Czech Academy of Sciences

STRATEGY AV21

Institute of Ethnology
Czech Academy of Sciences

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

May 27, 2026 (17.00 - 18.45)
Keynote Lecture by Dalen Wakeley-Smith: American Imitation and Romani Strategic Essentialism in the 20th century
Institute of Czech Literature, CAS

May 28, 2026 (9.00 - 17:40)
Conference: Between Cultural Appropriation and Ethnic Shifting
Vila Lanna

May 29, 2026 (17.00 - 19.00)
Discussion with Chelsi West Ohueri: Rethinking Race in Eastern Europe
CEFRES

Photo by Mariana Sabino

This conference builds on discussions of Romani racialization, belonging, and agency by focusing on identity performance, imitation, and claims to authenticity. It examines how struggles over representation unfold across historical and contemporary contexts, where Romani identity has been both stigmatized and appropriated. While some Romani individuals have been compelled to "pass" or conceal their identity, others have sought to reclaim it; meanwhile, non-Romani actors have adopted or performed Romani cultural markers through entertainment, aesthetics, spirituality, or lifestyle choices. From early modern anxieties about "counterfeit" identities to contemporary digital self-fashioning, these practices raise questions about legitimacy, recognition, and power. Bringing together interdisciplinary perspectives, the conference explores how such claims are produced and contested within broader systems of racialization, resource distribution, and citizenship. It highlights tensions between creativity and exploitation, affiliation and exclusion, and lived experience and symbolic appropriation, advancing a critical view of identity as fluid, situational, and politically charged.

Funding:
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Programme

1. American Imitation and Romani Strategic Essentialism in the early 20th century

📍 *Institute of Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences* (Na Florenci 1420/3, 110 00 Prague)

Wednesday, May 27

17.00 – 17.15 **Welcome Remarks**

17.15 – 18.45 **Opening Keynote Lecture**

Moderator: **Mariana Sabino-Salazar** (Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences)

- A lecture by **Dalen Wakeley-Smith** (Washington University in Saint Louis) titled **'Gypsy Madness': American Imitation and Romani Strategic Essentialism in the early 20th century** about how non-Romani Americans produced and circulated romanticized and stereotypical images of Romani people through performance, focusing on Irving Brown's *Gypsy Madness*. By juxtaposing these representations with the strategic activism of American Romani communities, it reveals how contested performances of identity shaped evolving ideas of citizenship, belonging, and race in the United States.

2. Between Cultural Appropriation and Ethnic Shifting: The Entangled Histories of Romani Imitation

📍 *Vila Lanna* (V Sadech 1, 160 00 Prague)

Thursday, May 28

8.50 – 9.00 **Registration**

9.00 – 9.10 **Welcome**

9.10 – 10.50 **Panel 1: Ethnic Shifting, Institutional Gatekeeping, and Roma Identity Across Religious and State Structures**

Moderator: **Kateřina Čapková** (Charles University and NYU Prague)

- **Sonia Styrkacz** - Appropriating Roma Identity: Boundaries of Authenticity, Verification of Belonging, and Challenges for the Community
- **Pedro Ravasio Vilela** - Brazilian Romanifishing: Between Religion and Monetization
- **Yanush Panchenko** - Romani Identity as Stigma and Resource in Ukraine

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10.50 – 11.10 **Coffee Break**

11.10 – 12.50 **Panel 2: Regimes of Romani Imitation: Sonic Mediation, Minstrelsy, and Racial Performance**

Moderator: **Ann Ostendorf** (Gonzaga University)

- **Cristina Hernández Casado** - "Dijo que se tiene por español y no por gitano" (He said he sees himself as Spanish and not as a *Gitano*) Identity and Cultural Expressions of the Romani Community in Castile, 16th – 17th Centuries"
- **Miguel Ángel Vargas Rubio** - From the "Gitano Question" to the "Flamenco Question": Afición and the Making of Public Debate through Flamenco in Spain (1765–2025)
- **Shaun Williams** - Brownface Minstrelsy, Sonic Whitewashing, and the Politics of Romani Audibility in Romanian Popular Culture

12.50 – 14.00 **Lunch**

14.00 – 15.40 **Panel 3: From the Fetishization of the Balkan Margins to Global Commodities: Cultural Imperialism and the Nationalization of Roma Difference**

Moderator: **Yasar Abu Gosh** (Charles University and NYU in Prague)

- **Carol Silverman** - Global Balkan "Gypsy" Music: Representation, Appropriation, and Profit
- **Gergely Pulay** - Cultural Appropriation and the Urban Margins of the Post-Socialist European Periphery
- **Camila Salvatore** - Narodna 'Balkan', but also 'Romsko' Kotel Roma Musicians' Discourses on Music and Genre

15.40 – 16.00 **Coffee Break**

16.00 – 17.40 **Panel 4: Ethical Representation and the Appropriation of Romani Identity in the Arts**

Moderator: **Karolina Válová** (Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences)

- **Margaret Frohlich** - The Ethical Frame and Romani Identity in *El payo chac* and *Zambra*
- **Ismael Cortés** - Performing the Other: Romani Identity and Cultural Extraction in *Els Zin-calós*
- **Tamara Moya** and **Lidia Merás** - Passing for Romani, Claimed as White: Lola Flores' Complex Ethnic Shifting Case

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3. Rethinking Race in Eastern Europe

📍 *CEFRES* (Na Florenci 1420/3, 110 00 Prague)

Friday, May 29

9.00 – 16.00 **Optional Guided tour to Lety u Písku,** Memorial of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Bohemia with **Helena Sadíková** (Charles University)

- This guided tour explores one of the most contested sites of Holocaust atrocities and their public recognition and commemoration in the Czech Republic. The memorial opened in 2024, following almost three decades of campaigning by survivors' descendants, who continue to strive for a stronger voice in the memorial's management and development. Helena Sadílková has participated in these negotiations since preparations for the current memorial began in 2018.

We will leave Vila Lanna at 9 a.m.
By registration only, limited to 15 participants

17.00 – 19.00 **Book Discussion and Reception**

Moderator: **Martin Fotta** (Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences)

- A conversation with **Chelsi West Ohueri** (The University of Texas at Austin) about her new book, *Encountering Race in Albania: An Ethnography of the Communist Afterlife* (Cornell University Press, 2025), followed by a small reception.