduced “the Gypsy” to a stock character, constantly symbolizing geographical meandering, cultural remoteness, or/and human inadequacy. As a result, employed *ad nauseam*, these negative and stereotypical tropes permeated social discourse and informed public attitudes, surfacing in political discourses, media representations, and ordinary conversations, especially alongside biased opinions about real people and communities.

To counteract these prevailing clichés, the popularization and dissemination of Romani literature should offer an effective means of recalibrating the general view or understanding about Roma. A growing body of literary narratives by Roma (and, although scarcer, by non-Roma) is contributing to the dispelling of these long-standing stereotypes, through a different, more nuanced, and more realistic representation of the personal experiences and values of Romani characters. Concurrently, the academic scholarship dedicated to Romani literature has grown exponentially in the last decade, rapidly evolving from sparse articles in specialized journals to doctoral dissertations and monographs. Nevertheless, despite the growth of this literary production and of the readership that accompanies it, Romani literature still suffers from lack of institutionalization (it is less taught in school), lack of dissemination (it is less published), lack of recognition (it has fewer literary prizes), and sometimes even lack of definition (“What is Romani literature?”). In this study I claim that, to help Romani literature emerge into the light, we should take into consideration theoretical interpretations that can increase our understanding of the complexities of Romani literature today, and can lead to an expansion of the field of Romani literature through the incorporation of non-canonical texts. One such theory is contained within Dan Miron’s ideas of the “modern literary complex” and “contiguity,” which I discuss in this paper in relation to two texts published in French: *Je suis Tzigane et je le reste*, a piece of collaborative writing between a Romani author, Anina

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1 There is no single term embracing all people of Romani or related ethnic affiliation. In this article I use the term *Roma* as an ethnonym, and the terms *Manouche* and *Tzigane* in keeping with the choices of the authors represented here who used these exonyms. The use of the quotation marks (“Gypsy”) is meant to underscore that non-Roma often attach derogatory connotations to these exonyms.

Ciuciu, and a French journalist; and *Rien ne résiste à Romica*, written by a French journalist, Valérie Rodrigue, and thus with, ostensibly, no Romani authorship. Although Miron's authoritative literary theory was developed in regard to Jewish writings, common features between the situations of the two literatures could make it applicable to Romani literature.

## 1. What Is Romani Literature?

Romani literature as a category is not easy to define, or even identify, and the general public might not even be aware that it exists. Compared to the discipline of literature in general, the field of Romani literature is very young. For reference, the discipline of literature, or literary studies, is considered by many to have started in the fourth century BCE, with the first major study of literature: Aristotle's *Poetics*. By contrast, although oral folk stories and storytelling traditions existed within Romani communities for centuries,<sup>[2]</sup> it is believed that the first written iterations of Romani literature date back to the first decades of the twentieth century, while the public's acquaintance with Romani literature as a distinct field might date from 2019, when the International Roma Writers Association (IRWA) debuted a "Gypsy Pavilion" at the Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany, the largest book fair in the world. The inaugural appearance as an organized presence was an attempt to represent what was described as "Europe's largest minority group" and who amount up to 25 million people worldwide. According to Veijo Baltzar, a Romani-Finnish author and the president of the IRWA, organizing this pavilion was not without its challenges, given the fact that Romani authors seldom belong to national writer unions, and the marginalization of Romani writers is a serious issue (they rarely succeed in publishing with the significant professional publishers in various markets). The unprecedented and most relevant aspect of this new pavilion was its transnational composition: the Romani writers featured in the pavilion hailed from many diverse countries and wrote in different national languages and Romani dialects – ethnic affiliation being the only element they had in common. Some of the authors represented in Frankfurt were Semso Avdic (Bosnia and Herzegovina/Sweden), Luminița Cioabă (Romania), Louise Doughty (Great Britain), Ibraim Dzemail (Macedonia/Germany), Irena Eliášová (Slovakia), Jasna Kosanovic (Germany), Félix Monget (France), Jud Nirenberg (United States), Ruzdija Russo Sejdovic (Montenegro/Germany), Santino Spinelli (Italy), and Georgi Tsvetkoff (Russia/Bulgaria).

In the face of this indisputable transnationality of Romani texts, it becomes easier to understand why the public at large is less familiar with Romani literature – not only because of its relative novelty, but also because it is, perhaps, the most overlooked representation of what Deleuze and Guattari call "minor literature": not the literature of a minor language, but the literature that a minority writes in a major language. What we could call Romani literature is produced not only in Romani but also, especially, in English, German, French, Spanish, and Russian, among other languages. An even more complicated image emerges after a more in-depth examination of the language issue: while in Eastern Europe there are strong communities of Roma who have preserved their language, and there is a demand for texts in Romani, in Western Europe some communities do not have a written language, such as the Manouche in

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2 These oral storytelling traditions include such forms as songs, legends, and fairy tales.

France, who use a specific dialect of Romani for oral communication among themselves, and French for everything else. Therefore, questions related to identifying and defining Romani literature have formed the basis of most studies dedicated to Romani literature, and continue to be hotly debated by both writers and field specialists.<sup>[3]</sup>

In the last decade, as these interrogations have increasingly made their way into discussion forums, literary conferences, and scholarly publications, what we might call Romani literature has become a progressively more complex and complicated field – one that is still emerging, on the verge of making the transition from anthropology to literature, from testimony to creation, and from oral culture to printed culture. Since Romani culture has essentially been orally based for centuries, researchers have differed in their opinions about the modern Romani literary canon, and whether it should include transcriptions of the traditional oral literature, including legends, songs, and fairy tales, and transcriptions of testimonies and oral autobiographies, or whether it should be limited to literary productions as conceived by the Western tradition, such as biographies, essays, memoirs, novels, plays, poetry, and stories.

For Milena Hübschmannová (see Eder-Jordan) and Marie-Dominique Wicker Romani literature affirms the centuries-old oral tradition within Romani communities, and the ways in which this tradition translates into the subtleties and nuances of new literary forms. They argue that written Romani literature should always maintain a special connection with this oral tradition, while also striving to be a link between dispersed Romani communities. What is important here is the idea of unity and continuity within diversity, a concept that informs most scholarship about Romani literature. Others, like Alain Reyniers, hold more traditional views, undoubtedly drawn to compare new and emergent literatures to the older Western canon. For Reyniers there is an oral Romani tradition, and written texts produced by Romani writers, but no Romani literature, or at least not yet. According to him, for such an emergent literature to mature a new stature or importance must be given, collectively, to written expression. In other words, for Romani literature to exist, a collective revolution must happen, which “would undoubtedly imply collective conscience beyond the community, and a relativization of group expressions” (Reyniers 2009, 115). This position can be controversial for its caducity: while the category of “world literature” has made a powerful return in the twenty-first century, Reyniers’ theory pleads for a national consciousness, capable to command and produce a “national” type of literature. In a strict opposition to the upholders of “world literature” theories,<sup>[4]</sup> Reyniers does not situate local subjectivities and histories within the larger framework of global modernity, but instead conceives literature merely as a reflection of the fight for national sovereignty. Like Reyniers, Jean-Luc Poueyto considers that Romani literature is the literature produced by Roma only, regardless of the fact that this strict delimitation raises many other questions related to the ethnic composition of the population called “Roma.”<sup>[5]</sup> The complications of such a strictly ethnical definition are infinite, and they go beyond literature.

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3 Such questions include: How can we identify and define Romani literature? Should this literature be written in Romani only? By whom is it written, and for what public?

4 Like Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and Christopher Prendergast.

5 When does one stop being Roma? Is a person whose Romani heritage goes back to only one great-grandparent still Roma? Is it open for interpretation?

Cécile Kovacshazy rejects this narrow taxonomy by highlighting the dire consequences of such a restriction, and by pointing to the contemporary literary field, with its plurality of places, languages, and cultures – the obstacles of which some are attempting to overcome through concepts like “Weltliteratur,” “world literature,” and “littérature-monde,” as mentioned above. Kovacshazy considers that, in the case of Romani literature, these impediments can be alleviated by taking into account one specific element of its status as an emergent literature: intentionality. In her opinion, Romani literature consists of any text that claims itself as such, and this aspect sets it apart from other category, such as Francophone or postcolonial literature – although in many ways it recycles the same questions as Creole, postcolonial, or Francophone literature. Kovacshazy’s take on the present state of Romani literature, as a fragmented conglomerate of Romani literary expressions, is much more empirical than theoretical, and suggests some basic differences between this corpus of work and what are more commonly regarded as national literatures: there is not “one” Romani literature, and being part of it implies an *a priori* ideological commitment from the writer, beyond a commitment to literature itself.

Paola Toninato, in her *Romani Writing: Literacy, Literature and Identity Politics*, also emphasizes the idea that many Romani writers work within the framework of more than one Romani literature, and that bilingualism (and sometimes even trilingualism) is not only common but also natural. According to Toninato, the deterritorialized nature of Romani communities has led to a hybridity of Romani literatures. She addresses this hybridity by classifying them according to the main language of writing or publication: Romani literature in English, French, Polish, Romanian, Russian, and so forth. She pays special attention to different categorizations of Romani literature, rejecting some (“ethnic literature,” “migrant literature”), embracing others as possible alternatives (“literature with no fixed abode,” “decentralized writing,” “world literature”), and receiving one with mixed criticism (“minor literature”). Although Toninato is thorough in explaining the implications of literature and literacy for Roma, she misses the opportunity to consider the very fruitful concept of diaspora, which she sees as problematic when talking about Romani communities. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) provides a broad definition of diasporas as “members of ethnic and national communities, who have left, but maintain links with, their homelands. The term ‘diasporas’ conveys the idea of transnational populations, living in one place, while still maintaining relations with their homelands, being both ‘here’ and ‘there’” (IOM 2019, 49). In light of this definition, Toninato rightfully considers the case of Roma to be quite exceptional, as they share some defining features of a diasporic population – for example, Roma share a sense of collective memory and a strong group consciousness as an ethnic community, one that is sustained over a long period of time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, and perhaps more significantly, they are a widely dispersed and internally varied group. However, Roma completely lack other crucial diasporic features, such as that which lies at the core of the classical notion of diaspora, as conceived for the settling of scattered colonies of Jews outside ancient Palestine after the Babylonian exile: namely, a strong link with a homeland – the original homeland.

And yet, regardless of the myriad details that complicate the way in which the diasporic status of Roma is interpreted, the concept is at the heart of many productive theories and perspectives on Romani literature. Julia Blandford, for example, contends that, as a socio-cultural category, the notion of a “diaspora” allows us to better account for some specific structures and ideas expressed in Romani literature, like dispersion, exclusion and inclusion, and references to a territory of origin. She argues that the concepts of “minor” and “migrant” literature are inadequate when accounting for the literature of the Romani communities that

together make up a “diasporic people.” Blandfort’s originality rests in her contention that, although the diasporic experience is deeply linked to memory transmission, in the case of Romani writers this cultural memory is fictional: there is no national reconstruction project, simply because this cultural memory is established without the consensus of the Romani people, which makes it fragile and transitional.

One glaring absence from the scholarship dedicated to Romani writings is discussions about the similarities connecting these writings to the original diasporic literature: Jewish literature. The concept of Jewish literature has equally demanded definition, as Jewish authors have lived in many countries, and have written in many different languages and in diverse genres. Critics are even today pondering the boundaries and stylistic features of Jewish literature, to such an extent that although Jewish texts have been written continuously for the past 3,000 years, one of the most cited volumes in the field has the edifying title, *What Is Jewish Literature?* The book explores the same questions that pertain to Romani literature such as: What are the criteria for identifying Jewish literature? Are they language, the religious affiliation of the author, a distinctive Jewish imagination, or literary tradition? These are long-standing questions that demonstrate, according to the author, Hana Wirth-Nesher, the ultimate indefinability of the subject. The most obvious similarity between Romani and Jewish literatures is the fact that both lack the basic markers of what is commonly understood to be a “national literature”: a shared geography and a common language. Moreover, Romani literature also shares some features with Israeli literature, the existence of which also complicates the concept of “national” literature, having been produced in several languages (Arabic, Hebrew, Russian, Yiddish, among others), by both Jews and non-Jews.

Aligning himself with critics of the concept of “national literature,” in 2010 literary critic and scholar Dan Miron put forward a new theory about the way we think about literature by asserting in his book *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* that the concept of “Jewish literature” is no longer viable. In an attempt to put an end to the question “what is Jewish literature,” he reproached previous theorists for their view of Jewish literature as a continuous, unified field, and for their failure to accept its overwhelming diversity, and especially the “abnormal” centrifugal forces of modern Jewish literature. In his book, Miron drew attention to American and European Jewish writers who did not necessarily write for a Jewish audience, and who had been left out by previous theories about Jewish literature, like Marcel Proust or Heinrich Heine. Miron went against the grain in not looking for unity, tradition, or continuity in his definition of Jewish literature, in what he saw as the obvious multiplicity and broader scope of Jewish writing. Instead of “unity” and “continuity,” Miron proposed “contiguity” as the principle that must inform a new Jewish literary theory. He recommended abandoning the idea of a single “Jewish literature” or a “modern Jewish canon” in favour of a “modern Jewish literary complex.” According to Miron, this Jewish literary complex would be almost impossible to define, because it is too vast and disorderly, and somewhat diffuse.

Miron’s new theory, based on contiguity, focuses on proximities, contacts, textual influence, dualities, mobilities, parallelisms, and other ambivalent and hard-to-define relations between the text, the author, and what he calls “Judesein” – a reference to the German term *Dasein*.<sup>[6]</sup> For an example of contiguity

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6 “Dasein” refers to an awareness of (human) existence. Similarly, Miron has declared “Jewish” any text that “evinces an interest in or is in whatever way and to whatever extent conditioned by a sense of Judesein, being Jewish.”

in the Jewish literary complex, Miron looks to Franz Kafka and Sholem Aleichem, not to imply that there are intertextual links between their works but to demonstrate that both were reacting in their writings to a similar Jewish context of persecution and weakness. In Miron's interpretation, the two writers are contiguous not because they were influenced by each other (they were not: they wrote in different languages, and within radically different literary milieus), but because they both embraced inaction, weakness, inertia, and a marginal existence, and they both reflected a suspicion of rules, laws, and ideology in their writings.

By focusing on texts that were relational through links that are more ambivalent and less tangible, or predictable, than those that we tend to refer to when discussing intertextuality, influence, inspiration, or a national context, Miron's "Jewish literary complex" has gone further than all previous literary theories used to define a literary corpus. In the case of Romani literature, Miron's theory opens up the possibility of moving from various ontological definitions (such as those based on language, location, ethnicity of the author, specific "Romani" content, or form) to an empirical definition, captured by the term *Romasein* – the sense of "being Roma in the world." This fundamental concept implies a new way of thinking about literature as a construct: it suggests that there is no previous Western canon to which Romani literature should conform, and there should be no specific Romani canon by which writers must abide.

By applying Miron's revolutionary concept of contiguity, we could define a new Romani literary complex based on proximities, unregulated contacts, and moments of adjacency. The new Romani literary complex would go beyond the traditional concept of literature as corpus of texts connected by a distinguishable formal property called "literariness" (as defined by Russian Formalists), and would align more with Terry Eagleton's assertion that literature is made of any text that a particular group relates to and values. A Romani literary complex would not necessarily "replace" the field of Romani literature, but would transform it into a multifaceted entity consisting of different connected, semi-connected, and unconnected particles, to paraphrase Miron, and would make room for writers who are Romani-literate without necessarily being Roma. This new way of decontextualizing and recontextualizing literariness, and literature in general, could have major consequences for the inclusion of literary Romaniness ("Gitanidad," "Gypsyiness") in fields that tend to be very structured and less flexible, like academia, and therefore could lead to a faster institutionalization of Romani literature. Miron's crucial contribution was to assert that Hebrew and Yiddish literatures can claim no monopoly on literary Jewishness, thus endorsing the latest trends in American universities, namely the inclusion of professors in French, German, or Russian literature on the list of affiliated faculty for Jewish studies programs. Similarly, Romani literature would increase its reach by becoming increasingly featured in academic programs of world literatures (or French or Portuguese literatures, and so on), through the presence of authors belonging to the Romani literary complex.



## 2. Case Study: Romani Literature of French Expression

As a case study, let us consider the Romani writers of French expression. For a long time, these writers were either absent from French and Francophone literary anthologies and critical works, or classified as exceptions, in the margins of the French canon. Matéo Maximoff, who has established himself as one of the great figures of literature in Europe, and whose books have been translated into multiple languages, is one such writer. Despite having written all his works, apart from a few unpublished stories, in French, and despite having been decorated as a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres of the French Republic in 1986, Maximoff has been consistently presented to the public as an “écrivain tsigane” or “écrivain manouche” (“Gypsy writer”). The same designation (“écrivain tsigane” or “artiste tsigane”) is used for Alexandre Romanès, a Romani-French contemporary writer and artist, even though he is one of the very few artist recipients of the French Legion of Honour,<sup>[7]</sup> and despite the fact that at the Shanghai World Expo in 2010, his troupe<sup>[8]</sup> represented France, and not Romanestan, Ionel Rotaru’s imagined country for all Roma.<sup>[9]</sup>

The literary works of many other contemporary Romani writers of French expression are often rejected by editors, either because the writer is not an established “name” in literature, or because their writings are unclassifiable and difficult to market, being uncharacteristic for the French canon. When talking about Luis Ruiz’s 2008 novel *La guerre noble*, for example, Hélène Ramdani, the founder of Le Navire en pleine ville, the very young publishing house that printed the book, qualified it as “a kind of philosophical tale written by a young Gypsy.” The publishing of the novel was advertised to the larger public as being “an event,” because of the misperception that the rest of Romani literature is exclusively oral. The marketing package accompanying *La guerre noble* informs the reader:

This book is an event. Its author, Luis Ruiz is Gypsy, and *his culture is all oral*. However, whether through his photographs that he exhibits regularly, or through his texts which are all odes to the richness of the world from which he came, Luis Ruiz has chosen to create bridges between the Gypsy universe and that of the Gadjos. And *for the first time, a text written by a member of the Gypsy community* receives the support of his peers, and *its publication is encouraged* (author’s translation and italics).

Quotes like this make it obvious that for the French publishing industry, either the concept of Romani literature in French does not exist or the inclusion of its members in the French canon is implausible.

With the exception of Maximoff and Romanès, all the other Romani writers of French expression are hosted by small, specialized publishing houses, even Sandra Jayat, whose first, autobiographically inspired novel, *La longue route d’une zingarina*, became required reading for elementary school French literature classes in the 1980s. Like Jayat, Romani writers Françoise Gaspard, Miguel Haler, Louise

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<sup>7</sup> Romanès received the Legion of Honour in 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Romanès’ troupe was called Cirque Tzigane Romanès.

<sup>9</sup> See Maria Sierra, “Creating Romanestan.”

Pisla Helmstetter, Jean-Marie Kerwich, and Sterna Weltz-Zigler are taking their chances with less famous presses that publish work that is perceived as risky, challenging, and pushing boundaries, and therefore unlikely to find any commercial success. While often rejected by editors at big houses, who have aggressive sales goals, Romani writers of French expression are embraced by smaller presses like Wallâda, which Françoise Mingot-Tauran created in 1982 with the encouragement and financial support of Father Fleury, the great resistance fighter and “national chaplain of the Gypsies.” Wallâda is the only French/Francophone publishing house that has an entire collection dedicated to Romani literary creation (Waroutcho). Other than Maximoff, other Romani writers published by Wallâda are Joseph Doërr, Lick Dubois, Miguel Dufour, Jan Vania de Gila-Kochanowski, Roberto Lorier, Esmeralda Romanéz, Joseph Stimbach, Georgina Valin, and Ricardo Viscardi.

Even a superficial analysis of the marketing and publishing situation of Romani writers of French expression shows that Romani Francophone literature is emergent, multifaceted, marginalized, and in dire need of dissemination. Considering all this, Miron’s concepts of a “literary complex” and “contiguity” could prove very helpful in promulgating texts and perspectives that may not be either traditional (as conceived within Western literature) or widely accepted by the community (both the Romani community and the larger literary community), but that can shed a light on the complexity of Romani culture and literary performance.

I am suggesting here two particular texts, *Je suis Tzigane et je le reste* (in a very liberal translation: I am Gypsy, now and forever) by Anina Ciuciu, and *Rien ne résiste à Romica* (Nothing can stop Romica), by Valérie Rodrigue, which, without the consideration of Miron’s two concepts, would not necessarily fit the traditional notion of literature for at least two reasons: they would not be perceived as literary works, as intended by their authors, and they would not be perceived as literary in aesthetic terms.

In *Je suis Tzigane et je le reste*, Ciuciu tells the story of a young Romani woman, Ciuciu herself, whose journey leads from refugee camps to the Sorbonne, from a precarious life to the status of lawyer and French-language author. It is the story of a difficult life, but just as much a testimony to a humanism that crosses borders of nationality, race, gender, and language. The idea of writing an autobiographical testimony seems completely inconceivable, even to the 22-year-old Romani author herself: she admits several times that unveiling her intimate self to the public eye was a difficult ordeal. The anxiety she felt by being exposed to public humiliation comes up several times in the book, including on the back cover: “My name is Anina, I am 22 years old and I am Roma. I have known misery, insults, sordid camps. In France, I did not always have enough to eat, and I had to beg in the street to survive. I will be forever humiliated by it” (author’s translation).

Also inconceivable is the invisibility of human misery, against which Rodrigue leads the charge in *Rien ne résiste à Romica*, a text painting the story of an improbable friendship between a Parisian bourgeois (the author) and a woman belonging to the Romani community, Romica, a pregnant mother who begs in front of the post office. Like Anina, the young protagonist of *Rien ne résiste à Romica* succeeds in moving from living in a slum to acquiring diplomas, a profession, and ultimately a country: France. Rodrigue presents to us Romica’s story, even with the risk of self-accusation and society shaming: “Romica had been begging in front of the main post office for four years and I had just noticed her presence” (Rodrigue 2016, 12; author’s translation). Further on, she asks rhetorical questions that dishonour not only her

readers but humanity as a whole, which she considers plagued by widespread blindness: “If people build shelters under our motorways, is it in the name of a nomadic lifestyle or extreme poverty? Who leaves their country? Who sleeps outside for pleasure?” (Rodrigue 2016, 15; author’s translation).

What is striking in both these testimonies is their call to examine one’s conscience, the humanist search they undertake, and their demands for justice. Very quickly the reader comes to understand the reality for these young women: Anina’s quest for a hospitable country, her tribulations during the long journey from Romania to her host country, and her humiliating experiences in the streets of Italy and France, as well as Romica’s very early marriage, her illusions regarding having children and the poverty that presided over her exile, and the makeshift villages where she lives. We are presented with a world that most people only see on television, or on the outskirts of French cities, when these areas are evacuated by the CRS.<sup>[10]</sup> Rodrigue’s and Ciuciu’s stories reveal all the imaginable pitfalls, and all the appalling administrative obstacles that Romica and Anina must overcome to come out of their “nonexistence” and their hiding – to claim a normal life, work, earn a living, study, find their place in society, and break through the invisibility that surrounds them.

However, when it comes to categorizing these two stories in terms of traditional literary genres, opinions could differ: they seem to meet the criteria equally for popular literature, literary journalism, and paraliterature in the form of autobiographical discourse. Representative especially of the type of emerging literature that is Romani literature in French, the stories of Anina and Romica remain very close to the narrative universe of the folk tale, from which they both borrow the dominant perspective of the subject-hero who embodies a group’s social values. Just as the folk tale hero, the two women go through the most difficult trials (illnesses, accidents, extreme precarity and mendicity), without losing the sense of morality and values passed on by their family and community, or their hopes for surpassing the difficulties that lay before them and their hopes to succeed in life. As shown in the beginning of this article, there are very few positive fictional representations of Roma in literature; most representations are portraits of destitute vagrants who spread contagious diseases, kidnap children, or kill honourable citizens. In contrast to these stereotypes, but still far from the (Western) canonical model of the hero, the portraits of Anina and Romica take shape in an otherwise familiar way: they each have a family who loves them and are part of a community whose members help each other, and, despite the difficulties, the end of each tale presents the heroine as an accomplished young woman – one will be a lawyer, the other a nursing assistant. They become, thus, carriers of the group’s desires and fears, embodying the group’s common social values. These elements anchor the two texts in the axiological universe of ethno-literature: the folk tale, through the trajectory of its hero, submits the collective values to the test for the sole purpose of finding them validated at the end of the story. But *Je suis Tzigane et je le reste* and *Rien ne résiste à Romica* are not mere folk tales. Unlike folk literature, the two texts exist in a transboundary area, between ethno-literature, literature, and journalism, thanks to the act of writing. Although the story belongs exclusively to the two Romani women, Anina and Romica, the pen, which performs an intricate dance between activism, clinical descriptions, lucid observation, and poignant, heartbreaking calls, more likely belongs to Frédéric

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10 CRS (*Compagnies républicaines de sécurité*, or Republican Security Companies) is the general reserve of the French National Police. They are primarily involved in general security but the task for which they are best known is crowd and riot control.

Veille, a journalist, and Valérie Rodrigue. All of this complicates both the authorial pact and the creative features necessary for the classification of “literature” as defined by Western tradition.

The two texts subscribe therefore to an atypical literary category. They are not folk tales, but neither are they traditional literary testimonies. *Je suis Tzigane et je le reste*, which was announced with fanfare by the publisher as “the first testimony of a young Roma, without concessions, moving, and beyond prejudice,” has a narrative that does not necessarily respect the rules of a literary testimony, such as those by Primo Levi. Although the writing of the book was motivated, just like with Levi’s story *If This Is a Man*, by a need to proclaim a hidden truth, to give expression to memories, to share a traumatic experience so that it does not happen again, Ciuciu’s narrative, unlike that of Levi’s, is not self-referential writing. The text was written, we learn on the second title page, by Frédéric Veille, based on Anina’s words, as collected by the journalist. In the same way, *Rien ne résiste à Romica*, although inspired by real events, and although “transcribing” real dialogue, is not really the testimony of the heroine, Romica. The real writer is Rodrigue, even if the story belongs to the young Romani woman. We are therefore dealing with two texts that bear the signs of self-narration without being written by the actors in the events described by them. According to the criteria of the Western canon, they would not necessarily be classified as literature, given that both “scripters” (Veille and Rodrigue) are journalists, and the particular type of prose used in these pieces closely resembles journalistic writing.

In order to contextualize these two remarkable works, we need to take a closer look at a relatively recent phenomenon in the literary episteme, which we could call the democratization of literature, and which coincides with the advent of globalization, after the fall of the Iron Curtain in Europe, in 1989. This democratization made possible new literary forms, such as those that Mary Louise Pratt calls “auto-ethnographic,” and describes as being visible especially in the “contact zones,” “these social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 1991, 35). In the Latin American world, the best known of these texts, called “testimonio” by John Beverley, is *Yo, Rigoberta Menchú*, by the Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú, who went on to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. In France, these kinds of testimonies increasingly have been disseminated since the start of the twenty-first century, and cover a huge range of subjects and contexts, from the situation of the homeless and refugees; to prostitution; physical, spiritual, and sexual abuse; autism and others neuroatypical conditions; harassment at school; and even cyber-addiction. Most of these texts, due to their co-authorship with a journalist, border on what is called “truth-writing,” or “reality-writing.”

The two narratives described here closely align with these types of “reality-writings” that have flooded the French publishing market in the last decades. Considered less important than works institutionalized by their inclusion in school curricula, anthologies, or literary histories, and therefore avoided by literary critics and academics for their low relevance to the French literary field, they have, however, benefited from a relatively high media attention, compared to other similar testimonies. Ciuciu has been featured in several cultural TV shows and invited to talk about the book and about herself, as the first woman of Romani origin to study at the Sorbonne, while Rodrigue has promoted her book through interviews, always in Romica’s company, whom she has introduced as co-author, and with whom she has shared the proceedings. Despite these parallels, if we were to judge these two texts by the ethnic affiliation of their

writers, only one would be considered part of Romani literature, Ciuciu's narrative, for having been told by a Roma (even if with the assistance of a non-Roma). *Rien ne résiste à Romica*, although sharing distinctive ideological assumptions, formal commonalities, overlapping themes, and thematic similarities with *Je suis Tzigane et je le reste*, would be rejected from the Romani literary canon because it was written by a non-Roma (even if with the assistance of a Roma). Equally significant, the latter would likely be rejected by Romani scholars (and many Romani writers themselves), whose approach to constructing a Romani literature corpus heavily implies an ideological commitment to a "national" project. However, the book would be an excellent candidate for a modern Romani literary complex, because this complex is less a set canon of texts than a mode of reading, emphasizing post-nationality and transculturality.

I believe, in this context, that by applying the concept of a "literary complex," we could move beyond a strict taxonomy of texts belonging to the literary canon, and include texts like the ones described here, characterized by "dualities, parallelisms, occasional intersections, marginal overlapping, hybrids, similarities within dissimilarities, mobility, changeability, occasional emergence of patterns and their eventual disappearance, randomness, and, when approximating a semblance of significant order, contiguities" (Miron 2010, 276), and even texts that are not produced by Romani authors, but that were written in reaction to Romani persecution.<sup>[11]</sup> The adoption of these new concepts would not only lead to a great expansion of the Romani literary complex; it would also create the basis for an institutionalized cultural capital (in Bourdieusian terms) that would, in return, certify the status and the importance of Romani literature as an autonomous field.

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11 Other examples could be *N'entre pas dans mon âme avec tes chaussures* (Don't step on my soul with your shoes) by Paola Pigani, or *Amadora: Une enfance tzigane* by Dominique Simonnot.

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