

Call for Papers

## **Between Cultural Appropriation and Ethnic Shifting: The Entangled Histories of Romani Imitation**

Conference

**27-29 May 2026, Vila Lanna, Prague**

**Conveners:** Mariana Sabino-Salazar (Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences) and  
Karolina Válková (Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences and the Institute of  
Romance Studies, Charles University)

**Deadline:** 1 December 2025

Struggles over identity and representation are central to the politics of difference in contemporary and historical contexts. Many Romani families and individuals have been compelled to adopt more socially acceptable identities in response to social pressures (e.g. through ‘passing’); in other contexts, however, people might seek to reclaim once stigmatised identities. The legitimacy of Romani identity has frequently been questioned, as in the case of the ‘counterfeit Egyptians’ in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England, or when some scholars attempted to distinguish ‘true’ from ‘false’ Roma in search of the core of Romani authenticity. Drawing on and reinforcing the same discourse about authenticity and legitimacy, non-Romani individuals sometimes adopted what they perceived as markers of Romani identity and customs—sometimes for entertainment, as in fashion or carnivalesque masquerade, and sometimes as a more elaborated lifestyle choice, for example, by presenting themselves as exotic fortunetellers or by choosing to ‘live as Gypsies’ as a way to reject modernity. Literature and cinema have also mobilised tropes related to shifts in identities and identifications: some characters pretend to be ‘Gypsies’, while others turn out not to be Romani by birth, after all. Artists, Gypsyloists, and other members of the cultural elite not only expressed their affinity for Romani culture, but some also claimed to be ‘Gypsies at heart’.

Specific historical conditions play a central role in these dynamics and in shaping the popularity and reception of such borrowings, appropriations, claims, and ethno-racial shifts. In Central and Eastern Europe—where Romani identity continues to be the most excluded and despised—such processes are rare and often limited to ad hoc and short-lived racist imitations and ethnic cross-dressing. In many countries in the Western Hemisphere, on the other hand, many people without apparent familial connections or lived experiences claim Romani identity or assert past

genealogical connections. Sometimes, as in present-day Brazil, such claims employ the language of cultural revitalization or draw legitimacy from communication with so-called ‘Gypsy spirits’ (*Espíritos Ciganos*). With the expansion of cyberspace subcultures, identity performance dynamics have opened up to a new range of possibilities, with users self-representing as members of ‘more exotic’ ethnic groups, sometimes using emoticons, handles, and hashtags that reference ‘Gypsy’ lifestyle. Some people go as far as cosplaying ‘Esmeralda’ or other generic fortunetellers in real life.

This conference asks how individuals and groups claim, borrow, or mimic Romani cultural and ethnic markers, and how unequal power relations shape which identities are recognized as (in)authentic or (il)legitimate. By focusing on such processes, the conference examines tensions between creativity and exploitation, belonging and exclusion, as well as lived experience and symbolic appropriation. In doing so, the conference broadens the horizons of Romani studies by systematically analyzing the performance of identities that are not fixed but fluid, situational, and politically charged.

We invite scholars and researchers from anthropology, history, cultural studies, political science, religious studies, sociology, literature, and other disciplines to submit proposals that critically analyze specific contexts and dimensions underlying such phenomena while generating comparative insights. We invite reflections on the following questions: When do non-Romani individuals or groups claim, borrow, or perform Romani ethnic and cultural markers, and how are such acts received, resisted, or legitimized? How are claims to Romani authenticity and demands for recognition negotiated across contexts? What genealogical, historical, or affective claims are used to justify Romani self-identification among people whom no Romani community or kin group recognizes as their own? How do such claims and counterclaims relate to systems of resource allocation, citizenship regimes, and the politics of recognition? Finally, how do these acts of imitation compare to other similar processes, such as racial impersonation (‘blackface’), so-called ‘trans-racialism’ or the reclaiming of Indigenous and Native American identities (e.g., ‘pretendianism’, settler self-indigenization, etc.)?

Topics of interest include, but are not limited to:

- Processes of ethnic reconfiguration influenced by religion, spirituality, and ancestry
- Historical contexts and power dynamics that facilitate specific forms of imitation, borrowing, or identity shifts (postcoloniality, colonialism, modernity, etc.)
- Commodification and circulation of Romani cultural markers and images in film, dance, music, and literature, and critical responses to them
- Politics and sites of representation that allow non-Romani individuals to access resources and social spaces intended for Roma

-Conceptual and methodological frameworks that help scholars distinguish between mutual exchange, creative hybridity, cultural revitalization, or new forms of solidarity, versus exploitative forms of cultural appropriation

-Who defines what constitutes ‘authentic’ and ‘legitimate’ cultural expression, and how such claims to authenticity are tied to histories of racism and exclusion

### **Application Procedure**

Proposals (maximum 250 words), accompanied by a short bio (150 words), should be sent to Mariana Sabino-Salazar ([sabino@eu.cas.cz](mailto:sabino@eu.cas.cz)) by December 1st, 2025. Notifications of acceptance will be sent in January 2026.

### **Practical Information**

The conference will feature non-parallel panels, each consisting of 20-minute presentations followed by discussion. English is the working language. The conference will be held in person to facilitate discussion and feedback.

Conference organizers will be able to cover accommodation for some participants. Applicants are invited to inform us of their financial situation by email and specify whether they require support.

Scholars, researchers, and activists from all disciplines are encouraged to apply. We particularly welcome applications from Romani and early-career scholars.

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This event is organized by the Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences, and the Prague Center for Romani Histories at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University. It is supported by the Lumina Queruntur award (LQ300582201) – project “Romani Atlantic: Transcontinental Logic of Ethno-Racial Identities” and the ERC AdvG INHIST (Inclusive History of East-Central Europe: Mid-19th Century to Present).