

"WHAT ARE THEY WRITING ABOUT US BLACKS?" ROMA AND "RACE" IN RUSSIA.

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What does it mean to be "black" (*chernyi*) in Russia? Here I will not attempt a history or genealogy of Russian ideas about blackness; instead, I analyze Romani accounts that reveal various ways "blackness" can be constructed in Russia. This essay turns upon Romani (Gypsy)¹ accounts of social interactions with Russians in which being "black" was an issue. Roma, besides themselves subscribing to and negotiating within many of the prevalent categories, also reverse the valence of blackness or make shifting alignments with other groups also defined as "black."

A "black" complexion marks "race" in Russia in the sense that it externally marks biologically essentialized identities. What complicates matters for racial purists is that color can not always serve as a criteria of boundaries crucial to them: not all Roma, for instance, are actually very dark. "Blackness," as many writers have already argued,² is constructed culturally. The lines of race, with "blackness" as its cipher, are drawn with reference to many standards, cultural concerns, and political agendas.³

In Russia, a "black" is, among other meanings, a person whom many North Americans probably would describe as "ethniclooking" people with "olive" skin and dark eyes and hair.⁴ However, in Russia as in many other places, "race" also is linked to categories that can be connected via tropes of generation or "blood" and thus mobilized in political arguments, as in this recent issue of one of the many nationalist newspapers in the capital: "The highest goal of the government must be to preserve that racial nucleus which alone can create culture, beauty and all the highest values."⁵ The Russian words *natsiya* ("nation" and "nationality") and *natsionalnost'* ("nationality" or "ethnicity") indeed often substitute for "race."⁶ These concerns with race and nation also often are layered with economic and moral statements about the poverty of the Russian people, who are said to inhabit a vast country rich in natural resources but tapped by foreigners.

The issue of "blackness" first emerged as significant to my research in 1990. I had been riding the Moscow metro with a Romani man, the husband of a Romani ethnographer, and had asked him why people were

looking at us in a hostile way. He replied, "because you are white and I am black." His wife later denied that this was the reason, stating that categories of race or racism did not apply in the Soviet Union: "Racism is something you have in America." This was several years after glasnost had begun, but the Soviet press for so long had depicted the evil colonial forces of capitalist countries and commonwealths as racist, it was still difficult to deal with the issue at home. Four years later, another Russian scholar told me that the term "race" imposed a foreign category upon Russian social life. It is not my intent to transpose histories of slavery and repression on the American continents to Eurasia but to untangle how signs of "blood," "blackness," are used in Russia in specific ways to explain behavior, culture, and social position as biologically determined. Even relations of exchange thus become a matter of race.

Russian poetic and dramatic imagery fixates on the blackness of Gypsy heroines and heroes. One of the most popular of "Gypsy songs" is titled "Black eyes" (*Ochi Chiorie*).⁷ The song was written by a Russian but became associated with Gypsies through performance. Many Romani performers are careful to point out that it is not a "real Romani song" but one meant for Russians, for the stage, although they all know the song and may be proud of their own rendition of it. But in public culture, the song stands for "Gypsies."

Although many romanticize and eroticize the hypnotic black gaze, in other moments they implicate it as sinister. "Do you know what dark eyes mean?" said a Russian trying to dissuade me from talking to Gypsies, "Such people have sway over others they have more e.s.p. (*extrasens*)." In an extension of this allusion to Gypsy power, another Russian said of more mundane, economic "crimes" that "Gypsies can make you hand over money without even realizing it it's like they hypnotize you."

Besides the visible signs of "race" complexion, eyes, even clothing, as we see below there are less visible *natsional'nie cherty* ("national traits") which are said to lie *v krovi* ("in the blood"). Russians say of Gypsies that "trading is in their blood," "stealing horses is in their

blood," "metal working" (or "metal" itself) is "in their blood."⁸ "Artistic talent," especially dancing, also is said to lie "in the blood," passed along through the generations. Even communistera Gypsy films and stage productions assert this: in the Moscow Romani Theater adaptation of Kalinin's novel, *Gypsy*, a Gypsy World War II hero, Budulei, searches for his family after the war. He stays at a collective farm and meets a boy who turns out to be his son. The boy's adoptive mother conceals his "true" identity and claims that a Tatar grandfather gave him his "swarthy face." Yet he reveals his blood when he learns "Gypsy dance" from visiting Gypsy youths he picks up the steps instantly, "instinctively." His father thereby recognizes his own "blood" just as immediately. The proof was in the performance, the irony here being that Russians usually consider Romani performers less genuinely Gypsy than "wild" metal workers or travelers.

Many Roma in Russia, whether they are professional performers or not, have profoundly internalized that dance talent and musicality, the dances themselves, are "inherited." This seems selfevident because children of famous singers follow their parents into the profession, and ensembles are often familybased. Through the proof of performance, and reference to that wellknown "Gypsy song," one urban Romani performer was able to escape misplaced antiSemitism:

Discrimination there isn't any of that. Haven't I told you yet how it saved me that I am a Gypsy? I am on the bus, and a drunk, a Russian was hovering near me. He said, "Huh, here! Kikes! Jews! We should just kill them all!" and he came up closer he held his hand over me. And I look at him and I say, [she illustrates with a shoulder shimmy] "I'm a Gypsy!" He fell on his knees then and started to sing the song, "Black eyes..." and I answered him "Passionate eyes..." and the bus stopped, and I ran away!

In this telling, she denied "discrimination," the social asymmetries entailed by being black: having "black eyes" was useful, as long as she was not mistaken for another kind of nonRussian.

Roma in Russia also speak of blackness as among the criteria of a "true Gypsy." While they may emphasize that "we also have people with green eyes or pale skin," some tease such Roma, calling them *Gazhe* (nonRoma).⁹ The blackness category is learned and was overtly taught in a Romani Sundayschool for children of urban, intellectual,

and performing Roma in Moscow. The children had been assigned to draw "a Gypsy girl." At the end of the lesson, the teacher picked up two sample pictures, one of a girl with a light face, the other dark, and asked the children which was better, then explaining: "Of course the dark one [is better]. Again why? Because here we have a clear image ..." The Romani children, themselves of varying complexions, did not all automatically draw darkfaced Gypsy girls. Note that, in this case, darkness was not necessarily negative; as I hope will be clear, there is room for ambivalence, especially among Roma.

Applause for inherited talent and other positive valuations of blackness may not compensate, however, for the problems of actually being seen by Russians as "black" in daily life. Other Roma, especially those who are not performers, are more cynical about the meaning of "being black." A Keldelari¹⁰ welder noted that, once Russians identify a person as "black," they expect a whole array of transgressions, especially economic crimes:

All Russians care about is whether you're black or white. And if you're black you are obviously a speculator. Say I go in and I need to buy a lot of linoleum (He points to the new house he is building, and then at the ruined linoleum of the floor of his current house), say I need 30 sheets! They look at me and think for sure I'm just going to resell it, maybe they don't even give it to me.

"We are blacks," he also told me, stressing that "we are treated like second class here, like your Blacks in America." This phrasing may be considered the "importation" of a "foreign" category, but this man's way of describing his experience does not negate its reality to him.

Younger Roma display a fascination with the music and dress of American "Blacks" on MTV that rivals their fascination with Russians. Those of wealthier, merchant Lovari¹¹ families, especially, trace their identification with American Blacks not in terms of defeat or second-classness, as did the Keldelari metalworker, but in terms of an "attitude" that they say they can detect in expressions and movements of American musicians that renders them "like us." They also equate blackness with America (as in, "the statue of liberty isn't that where Michael Jackson dances in the video?") and see America as "better then Russia." Thus they reverse the valence of blackness and shift their own place in racial hierarchies:

Roma, if more like American blacks, and thus more like Americans, must be better than Russians.

Most Russians do not share this positive equation between Roma and America that Roma create via "blackness." In an elevated mood, a Russian might agree that Roma are "like American Negri"¹² for their ability to "musically improvise." In daily life, however, blackness is a category loaded with suspicion, and Gypsies are but another example of clannish "blacks" who inhabit the markets and survive by "shady deals." "Black" is thus a shade of economic activity: a "black" can be one who participates in the "black market."

It is probably commonplace to draw a connection between ethnic paranoid images of exchange. However, in an article tellingly titled, "Gypsies Wander in Volvos: their Way of Life as a Mirror to Our Economy," the following citation from a Russian newspaper illustrates how such paranoia unfolds in Russia in connection with Gypsies:

Mikhail Sergeevich [Gorbachev] made perhaps the greatest gift to the Gypsy people with his antialcohol legislation. Crowds of the thirsty in every city and backwood were drawn to their Gypsy brothers: in Moscow, for instance, to the train stations, in Maloiaroslav, to the railroad bridge. Here you could buy from these possessors of black eyes your favorite forbidden drink at any time of the day or night. If you will, this was when the capital of several families crawled into the first million ...¹³

To make a more general and graphic connection between images of exchange and racial outsiders in Russia, I draw upon a vignette from the early winter of 1991. Despite the talk of "democratic" and "free market" reforms, food was more scarce than the year before; even bread was hard to find. Older Muscovites who remembered the material hardships of the Second World War said, "Now times are as bad as during the blockade, as bad as during the war," and others described contemporary Moscow with tropes of war: "Moscow has been invaded; Russia is being taken over." Some meant music videos in English and foreign businessmen. However, more upsetting to many was an "invasion" by *litsa kavkazkogo natsional'nosti* ("people of Caucasian nationality" and, more colloquially, "Southerners" or "Blacks").

"*Litsa*" translates literally as "faces" and also means "individuals." *Litso* (sing.), however, easily takes on

derogatory shades from phrases such as *zhidskaia morda*, or *tsyganskaia morda* ("Kike mug," "Gypsy mug").¹⁴ At any rate, nationalist Russians cited, as representative of this "invasion," the lines of peddlers with goods spread on card tables in the park next to the first Moscow MacDonald's, across from Pushkin's monument. Forgetting stories about Pushkin's African grandparent (as well as his poems romanticizing the Caucasus and Gypsies), they described the hawkers as "desecrating" this emblem of the Russian nation.¹⁵ These hawkers were Georgian, Armenian, Romani, and other non-Russian traders who long had been prominent at the semiofficial and illegal markets. By 1991, the Caucasian contingent had expanded their trade to include foreign cigarettes, liquor, cosmetics and clothing, and now seemed to sell on every street and in every metro station. Certainly Russians were just as active in informal trade. However, they had more access to the newly formed commodity exchanges in the capital and were better positioned to take over official stores and set up joint ventures. Non-Russian non-Muscovites, however, had nowhere to set up shop but in the streets and kiosks lining them, and thus they also were more visible.¹⁶ That winter, the Russian press seized upon an incident involving two Armenians and an Azeri taxi driver. In a dispute over fares, the Azeri driver was killed. The articles reinforced Russian constructions of hottempered and violent Caucasians embroiled in endless feuds among "clans." These images substituted for real analysis or recognition of non-Russian demands for linguistic autonomy or statehood, which were in any case resented in association with the breakup of the former Soviet empire. Histories and cultures were submerged in popular discourses linking "blood" with trade and criminality.

For some months after this incident, Russian cabdrivers refused to pick up people who looked like "southerners." In Russia, as in many other places, race is constructed culturally in a way that overlaps it with other categories of social life, and the visible signs of race and kind can be other than complexion. "Blacks" also can be marked by style, by a certain kind of dress. In that year, traders and the new rich preferred silks and rayons cut into baggy pants or long slim skirts; such clothes, especially if worn with gold jewelry or teeth, also marked a person as "black" in both the market and racial sense of the term. Because some Roma, especially Lovari, in addition to being "swarthy" do not dress in the fashion of Gypsies in films but in these same rayons and silks, Russians

confused them with Armenians or Georgians. Thus the taxidrivers would not pick up Roma either.

In the weeks after the original taxi incident, a teenage girl from a welltodo merchant Lovari Romani family recounted the following:

... Since the Azeri thing, taxi drivers don't want to take blacks. You can stand for an hour, and no one will stop. If you dress well not like Russians it means you are black. Once me and my cousins were going home at midnight. We finally got a car used our best Gypsy accent, "We are Gypsies!" (*"My Tsygane!"*) and reassured him, "Gypsies always pay!" It was boring in the cab, so our brothers started joking, "You stupid Russian we're really Georgians, we're fooling you!" "Get out of my cab!" He left us right there, and we stood for an hour! Those girls cursed their brothers!

To avoid being mistaken for the wrong kind of "blacks," they had to "pass" as a version of themselves.

Gypsies are described with great regularity as quintessential "tricksters," as always masquerading and disappearing. However, Roma do not alter their outward identities because they have a peculiar cultural tradition for doing so. Pragmatic shifting or masking is possible, even sometimes required, because blackness is itself already a "shifter."¹⁷

"Blackness" is a slippery category. It is inescapable because supposedly unchanging features mark it, but it also is indefinite, both because it umbrellas so many "kinds," whose actual members may be aware of other distinctions, and because the meaning of "blackness" overlaps changing moral, market, and national identities and thus its definition changes with them. Blackness also is first constructed as "they" (in line with say, national interests), and after that becomes a possible "we" and may become a powerful, if momentary, focus of weness.

Many have argued that Roma are adept at "masking" in Goffman's sense, with the qualification that because they are marginal they must do so. Certainly the Lovari teenagers found themselves, for once, less despised than another minority, and it was to their advantage to portray themselves not as Caucasians but as Gypsies. However, what alternative is there to "masking," survival or no survival, when the majority population can never seem to get one's identity "straight" in the first place?¹⁸ The

Roma in this case began with the social fact that they were misrecognized. When the Romani youth claimed to be Georgian after convincing the driver that they were Gypsies, he was making a play on Gypsy identity as non-Roma imagine it, taking revenge on Russians who did not recognize Romaniness as any different from Georgianness.

At the same time, Roma also do identify with other "blacks," both in irony and in earnest. What then does it mean to be "black" among other blacks? This is how the Lovari girl continued her narrative:

Once we couldn't get a cab at all, so we took the metro. We saw how all the Gazhe (Russians, nonRoma) were reading, and my cousin started saying, "What are they writing? What are they writing?" They thought he was crazy. All the other black people, Armenians and such, were smiling; they knew. "What are they writing about us Blacks, eh?" One old lady said, "They are writing that we need to kill you all, that you are robbing us, and we are becoming poor." Then another Black said, "We should kill you." My brother laughed and he said, "No, no, you don't have to kill her this is a good, fat, Russian woman." We laughed so hard, we had to get off the train there!

"What are they writing about us blacks?" The question less requested information than it referred to, indexed, the asymmetry of a relationship to the majority that was shared by "us blacks" at that time. That is, speaking of being shut out by print was a way of expressing how all the blacks on the train at that moment experienced a non-imagined anticommunity as nonRussians. This is of course a pun upon Anderson's formulation of imagined communities (1983), only here denizens of the nationstate were watching the progress of print from the margins.

This exclusion was not because these Roma could not read what was written about them contrary to stereotypes of the illiterate Gypsy, many Roma in Russia can read, and certainly many younger people of the Lovari groups can read not only Russian, but English. The point is more about the control of language, control of infrastructure, and exclusion from networks of bureaucracy, including print media. As another instance of language as exclusive, and thus constituting "kinds": after the Lovari girl had told me about the taxi drivers, I recounted that a Russian woman had seen me bargaining in the market with a Georgian. She had heard both of our accents and rolled her eyes, saying, "They understand each other!" This

story made her laugh heartily, "Yes, you are like us a foreigner here too..." Language here is a marker of common exclusion, as being written about was emblematic of other exclusions, in politics, in the market, on public transport.

Take then as well the Rom who is said to have written his "name" down in his Russian passport as "Melalo Kalo" which translates into Romani as "Dirty Black." This joke had a double, disemic19 twist: the Roma could name himself as stereotypically "black," but in a language that no Russian bureaucrat could understand. At the same time, we have seen that Roma do think of themselves as black but not in the way that one might expect. Such irony, expressed in the control of language, is fiercely engaged, not detached: it is a statement about being bound, because of another's nonrecognition, to the anonymity of the being "black."

Textnotes

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1. Roma sometimes use names such as "Gypsies" or "Tsygane" (Russian), even among themselves. The Roma I know usually use such terms either ironically or else to cater to nonRomani listeners who do not know the Romani term. I try to preserve this sense here by using

"Gypsy" when the speaker is a Russian or is a Romani person speaking in the above senses. I use "Roma" when the speaker is Romani or when I am narrating. I hope this way both to keep the analysis clear and to give a sense of the shading of stereotype in discourse. This is not to say that Roma never sincerely use the term "Gypsy" to refer to themselves. However, it is clearer not to use the words haphazardly, as if Roma made no distinction between them, even if that distinction may idealize oppositions of "true" vs. "ersatz" Roma, a debate over which there is no space to describe here.

2. See, for instance, Hall, 1992: "What this [cultural construction of race] brings into play is the recognition of the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experiences of black subjects" (p. 254). Hall here is concerned also with the politics and "relations of representation," taking part in an ongoing debate that in its wider trajectory has of course influenced the shape of this paper, although I am not able here to fully engage cultural studies or critical theory.

3. On ways criteria of racial boundaries align with national ideologies and notions of class (along with moral reputability and gender) see, for instance, Ann Stoler, 1992; Joel Strieker, 1995.

4. The terms *temnyi* ("dark") and *smuglyi* ("swarthy") may substitute as descriptors, and it may be that *chernyi*, ("black") only recently has become a common term describing complexion. However, rather than isolate it as a crucial keyterm, I use it only to begin to discuss its meaning in a social system in which some people experience a color bar.

5. *Shturmovik*, 1995, (p.2).

6. As it did in another statement in the same issue from the Russian National Union (p.1): "... there are even people who ... rush to mix with the Jewish natsia and expect all kinds of beneficial results ... a man and wife who are both Russian and happen to want healthy, racially whole children are automatically labeled fascists ..." Certainly this is only a faction among Russians, but I have heard intellectuals and nonextremists express similar ideas about Stalin's decimation of the Russian nation and the need to rehabilitate the genepool with the best of Russian intellect.

7. The song is about dangerous, sensual magnetism, romantic and exotic: "Black eyes, passionate eyes, burning and magnificent eyes, how I fear you, how I love you ..."

8. These are not metaphors for the ingrainedness of a long habit. This is clear in the way one Russian judge in an interview transposed the popular notion of blood into a scientific register: "... It's in their genes ... Do they understand their place in society? God found them useful, so they have a right to live. But their life is difficult ... and their genes make them unable to work."

9. One Romani girl in Moscow with auburn hair dyed it black, while the mother of another with blond hair was constantly explaining that the girl was indeed "truly Romani."

10. There are at least ten different "dialect groups" or "nations" of Roma in Russia. Space prevents me from describing them or their relations here, which I address in other papers. Keldelari are among the Vlachs-speaking Romani groups.

11. Another Vlach Romani nation.

12. This is not necessarily a derogatory term.

13. *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, 2 June, 1995.

14. Litso is the term for human faces, morda for animal.

15. See issues of Den' in 1992 and 1993, for some of the more virulent public attacks on "blacks" and "speculators."

16. Moreover, they had no residence permits, and thus no *vizitki*, the identification cards shoppers had to show to cashiers in state shops. The card was intended to limit the purchase of shortage goods to registered Muscovites. Cashiers often asked those with darker skin to show these cards, while they would hand a paler "Russian" her receipt straight away.

17. Not unlike the way deictic terms such as "here," "there," and "we" do not stand for some definite object but shift reference, depending on the speaker. See Silverstein (1976).

18. Humphrey (1993) describes Russians who misrecognize Tajik and other refugees at train stations, telling her that they were "Gypsies."

19. Of course, Romani "selfknowledge" of themselves as "Roma" and as "Gypsies" is just as constructed and disputed as anything outsiders believe they see of "Gypsies." The point is that while selfknowledge is not necessarily more true, it is supposed to be "known only by us about us," and that thus stereotypes that can be deployed in various, and sometimes ambivalent, ways. See Herzfeld (1987) on disemia and the double-edged and ambivalent possibilities of identity in Greece.

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