ROMA AND
TRAVELLERS
TEAM

Ill. 1
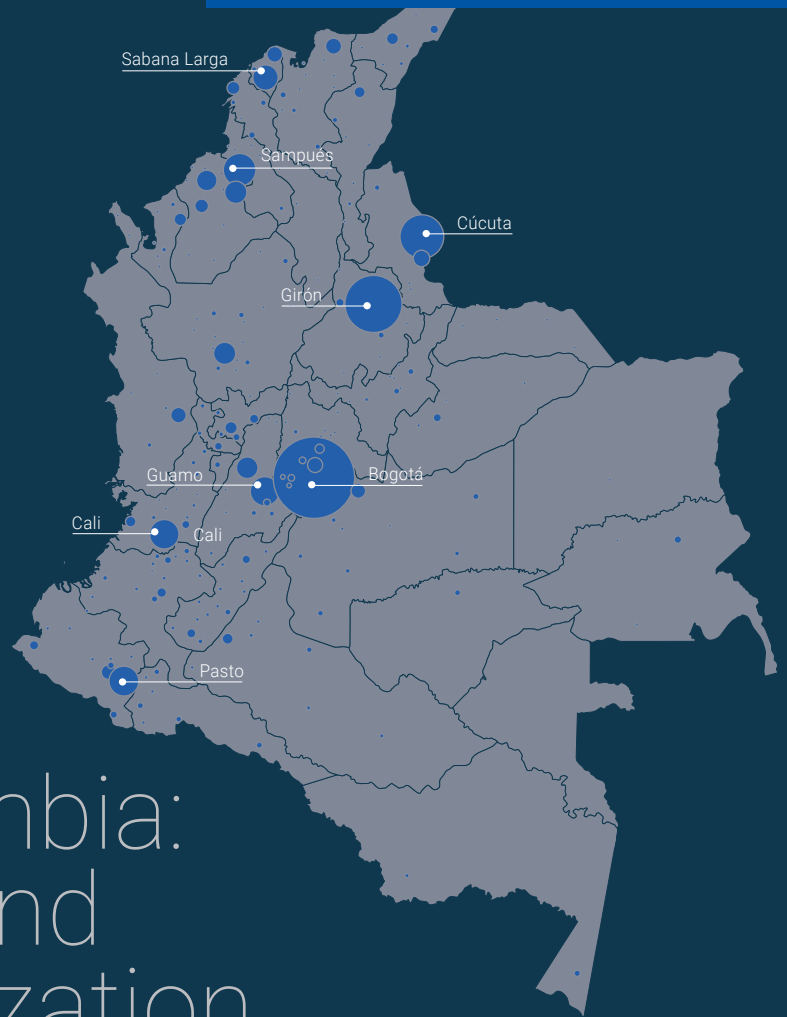
Map of the 2018 census of Romani (Rrom) people in Colombia. Although the numbers of Romani people went down from a previous census in 2005, the distribution of population coincides better with internal tallying among Romani organizations.

Source: National Department of Statistics, Colombia

1.000   500   100   50   10

3.17

Roma in Colombia: Arrivals, lives and political organization

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Only a few works have been published about the Roma in Colombia, although it is the first country in the Americas that recognized the Romani People as one of the official ethnic groups living on its territory. For decades, Romani families have both traversed the country and made it their home, either temporarily or permanently. This factsheet gives an overview of Romani arrivals in Colombia, what we know about Romani experiences since that time, and the political projects that have recently put Colombian Romani organizations on the map.

INTRODUCTION

The presence of Romani (*Rrom*) groups in the country of Colombia, located in the northern part of South America, has been more evident in works of fiction than in historical documents. The Nobel Prize winner Gabriel Garcia Marquez, for example, starts his well-known *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with a passage on how once every year a Romani camp would be set outside of Macondo, the fictional place which represented any town on the Caribbean Coast [Ill. 2]. Melquiades, the Romani protagonist of this passage, brought wonders and inventions from outside, such as ice, magnets, spyglasses, and magnifying lenses. However, history books have been particularly silent about the people that served as inspiration for this story. Only recently, in the late 20th

and 21st century, have academics started to slowly catch up, publishing studies that give us a glimpse of the historical and contemporary Romani presence in the country.

Colombia's 2018 census, conducted by the National Department of Statistics, tallied 48,258,494 people in the country. The census also designed specific instruments and methods to count its Romani population by actively collaborating with Romani political organizations, refining its strategy from a previous attempt in 2005. These are the only two censuses which have taken into account Romani people in Colombian history. The 2005 census used only self-ascription, and determined that 0.012% (or 4,857) of Colombians were Romanies; in 2018 the cipher went down to 0.006% (2,649) [Ill. 1]. However, these numbers need to be taken with a grain of salt, since they only include families that

Ill. 2
One Hundred Years of Solitude, the most important novel of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Colombian author and Nobel Prize winner, is the most renowned mention of the presence of Romani people in the country.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez – Cien Años de Soledad | One Hundred Years of Solitude

[…] Todos los años, por el mes de marzo, una familia de gitanos desarrapados plantaba su carpa cerca de la aldea, y con un grande alboroto de pitos y timbales daban a conocer los nuevos inventos. Primero llevaron el imán. Un gitano corpulento, de barba montaraz y manos de gorrión, que se presentó con el nombre de Melquiades, hizo una truculenta demostración pública de lo que él mismo llamaba la octava maravilla de los sabios alquimistas de Macedonia. […]

[…] En marzo volvieron los gitanos. Esta vez llevaban un catalejo y una lupa del tamaño de un tambor, que exhibieron como el último descubrimiento de los judíos de Amsterdam. Sentaron una gitana en un extremo de la aldea e instalaron el catalejo a la entrada de la carpa. Mediante el pago de cinco reales, la gente se asomaba al catalejo y veía a la gitana al alcance de su mano. «La ciencia ha eliminado las distancias», pregonaba Melquíades. "Dentro de poco, el hombre podrá ver lo que ocurre en cualquier lugar de la tierra, sin moverse de su casa." […]

[…] Every year during the month of March a family of ragged gypsies would set up their tents near the village, and with a great uproar of pipes and kettledrums they would display new inventions. First they brought the magnet. A heavy gypsy with an untamed beard and sparrow hands, who introduced himself as Melquiades, put on a bold public demonstration of what he himself called the eighth wonder of the learned alchemists of Macedonia. […]

[…] In March the gypsies returned. This time they brought a telescope and a magnifying glass the size of a drum, which they exhibited as the latest discovery of the Jews of Amsterdam. They placed a gypsy woman at one end of the village and set up the telescope at the entrance to the tent. For the price of five reales, people could look into the telescope and see the gypsy woman an arm's length away. "Science has eliminated distance," Melquiades proclaimed. "In a short time, man will be able to see what is happening in any place in the world without leaving his own house." […]

want their ethnicity to be visible. Additionally, such instruments do not factor in the families' movements inside the country or abroad. Despite being such a small percentage of the population, there is evidence that Roma have had a continued presence in the country since at least the 19th century, and are now recognized by the state as an ethnic group with special cultural rights.

Analyzing family systems is the most grounded way of describing the collective groups formed in the Americas. Although lineages, better referred to as *vitsi*, have been defining for Romani experiences in Europe, they were toggled when only a few individuals crossed the Atlantic. Instead of the usual labor divisions, places of provenance and names of those who crossed have become the defining factors. A direct paternal line is usually the most common sign of belonging to a particular *vitsa*. However, these lineages are intermingled, and who belongs to which one is highly contextual and not mutually exclusive, given constant exchange and intermarriage. In Colombia, several *vitsi exist, among them* the *Ruso*, the *Bolochok*, the *Greko*, the *Demetrio* (sometimes also referred to as *Migueles*), the *Mighai*, the *Anes*, the *Bimbay*, the *Churón*, and others.

MIGRATION IN AND OUT OF COLOMBIA

Several authors have proposed a "wave" model in order to map the different arrivals of Romani groups to the Americas. This has been the dominant way of thinking about how Romani people reached the continent, and is reflected in many of the maps built, showing neat arrows that cross from one continent to the next in a single direction. Although it is true that there are several moments in which Romani groups reached the Americas in greater numbers, Romani individuals and families were arriving in countries like Colombia on a continuous basis, maintaining contact and creating networks through the movements

of people and information. While certain historical milestones show the moments in which Romani arrivals became more numerous, their crossing has usually replicated the migratory patterns of other European peoples to the continent.

An approach taken by some authors and also used here is to note how Romani arrivals in the Americas took diverse forms in different historical moments.

COLONIAL EMPIRES
Colonialism represents by far the longest period in consideration. The colonial period was characterized by mixed attempts of migration control by imperial authorities from Spain, Portugal, France, and Great Britain. Metropoles in Europe implemented laws that barred Romani groups from moving across certain borders but also laws against staying put, while imprisoning or deporting those considered asocial or criminal to prison colonies or as galley rowers. Although this sounds contradictory, it makes sense in a framework in which newly-formed nations began enforcing policies of assimilation and expulsion of any people they considered non-nationals, while encouraging emigration to their colonies as a strategy of maintaining control over these domains. Laws emphasized one or the other depending on specific interests.

Sources identified by Prorrom, the main Romani organization in Colombia, have pointed out the possible presence of Romani individuals in the third of Columbus's trips, individuals referred to as: Anton from Egypt, Macias from Egypt, Catalina from Egypt, and Maria from Egypt. At this point in history, it was very usual to equate Romani people with the medieval image of "wandering magicians" from Egypt. These mentions in boat registers point to a continuum of arrivals from very early in the history of contact between European empires and indigenous peoples in the Americas. However, individuals or families that

Ill. 3

In the city of Pasto, located in the southwest of Colombia, some Romani families live in tents, sacrificing certain luxuries for the possibility to live together and be mobile whenever it becomes necessary for their economic strategies.

Credits: Author

Ill. 4

Metalwork has been a crucial economic strategy for most Romani families in Colombia. Although most have moved into car and hydraulic repairs or stainless steel industrial forging, several elders still make a living by creating and repairing objects made of copper, bronze, and aluminum. In this picture, a Romani elder fixes an umbrella stand with his hammer.

Credits: Author

chose to cross the Atlantic in order to avoid discriminatory measures usually do not appear in early documentation, as they likely chose to pass as non-Roma within the inevitable diversity of the American continent. This makes the confirmation of such a hypothesis a complicated and ongoing endeavor. As Spain barred the passage of *Gitanos* to its colonies after 1581, and tried to deport those already living in the New World, it is assumed that most Romani people arriving to Colombian territory later than this chose to present themselves as non-Roma in order to be able to make the trip, the same way Sephardic Jewish and Muslim migrants did at the time.

INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENTS AND THE 19TH CENTURY

The second notable moment spans the 19th century, and coincides both with the Napoleonic Wars in Europe and with independence efforts in the Americas. Political changes caused events that brought to light transatlantic crossings, such as Romani people being part of the courts of Joao VI (1816-1822) of Portugal and Pedro I (1822-1831), exiled in Brazil; and Romani people forming part of the court of Maximilian I (1864-1867), who tried and failed to conquer the newly independent Mexico, supported by French troops. For Colombia, there was no such event, but oral history has showed that some families made their way to the country, especially at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Through these accounts we know that most of the families that arrived at this time and retained their ethnic belonging were Romani speakers from Eastern and Central Europe. Linguistic works have noted how the Romani language varieties spoken in the Americas share features with Southeast European Romani variants, specifically the Vlach Romani variety, suggesting a connection with groups who lived in Eastern

and Central Europe. During this period, several factors came together to initiate mobility towards Western Europe and then across the Atlantic: the abolition of serfdom and slavery in Moldavia and Wallachia; the dissolution of guilds; the expansion of railways after the 1850s; the liberalization of the economy; and the introduction of universal rights, among others. Unlike other countries in the Americas that welcomed migration, Colombia was characterized by its harsher treatment of immigrants, which contributed to irregularity and non-documentation.

THE WORLD WARS

The third moment came with World War I and World War II; together with other refugees from the armed conflicts in Europe, Romani groups and families crossed the Atlantic looking for safety. Although refugees usually reached countries that were frequent migrant destinations, such as the USA, Canada, Brazil, and Argentina, some of the oral histories recovered by activists and academics in Colombia have unearthed narratives of families arriving during this time. They traveled by boat and entered through the Caribbean port of Barranquilla, or crossed the borders with Venezuela, Brazil, and Ecuador. In Colombian history, this period is marked by the 9th of April of 1948, a failed attempt at revolution that followed the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a presidential candidate, and the start of a historical period of internal conflict and violence. Most families still living in the country claim to remember that event, and consider it both a turning point in which most families gathered in one place, and the moment in which they decided to leave towards other parts of Colombia. These families went to places that were not yet drawn into violence and civil conflict, such as the Caribbean plains or the so-called colonization frontiers, where people

Ill. 5
Celebration of the 8 of April in 2008, Bogotá. Romani elders and children of the families affiliated to *Prorrom* give a presentation containing allegorical scenes alluding to the history of migration of Romani people to Colombia, as well as performances based on a book that was released that day and that contained *paramici* (stories) gathered from Romani elders.

Credits: Carlos Prieto Acevedo

Ill. 6
Two married elders of a Romani family in Bogotá walk through their neighborhood, in the western part of the city, also known as the "Industrial Zone". Families have lived in this part of town off and on since the 1950's or so.

Credits: Author

were actively transforming the environment for agricultural or livestock production, far from densely populated areas.

THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY AND THE PRESENT

The latter part of the 20th century and the 21st century have seen other types of arrivals of Romani families to the country, which can be considered a fourth moment of Romani immigration.

Given the continuation of the violence, the country was until very recently considered a place of outward migration. Since the 1980s, a significant number of the families that had previously established themselves in the country made the decision to leave, especially when the violence perpetuated by armed forces and drug cartels affected them personally. *Bolochok* families in Medellin, for example, decided to move to other parts of the country, such as Bogotá, Bucaramanga, and Cúcuta, as well as abroad, to Venezuela, Mexico, and the United States. The *Demetrio* left Barranquilla and Bogotá for Venezuela, Mexico, and the United States as well and only a few individuals stayed back. *Ruso* families left Bogotá for Argentina, Venezuela, and the United States, although some returned after a year, only to later also follow the path to North America. The situation in the country provoked outward mobilities for several years, until the second decade of the 21st century, when Colombia became the destination of, to date, 1.5 million Venezuelan citizens.

In previous years, Venezuela had been an important destination for Colombian Romani families. For a while, the border city of Cúcuta, and the biggest city in the east of the country, Bucaramanga, housed most of the country's Romani population. Business across the border was a usual occurrence, taking advantage of the price and technical differences between the two countries. Venezuela's economic growth at the time also allowed plenty of families to accumulate enough capital to buy houses

across the border in Venezuela – in Rubio, or in cities such as San Cristobal, Maracaibo, Caracas, among others. Economic strategies diversified when used-car dealerships, hydraulic repair, and peddling were complemented by technologized water-proofing and asphalt businesses. After 2010, Venezuela's economy slowed down, its currency devalued to an unprecedented degree, all while its regime implemented authoritarian measures to stay in power. Given this panorama, several Romani families moved to Colombia along with the upper- and middle-class population from Venezuela. Following Romani networks, some stayed in Colombia, while most moved on to the United States through Ecuador or Mexico. In addition, some Colombian families took advantage of this movement and migrated to the United States themselves. Concerning mobility, the current moment is one of upheaval, in which the relative stability that existed in the 1990s and 2000s has been replaced by uncertainty.

LIFE IN COLOMBIA: THE EARLY DAYS

This section will focus on the daily life of those families that stayed in Colombian territory for several years, forming deep ties to its territory, peoples and society. The oral histories mentioned before place Romani families at the beginning of the 20th century arriving in Colombia and looking for cities that could act as a base for their economic strategies. At the time, the recognized hubs were Bogotá and Barranquilla, the first one serving as the main meeting point in the Andean mountains, and the second one the main port of the country on the Atlantic Coast. In Barranquilla, for example, the Demetrio family established scrap metal and antique businesses, which gave them the stability needed to live in the city and acquire property. In the meantime, other families were focused on more mobile strategies that allowed them to take advantage of their skills in horse breeding, metalwork,

Ill. 7
Bird-eye view of one of the first warehouses used to make and store stainless steel industrial appliances in Bogotá, belonging to members of the Ruso family.
Credits: Author

Ill. 8
Welding, stainless steel work, together with car and hydraulic mechanic skills, have become central in complementing copper, bronze and aluminum artisan craftsmanship among several romani families in Bogotá and other parts of the country. Here a romani man welds together a deep-fryer basket in disrepair.
Credits: Author

peddling, fortune telling; all while remaining independent. The priority of one or other skill varies according to the region that the families choose to live in; while in the Caribbean the cattle-centered economy favored horse breeding and tack making, in the Andes and on the Pacific Coast, the sugar cane industry would favor metalworking.

In a country whose economy was primarily agrarian, these skills were crucial for the prevailing *hacienda* model. The system was inherited from colonialism, and consisted of large areas of land owned by powerful individuals or families, who, through slavery, indentured and sometimes free labor, carried out a mixed agriculture and livestock production. Mobile strategies, which many times meant living in tents either permanently or during a period on the move, allowed the families to be independent while also providing services for farmers and landlords who needed metal tools sharpened and fixed, pots and pans made smooth and shiny, products delivered from the cities that were scarce in remote places, and enough powerful horses for transport and farming. Bogotá, Barranquilla, and later other cities like Medellin, Cali, or Cúcuta, were the places where the materials for these jobs were readily available. Families carved out diverse routes that were used to provide those services to as many places as possible, bearing in mind that only when there is a big enough population could such skills sustain a non-mobile family.

As industrialization took hold and the plantation model began replacing *haciendas*, Romani families adapted, making equipment for newly created factories and businesses, and learning new crafts, such as hydraulic machinery repair, welding techniques, or car repair and refurbishment. Their ways of earning a living also diversified through learning new crafts from Romani groups in other places, such as the mobile cinema trade learned from families who lived in Mexico. Buying land and houses in urban environments became more common as these changes

ensued, and families began to spend even more of their time in cities such as Bogotá, Medellin, Bucaramanga, and Cúcuta. Currently, only families in Pasto still live in tents, but many do occasional rounds in the countryside for peddling, metalwork, and machinery repair. By the end of the 20th century, Colombia became the country with the most internally displaced people in the world. The families had maintained a close relationship with cities since their arrival, and fit right into their diverse population, now growing exponentially given forced displacement.

LIFE IN COLOMBIA: CONTEMPORARY TIMES

The 1990s brought changes to the economic landscape of the country. The neoliberalization of the economy opened Colombia to foreign industrial techniques that replaced artisan craftsmanship like the one many Romani families had specialized in. Cheap materials, such as plastic and lower grade aluminum, replaced copper, bronze, iron, and other metals that were the prime materials for the creation of tools, kitchenware, decorative pieces, etc. [Ill. 4, 7, 8] Each family had its own response to this dilemma. For example, while the *Bolochok*, the *Mighai*, *and the Demetrio* had made most of their money with horses and fortune telling, at this time their shift towards car sales, leatherwork, and hydraulic repair was well underway. The *Ruso*, the *Greko*, and others diversified their metalwork skills, including aluminum and stainless steel as part of their repertoire, and many began complementing it with what they could sell door to door.

It is also important to note that peddling and fortune telling, although affected by these new trends, remained a part of Romani households and women's economies. Other factors, such as the increased importance of Pentecostal churches within Romani communities, and the introduction of cheap products from abroad (mostly brought from China or Southeast Asia),

Ill. 9
The covers of three of the main books that have been published by a romani organization in Colombia: *Los Rom de Colombia, un pueblo invisible* (The Rom of Colombia, an invisible people), *Tras el rastro de Melquíades. Memoria y resistencia de los Rom de Colombia* (Following Melquiades's trace. Memory and Redistance of the Rom of Colombia), and *Le Paramici le romege kay bes en akana ando o*
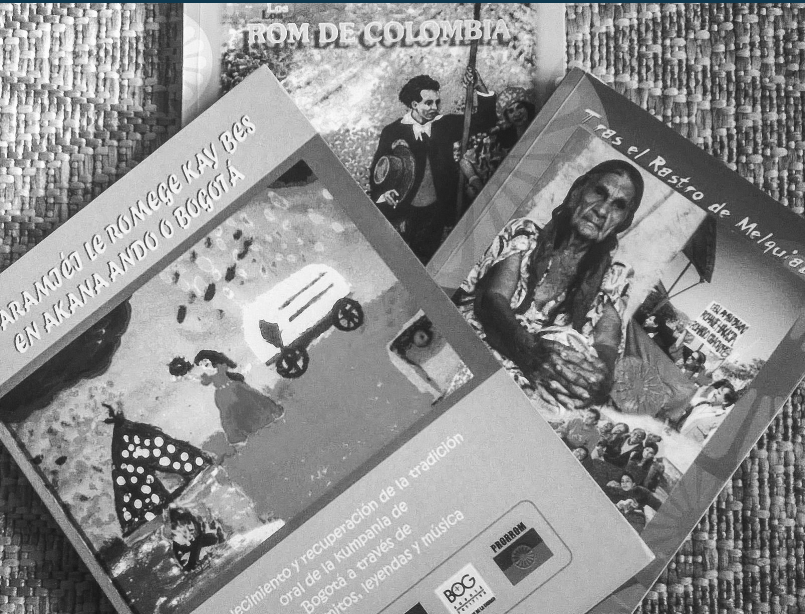
Bogotá, which compiles stories, songs and other narratives of the romani families that live in the country.

Ill. 10
A romani woman cooks *prozime*, a dish made out of potatoes, cabbage, pork bones, wheat flour and seasoning, considered one of the main romani recipes kept by the families that live in Colombia.
Credits: Author

modified the role of peddling and fortune telling for Romani economies in the country. While mystical and spiritual practices have always been part of the ways to make sense of life in Colombia, for many Pentecostal Romani families fortune telling became a sinful, and therefore dishonorable way to earn a living. Peddling, on the other hand, continued being important, but thanks to mass production of cheap goods, it was progressively relegated to territories where these products do not reach. Still, they have remained the two most common occupations among Romani women in the country, together with the responsibility of taking care of their household and raising their families.

Romani families in Colombia have historically been Christian. Most used to be Catholic until the arrival of Romani and non-Romani Pentecostalism. A significant number of the families in Bogotá, Medellin, Pasto, and other cities have formed Romani Pentecostal churches and begun attending non-Romani Pentecostal Churches, while a few joined the Jehovah Witnesses. For many families, Protestant Christianity has also become part of daily life since this trend started in the 1980s and 1990s, and in Colombia there are already established Romani Churches, which hold service in the Romani language and are connected transnationally with similar organizations across the Americas and Europe. *Camino al Cielo* (Way to Heaven) is the most well-known Romani church located in Bogotá, although Pentecostalism is widespread across the country.

Besides the aforementioned economic strategies, a number of rituals, institutions, and events are maintained as ways of keeping the sense of Romani belonging. For example, marriage remains a joyous occasion, a series of events in which the families forge or re-forge connections that last for generations. They occur quite frequently, but it is important to note that most

families have also welcomed the possibility of mixed marriages with non-Roma, especially of a Rom with a non-Romani woman. Other institutions are present as well, such as the Romani language and its usage, including when and how to speak both Spanish and Romani; *zakono* or *romanipe*, both words used to describe the ways in which one is a Romani person; certain practices associated to *marime*, or purity norms followed in daily life; *vortechia*, or the obligation to divide earnings in a joint business venture with Romani partners in equal parts; and the *Kriss*, or the Romani justice system based on an elder council that discusses collective decision-making and conflict resolution. Although heavily influenced by the Colombian context, other elements, such as keeping social stratification according to age and gender, maintaining kinship connections and networks through mobility and hospitality, showing respect to institutions and elders, using specific styles of dress, movement and thought, are all part of the community-formation processes of Colombian Romani families. Romani collective belonging and identities are constantly negotiated in daily life. This happens among and between communities in different localities in a city, regions in the country, through kinship networks, and across national borders.

ROMANI POLITICAL ORGANIZATION IN COLOMBIA

In 1990, after the assassination of three presidential candidates, a student movement forced an electoral decision to revise Colombia's 1886 Constitution. Out of this effort came the 1991 Political Constitution of Colombia, and for the first time the country wrote as its Article 7 what was an evident lived reality: Colombia is a diverse country, composed of many ethnic groups, and has been since its founding days. This new set of norms reflected

Ill. 11

A short article in the local newspaper Vanguardia Liberal, from the city of Bucaramanga, published the 27th of December, 1997. Romani families in Girón, in the Santander District, outraged because of the way Romnija were portrayed by the piece, contacted academics and activists in order to better understand the avenues of negotiation with the Colombian state. A complaint was filed and the newspaper had to retract the piece and issue an apology. This was the first step towards collective organization. The piece is a blatant account of the stereotypes that mediate relations between Roma and non-Roma in the country. Evidently, the journalistic standard of consulting all parties in a story were not respected.

The time of the Gypsies

The arrival of this year's end season brings tourists to the Girón national monument. Because of this, Gitanas [Romnija], mysterious inhabitants of the Beautiful Village, who have been living alongside Gironeses generation after generation, come out of every corner to tell fortunes, life and death from the palms of strangers.

This attitude, although striking, compelled some citizens to report to the Open Mail the need to warn the visitors to be careful and avoid having their good faith and, mainly, their pockets, assaulted.

"We do not want problems with anyone", said the whistleblowers, "but there are some of these people that are not trustworthy because, while one is distracted, they are placing their hand in your pocket, or hiding between their skirts what they can easily steal", explained one of them.

the decades-long activist movements of diverse indigenous peoples (*Pueblos Indígenas*) in the country. Subsequently, protests by people of African descent (*Afrocolombianos*) and Black Colombians (*Negritudes*) paved the way for the inclusion and recognition of other ethnic groups. *Palenqueros* (escaped slaves who formed their own collectivities), *Raizales* (Protestant Afro-Caribbean groups, originally from San Andres and Providencia Islands, who speak an English Creole language) and Romani (*Rrom*) people were later incorporated into this legal framework.

Romani families remained throughout the 20th century despite the overall violent circumstances, and learned to maintain a low profile. As a result, many Colombians are not aware of their presence. While older generations remember Roma people from childhood, they are now mostly noticed in the two cities that have Romani neighborhoods: Bucaramanga and Cúcuta. It was in 1997 that the local press started to write about their community in the town of Girón, next to Bucaramanga, all while reproducing age-old tropes about Romani women and fortune telling in public spaces [Ill. 11]. Such reporting responded to the prevalence of stereotypes as the main images about Romani people, fed by the historical strategies to pass as non-Roma mentioned above.

The Romani families that live in the municipality of Girón saw this as a sign to contact two academics who had tried previously to get Romani families to join the movements for cultural rights. *Prorrom* (*Proceso Organizativo del Pueblo Rrom* or Organizational Process of the Rrom People), the first organization in the country, came out of these joint efforts between non-Roma and Roma. Some families in Bogotá joined later, allowing the organization to maintain permanent contact with the central government, given their strategic location in the capital city. A second organization under the name of *Unión Romani* (Romani Union) was created when some of the founders of *Prorrom* had disagreements; its influence has grown, especially since 2008. Representatives of the two organizations such as Vénecer Gómez, Dalila Gómez, Sandro Cristo, and Lupe Gómez were among the first to engage with these academics and government officials. These encounters paved the way for the first texts about the Romani experience in Colombia, as well as the first laws and decrees that included Romani people.

The negotiations that followed this legislation reached specific compromises between the state and the organizations in the country, which included the institutionalization of Roma as an ethnic minority, and the creation of administrative units that enable the government to engage with families in particular localities. A process of consultation also resulted in a key piece of legislation, the Presidential Decree 2957 of 2010, that defines the Romani ethnic group, delineates who belongs to it, and provides a framework for the extension of special cultural rights to the Roma, considered "a people", *El Pueblo Rrom* (or the Romani People). This has presented issues of discrepancy between the law and actual changing realities, but has also established a historical precedent of recognition.

For instance, the territorial units defined by the decree were modeled according to the areas in which, historically, there has been a larger concentration of Romani families: Bogotá, Girón, Cúcuta, Pasto, Ibagué, Sabana Larga, Sampués, Sahagún, San Pelayo, and Envigado. The representatives of each unit meet periodically with the central government in Bogotá, in the so-called National Dialogue Commission for Romani People (recently referred to as the National Dialogue Table). However, oral accounts have noted that these centers do not ac-

count for every place were Romani families live or travel to. In Colombian law these units were named *kumpany* (sing. *kumpania*), after a term that was originally malleable enough to refer to the collective of Romani families in a particular locality or region, or those who traveled and lived together. Although this has allowed a decentralization of Romani political organization, it has also affected how the state sees Romani communities, anchoring them in specific territories in a logic similar to other Colombian ethnic groups.

This legal process has been accompanied by an effort to deal with the biased perception that the government and the public have of Romani people. *Prorrom* and *Union Romani* have both used events and government-sponsored projects to promote a better understanding of their presence in the country and their way of life. A recurrent way to do so has been to celebrate the 8th of April, International Romani Day, among the families that live in each of the localities. These celebrations, recognized by the government, often include food, dance and music considered typically Romani – including the Romani anthem *Gelem Gelem* – and occasionally feature a theater performance. [Ill. 5] These occasions allow for the repurposing of symbols that were originally designed during the World Romani Congress for the support of a nation-building effort. Flag, anthem, and official day have become a way to reaffirm Romani uniqueness in the context of Colombian ethnic revival.

The government has maintained a relationship with *Prorrom* and *Union Romani* mainly through government-funded short-term projects that intend to comply with the mandates dictated by the aforementioned laws. Such limited resources have funded events, workshops and subsidies, with the intention of implementing a different approach in education, health, and justice, recognizing that Romani people have particular cultural and social rights in the country. Among such initiatives are: collective gatherings and celebrations of the 8th of April and other special moments; dance and music workshops; small food-, raw material- and merchandise subsidies as complementary to independent daily life sustenance; the creation of the figure of *referente* (*referent*) to aid certain official institutions in providing targeted services to Romani families; the recent creation of special agreements with schools and personalized tutors, in order to accommodate a different approach to education; the very recent implementation of special criteria for Romani families to access state subsidies for housing, health, or sustenance, as well as in transitional justice reparations; and a few events for the promotion of Romani crafts, clothing, and art. Unfortunately, sustainable medium- or long-term initiatives have not been the rule during the process. This might change, however, as lessons from the decades-long activism of indigenous and Afrocolombian peoples show that a *plan de vida* (life plan) and other more comprehensive processes can contribute to more sustainable and long-term community-based actions in the future.

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