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Examining the Use of the G-slur, “Roma” and “Romani” in Comic Books and Fan Fiction Works

Introduction

During winter break of 2021, I decided to watch Marvel’s WandaVision, a limited series on Disney+, which features Wanda Maximoff, an original Marvel comic book character which made her debut in X-Men #4 (1964). Despite Wanda’s noticeable presence within Marvel comic books, I had perceived her to be a character who had often faded into the background of many films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films. Therefore, WandaVision was the first series dedicated to her character within the MCU.

WandaVision was my introduction to Wanda’s depiction in the MCU, however, it was through fan fiction that I learned of her Jewish/Roma comic book origins. After exploring the portrayals of Wanda’s character by fan fiction writers, I began to explore her history outlined by comic book writers from her first appearance in 1964 to her more recent appearances in 2018 and 2019. Wanda and Pietro Maximoff were first depicted as originating from a Romani community in the fictional country of Transia, located in Southeastern Europe near Serbia, Romania, and Macedonia (Avengers (1979), Issue 186). Much later, their country of origin was retconned to be that of Serbia (Scarlet Witch (2015), Issue 11). Regardless of the various revisions made to the Maximoff twins’ origins throughout the decades, their identities as Eastern European Roma remain central to their characters within the comic books. This fact makes Wanda's depiction as a white, Slavic, Sokovian woman in the MCU even more puzzling. This puzzlement, however,

becomes that of unease when one observes the ways in which fandom goers' engagement with comic book portrayals of Wanda contrast that of the engagement with her portrayal in the MCU. We can even observe conflicts between Roma users, Roma comic book fans and non-Roma comic book fans on social media platforms such as Twitter.

Considering the contrasting interpretations of Wanda Maximoff's character, I examine the usage of the g-slur, "Roma" (alternate spelling "Rroma") and "Romani" (alternate spelling "Rromani") in Marvel comic books and fan fiction. The term "Roma" describes a non-homogenous group of people who are descendants of people who migrated from northern India over 1,000 years ago. Though it is important to note that within the Roma are various subgroups which have their own dialects of the Romani language, Romanes, and their own "narratives of their history" (Marsh). "Romani" is the adjectival form of the word "Roma", examples being "Romani language", "Romani cultures" and "Romani history". Though often used today, the g-slur is not the appropriate term to use for the Roma. When referring to a group, one should use the term "Roma". The alternate spelling, "Rroma" is used by Romani scholars to avoid confusion with words such as "Rome" and "Romania".

The g-slur was assigned to the Roma by those non-Roma who, after seeing their dark skin and dark hair, had mistaken them for Egyptians (Breaking "Gypsy" Stereotypes, Romani, Rromani, Gypsy?). Today, the Roma Education Fund estimates that there are 10 to 20 million Roma living in the European Union (Roma Education Fund). However, in her forward for "Gypsy Law: Romani Legal Traditions and Culture", a collection of essays written on Romani law and Romani culture published in 2001, Angela P. Harris, a professor of law at UC Davis School of Law, writes: "While the subordination of other "people of color" in the United States—notably African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino/as—has

resulted in a complex cultural inter-change with European America, the Roma have been able to remain a people apart, largely invisible both to the dominant culture and to other racialized minorities” (ix). Expanding on the history of anti-Roma oppression, it is important to understand antiziganism or “antigypsyism”, which is defined as “the specific racism towards Roma, Sinti, Travelers and others who are stigmatized as ‘gypsies’ in the public imagination” (Antigypsyism.eu).

In this paper, I aim to numerate and analyze the contexts in which terms such as “Roma”, “Romani” and the g-slur are used in Marvel comic books versus fan fiction works. I will examine the terms within context of their works to ascertain how they are being used. I have chosen works which center Wanda Maximoff and her twin brother, Pietro Maximoff. I theorize that fan fiction writers are more likely to use the terms “Roma” or “Romani” over the g-slur than comic book writers.

Throughout this paper, I will be referring to the slur which is targeted towards the Roma or Romani people as the g-slur. When referring to this group, I will be using the terms ‘Roma’ and ‘Romani’, as outlined in the Diversity Style Guide (Roma, Romany, Romani). I have chosen to follow this guide as it is most in line with the information I have encountered about terminology and the Roma people. When referring to resources and excerpts taken from my research, the g-slur will appear uncensored and in quotation marks to reflect any dialogue or resource title. When discussing my research, I will always use the term “g-slur.” I have chosen not to write the word when not necessary to respect and acknowledge the harmfulness of the slur towards the Roma.

Romani activist, Vicente Rodriguez Fernandez, writes: “One effective way to engage young people on these topics is to reveal the surprising number of Roma references in American

pop culture... The backgrounds of characters like [Doctor Doom and Dick Grayson] could change the way Roma youth view their identities in a positive and powerful way" (Fernandez). It is important to examine the terms used to describe marginalized groups in media such as comic books, television shows and films as taking into consideration the terminology we use for certain groups, especially minoritized groups, demonstrates respect and acknowledges their humanity.

Methodology

For this study, I will be reading Marvel comic books that feature Wanda Maximoff's character. Occasionally, I will explore comic book runs that feature her twin brother, Pietro Maximoff. Through this methodology, I am to collect instances in which the g-slur, "Roma", and "Romani" are used and to determine the connotations of these words. I will connect my analysis back to my examination of Wanda and Pietro's characterizations. I will also be collecting fan fiction works from Archive of Our Own. I will pull fan fiction for my study by searching through categories such as 'Marvel' and 'WandaVision' using the tags 'Jewish Wanda Maximoff', 'Roma Wanda Maximoff' and 'Romani Wanda Maximoff'. Fan fiction writers often include these tags to affirm that their interpretation of Wanda's character is specifically Jewish/Roma. The use of these tags also suggests to readers that Wanda's identity plays an important role in their story.

I noted the instances where any of the listed terms were used in Table 1 and Table 2. For both tables, "Roma" and "Rroma" were compiled into one category, "Romani", "Rromani" and "Romany" were compiled into another category, while the g-slur was placed in its own category. I also noted the word counts of each fan fiction work in a column. Table 1 lists the fan fiction as

‘FF’ then a number. Table 2 notes the title of the comic, the issue number, and the page number when applicable. While examining fan fiction works, I entered the previously mentioned terms into the “control + f” feature in Google Chrome. I subtracted the instances where terms were used in fan fiction tags and in the author’s notes. The focus of this paper is on the use of these words within the context of a piece of work, however, relevant information about the author’s choice to use or not to use a certain term helped to inform my analysis. After recording this information, I examined the context in which these terms were used. When working with fan fiction, I chose to analyze the first two instances, as fan fiction relies heavily on written communication while comic books rely more on visual communication. After completing my analysis, I drew conclusions from the data.

Findings

I examined nine works of the most recently published fan fiction with the criteria listed previously. Within these works, the g-slur was used 84 times. The term “Roma” or “Rroma” was used three times, while the term “Romani”, also spelled “Romany” or “Rromani”, was used 71 times. As demonstrated in the table below, fan fiction 3 (FF3) used the g-slur 82 times, while fan fiction 2 (FF2) used the slur twice (Ilya_Boltagon, squipy_witch, Marvel_AU). The only piece of work to use the term “Roma” or “Rroma” is fan fiction 6 (cutlasses). When examining the use of the word “Romani”, “Romany” and “Rromani”, the number of uses per work is more varied. FF2 used the term, “Romani” (also spelled “Romany” and “Rromani”), the most with 51 uses (Ilya_Boltagon, squipy_witch). This work has 50,725 words and 19 chapters. The size of this story gives the author ample opportunity to use such terms. Fan fiction 4 (FF4) uses “Romani” or a variant of the word 11 times (littlestarlight44).

Two works, FF3 and fan fiction 6 (FF6), do not use “Romani” at all, however, FF6 does use the term “Roma” (Marvel_AU, cutlasses). One detail to account for FF3’s excessive use of the g-slur is that this piece of work is written in text message format, where the g-slur is a part of Wanda Maximoff’s username. When analyzing this work, I attributed this to be the character self-identifying with the g-slur, therefore reclaiming it. As in real text message software, the g-slur appears when the character sends a message. It is important to note that the author of this work is not a native speaker of English and did not indicate whether they understood the connotations of the word in English.

Fan fiction	Word Count?	G-Slur	Roma Rroma	Romani Romany Rromani
FF1	1,645	0	0	1
FF2	50,726	2	0	51
FF3	6,007	82	0	0
FF4	20,326	0	0	11
FF5	2,413	0	0	1
FF6	4,965	0	3	0
FF7	1,381	0	0	4
FF8	1,224	0	0	1
FF9	7,514	0	0	2
		84	3	71

Table 1: Lists instances in which terms such as "Roma", "Romani" and the G-Slur are used in fan fiction.

After collecting and analyzing fan fiction works, I examined nine comic book issues where the forementioned terms were used. Across all examined issues, the g-slur was used a total of 15 times. “Roma” or “Rroma” was used a total of six times, while “Romani”, alternate spelling “Romany” was used 5 times. Unlike that of fan fiction, comic books use a combination of text and illustration as its means of storytelling, so it is expected that the data yields lower values than those of the fan fiction works.

One similarity yielded from the data collected on fan fiction works lies within the use of the g-slur. A single issue, *Mystic Arcana: Scarlet Witch*, accounts for most of the instances in which the g-slur is used. Another similarity the two categories' share is that there is no one issue or piece of work which uses all three terms. This can be explained by the fact that "Roma" and "Romani" have varying spellings and have specific grammatical functions. I was unable to ascertain the intentions behind alternating with different spellings of these terms. Issue #11 of *Scarlet Witch* (2015-2017) uses the term "Roma" the most with four instances, while issue #8 and issue #11 utilize "Romani"/ "Romany" two times (Robinson).

Comic Name, Issue Number	G-slur	Roma/Rroma	Romani/Romany
Scarlet Witch (2015-2017) Issue #1	1	0	0
Scarlet Witch (2015-2017) Issue #8	0	1	2
Scarlet Witch (2015-2017) Issue #11	0	4	2
Scarlet Witch (2015-2017) Issue #12	0	1	0
Avengers: Children's Crusade (2014) #4	1	0	0
Vision and the Scarlet Witch (1982) #1	1	0	0
Mystic Arcana: Scarlet Witch (2007)	9	0	0
Scarlet Witch (1994) Issue #2	2	0	0
Quicksilver: No Surrender (2018) #2	1	0	1
	15	6	5

Table 2: Lists instances in which terms such as "Roma", "Romani", and the G-Slur are used in Marvel comic books.

When comparing the works of fan fiction to comic book issues, it initially appeared as though the g-slur was used more often than terms such as "Roma" or "Romani". In the comic books, it was found that the g-slur appeared in 57% of the instances while "Roma" or "Romani" appeared in 42% of the instances. In the examined fan fiction works, the g-slur appeared in 53% of the instances, while "Roma" or "Romani" appeared in 45% of the instances. However, removing the outliers for both variables shifted the numbers.

After removing the outlier from the comic book data, Mystic Arcana: Scarlet Witch (2007), the percentage of usage from the g-slur fell from 57% to 35% while the instances in which “Roma” and “Romani” were used rose from 42% to 65%. When the fan fiction outlier, fan fiction work 3, is removed from the data, the percentage of the use of the g-slur fell from 53% to 2.6% while the percentage of use of “Roma” or “Romani” rose from 45% to 97%.

While examining both the comic book issues and the fan fiction works, I found that many instances where the words “Roma” or “Romani” were used had to do with discussions or examinations of origin. In Fan fiction 1, Wanda’s son, Billy Kaplan, is spending time with his mother to learn how to better control his powers. During this time, Billy learns about Romani culture. The fan fiction author, orphan_account, writes: “Billy sighs and downs the lemonade in one drink, then observes his mother. Her skin glows bronze in the sunlight. He glances at his hands and finds them offensively pale, wishing he looked as Romani as his blood.” (orphan_account).

In fan fiction 2, chapter 9, Wanda is doing research on her mother’s people, the Roma. The author writes “...After some searching, she found a book titled 'Romani Culture and Gypsy Identity' that looked as if it had never been read. She froze momentarily. Gypsy? Was that what her mother had been? Shrugging, she pulled down the book, retreating to one of the soft chairs and beginning to leaf through it.” (Ilya_Boltagon, squipy_witch). The quote demonstrates the only two instances where the g-slur is used in this piece of work. In the note included at the end of the chapter, the authors explain their choice to include the word. They write: “We are aware that the word 'gypsy' is viewed as an insult by Romani, and we mean no offense to anyone. The book referenced in this chapter is a real book, and, unfortunately, it is titled as the story states, and, in-story, Wanda at this point doesn't know that the word 'gypsy' is offensive.”. This fan

fiction was the only piece of work to explain its use of the g-slur. While analyzing this excerpt, I interpreted the use of the g-slur as being a neutral one. Wanda used this term to describe her mother because it was—assumably—the only terminology she had at that moment. This theory may be supported by the fact that the book in which the work references uses the term. In this instance, it can be concluded that Wanda used this term because the piece of scholarly writing she was referencing used it.

In chapter 8 of the same work, the Maximoff twins' father, Erik Lehnsherr also known as Magneto, shows Pietro old footage of him and his sister with their mother's family in Eastern Europe. The author writes: "...Were these Romani, his mother's people? He hadn't even known she'd been Romani until today!" and later "As he watched the girl—No, Wanda help him up, Pietro could see the Romani people in the background watching them." (Ilya_Boltagon, squipy_witch). In this excerpt, we see how the term "Romani" is used as opposed to the g-slur to describe the characters' origins. Compared to the two instances where the g-slur is used, the work goes on to use "Romani" 51 times.

Fan fiction 6 attempts to shed some light on the Maximoff twins' origin stories from the MCU's Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015). The author writes: "It's hard to find someone who'll let you into their house when you're Rroma — they think you'll take everything — but Wanda cleans houses for a bit of extra cash." (cutlasses). Note the use of the alternative spelling "Rroma". The author does not explain their decision to use this spelling, however, it can be assumed that it is to avoid any confusion with other places or ethnicity markers which use a similar spelling. Another important detail to note is the comparison between word usage and the connotation it is communicating. "Rroma" is not a derogatory word, however, the negative perception of Romani people is expressed through the clause "they think you'll take everything".

This highlights an interesting authoritative choice to explore the marginalization of the Roma, while using terms which are not derogatory like the g-slur.

In issue #2 of Quicksilver: No Surrender, we do find another instance of a Romani character using the g-slur. In this series, Pietro Maximoff gets stuck in a time paradox and recalls his and Wanda's childhood. "Because we are Romani, the villagers called him [Pietro and Wanda's father] a thief when he tried to feed his children...", Pietro continues "When they [Americans] use their trust funds to safely wander the world, they call themselves gypsy, never having to feel the pain and hate that word carries with it." (Ahmed, 7). Pietro uses the g-slur in frustration of Americans' appropriation and ignorance of the term, while "Romani" is used to describe their identity. It is important to note the contrasting terms and their contexts. "Romani" is used as a self-identifier, while the g-slur is used to highlight the harmful actions of non-Roma which ultimately harm the Romani.

In the first issue of the Scarlet Witch (2015-2017), written by James Robinson, Wanda meets with a NYPD detective to consult on a murder case. When learning that Wanda already knows about a series of related murders, Detective Erikson asks, "You look in your crystal ball to see that?" to which Wanda responds "Yes, while a gypsy violinist played in the background." (Robinson). Within this context, Wanda uses the g-slur in response to detective Erikson's antiziganist microaggression, presenting a reoccurring theme in which the g-slur by both Roma and non-Roma present Romani people within a negative or derogatory context.

In later issues, such as issue #8 and #11, Wanda uses the terms "Romani" and "Roma". Robinson writes: "For a long time, I thought I was the daughter of a Romany woman and man—" and later "She'd [Natalya Maximoff] given her newborns to a relative—one of her people, a Roma like herself..." (Robinson). After the first instance in issue #1, the g-slur is never used

again. It is however replaced with “Romany” and “Roma”. In both instances, Wanda is engaging in self-exploration.

In *Avengers: Children’s Crusade*, Billy, along with the Young Avengers race to find the Scarlet Witch, Wanda Maximoff, before the Avengers and X-Men. Heinberg writes: “It’s all been perfect. Meeting Victor—falling in love—the king proposing to the gypsy girl.” (Heinberg, 86). Even in this example, the g-slur has an underlining derogatory connotation. The contrast between the word “king” with that of the g-slur demonstrates a difference in power, notwithstanding the fact that Victor Von Doom, otherwise known as Doctor Doom, is also Romani. I suspect that Wanda uses the g-slur to describe herself and not Doctor Doom as it speaks to their difference in positions of power. The purpose of the g-slur within this context is not solely connected to Wanda’s Romani origins but to denote the fact that she is of a lesser, peasant-like status compared to Doctor Doom who holds the title of king.

While examining the single issue, “*Mystic Arcana: Scarlet Witch*” most of the instances where the g-slur is used in the phrase “gypsy queen” or “queen of the gypsies”. The g-slur itself is used to refer to another Romani character, a witch who hopes to adopt Wanda into her coven. I argue that the use of the g-slur paired with that of ‘queen’ presents a form of antiziganism rooted in a race or ethnicity-based fixation on Romani women. This issue leans into the “Hot Gypsy Woman” trope through its portrayal of Romani women in revealing clothing and leans heavily on outside perceptions of the relationship between Romani women and witchcraft (*Hot Gypsy Woman*). The use of this trope in combination objectifies and dehumanizes this issues Romani characters. I would argue that this example is the most harmful out of the examined comic book works as it lacks a profound exploration of the Maximoff twins’ origins and instead depends on a weak plot and poorly developed supporting characters which function as nothing more than

walking, harmful stereotypes. I aim my criticism towards this issue not solely based on its poor depiction of Romani people, but because it, as a comic book and not a piece of fan fiction has the power to establish what is canon in the universe. Poor source material has the potential to lead to poor interactions between non-Roma fans and Roma fans, which can be viewed as a microcosm of Roma-Non-Roma relations. Beyond interactions between fans, media which peddles prejudices perceptions of marginalized people can directly impact the treatment of said peoples in the real world. It should be noted, however, that this is not to say that portraying a Romani character which utilizes witchcraft is antiziganist, but that depicting a Romani character which characterization is based on antiziganist stereotypes is harmful.

Overall, both comic books and fan fiction works have been found to use the g-slur as well as “Roma” and “Romani”. Comic books, however, have been found to use the g-slur slightly more often than fan fiction works. The two instances where the g-slur was used in the examined fan fiction works were presented as identity markers for Romani characters. One was a part of a username used by Wanda Maximoff, while the other was used in the title of a scholarly work featured in the story. Generally, fan fiction authors lean toward using “Roma” and “Romani”. While comic books have been found to use the g-slur more often than fan fiction works, terms such as “Roma” and Romani” are still used more often than the g-slur. Generally, the g-slur is used with negative connotations in comic books, while “Romani”, “Romany” and “Roma” are used with neutral or more positive connotations. All these terms have been used to explore the origins of Wanda and Pietro Maximoff and their relatives in both comic books and fan fiction works.

Conclusion

Contrary to my initial hypothesis, the use of the g-slur in both mediums is not as normalized as I originally thought. Previously, I argued that comic book writers are more likely to use the g-slur when writing story arcs for comic book character, Wanda Maximoff. This study, however, demonstrated how the g-slur is not more or less likely to be used in a comic book or in a fan fiction. Though the g-slur appeared 84 times in the examined fan fiction works and 15 times in the examined comic book issues, this does not necessarily prove that the word is less likely to appear in either medium. Outlining this, it is important to stress that this topic requires further examination of comic books and fan fiction works.

At first glance, this data disproves my theory that comic book writers are more likely to use the g-slur. When examining it at face value, it suggests that fan fiction writers are more likely to use the g-slur instead of “Roma” or “Romani”. However, it is important to understand that the final values for the instances of the g-slur were both heavily skewed by a single issue or fan fiction piece which used the term more heavily than others. Seven out of the nine examined fan fiction works did not use the g-slur at all, while two did. Meanwhile, in the examined comic books, six out of the nine examined comic book issues did use the g-slur, while three did not. So, while the g-slur appeared the most in a single fan fiction work, the g-slur was more likely to be used throughout different comic book issues.

In certain aspects, these findings present more questions than answers. It would be beneficial to expand this study by comparing publication dates and writers of both the comic books and fan fiction works. Examining these factors could answer the question of whether the g-slur is used more often today than in the past. An examination of writers could help researchers draw conclusions about who is most or least likely to use what terms when talking about Wanda

Maximoff's Romani origins. It is unclear if doing a separate study on other Romani characters such as Dr. Doom or Dick Greyson of DC comics would yield similar results.

While conducting this study, I was confronted by questions which are less a matter of data and more a matter of discourse. To my knowledge, none of the comic book writers nor fan fiction writers are of Romani origin. Knowing this, it begs the question of whether it is right to use slurs in works, even if the character uttering the slur belongs to the targeted group. Additionally, is the context in which a slur is used relevant to the impact of the use of the slur? As mentioned previously, some comic book issues and fan fiction works did not use the g-slur at all, opting to use "Roma" or "Romani" instead. If this is an option, why don't writers utilize it more often? One could argue that the g-slur is still not recognized as a slur by the non-Roma population. But this argument presents another pressing question. Why? USian society has made efforts to alter cultural and social norms when it comes to the treatment of other minoritized groups, so why is US society still struggling to acknowledge and confront antiziganism? Though I do not have solid answers to these questions, I can say that these conversations should not be held without the input of Romani people. Our role as coconspirators to dismantling antiziganism should go far beyond conversations to making sure we are uplifting Romani voices whenever possible, especially in various forms of media such as comic books, television shows, films and even fan fiction.

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