"If we didn't have this story, we would not have this day":: Roma "Gypsy" Stories as Sustenance in Difficult Life Stages

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President's Address 2013

"If we didn't have this story, we would not have this day": Roma "Gypsy" Stories as Sustenance in Difficult Life Stages

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Abstract: Roma "Gypsies" have been sustained through centuries of persecution and ostracism by a long history of oral storytelling practices. Stories by Roma in the German-speaking countries use the themes of food, gender relations, trickery, sexuality, and interactions with non-Roma to debunk stereotypes and envision social change. Ambiguities in their tales demonstrate the continual contradictions that the Roma have encountered in their everyday lives and reveal the varying outcomes and interpretations that every situation potentially encompasses. The mixture of fantasy with reality and of humor with seriousness in many stories presents a venue to maintain traditions while imagining cultural transformations.

Preface: Dedication to Elsa French, Ceija Stojka, and Wolfgang Nehring, and Eulogy for Wolfgang Nehring

In the past two years, I have lost three of my greatest mentors: my mother, Elsa French; Austrian Romani artist, writer, performer, activist, storyteller, and survivor of three concentration camps under the National Socialist, Ceija Stojka; and my dissertation supervisor, Wolfgang Nehring. All three shared not only me as one of their greatest fans but also the power to tell and appreciate

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a great story. They have all left legacies in the form of stories: my mother in the numerous letters she had written over the years; Ceija Stojka in her artwork, autobiographies, journals, and interviews; and Wolfgang Nehring in his scholarly work. On this Day of the Dead, my talk is dedicated to them.

I want to preface my presidential talk with a tribute to Wolfgang Nehring because he played such a major role in sustaining, developing, and growing our illustrious organization, the PAMLA. In the twenty-eight years that I have been a PAMLA member, I honestly cannot remember a single PAMLA conference that I attended where Wolfgang was not giving a paper, chairing a session, serving on the executive committee, being an officer, sitting on the editorial board of *Pacific Coast Philology*, or giving the presidential address. Wolfgang's involvement with PAMLA extended back to 1975, thirty-eight years ago. It is a very strange feeling for me, as I'm sure it is for many here, to be attending what I believe is my first PAMLA conference without having Wolfgang here.

In fact, Wolfgang as my dissertation supervisor—my *Doktorvater*, or "Doctor Father," as we German scholars rather affectionately call such influential authority figures in our lives—originally spurred my involvement in PAMLA by encouraging me as a graduate student at UCLA to give my first paper at the 1985 PAMLA conference at UC Santa Cruz. I vividly remember that conference, from its glorious Friday-night reception with free wine and food, and then the free pastries and coffee in the morning—certainly treats for any graduate student on a tight budget—to the conference's wonderfully stimulating sessions and mealtime talks, including president Ruth apRoberts's engaging, whimsical talk on A. E. Housman as intertextualist (I realize that I am stepping into large footsteps with my own presidential talk today), to the close-knit community of scholars, and yes, even the dancing. Wolfgang did love to dance, and I remember a group of us going out to dance, a festivity that he repeated at several subsequent PAMLA conferences.

But I also remember how scared I was to give that first paper, and how much I wanted to please my *Doktorvater*. I practiced and practiced, edited and edited, because most of all, I feared the questions that he would ask me at the session. For those of you who knew Wolfgang, you know what I mean when I say he was never at a loss for asking critical questions. At PAMLA sessions, he always had a question in every session he attended. And I distinctly remember the questions he asked me at my first conference. In my paper, I was arguing for the aesthetic and literary qualities in nineteenth-century German women's letters, using feminist theories of the time. "But," Wolfgang asked, "are these letters *good* literature?" "And," he queried, "are you sure that this feminist theory is not just a *trend*?"

Whereas I then considered such questions part of an "old school" of textual criticism that was apprehensive about any kind of new theory and textual

reevaluation, I now understand that behind those questions stood a true love of literature, a constant, unwavering appreciation for a good story. And there were so many stories about Wolfgang that I am sure I never knew. This fact became apparent to me when I read the loving eulogy that his daughter, Cristina Nehring, wrote. Here she tells stories about his indefatigable love for his granddaughter, Eurydice. But one story in particular hit home with me. Cristina writes about Wolfgang awaking on January 2, 2013, with a fever. As the family was preparing to bring him to emergency care and a possible overnight stay in the hospital, Wolfgang had a last request of Cristina, which she narrates:

> It was after 9 p.m., and we were preparing for a night in the hospital, and I was asking him what he wanted me to fetch him from his house: pajamas, toiletries . . . and what about a book? Which book should I bring from his sprawling literary library?
>
> His answer was unhesitant. "Pinocchio," he said. He and my mom had given Eurydice an attractive, detailed version of the Pinocchio story for Christmas, but it was too long to read to her word by word. "I want to pre-read Pinocchio," he explained, "so I can tell it to the Lovebug in my words when I see her next."

We all know the moral to the story of Pinocchio—lying will get you a long nose. In retrospect, I can now see how much Wolfgang's choice of this story so much fits into his value system. As we all probably dreaded his criticism and questions, his was honest criticism. Not wanting ever to lie, he never shied away from saying what was on his mind.

But this story also shows how much storytelling offers connections, and how much storytelling offers hope. Wolfgang particularly wanted to tell his granddaughter a story, but in his own words, hoping to create a personal, even unforgettable experience with a loved one. I am also sure that he pre-read many of the works that we panelists would be talking about in our PAMLA papers just so he could interpret them in his own words and with his own questions. In my presidential address, I would like to pick up on these themes of storytelling as a means to offer connections, hope, and sustenance in difficult stages of life. But first, I would like to tell a little story of my own, one that reflects the hope that so many people have for Wolfgang's legacy to live on:

Once upon a time, over twenty-five previous UCLA graduate students felt touched by Wolfgang Nehring's intellect, wisdom, tutelage, scholarship, and care. They wanted to pay homage to all he had given them, and thus they decided to compile a Festschrift (see Burwick, French, Guntersdorfer), a collection of essays in his honor. They wanted to present the collection to him on his seventy-fifth birthday, which would occur on November 15, 2013. They began the collection in 2010, thinking they would have three years to compile the essays and plan a big celebration at which they would surprise him

with the "Festschrift" and once again drink a glass of wine and dance with him. Alas, the unexpected happened: Wolfgang Nehring died on January 3, 2013. The students were shocked, but they also knew they had to carry on. As with the stories I will tell and talk about in my presidential talk, this one, too, has an ambiguously bittersweet ending. Wolfgang Nehring is no longer with us physically, but we did finish our tribute volume to keep him with us professionally and spiritually. Several of the contributing authors and those who wanted to thank him in the introduction are here today. And yesterday, PAMLA's executive committee voted to work on endowing a scholarship in Wolfgang Nehring's and Hans Wagener's names (Hans was also an active PAMLA member who passed away this past summer) for a graduate student in German to attend the conference. I invite everyone now to toast and celebrate the life of Wolfgang Nehring and his lasting legacy with PAMLA.

"If we didn't have this story, we would not have this day"

Storytelling offers connections; storytelling offers hope; storytelling can transform lives. Of course, talking to a room full of scholars of literature, language, and culture, I can tell that I am preaching to the converted when I talk of storytelling's powers. I am not the first one who has praised the impact of storytelling, nor will I be the last, I am sure. Many of us are familiar with Walter Benjamin's essay on the storyteller, in which Benjamin sees storytelling as engendering necessary communication between humans, and between the past, present, and future. Writing in 1936, Benjamin viewed the increase in information through modern technologies as creating a downfall in storytelling, and therefore an "incommunicability of experiences in the modern world" (Hall). In the modern world, Benjamin argued, "Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back" (94). Hannah Arendt picked up on this theme of storytelling creating a hope for living on after death when she argued that "human essence . . . the essence of who somebody is—can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story. . . . Even Achilles . . . remains dependent upon the storyteller, poet, or historian, without whom everything he did remains futile" (59). Likewise, Ernst Bloch devotes an entire part of his monumental work *The Principle of Hope* to fairy tales and their abilities to invoke that "spirit of utopia" (*Geist der Utopie*) (339-69). He writes: "Even in the fairytale there is suffering, but it changes, and does so for good. . . . It is always the little heroes and the poor folk here who manage to reach the place where life has become good" (353). Yes, obviously, we have many good advocates within the disciplines of language, literature, history, and cultural studies to extol the powers of storytelling.[1]

Even natural and social scientists are also recognizing storytelling's virtues. Various studies have investigated the relationship between storytelling and neuroscience, attempting, as Sanjay Nigam states, to use functional imaging to "point to a neuroanatomical basis for compelling storytelling ability" ("Abstract"). Psychologists and biologists have found a strong relationship between storytelling and the production of endorphins in our brain, the neurotransmitters that are "natural pain and stress fighters." Storytelling stands equal with extended exercise, ingestion of chocolate and chili peppers, acupuncture, massage therapy, meditation, and sex for its ability to release healing endorphins (Stoppler). Research has proven that storytelling has a profound psychological effect on the positive development of "motor skills, cognitive modification, self-confidence . . . learning, focusing . . . attitudinal changes, relaxation and healing in children" (Honeycutt, Pecchioni, Keaton, Pence 24). Carol Gray, a former consultant to students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) has created an entire center that promotes using what she calls "social stories" to help students with autism. Storytelling has been shown to help social work students "to develop and integrate an awareness, sensitivity, understanding, and appreciation for the experiential realities of diverse client groups" (Carter-Black).

The famous TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talks contain no less than eighty-eight productions with *storytelling* as their keyword. The field of digital storytelling stresses the genre's relevance for business, marketing, and technology. Witness the forthcoming guidebook that a friend recently sent to me entitled *Online Video for Dummies*, which devotes an entire chapter and sections of other chapters to storytelling.[2] Imagine my surprise when I discovered Gustav Freytag's famous narrative pyramid on page twelve, with a little special box headed "Who is Gustav Freytag?" on page thirteen! I could not help but dig up my own notes on Freytag from my 1978 undergraduate class on Goethe's and Schiller's dramas, only to see the exact same pyramid illustrating the main components of any successful story, including the inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.

In a time when the humanities are under scrutiny, and especially language and literature departments are being asked to cut budgets and programs, storytelling can offer a means, yes, "to sell" ourselves in the humanities, to create our own versions of "storytelling for dummies," not to "sell out" or to "dummy ourselves down" but rather to teach and raise the bar for the power of storytelling to infect all aspects of our lives and work. From whom better to learn a story than from those who tell stories, from all those writers we read in classes and analyze in our research? What better reason for bringing literature, culture, and the art of storytelling into our lives than to improve those lives with connections and hopes?

And who better to know about the power of storytelling as a source of hope than the Roma, or the so-called Gypsies, who, having faced centuries of ostracism and persecution, have developed a vast repertoire of stories from their historically oral culture and thereby increased their chances of survival. The term *Roma* may not be as widely known in the English language as the word *Gypsy*, and the Roma's storytelling culture may not be well known among literary scholars. Thus, a brief description of terms and important historical events is necessary.

The term *Roma* is a self-ascribed one that Roma use to identify themselves. The male is a Rom, the female a Romni. The language is Romany, and I employ *Romani* as the adjective, as in "Romani literature." In contrast, the word *Gypsy* was originally one used by the Gadže, or non-Roma, and it evokes a long history of stereotypical images. The etymology of *Gypsy* derives from the misconception that Roma originally came from Egypt and not from northwest India, an origin that most linguists in Romani studies have verified. Although the etymology of the German word *Zigeuner* is not totally clear, linguists surmise that it most likely stemmed from the Byzantine Greek *athinganoi*, referring to a sect of "untouchables" in the Phrygia region of what today is Turkey.[3] But this is another false origin. The Austrian writer Erich Hackl points out the negative connotations of the term *Zigeuner* in German (15-16). One refers to *Zigeunerspieß*, literally a "skewered Gypsy," or a kind of kebab, and not *Romaspieß*. Likewise, English contains the pejorative designations of "academic Gypsies" and "Gypsy blood" but not "academic Roma," or "Roma blood." The verb *gyp* (as in to be "gypped") also derives from the pejorative, widespread, false belief that all "Gypsies" steal. Some German-speaking Roma also still prefer the word *Zigeuner*, or even *Gypsy* in English because it evokes their long tradition and, as I've noted, most people are still more familiar with *Gypsy* than with *Roma*. In Germany one often refers to the "Sinti" and "Roma" separately, with Sinti being the particular subgroup of Roma who have been in Germany since the fifteenth century, and Roma being all other subgroups, and particularly those who have emigrated from the previous Eastern bloc countries.

After groups of Roma arrived in central Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, initial reactions of curiosity rapidly turned into hostility, discrimination, and banishment.[4] Officials in many German states and territories and in the Habsburg Monarchy proclaimed that Roma were *vogelfrei* ("outlaws") and could be killed without penalty and with bounty. In the eighteenth century, the Austrian archduchess Maria Theresia enacted several restrictive policies, including laws prohibiting traveling and speaking Romany. In contrast to the negative stereotypes of Roma as pilfering, dirty, deceptive wanderers, the myth of the exotic and erotic "Gypsy" leading

a happy-go-lucky, migratory life began to congeal in the seventeenth century from the intertwined discourses on nature, justice, gender, and the body. European authors and philosophers began associating mostly the "Gypsy" female figures such as Mother Courage, Mignon, Isabella von Ägypten, and Carmen with freedom, desire, and exoticism on the one hand, and with wildness, demonic powers, and chaos on the other. Writers thereby developed coded discourses about Roma that have persisted into the present times.[5]

In the twentieth century, over 80 percent of Roma in German-speaking areas were murdered under the Nazis. In total, estimates of Roma killed during the Nazi times are around 500,000, with most of the victims coming from Eastern Europe.[6] In Germany and Austria after World War II, many Roma never received full compensation for the torture and material losses they incurred under the Nazi regime, or if they did, the process was grueling and humiliating.

In the twenty-first century, Roma have encountered renewed targeted discrimination and violence in reaction to immigrants coming from the previous Eastern bloc countries (Silverman 1-13, Landler). From expulsions of Roma from France, to murders of Roma in Hungary, to immigrant fears in Germany and Austria, to the latest news about the "Blonde Angel" discovered in Greece, news media today overflow with negative stories propagating stereotypes of Roma as dirty, thieving, conniving, begging child abductors (ČTK). But why should it be that most of the stories that one hears about Roma in the media or reads in literature are negative and that those stories come largely from non-Roma?

Where are the voices of the Roma in historical accounts, in the media, and in literary analysis? Roma have, indeed, produced stories, although many have been lost or destroyed in the years of persecution. In line with Benjamin's assertion that storytelling has the power to connect, I am especially interested in the tales that Roma tell for their abilities to bring together seemingly contrasting threads of truth and falsity, right and wrong, male and female, and Roma and non-Roma. In his study *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, Jack Zipes talks about the power of fairy tales to construct social change and critique. He also points out the integrative, transformative nature of fairy tales. No *Urgeschichte*, or single original tale, exists; all tales have transformed over time and incorporated various ideas along the way. Building on the notions of why fairy tales stick, I claim that the mixture of fantasy with reality and of humor with seriousness that can occur in folktales has presented Roma with a venue for maintaining traditions while imagining transformation.

The tales that I investigate here represent a very small sampling of those in the repertoire of prolific Romani storytellers. Given the wealth of such stories, even I must be selective in my analysis here, drawing on stories that Roma

have told orally and that have then been transcribed and published in written form. Tales often open with the standard fairy-tale beginning of "Once upon a time" or "Many years ago." Yet several tales commence with paradoxical sayings such as "It was because it wasn't" or "Just as it was not, so was it still." First, these contradictory beginnings and endings reflect Romani beliefs in a connection between ephemeral life on earth and ethereal spiritual life after death. Second, they demonstrate the continual contradictions that the Roma have encountered in their everyday lives. Likewise, several tales end with the expression "Here the good, there the bad," which also suggests a recognition of the varying outcomes and interpretations that every situation potentially encompasses. Not every story concludes with a happy ending but instead might proclaim noncommittedly, "And this story, whether true or not, so it goes" (*Fern von uns im Traum* 23). Such opening and closing proclamations reflect ambiguities in the tales; they also address the concerns of skeptics who might view the events or characters as too fantastical to be true.

Ambiguities often defy standard characteristics in fairy tales. Zipes points to themes, prevalent in Western fairy tales that, as he states, "makes them stick," including child abuse and abandonment, sibling rivalry, and family infighting (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 115). These themes almost never arise in Romani tales. Instead, Romani tales are more likely to use ambiguity and humor than didactic models that might enforce restrictive norms.

The story "The Greedy Beggar" exemplifies this common intertwining of the real and the fantastical (*Der Rom und der Teufel* 11-17). The story begins with the ambiguous sentence "Just as it was not, so it was; there was no blanket, just a cloth. Nobody can say whether it is true or whether someone made it up. The Roma told this story in earlier days" (*Der Rom und der Teufel* 63). Veracity contrasts with falsity. The emphasis on the Romani world as the source for the story creates a separation from non-Roma.

The Rom protagonist in the story is so greedy that he refuses to share his food first with a rabbit and then with a wild pig. One day he comes to a farm, where the farmer woman asks him to help her take in the hay. The beggar refuses to do so unless she compensates him. She asks him why he needs payment because he has already had something to eat. She knows this from the animals with which he has refused to share. She agrees to let him drink goat's milk as payment for his work. When she gives him the milk, he drinks it up so greedily that he becomes sick. He returns to his home and tells everyone that there is a witch's house in the forest. Subsequently, anyone who goes to find the witch and the house and does not find anything thus does not believe the beggar. When he finally goes back to see for himself, he meets the pig and the rabbit again, who this time refuse him their food. He wanders around looking for the house for years. Finally, some women looking for mushrooms find him

dead in the forest. The moral, so the story ends, is that God punished the Rom because he was so mean to the animals and did not give them something to eat when they were hungry. The story ends with an adage that implies that one must be willing to give more than just a small share: "Did not give a blanket, only a cloth." The implication is that to give more is better than to present less.

While the moral of the story, to share and share alike, seems ethically sound in any culture, in the context of Roma and Gadže relations, this tale holds heightened significance. By celebrating selflessness over selfishness, in direct contradiction with stereotypes that have characterized Roma as perpetual robbers and beggars, the tale debunks those stereotypes. Ian Hancock describes the sharing of food as an integral part of Romani etiquette and as part of purity and pollution beliefs: "Not offering something to eat—and for that matter refusing to accept something offered—is a serious breach of etiquette, because it suggests that the person slighted in this way is not clean" (*We Are the Romani People* 81). Romani storytellers such as Philomena Franz and Ceija Stojka often tell stories of culinary delicacies that they proudly share with others.[7] The fantastical context in the tales provides one way to mediate this message of the necessity to share food and drink.

"The Greedy Beggar" also questions the stereotype of the female Romani witch that has pervaded non-Roma accounts. In this tale, only the greedy male Rom claims that the woman is a witch; others cannot confirm his perceptions. The mixture of the magical talking animals with human nonbelievers who produce a reality check leaves the story open-ended as to whether the female is really a witch or not. The story thus ambiguously provokes a reading that defies harmful generalizations about all Romani women being witches while at the same time not denying that some of them may, indeed, have magical powers.

The fairy-tale genre relies on magic and superstition. Here I could explore more the connections with magical realism, but time, unfortunately, limits me. The Roma also often use the fairy-tale genre to manipulate the widely held stereotypes about the Roma's connection with mystical forces and to add such equivocal interpretations as in "The Greedy Beggar." The stories that storyteller Reinhold Lagrene relates exploring his Sinti heritage continue to prove the significant role that magic plays in tales, if even to make the non-Roma world appear laughable and dumb. A leitmotif that relies on the relationship between the oppressed and the dominant culture reveals a self-inflicted identification of the Sinti with forces of evil. According to Lagrene, Sinti stories take this prejudicial identification of the Roma with evil and ironically turn it around to unveil the ignorance and superstition of the majority culture. Through the character of the young trickster Chinto Mari, the Sinti inject whimsy into their actions.

In the tale Lagrene recounts, entitled "The Story of Chinto Mari," the actions of protagonist Chinto Mari's mother create this twist (Lagrene "Anhang"). When Chinto Mari refuses to take a bath, he runs away from home naked and tries to hide in a barrel. The first barrel that he climbs into is full of tar, and the second one is full of feathers. When he tries to remove the tar and feathers first from his head, his hair stays sticking up, so that he looks like he has horns. When he searches for food in a farmer's house, the farmer spies him and thinks he is the devil. The farmer offers a truckload of food to any person who can exorcise the devil from the farmhouse. The local priest tries to accomplish this task by spraying the house with holy water, but Chinto Mari stays in the house. When Chinto Mari's mother hears about the commotion, she knows immediately that her son must have been at the root of the brouhaha. She feigns possession of secret powers that she offers to use to rid the house of the devil. The narrator tells the audience of her plan, which accomplishes its exact intention; namely, her scheme makes the non-Roma appear comic in their ignorance and unfounded superstition:

> She went to the farmer—a whole wagon full of food and drink, in addition to a lump of cash that they all could use—and advised the farmers that they should let her try to free them from the bad spirits because she knew an age-old curse that her great grandmother had once told her while on a pilgrimage to Rome, which she herself had received from the Pope (which naturally was not true, but out of fear for her son she saw no other possibility than to claim this in order to enter the house). ("Anhang" 108)

Chinto Mari's mother employs several main devices that have characterized the Roma, including wagons bearing items that the Gadže need; connections with supernatural forces; traveling pilgrimages; and legitimacy bestowed on her by a religious power. Her inner thoughts admitting the falsity of her claims unveil how the Roma can play with standard images to trick the Gadže.

From outside the house, Chinto Mari's mother communicates with Chinto Mari as the devil in Romany, who no one else understands. She tells him of the danger he is in and warns him that if he does not respond, then someone will burn the house down with him in it. The father, whom the narrator says has purposely remained distant from the entire scene, realizes that Chinto Mari cannot expose himself yet to the crowd, for then the farmers would become the laughingstock of the town for having believed he was the devil. That reaction could have grave consequences for Chinto Mari's parents, whom the townspeople would blame for making them look like fools. For that reason, the father sneaks around the back of the house and helps his son dress in his regular clothes. The son and the father then walk out through the crowd as if neither of them has been involved in the whole calamity. The mother, in the meantime, goes into the house, moves the

chairs, tables, and dresser around, and throws around plates and cups as if she is chasing away the devil. She emerges from the house disheveled, and the crowd cowers before her in fear of the magical powers that have allowed her to rid the house of the devil. Subsequently, however, instead of praising and thanking the Sinti family, the townspeople avoid them, believing that they have cavorted with the evil devil. Eventually the ostracized family moves away.

In this story the woman becomes the savior for the son, but ultimately she cannot save the entire family from ostracism. Again, an ambiguous ending leaves the Romani woman as rescuing the town from what it believed were evil supernatural forces only to face alienation for herself and her family because she supposedly possessed magical powers herself. Such tales ultimately then question stereotypes that divide the world into the good and the bad and the place that Roma take in that schema. They hark back to the centuries-old equation of women with malevolent magical powers and the consequences of such connections. The amusing story of trickery creates a snowball effect that results tragically in the family's forced departure from the town. The ultimate irony is that the woman merely feigns having such powers and thus does not really stand on one side of the dichotomy or the other.

As with such tales as "The Greedy Beggar" that display stereotypes while also attempting to dispel them, the metaphor of truth and veracity in "The Story of Chinto Mari" seems to be a direct manifestation of the Roma's attempts to straddle their own individual cultures with the mainstream one while also showing diversity among Roma.[8] Romani storytellers adapt ideas from their own cultural contexts to fit the worlds in which they have lived and in which they are living. And conversely, they transform ideas and stories from the non-Romani cultures through use of materials from Romani cultures. For this reason, we could apply Homi Bhabha's concept of "cultural hybridity" to the double position of Romani culture, as Michaela Grobbel does in her essay on Romani autobiographies, in that Romani culture forms part of the dominant culture at the same time that it remains outside. The tales of the Roma reflect, to cite from Bhabha, "a movement away from a world conceived in binary terms, away from a notion of the people's aspirations sketched in simple black and white" (*The Location of Culture* 14-15). Avoidance of a black-and-white model opens doors for questioning norms and moral codes of behavior.

Still, readers and listeners must not ignore the strong influence of the individual storyteller on the events in the story. In this way, the Roma do not necessarily stand merely "between" cultures, to borrow from Leslie Adelson's position "against betweenness." According to Adelson, by existing in a realm of "betweenness," a culture may appear somehow eternally stuck in the middle, flanked by two static cultures whose characteristics are immutable.[9] Such is not the case in the storytelling process that goes on when individual

narrators orate and perform. Lagrene emphasizes the important role that the Romani storyteller plays in building and transforming the story, continually devising twists and turns that make audiences think. Both the oral nature and the mixture of the real and the fantastical in Romani tales help to explain the often nonlinear, open-ended, ambiguous nature of many tales, characteristics that readers of more traditional fairy tales have historically found confusing and illogical.

One story by the marvelous storyteller Ceija Stojka, to whom I also dedicate this talk, plays especially with ambiguous relationships between the sexes and erotic references. "Why the Rom Stayed with His Wife" (*Fern von uns im Traum* 10-17) is the tale of an eternally sad and serious princess whose father promises to offer her in marriage to any man who can make her laugh. This tale has many variations in collections of Western storytelling (Aarne 559). In Ceija Stojka's version, the king offers money for the winner, and her protagonist is a poor, dirty Rom with a wife and many children. Financial necessity spurs him to try his luck. He is able to make the princess laugh through a kind of striptease on top of his old oven that he has transported with him to the castle. Both the father and daughter are delighted; the father is so impressed that he asks the Rom to marry his daughter along with receiving the riches. The Rom is already married, and he knows that his wife and seven children are waiting for him to return with the riches he has won. Thus, instead of agreeing to marry the princess right away and move into the castle, the Rom asks to live with her in a container on the water so that they can swim together.

For six weeks the two swim in the water and eat and sleep in the container, leaving the reader to wonder how such an adulterous relationship fits into the moral system of the Roma. The Rom in Ceija Stojka's story does eventually begin to think about his wife and children, however, and sees them in his dreams, with his wife sewing and taking care of the children. The king does not want the Rom to leave and locks him up in the castle. But the Rom manages to escape back to his wife, who prepares for him a meal of fried beans and semolina. He relishes the dinner and compliments her on the delicious, crunchy cracklings from the fat in the meal. The final irony, however, is that the crunchiness that the man found so scrumptious was not from cracklings but rather from beetles that had crawled into the food.

The many sexual innuendoes in this tale threaten to defy the usual gender norms in many Romani cultures, such as those restraining sexual references and favoring loyalty between husband and wife. The man performs a striptease whose underlying intent is to seduce the princess. He commits a form of adultery by absconding with her in a barrel. He does eventually return to his wife, who gains the upper hand by informing him of his folly in mistaking insects for food. In the end, humor lightens up the message, as the

tale concludes by speaking in favor of marital fidelity on the husband's part. Again, as in "The Greedy Beggar," food plays a major role, whether as ultimate reward or as punishment.

In several stories the sexual body parts are actual characters, thus adding elements of fantasy and humor to otherwise gruesome endings. "The 'Daughter,'" for example, involves women's genitalia as a farcical means to reinforce the loyal love of the husband for his wife (*Kerzen und Limonen* 56-57). The story involves a man and a woman who are married. The man does not want to leave the woman at all, so day in and day out he sits by her. Finally the woman tells him to go out into the forest, or to go out and earn some money to bring home. The man says he does not want to leave the woman, to which she replies that she will cut off her "*Tochter*" (her "daughter") and put her in a box for him to take with him. Obviously, "daughter" is a euphemism for vulva, for later in the story she refers to her "*Geschlecht*" ("sexual part"). The woman does indeed cut off her "daughter" and put her in a box for the man to carry with him. The man goes out into the forest with the box and cuts wood diligently. Soon, however, he yearns for the "daughter." He opens the box and a mouse ("*die Maus*," which is also feminine) springs out.[10] He calls out to the mouse not to run away, and his penis ("*sein Pimmel*") also beckons her not to run away. The man chases the mouse, which runs home. When his wife sees him she asks what happened. The man explains that the mouse has run home, and that he has yearned so much for his wife that he has followed the mouse home, but now the mouse is gone. His wife reassures him that the mouse has returned to her place, and indeed, when the man checks, he sees that "she" is again at home.

Such stories reveal the bawdy (both bawdy and body) humor that often surfaces in Romani folktales. As the editors of *Fern von uns im Traum* explain in the collection's epilogue, the frequent use of sexual organs for this humor is not obscene or vulgar but rather quite straightforward and matter-of-fact. The ease with which the Romani female narrators reference the sexual organs in this playful, often fantastical manner suggests that storytelling may originally have been a means to counterbalance the strict social and moral pressures present in conservative Romani groups.

In "The Priest and the Devil," for example, sexual jokes connect with the common theme of outwitting the devil (*Fern von uns im Traum* 38-39). In this particular story, a priest cavorts with women and girls, and for that reason, the devil comes to fetch him. The priest asks for one more chance, which the devil gives him, stipulating that the priest has to show him something that the devil has never seen before. The priest surveys his goat and his servant girl, who weighs 120 kilos, or 265 pounds. He undresses the servant girl and brings her into the goat's stall and takes the goat out. He asks the girl to get down on

all fours and stand in the goat's stall. Then he lays a chain around her neck. The devil comes at the promised time, and the priest tells him to look around. The devil is amazed because he has never seen a goat that looks like the one he sees in the stall. He exclaims: "'She has utters in front and a beard in back!'" (*Fern von uns im Traum* 39). He lets the priest live and says good-bye.

Lest the reader think that women's sexuality and genitalia serve only as targets of jokes in the narrations, one must examine several tales that focus on clever women who outwit figures of authority, in most cases male, in a very sexual manner. In the last story I have to tell today "And I, Where Do I Go?" (*Kerzen und Limonen* 46-53), a Rom has many children, but he is unable to find work. One evening his wife instructs him to go to a coffeehouse the next day and to stay there and not come home until eleven o'clock at night. In the meantime, she states, she will go and earn some money.

The next morning, the wife first goes to the hairdresser, who fixes her hair but then begins to fondle her and joke with her and then he asks her when he should come to see her. She tells him to come punctually at eight o'clock. She then goes to the grocery store. She flirts with the grocer, and he asks her when he should come to see her. She tells him to come punctually at nine o'clock. She then visits the mayor. She flirts with him, and he asks her when he should come to see her. She tells him to come punctually at ten o'clock. The hairdresser arrives at eight o'clock, and the wife pretends to be cooking dinner, and then she begins to iron. As the iron is heating up, she asks the hairdresser to undress down to his underpants and shirt, and stalls until nine o'clock, when the grocer knocks on the door. She tells the hairdresser that her husband has come home. When the hairdresser asks what he should do, she instructs him to go out the window, telling him that she will throw his clothes out after him. As he climbs out the window, she steals the money from his clothes, and she irons his behind.

The same events occur when the grocer arrives: she asks him to undress down to his underclothes, and she stalls for time until the mayor knocks at ten o'clock. She tells the grocer that her husband is home and to escape through the window, but as he is fleeing, she steals his money and brands him on the behind with the iron. Likewise, when the mayor is with her, she tells him to undress to his underclothes, and she stalls until eleven o'clock, when her husband arrives home. As the mayor is escaping through the window, the wife steals his money and brands him too with the iron. She now has the clothes with the money of all three men. The next day, the hairdresser and the grocer go to the mayor to complain, only to find out that he has a similar story and a scalded behind as well. The tale concludes with the assertion, "Above all, she is a clever woman" (53). Here, the woman is not a victim but rather an active agent in gaining money for her family to survive.

In all her flirting and invitations to engage in extramarital affairs, the wife in this story suggestively breaks with the moral and ethical codes of gender behavior that characterize Romani groups, which often demand marital fidelity from both the wife and the husband. In the end, of course, this wife does remain true to her husband, and she does acquire the necessary money to feed her family. Thus, her behavior implies that circumstances in which the woman can at least bend such codes do sometimes arise, especially when the woman's actions involve the family's welfare. The woman does not need to stand by passively while her family languishes. When the survival of the family is at stake, she can gain honor by distorting sexual taboos. She can also play with the boundaries that dictate her sexual behavior without overstepping those boundaries.

Various scholars have demonstrated how the binary opposites prevalent in fairy tales—good and evil; men and women; children and adults; animals and humans; country and city; Caucasians and people of color—have served as models for countries in the process of building their national, and often nationalistic identities. The construction of that identity frequently involves developing racial, sexual, ethnic, or national traits that differentiate one nation from another.[11] In the fairy tales by Roma examined here, binary opposites exist—between the Roma and the non-Roma worlds, men and women, animals and humans, lower and upper classes—but the equation of good and bad to the individual sides is not always clear. From the opening of tales with lines such as "It was because it wasn't," the listener or reader is warned to expect paradoxes, inconsistencies, and open-endedness. By concluding with an equally equivocal proclamation—"There the bad, here the good"—the storyteller fulfills those expectations. The audience or reader often receives no clear message but rather is left to contemplate the many meanings in the tales. Storytelling offers Roma, a people who have not been included in the process of nation building, a familiar resource with which they can fantasize and envision a world lacking in binary opposites. Storytelling becomes a means to break down limiting stereotypes, assert social critique, and sustain hope for cultural connections during life's and history's difficult stages.

As I pay homage to those whom I have lost, I also value the stories they have left behind—in Wolfgang's case, the many books, articles, and conference papers; in my mother's case, the decades of letters; and in Ceija Stojka's case, autobiographies, stories, poems, and artworks. Every day brings a new story, and every story brings a new day. May you always remember, as the Romani adage in the title of my talk claims, "If we didn't have this story, we would not have this day." To that wise saying I would add, "If we did not have this story, we would not have these people."

NOTES

The quote in the title is from the story "Der rote Gažo" in *Fern von uns im Traum*, 93. All translations are mine in this presidential address delivered at the 1 Nov. 2013 meeting of the PAMLA in San Diego.

1. The historian Joan Scott applies this quality of hope in storytelling to an analysis of the work of Natalie Zemon Davis, an American and Canadian historian of the early modern period, highly praised for her book *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Joan Scott sees Davis as "a quintessential storyteller" whose work "decenters history not simply because it grants agency and so historical visibility to those who have been hidden from history or left on its margins, but also because her stories reveal the complexities of human experience and so challenge the received categories with which we are accustomed to thinking about the world" (203). Storytelling also has a long tradition in Jewish culture epitomizing hope in times of distress. See Schram's essay "Elijah's Cup of Hope: Healing Through the Jewish Storytelling Tradition."
2. I thank Kurt Silverman for sending me an electronic copy of this book.
3. Sources of information on the history of Roma are too numerous to list here. For general introductions see Angus Fraser's *The Gypsies*, Ian Hancock's *We are the Romani people*, and Donald Kenrick's *Gypsies: From the Ganges to the Thames*.
4. For historical accounts of Roma in Austria and Germany see works by Gilsenbach, Halwachs, Haupt, Hohmann, and Tebbutt, and the website *Rombase*.
5. See works by Claudia Breger and Klaus-Michael Bogdal in particular for discussions about images of Roma in European literature.
6. Ian Hancock points out the difficulties with documenting the actual numbers of Sinti and Roma victims of the Nazi "*Porrajmos*" (the word in the Romany language that Roma use to identify the Nazi persecution) Holocaust including the lack of accurate records and scholarly interest to investigate thoroughly ("'Uniqueness' of the Victims" 54–57). A commonly stated estimate of the number of Sinti and Roma killed by the Nazi regime in Europe was 250,000. Hancock has, however, argued that the figure may be as high as 1.5 million ("Gypsy History in Germany and Neighboring Lands" 20). The scholar Michael Zimmerman places that figure lower, stating that the number of Romani victims of Nazi Germany totaled 50,000 people, 15,000 of whom were German Romani. To this, one should add the number of Roma killed in fascist regimes in Croatia and Romania, which most likely exceed 35,000. These figures then add up to 90,000, but Zimmermann suggests that the total number of victims might exceed these figures (*Rassenutopie und Genozid* 284–92, Lewy 221–22). Figures currently supported by many German Sinti and Roma organizations, including the Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum der Sinti und Roma in Heidelberg, are half a million (Rose 16). Perhaps more significant than actual numbers is the percentage killed, which in estimates ranges from 50 to 70

percent of the estimated pre-war Romani population, depending on what regions one includes (Hancock "'Uniqueness'" 55.)

7. For an analysis of the motifs of food and foodways in Ceija Stojka's works, see my essay "How to Cook a Hedgehog: Ceija Stojka and Romani ("Gypsy") Cultural Identity Through the Culinary Literary Arts."
8. Essays by Wogg, Cech, and Fennesz-Juhasz, and by Cech, Heinschink, and Halwachs in the three collections of Romani tales rely on Aarne and Thompson's classifications to categorize the Romani tales when appropriate.
9. Carol Silverman presents a cogently nuanced and critically useful discussion of theories of hybridity in relation to Romani music (*Romani Routes* 42–47).
10. The mouse is also a literary sexual symbol, the most prominent appearance being in Goethe's *Faust*, during the *Walpurgisnacht* scene in which Faust witnesses a mouse coming out of a witch's mouth.
11. Other scholars have pointed to the role of literature in general, and especially that in the nineteenth century in Germany, in creating a national and even nationalistic identity. See, for example, Amann and Wagner, Anderson, Fishman, Kontje, and Schenda. I am indebted to Gabi Kathöfer for these references.

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