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Countering European Aphasia of the *Porajmos*: *Dites-le avec des Pleurs* as Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with European aphasia of the *Porajmos* (that is, the Nazi genocide of those labelled as Gypsies), the inability to link past antiziganism to the present, and how the Romani author Matéo Maximoff attempted to overcome this particular break with his semi-autobiographical novel *Dites-le avec des Pleurs*. Approaching *Dites* as an instance of autoethnographic expression, I argue that *Dites* mediates between Romani and non-Romani Europeans and between Europe's past and present.

"Who will tell the story of the Gypsy genocide?" (202). More than two decades after the late Romani author Matéo Maximoff noted down this question in his semi-autobiographical novel *Dites-le avec des Pleurs* (1990), the Nazi mass murder of those labeled as Gypsies remains largely excluded from European discourses on the Holocaust.[1] Whereas the *Porajmos*, the Romani term for what Maximoff called the Gypsy genocide, has fostered more attention over the last decade, it continues to be treated as a footnote to European history. Closely tied to this ongoing marginalization is the inability to link antiziganist measures that underpinned the *Porajmos* to current racist policies aimed against European Roma. This particular break between past and present, which anthropologist Laura Ann Stoler refers to as "aphasia," is illustrated by the aftermath of the French government's policy of expelling thousands of Roma. During the summer of 2010, Viviane Reding, the Vice-President of the European Commission, stated that the policy of expulsions of Roma from France was a disgrace and that "[d]iscrimination on the basis of ethnic origin or race has no place in Europe" (qtd. in Aubry 97). Reding went even further in her statement by linking the expulsions of Roma to the treatment of Jews under Nazism, a comparison that was quickly condemned by various European leaders. Angela Merkel, for instance, expressed that she "found the tone and especially the historical comparisons unsuitable" (Siddique). In response, Reding "expressed regret for comparing treatment of Roma with that of Jews during the Second World War" (Siddique). The simple fact that Reding condemned France's policies towards Roma because it reminded her of how Jews, instead of Roma, were treated during World War II, is symptomatic for the wider marginalization of the *Porajmos*. At the same time, her failed analogy highlights that the recent growth of attention given to this specific victim group of the Holocaust does

1. All translations from texts written in languages other than English are my own unless otherwise indicated. Following Alaina Lemon, I use the term Gypsy (without quotation marks) to indicate stereotypy and antiziganism, while usage of the plural Roma and adjective Romani refers to actual individuals or the Romani collective. All terms derived from the masculine singular Rom (which means "man" in Romanes) refer to a transnational collective, which is comprised of other subgroups that sometimes may not define themselves as Romani. I have chosen for the usage of the term Roma since it is widely used in academia and more convenient than continuously referring to the "Sinti and Roma."

not necessarily mean that antiziganist sentiments are attacked with the same vigor as antisemitic ones.

The German literary scholar Klaus-Michael Bogdal is particularly concerned about the inability to link contemporary antiziganist thought to the "unique six-hundred-years history" of the European Roma as "a group marginalized like none other" ("Europe"). Bogdal stresses that antiziganist stereotypes are figments of Europe's imagination and, more importantly, that these figments have been immensely dangerous for centuries. While the *Porajmos* was the culmination of violence perpetrated against Romani people, European Roma have served as scapegoats in the process of modernization ever since they first arrived in Europe in the Middle Ages. Arguing that Europe invented necessary "others" in the process of modernization in order to invent itself "as the agent of civilizing progress in the world" ("Europe"), Bogdal illustrates that stereotypical images of Gypsies have become engrained in European cultural memory. Following this rhetoric, including the cultural memory of the *Porajmos* might reveal "a less auspicious aspect of Europe's grand narrative of modernity" ("Europe"), for it shows that certain structures of perpetratorship not only preceded Nazism but continue to prevail in the present.

Maximoff was one of the earliest Romani activists who sought to counter European stereotypical images of Gypsies on the one hand and aimed to inscribe the *Porajmos* into European discourses on the Holocaust on the other. Shortly after World War II, during which he was interned at a concentration camp for *nomades* in Lannemezan, Maximoff sent letters to the French media, urging them to report on the suffering endured by him and his community. Paola Toninato asserts that Maximoff's internment served as a catalyst for his writing career and that his main aim was "to document the sufferings and persecution of the Roma through the ages [and that] he devote[d] particular attention to narrating the life of the Roma interned in concentration camps" (83). Especially his semi-autobiographical novel *Dites-le avec des Pleurs* (1990) aimed to represent the suffering during the *Porajmos* and its aftermath. In his attempt to achieve this goal, Maximoff created a complex work of literature that is set across the European continent. By discussing how Maximoff aimed to combat European aphasia of the

Porajmos, I propose to regard *Dites* as what Mary Louise Pratt calls an instance of "autoethnographic expression" (*Imperial* 9). Such an analysis of *Dites* shows how Maximoff opened up new possibilities for negotiating the past and present of European Roma.

Mediating Between Worlds

In the article "Arts of the Contact Zone," Pratt writes that an autoethnographic work of literature is "a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made for them" (2). These texts are not "autochthonous forms of expression or self-representations, [but rather] involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis" ("Arts" 3). Autoethnography as a genre "takes place in the margins where the so-called 'other' attempts to represent an experience of self that is at once authentic and autonomous *and* communicable" (Haake 87; emphasis in original). Along similar lines, Toninato defines autoethnography as "a strategy used by the Roma to represent themselves 'through the eyes of the other' without losing their cultural specificity" ("Translating" 233). The ways in which Roma in particular and subaltern individuals in general appropriate dominant idioms in order to achieve this goal are numerous. Although autoethnographic texts are written in the dominant language to reach a wide audience, they often include bilingual and dialogical aspects in order to "merge with, infiltrate and intervene with understandings the dominant group has constructed of [the] 'other'" (Haake 87). At the same time, however, Pratt points out that these texts are "often addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of the speaker's own social group" (*Imperial* 9), in order to open up a dialogue between both readerships.

Dites can be regarded as an autoethnography for several reasons. The title, for instance, is more than a simple alteration of a well-known French expression. Literally translated *dites-le avec des fleurs* means "say it with flowers," which appears to be a pleasant expression referring to the present of flowers as a way to express certain sentiments, printed on postal cards such as the one rediscovered by the

semi-autobiographical protagonist *Mateï*.[2] The phrase, however, is also rather sarcastic. If a person needs to share a hurtful message, *dites-le avec des fleurs* means to point out that s/he should cloak the gravity of the truth. In this light, the expression means "you better bring flowers." Shortly after we read that Mateï cried out "*dites-le avec des fleurs*!" (13), the narrator intervenes and describes, in the past tense and in cursive lettering, that Mateï collected his items and returned to his bunk, where "tears welled up in his eyes, and he cried … *dites-le avec des pleurs*!" (14). At the end of the first chapter, it is revealed that the young Rom is interned at a German concentration camp, and that he "knew that his days were numbered and his time limited, unless a miracle intervened. [He] looked at the old postcard that showed his handwriting … and could not help but cry again: *Dites-le avec des pleurs*!" (21). These first pages of *Dites* exemplify how the text works with and appropriates the dominant idiom, and can thus be seen as an autoethnographic instance, since the change from *dites-le avec des fleurs* to *dites-le avec des pleurs* alters a well-known French expression. Interpreted from the perspective of the main character, the phrase emphasizes the failure to embellish the gravity of Mateï's situation. He cannot say it with flowers and thus says it with tears. Moreover, the postcard is hopelessly out of place in the context of the camp, and reads as a bitterly ironic twist on the text of the postcard, enforcing the gravity of Mateï's situation.

Autoethnographies function on more levels than solely on language and idiom. *Dites* can, in fact, already be seen as an autoethnography, since it uses a "dominant" medium—literature—in order to inscribe the memory of the *Porajmos* into the wider discourse on the Holocaust. Still, *Dites* is not only an autoethnography because the text was written in French, but more so because Maximoff uses his insider-outsider position in order to give non-Romani audiences insights into the experiences of Roma during World War II. The narrative that focuses mostly on Mateï and his family is interspersed with photographs from

2. It is worth noting that the name of the protagonist is spelled as "Matéi" in the first few chapters, while Maximoff changes this spelling throughout the rest of the novel into "Mateï." Since the latter version is used more often I will use this spelling. There is no indication that the two characters differ from each other. Maximoff offers no explanation for this change of spelling.

the 1960s of European Roma, an historical essay on the *Porajmos* written by a scholar, a set of fictional testimonies near the end of the work, and, as the conclusion, three chapters in which Maximoff directly addresses the reader. According to Maximoff, *Dites* was intended to fully represent the *Porajmos* and to tell the story of the Romani "race" (244). This statement seemingly deviates from the assertion that much of Holocaust literature has no intention to provide a full account of the atrocities (Horowitz). Instead, *Dites* strives to provide the full story of the *Porajmos* for non-Romani *and* for future Romani generations. With this claim, all the different elements of *Dites* fall into place, and Maximoff's role as autoethnographer is confirmed. The first three-thirds of *Dites* serve as vignettes in which Romani culture and history are described, the essay functions as an historical framework, the photographs give insight into Romani culture shortly after the war, the testimonies resemble anthropological interviews, and the final three chapters provide the reader with Maximoff's concluding remarks.

As noted by Sarah Horowitz, many works of Holocaust fiction written by survivors "utilize the settings of ghettos, forests, labor camps, or situations of hiding to convey the texture and inner experience of Nazi persecution" (435). Maximoff introduces Mateï in such a setting:

> It was the first time that the camp was so quiet. No sound was made. … The complete silence was most reassuring, unless it meant that the whole world was dead; only the harsh light shining from the projectors isolated the camp from the rest of the night. … It rains softly; everything is quiet, so all is well. Nothing will happen until the morning comes. (13)

Like much of Holocaust literature, *Dites* is marked by a "self-reflexive ambivalence about literary representations [that] rests on a fundamental paradox: the drive to recount, describe, and remember clashes with a strong sense of the limitations facing any account" (Horowitz 430). Horowitz argues that many literary representations of the Holocaust produced by survivors, for this reason, work by indirection. "Rather than plunge readers into the dark heart of atrocity," Horowitz writes, "it presents narratives that spiral around and toward moments of horror that are not fully narrated, or

layers together fragments of imagery and narrative that suggest the whole, without claiming to fully represent it" (430).

Certainly, the reader is plunged into the dark heart of the *Porajmos* on the very first pages when Mateï is introduced, yet *Dites* is not marked by a sense of indirection. Rather, the text suggests that all of the different elements were carefully put together in order to tell the story. In the third part of *Dites*, "After the War," the narrator (presumably Maximoff himself) reflects on the numerous times the Jewish story of the Holocaust has been told, especially in comparison with its Romani counterpart. After wondering who will tell the story of the Roma, the narrator returns to Mateï:

> Mateï, who knows how to read and write, became a writer because he could, to try to become the historian of his race. But alone he was not up for the task. He hopes that many Roma … will follow in his footsteps [and] give their testimonies. Here are a few testimonies recorded by Mateï's tape recorder. All given in Romani, he translated them into French, but with respect for the Romani idiom. (204)

This passage serves not only as an introduction to three fictional testimonies that follow directly afterwards, but also emphasizes the importance of testimonies when it comes to telling the story of the *Porajmos*. By including these testimonies, Maximoff shows his awareness of the privileged position of survivor testimony within discourses on the Holocaust, while he simultaneously reflects on how Romani survivor testimonies have remained largely absent. Part of this, as illustrated by Mateï's hope that other Roma will testify, is because most Romani survivors refuse to talk about their persecution during World War II. The majority of them has remained silent and refuses to share their personal accounts of persecution with both Roma and non-Roma. Indeed, as pointed out by Susanne Knittel, the absence of survivor testimonies can and has led to marginalization of certain victim groups within scholarly and public discourses on the Holocaust (12). Thus, by adding the three interviews, Maximoff appears to respond to the central role of survivor testimonies. More importantly, the addition of

this privileged genre is intended to open up a dialogue between Romani and non-Romani Europeans for they engage with both dominant and marginalized terms.

Framed as interviews, these testimonies are situated roughly thirty years after the end of the war. They include footnotes in which Mateï further explains certain answers, and in all of the testimonies we read how he urges the survivors to share as much information as possible. Like the two other testimonies, the first transcript begins with Mateï presenting himself and asking the survivors their name and Romani "tribe" (205). "I am Yayal," answers the first interviewee, "I was interned at a camp in Riquewihr. We were hungry and cold. Fortunately, I was with another Rom who was an excellent companion … of misery" (205). The transcript continues:

> **M.**: Do you remember his name?
>
> **Y.**: Yes, his name was Alphonse…
>
> **M.**: I know him, as a matter of fact, was he in Belgium?
>
> **Y.**: Yes, that's right. He was with me. There were five Jews with us. They were relatively young.
>
> **M.**: Excuse me! I am interrupting you because I want to collect as much information as possible regarding the camps. Do you remember the name of the Jews?
>
> **Y.**: No, the names, I don't remember them anymore, because it is such a long time ago; already thirty years have passed, and I have a very short memory, I cannot remember their names. (205–06)

This snippet of the first transcript not only foregrounds the difficulty of remembering, it also highlights the necessity of this information in Mateï's attempt to paint a full picture of the experience in the camps. Another survivor interviewed by Mateï, Paprika, describes how she was interned at Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, how a number (Z 9771) was tattooed on her arm, and how her child was the "first baby girl to be burned in Auschwitz" (208). She is unable, however, to elaborate further on her own experiences, since she finds them "shameful" to talk about (214).

Unlike the first two transcripts, the third testimony blurs the lines between fictional and non-fictional, with what initially seems to be a minor difference. This transcript does not begin with "Mateï," but with "Matéo." For the reader, it appears that Maximoff himself translated this testimony, yet this assumption is problematized when the survivor who is interviewed, Lotcho, continuously refers to Matéo as Mateï. Or, interpreted along different lines, Maximoff was Mateï all along. While Pratt does not clearly pinpoint this ambiguity as characteristic for autoethnographic texts, Maximoff's presence in *Dites* nevertheless highlights that we are dealing with a *self*-representation. The inclusion of the testimonies fits the autoethnographic genre seamlessly. As pointed out by Michael Zimmerman,

> the history of how people have dealt historically and politically with the National Socialist persecution of the Jews may appear to be an attractive role model, well worthy of imitation, precisely for advocates who articulate the cause of socially marginalized groups of the persecuted. (23)

In this light, the testimonies in *Dites* follow the "blue-print" of Holocaust remembrance, while the text simultaneously includes Romani idiom.

Countering Stereotypes

In trying to understand the roots of stereotypical images of the Gypsy as a wandering vagabond (simultaneously as a criminal and as a romantic figure), Bogdal writes that

> while groups such as the Germans, Gauls, Angels and Saxons had developed the national myth of foundation and origin in order to corroborate their arrival in and occupation of a particular territory, the first legends of the Roma told of their mysterious and distant origins and failure to settle. ("Europe")

Bogdal links this uncertain origin to the Roma lack of *Heimat*, a German concept that illustrates the importance of property and homeland in nationalist thought, and claims that Gypsies and their dwellings, seen as threats to European civilization, became the antithesis of the European invention of home. When so-called civilizing measures failed to succeed because of the Romani resistance, Roma were degraded as "rogues" and "vagabonds" "that existed outside and beneath the social hierarchy and who attempted to survive through casual labor, begging and crime" (Bogdal, "Europe").

Toninato's assertion that Romani authors often engage in writing autoethnography as translating subjects in order to counter stereotypical images of Gypsies is confirmed throughout *Dites*, for instance when Mateï's thirst for knowledge is emphasized in the following passage:

> How can you go to school when you travel every day and are chased from one village to the other by the police[?] … [Mateï's] school is nature itself … and the little reading and writing his father taught him. But how can more be learned? (45)

This passage not only counters the general conception that Roma are illiterate and have no interest in education, but also sheds light on the roots of this stereotype. The statement that the police forced Mateï and his family to "stay on the road" implicates that the responsibility for their itinerant lifestyle and the resulting lack of education is to be ascribed to the overarching institutions and laws rather than solely to European Roma themselves.

Another stereotype that Maximoff counters with *Dites* is the image of Gypsies as living "outside" of history. In *Bury Me Standing*, Isabel Fonseca writes that the Romani community is able to deal with collective traumas such as the *Porajmos* through forgetting. Fonseca states that the Roma have turned this into "an art [that] does not imply complacency: its tenor is one of—sometimes buoyant—defiance" (275–6). The idea here is that this "forgetting" of traumatic events is not something negative, but rather a coping mechanism used by Roma to deal with their past. The anthropological historian Inga Clendinnen has explored the notion of the Roma as "a forgetful people" as well.

Interestingly, she names the short (and only) paragraph about Roma in *Reading the Holocaust* "The Gypsies: Forgetting," followed by a section titled "The Jews: Remembering" (6–8). Clendinnen states that European Roma have chosen "not to bother with history at all [for they] seek no meaning beyond those relevant to immediate survival" (8). The idea that Roma are somehow able to completely live in the present and have "healed themselves of a painful past by insulating themselves from traumatic memory is a striking and even heartening proposition" (Stewart 568). Framing European Roma as a collectivity that does not bother to remember its past is problematic since it ultimately denies their identity and culture.

Maximoff already counters this stereotype in framing *Dites* as a text that aims to inscribe the *Porajmos* into European mnemonic discourses in the first place. At the same time, however, it is obvious throughout the text that Romani cultural memory is constructed differently than its non-Romani counterparts. As made clear in the invented testimonies and at several other instances in *Dites*, Romani cultural memory is not so much crystallized in physical *lieux de mémoire*, to employ an expression by Pierre Nora, but rather in sites that are both difficult to grasp for the outside and not shared with the outside at all. Instead, these memories are shaped through stories and songs that are neither written down nor translated. In the last three chapters of the text, Maximoff merges European mnemonic culture with its Romani counterparts. Written in September 1989, Maximoff takes on the role of the wise storyteller Le Papo, and addresses his community in a tone characteristic of Romani oral traditions. Each of these chapters starts off with a variation on "my children," and together read as a plea for remembrance:

> Every now and then, one of you asks me to tell a story I already told a dozen times. I repeat this story on purpose, to let it become part of your memory. … [So] you can turn to your children and grandchildren to tell them the story. (237)

Besides merging dominant forms of remembrance with those of the Romani, these chapters (to return to Pratt) highlight that *Dites* is addressed to non-Romani *and* Romani Europeans.

Overcoming Aphasia

Returning to Stoler's concept of cultural aphasia, understood as the inability to link the *Porajmos* to current racist policies aimed against European Roma, it is my contention that *Dites* potentially mends this break by opening up the dialogue between Romani and non-Romani Europeans. When it comes to memory politics however, understanding aphasia includes more than breaking through the "simple paradigm of silencing and obliteration [but also] means acknowledging the double role of memory" (De Cesari and Rigney 10). Chiara de Cesari and Ann Rigney write that memory "functions as an instrument of discrimination and a measure of exclusion" on the one hand and "offers a conduit to recognition and empowerment on the part of the marginalized and dispossessed" on the other (11).

As pointed out by Bogdal, stereotypical images of Gypsies are so deeply embedded in European societies that they have become a part of cultural memory ("Europe"). At the same time, inscribing the *Porajmos* into European cultural memory of the Holocaust illustrates the second role of memory. In *Dites*, Maximoff uses autoethnographic strategies in order to gain recognition and empowerment for Romani communities in the present. His work illustrates that the marginalization of the *Porajmos* within the discourse on the Holocaust cannot and should not be detached from ongoing antiziganism. Unfortunately, *Dites* remains little known and overlooked by scholarship. Thus, it is difficult to pinpoint whether the autoethnography indeed has the ability to mend the failed connection between the *Porajmos* and antiziganism in the present day. Nevertheless, in navigating his way between Romani and non-Romani discourses, Maximoff has written an indispensable and complicated representation of the *Porajmos*.

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