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Olfactory Stereotyping and Anti-Roma Racism: The Cultural Significance of ‘Roma Smell’ in Slovene Anthropology, History, Literature, and Criminology

Abstract

The article draws on various sources about Roma in Slovenia to show the role of body odour and illustrate the role of perceived odour in racial discrimination and in maintaining distinctions between the majority population and the Roma. The cultural significance of Roma body odour is a complex and multi-layered topic, traceable in several sources dating back to the 19th century. The odour associated with the Roma has been described from various perspectives. In anthropology, the study of Roma odour provides valuable insights into cultural perceptions and stereotypes about the Roma community. Throughout history, the depiction of Roma odour in literature has often reflected societal prejudices, perpetuating negative stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards this marginalised group. Literary works frequently emphasise the bad odour of this ethnic group, while paradoxically ascribing to the Roma an excellent sense of smell, often used metaphorically to represent subtle intuition. In criminology discourse, the association of Roma odour with criminality highlights the interconnectedness of ethnicity and the criminal justice system.

Keywords

Roma, odour, stereotype, prejudice, anthropology of smell, Slovenia.

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1. Introduction

The smell stereotype is a documented form of racist dehumanisation that has historically been directed at Roma, as well as other marginalised groups. This kind of stereotype is considered a form of sensory racism that serves to dehumanise, create artificial boundaries between groups, justify segregation and discrimination, and perpetuate social exclusion.

To understand the significance of olfactory stereotyping and anti-Roma racism, it is essential to first clarify some basic concepts. While the terms antigypsyism and anti-Roma racism are closely related, they differ in usage and scope. Antigypsyism refers specifically to racism, discrimination and prejudice against Roma, but also encompasses hostile attitudes towards people perceived as Gypsies (Carrera et al. 2017, 9–10). The term anti-Roma racism is sometimes preferred because it avoids the potentially pejorative term Gypsy and focuses specifically on discrimination against Roma (Cortés & End 2019).

Both terms describe the systematic discrimination, prejudice, and negative stereotypes that Roma have faced in the past and continue to face today. This includes discrimination in housing, education, employment, healthcare, and other areas of life (FRA 2018).

The Alliance Against Antigypsyism and other organisations argue that antigypsyism is a specific form of racism with unique historical and structural dimensions (Albert et al. 2016, 4–5), including deep-rooted stereotypes and myths about Roma (Nicolae 2007, 21); institutionalised discrimination (Albert et al. 2016, 6, 8); historical persecution and marginalisation (Selling et al. 2015, 15); denial of Roma history and identity (Rostas 2019, 18, 82); and dehumanisation and scapegoating (McGarry 2017, 93, 94, 129, 222).

Many Roma rights organisations use both terms, although in some contexts the term anti-Roma racism is increasingly preferred to emphasise respect for the terminology preferred by Roma (Vermeersch 2006, 13). This ongoing terminology debate reflects the general development of how discrimination against Roma communities is conceptualised and discussed in academic and activist circles.

Janko Spreizer (2022) provides the most comprehensive overview of antigypsyism in Slovenia. She analyses its consequences in terms of discourses, derogatory stereotypes, distorted images, and the legal effects of structural racism against Roma. Her work is of particular importance as it provides a systematic examination of how these different forms of discrimination intersect and reinforce one other.

In the context of perceived Roma odour, the most appropriate term is anti-Roma racism, as the odour of other social groups is also referred to as racism. This choice of terminology recognises the parallels between different forms of racial prejudice and places discrimination against Roma within the broader framework of racism research.

The study of sensory stereotypes, such as the perception of odours in relation to Roma, has gained attention as a crucial aspect for understanding antigypsyism. This article aims to explore the racist perceptions surrounding the notion of Gypsy smell, a stereotype that has been perpetuated through various cultural and academic perspectives. Mladenova et al. (2020), for example, highlight how antigypsyist stereotypes are embedded in European cinema and serve as a vehicle for symbolic violence against Roma communities. The role of such stereotypes in fuelling wider anti-Roma sentiment, particularly their connection with contemporary populist movements, was further criticised by Selling (2022), who blamed the historical irresponsibility of institutions such as the Gypsy Lore Society in perpetuating these harmful stereotypes.

Therefore, to effectively address this sensitive issue, it is important to clearly frame the academic context, explicitly recognise the racist nature of these stereotypes, and contribute to combating discrimination. By engaging with these critical perspectives, this article seeks to illuminate the damaging effects of sensory stereotypes on perceptions of Roma in Slovenia and beyond, and to advocate for a more nuanced understanding that challenges these pervasive narratives.

2. The Politics of Odour: Smell, Identity, and Social Hierarchies

Smell does not exist independently but is always interwoven with olfactory habits, practices, beliefs, prejudices, and sensory training. In sociocultural or temporal contexts, smell is not universal. While smell has long been considered inferior among the senses, anthropological studies on smell have explored, on the one hand, the sociocultural factors that influence olfactory perception and cultivation, and, on the other hand, the ways smells shape our attentiveness to others, our cultural identity, our social and power relations. In addition, anthropologists have examined the symbolic dimensions of smell as a carrier of moral norms and aesthetic values, its meanings in everyday life, ranging from love and eroticism to hatred and racist and xenophobic olfactory stereotypes of the “other” (as, for example in Classen 1992; Jütte 2012; Reinartz 2014; Tullett 2016; Le Breton 2017; Classen 2019; Hancock

1987; Lucassen et al. 1998; Matras 2015), as well as the ways in which smells are verbalised.

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Canadian anthropologist Constance Classen, in her article *The Odor of the Other: Olfactory Symbolism and Cultural Categories* (1992), states that the use of olfactory symbolism as a means of expressing and regulating cultural identity and difference between communities is found in many cultures (Classen 1992, 135, 148). She notes that when stench is attributed to the other, it is far less a reaction to an actual perception of the other's odour than a strong metaphor for social decay. On a small scale, we say that something or someone stinks when it does not conform to our ideas of decency; on a large scale, we apply this metaphor to entire groups of people (Classen 1992, 135). This applies in particular to Roma people, who have long been confronted with stereotypes and discrimination that are also based on perceived odour (Hancock 1987; Lucassen et al. 1998; Matras 2015). So, while we may feel an aversion to something or someone because their odour offends us, we may also ascribe an offensive odour to something because we feel an aversion to it (or the two elements may even work simultaneously so that they reinforce each other) (Classen 1992, 135). Among the symbolic functions of odours, Classen also includes the perception of the odours of strangers, because as a rule those who are considered to conform to cultural norms have a pleasant, relatively harmless, non-threatening odour, while those who threaten society in one way or another (strangers or those who violate social norms) are assigned an unpleasant or deceptively pleasant odour (Classen 1992, 148).

David Le Breton, the leading French authority on the anthropology of the body and senses, defines the "odour of alterity" as "an olfactory demarcation between self and other." In Western societies, he notes, "Blacks, Jews, Arabs, prostitutes, poor people, strangers, and others are often stigmatised by odour and sometimes find each other mutually malodorous" (Le Breton 2017, 162). He states that every person has an olfactory halo that surrounds them and distinguishes them from others. While he finds the idea of an "ethnic" or "racial" odour controversial, from an anthropological perspective it is a moral marker. Good smells inspire trust, while bad smells are considered deceitful and dangerous or at least strange and suspicious. Odour, though usually imaginary, symbolises a boundary between the self and the other. Its pejorative connotations, while not necessarily racist, often testify to ethnocentrism; a different smell results, for example, from a way of life, a certain diet, a certain type of clothing, the use of oils or ointments, or certain working conditions (Le Breton 2017, 162).

Canadian anthropologists Howes and Classen, among others, also point to the connection between social organisation and the senses, noting that the phenomenon of nationalism cannot be adequately captured by adherence to particular political ideals such as democracy, for it always involves attachment to particular tastes, smells, sounds, and sights (e.g., national dishes, anthems, and flags) (Howes 2021, 131). Howes and Classen state that sensory ways, models, and metaphors shape our notions of social integration, hierarchy, and identity. The senses are used directly for political purposes, marking, excluding, punishing, or highlighting particular individuals and groups (Howes & Classen 2014, 66). Similarly, Sekimoto and Brown, American professors of communicology, contend that race is not simply a social construction and is not simply marked on our bodies, but is fundamentally a sensory construction that is felt and registered through our senses (Sekimoto & Brown 2020, 2, 30).

As a result, humanistic research on smell has also emphasised the link between smell and power. Just as gods and kings were once believed to smell pleasant, the smell of the poor corresponded directly to their failed physical and supposed moral condition. The poor masses, sick or not, were regularly labelled as contaminated and thought to produce a miasma that threatened the health and well-being of the respected and fragrant upper classes. Hygiene was a particularly pressing issue when the authorities were investigating the living conditions of the poor. While baths became commonplace in the Western world during the 20th century, class differences could not be “washed away” so easily (Reinarz 2014, 213–214). The lower class and the working class simply stank to the upper class and the bourgeoisie, even if they were clean, such as servants (Aspria 2009). Numerous sensory stereotypes that had been applied to categorise social groups since the Middle Ages continued to be prevalent in the social order of 19th-century Europe. For instance, the working class was often thought of as people who were both rough and smelly, in addition to living in a rough and unpleasant environment. Workers’ purportedly thick-skin and insensitivity to malodour were interpreted as proof that they did not perceive the harshness of their work or believe they lived in filth and stench. The bourgeoisie despised such filthy and uncivilised individuals while also being afraid of the sensual and social chaos they symbolised (Classen 2019, 2–3).

Medical historian Jonathan Reinarz (2014) notes that Western observers in various colonial settings were particularly sensitive to the perceived indifference of the native populations to hygiene issues (Reinarz 2014, 214), a perception that is closely linked to the process of othering

and the formation of ethnic and/or class boundaries. As a result, public health campaigns and the idea of urban cleanliness became increasingly associated with the project of colonial progress. Even after the discovery of microscopic pathogens, the rhetoric of hygienic aesthetics remained focused on colonial debates about public health. Even ancient travellers considered dirt a defining characteristic of the strangers they encountered. Integration into another culture, therefore, required newcomers to adapt, usually by adopting new and stricter hygiene rules. In some cases, such an adjustment was considered impossible given the prevailing belief in racial odours. Smell plays an important role in determining racial identity. In environments where racial mixing was common, such as the American South in the early 20th century, racial segregation by smell maintained an artificial division between whites and Blacks. To whites, Blacks simply stank, and that smell was a sign of their race. Other groups, such as Jews and Chinese, were similarly distinguished by scent (Reinarz 2014, 214–215).

According to British historian of olfactory culture William Tullett, 18th-century travelogues and other accounts of racially diverse groups such as Jews, Indians, and Africans suggested that they had a particular odour related to the foods and cosmetics they used, while the perception of their odour was also a “consequence” of their skin colour (Tullett 2016, 310).

Reinarz claims that anthropological research eventually shifted away from made-up stereotypes and concentrated instead on olfactory classifications across various cultural groups in the 20th century. Studies, for instance, reveal that the more highly developed olfactory cultures of the Andaman Islanders and Dassanetch herders of Ethiopia “have subjected individuals within their own societies as inferior due to odour alone”. Westerners, however, continued to associate strong olfactory sensitivity with lower mammals. Racially distinct people were consistently categorised as inferior and different, regardless of whether they resided in crowded slums, were next to herds of cattle, or had a refined sense of smell (Reinarz 2014, 215). The senses of smell, touch, and taste were traditionally associated with women, while hearing and sight – the two senses that were regarded as the most rational – were more commonly associated with men. Women were classified based on their odour in addition to being thought to have a more developed sense of smell. According to Reinarz, those “who transgressed moral codes, such as prostitutes and witches, ostensibly smelled filthy, while virtuous maidens and nurturing mothers traditionally smelled sweet” (Reinarz 2014, 215–216).

It goes beyond just Western culture to stigmatise specific racial and ethnic groups based solely on their smell. According to Malinowski in *The Sexual Life of the Savages* (1932), the witches of the Trobriand Islands, for instance, had an exceptional sense of smell and could “hear and smell at enormous distances” (Malinowski 1932, 39) while simultaneously emitting “a smell reminiscent of excrement”, which was feared by everyone, especially by those who were sailing, for witches were dangerous on water (Malinowski 1932, 379). In the case of prostitutes, moral concerns relied on the language of disease, further justifying the division and regulation of prostitutes and brothels in periods of increased moral panic (Reinarz 2014, 216).

Jütte (2012, 317) claims that, until recently, the stigmatisation of foreigners, particularly Jews, also involved the use of stench symbolism. The Latin phrase *foetor judaicus* warned against getting too close to the devil and was a stereotype of Jews’ allegedly distinctive stench. The 20th century saw the continuation of this stereotype. These days, associations with offensive odours also show up for other social categories based on gender, age, nationality, skin tone, and socioeconomic status. Certain other groups of people, such as prostitutes, witches, black slaves, and Roma, were exposed and isolated as a result of a purportedly typical smell or stench (Jütte 2012, 317).

3. Methodology

The data on the odour of the Roma in Slovenia is fragmentary and primarily consists of stereotypical references to hygiene, morality, and the resulting negative attitudes towards Roma. Mentions of odour as an ethnic characteristic of Roma are scattered in literary, ethnological, anthropological, and historical publications, dating back to the late 19th century. In Slovenia, several authors have mentioned or described the odour of Roma. Criminologists (Liebich 1863; Gross 1898; Gross 1901), writers (Trdina 1987 [1870–1879]; Lainšček 2008) and historians (Steklasa 1890; Studen 2015) discussed this olfactory distinction in relation to the 19th century, while anthropologists (Janko Spreizer 2002; Lamberger Khatib et al. 2006; Mlakar 2019) and pedagogues (Ašič 2022; 2023) focused on the 20th and 21st centuries.

Ethnologist Štrukelj (1980) and historian Mihelič (2024) dealt with Roma and olfactory stereotypes in their analyses of Janez Trdina’s literary works, although their mentions of sensory perceptions in connection with Roma are relatively brief. The most comprehensive study on the significance of Roma smell was produced by Ramšak (2024) in her book

on the anthropology of smell. In addition to the sources already mentioned, research was conducted using Wikisource (in Slovene, *Wikivir*¹), as well as repositories of the University of Ljubljana and the University of Maribor, the Digital Library of Slovenia, and the Sistory portal – an online platform dedicated to Slovene historiography. Throughout the research, special attention was paid to keywords such as Roma, Gypsy, odour, stench, smell and similar terms.

All mentions of the odour of Roma and their olfactory abilities were systematically listed and contextually compared. A typology of odour references was created, ranging from descriptions of the Roma's allegedly dirty life, dietary habits, their tendency to criminality, to sensual descriptions of Roma women.

In discussing the odour associated with Roma people, the term Gypsy is used in various places within the article. This occurs when quoting older sources verbatim or referencing explanations in more recent literature that rely on these older sources, although the term Gypsy is demeaning and offensive to the Roma community as it is often associated with stereotypes and discrimination. Gypsy, written with a lowercase initial, refers to a person who is not necessarily a Roma, but has the characteristics of an itinerant person or group with traits traditionally attributed to Roma, e.g. a traveller, a tinker, or a person who earns a living through dishonest practises or theft, etc. In Slovene literature, both terms can be found, but since the line between a member of a minority, written with a capital letter, and a person with a Gypsy lifestyle, written with a lower-case letter, is often blurred, descriptions of odour refer exclusively to ethnicity, because only in this context does the interpretation of odour make sense.

4. Slovenes' Perceptions of Roma Odour

According to historian Andrej Studen's book *Maladapted and Dangerous: The Image and Status of Gypsies in the Past* (2015), Gypsies were viewed very negatively by so called civilised Europeans in the 18th and 19th centuries. These Europeans distanced themselves from Roma people, seeing them as dirty, uncultured, and foul-smelling. Gypsies were described as having an unbearable, repulsive, and unforgettable odour, reminiscent of the smell of Black people. It was assumed that this stench originated from their dirty bodies and was linked to their skin colour. The idea of their disgusting stench aligned with the bourgeois hygiene standards of the time, which considered dirt to be one of the most important elements of disgust (Studen 2015, 27).

Studen notes that the stories about the Gypsy community are often characterised by contempt and disdain. Throughout history, Europeans have marginalised and denigrated Gypsies, referring to them as the others and targeting their unconventional lifestyles. Gypsies were ostracised, discriminated against, and branded as a group of disorderly, unhygienic people who lived off fraud and theft. They were labelled as parasites, lazy people, criminals, fraudsters, beggars, and wanderers. Studen mentions Grellmann's observations from 1787, which associated the Gypsies with criminal activities and offences since their arrival in Europe, leading to a strong aversion and disgust towards them (Studen 2015, 15, 27). Studen also quotes Hans Gross's 1893 *Manual for Examining Magistrates, Police Officers, and Gendarmes*, which states that the cunning, impudent, and cheeky Gypsy commits theft covertly, "like a ghost," leaving behind "only his smell – his characteristic, obvious, and recognisable odour, which lingers for a long time and is not forgotten by anyone who has once smelled it" (Studen 2015, 25).

Gross, an Austrian criminal jurist, criminologist, and the founding father of criminal profiling, played an important role in shaping anti-Roma racism within criminology and law enforcement during the Habsburg Empire. In the preface to the fifth edition of the book *Handbuch für Untersuchungsrichter als System der Kriminalistik* (Manual for Examining Magistrates as a System of Criminology, Volume 1) in 1908, which was first printed in 1898, he formulated his views on the role of criminology within the criminal justice system. In particular, he outlined a general doctrine that categorised criminal somatology and psychology as subdivisions of criminal anthropology – a core component of the criminological discipline at the time (Gross 1898, XVI). Chapter 9 of his book (Gross 1908, 440–464) expresses racist views towards Roma (who are referred to as *Zigeuners* or Gypsies). It describes them as having inherent negative traits such as laziness, dishonesty, and cowardice, and discusses common beliefs and misconceptions about Roma, including accusations of child stealing and ingratitude. The chapter also highlights the characteristic odour of Roma (*Zigeunergeruch* or Gypsy smell), describing it as musky and mousy, and sticking to surfaces they have touched. Gross even suggests using this smell to detect whether Roma had been present. Overall, the chapter reflects a prejudiced and dehumanising attitude towards the Roma community, treated as sub-human because of their perceived physical and behavioural traits. These views were clearly rooted in racist stereotypes and prejudices.

Historian Studen (2015) points out that at the end of the 19th century "the smell of Roma was very much like the equally distinctive smell

of Blacks,” and that it had “crammed itself” into the courthouse walls, making the court officials very familiar with it (Studen 2015, 25). He refers to Gross, who wrote in his *Manual for Examining Magistrates as a System of Criminology* in 1898 and later editions:

The Gypsy simply passes by like a ghost, noiseless, without being, without body [...]. Only his smell remains, his peculiar, unmistakable, long-lasting odour, which no one forgets once they have noticed it. It is said to resemble the odour that is also known as the characteristic Negro smell. Court officials who are familiar with this odour and have a not-too-dull sense of smell notice it as soon as they enter the courthouse when Gypsies are brought in, so you have to believe that the smell even sticks to the walls. This fact could be used to determine whether Gypsies were present. If the Gypsies stole somewhere, they must have stayed there for a while and touched a variety of things. In most cases, boxes, beds etc. were opened so that clothing, linen etc. were exposed and, therefore, as is usual with woollen fabrics etc., could greedily absorb the smell and hold on to it for a long time. If someone who knows the odour of Gypsies enters the room and not too much time has passed since the thieves left, the presence of Gypsies can be detected with almost absolute certainty. This odour develops particularly strongly when the Gypsies have been working hard and sweating (Gross 1908, 446).

Gross attributes the smell of Roma to their dirty way of life, from which we can conclude that it is not entirely a racist designation:

You must be careful with the Gypsy odour [...]. If you compare it to what you know, perhaps it would be best to say: the smell of fat combined with the smell of mice. Of course, the indescribable filth of the Gypsies must also be considered, which can even become evidence under certain circumstances (Gross 1908, 446–447).

Nevertheless, Gross repeatedly cited the “Gypsy smell” as alleged proof of Roma guilt, and this false claim was used in his criminological manuals and in court. In Gross’s *Criminal Psychology: A Manual for Judges, Practitioners, and Students*, first published in 1898, reprinted several times, and translated into English, he writes: “I remember that one time when I had in court to deal almost exclusively with Gypsies, I could immediately smell whether any Gypsies had been brought there during the night” (Gross 1898, 215). The specific smell of Gypsies was said to be useful to criminal investigators, allowing them to establish or confirm the presence of Gypsies with almost complete certainty. The odour was said to resemble “a rancid, greasy smell mixed with the smell of a

mouse” (Studen 2015, 25–26). Studen notes that a few years later, in his *Encyclopedia of Criminology*, published in 1901, Gross defined their odour as a distinctive characteristic:

The odour of Gypsies, similar to mouse urine or rancid fat, is extremely characteristic and remains in the rooms where Gypsies were (especially if they have previously worked hard and sweated for a long time, their odour even penetrates the walls, and in this way, we can determine whether Gypsies were in the room). The smell of Blacks is said to be similar (Gross 1901, 32).

In his discussion of Roma odour, Gross apparently relied on racist and offensive statements from criminologist Liebich’s 1863 work *Die Zigeuner in ihrem Wesen und in ihrer Sprache nach eigenen Beobachtungen dargestellt* (The Gypsies, Depicted in Their Nature and Language Based on Their Own Observations):

Gypsies have a strange, repulsive smell, which is especially noticeable and perceptible in interior rooms. This smell, too, cannot be easily described, just like the substantially different but no less specific smell of poverty, which every criminal and police officer knows (Liebich 1863, 22).

Gross’s racist approach, which extended beyond odour, is evident throughout his work. Without any differentiation, he generally attributes negative qualities to Gypsies, such as cowardice, rudeness, treachery, lust, superstition, revenge, boundless laziness, animal hunger, sensual love, and vanity (Štrákl 2010, 42). Gross denies Gypsies any moral competence, and his criminological assessment is scathing, ascribing to them a special affinity for stealthy theft executed with quick skill. A characteristic of the racist discourse of the time, however, which also appears in earlier literature about Gypsies, is the physical devaluation of the group through the emphasis on alleged racial and ethnic characteristics. According to Štrákl, in his 1908 work *Handbuch für Untersuchungsrichter als System der Kriminalistik* (Manual for Examining Magistrates as a System of Criminology), Gross advises criminologists to pay attention to the smell at the crime scene, since Gypsies, like “Negroes”, have a penetrating, long-lasting odour reminiscent of grease and mice (Štrákl 2010, 42). Apparently, comparing the smell of Gypsies to the smell of mice, old grease, and Black people seemed to him the most appropriate description. From the above descriptions of procedures and instructions in criminology, it is clear that the unpleas-

ant smell of suspected Roma, which stemmed from their poor living conditions and habits, influenced criminologists' beliefs about their guilt and their attitude towards suspects.

The persistent and enduring racist views about Roma from inter-war Yugoslavia continued after the Second World War. No sources have been found documenting the odour characteristics of Roma during the war itself. As described by Komac (2005), the relationship between Roma and criminology after the Second World War was marked by Roma being treated as an alien element within the Slovene social body, which led to a systematic stigmatisation and criminalisation of their behaviour, reflected in police and court proceedings in which they were often portrayed as scapegoats for social problems. Due to perceptions of their inherent criminality, crimes committed by members of the majority population were also often attributed to Roma (Komac 2005, 158). After the war, in 1946, the situation was at its worst in settlements such as Pušča in eastern Slovenia, described in post-war sources as neglected, infested, and overcrowded, with rampant cases of scabies, lice, bedbugs, glaucoma, and typhus. There was terrible uncleanness and stench in the dwellings. Sources link the poor sanitary conditions to a higher likelihood of crime in the nearby town (Komac 2005, 137, 153). In criminal cases in which Roma were held responsible for their crimes, mostly thefts and robberies, the old police cadres relied on the findings of classical Romology, which included among the typical physical characteristics of Roma a "pronounced physical Gypsy odour, which was intensified by their inherent impurity" (Komac 2005, 150).

In his thesis *Using Smells in Investigations*, Darko Maver, a police officer, lawyer, criminologist, and long-time professor at the Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security at the University of Maribor in Slovenia, concluded that prejudices and stereotypes frequently result from the actual or perceived smell of a group. For example, there are stereotypes against the "lower class", who are perceived to "stink" and should therefore be avoided (Maver 1976, 12). He suggests using a variety of tools in odorological forensics, including the human nose, dogs or other animals, and technical methods to achieve accurate results. The amount and speed of inhaled air, emotions, olfactory defects, habituation to the odour (if we inhale the odour long enough, we become accustomed to it), and other factors can also have an impact on a person's olfactory abilities (Maver 1976, 15). He illustrated the role of emotions with examples of criminalists' expectations from August Munda's 1951 textbook *An Introduction to Criminology*. For instance, a criminalist might initially perceive a strong smell of burning during an investigation,

but when told the burning site is an hour's walk away, the perception of the odour disappears. Similarly, a strong stench during an exhumation might vanish once it is discovered that the coffin is empty (Maver 1976, 15).

The writer Janez Trdina also commented on the smell of Gypsies in *Images of Ancestors: Janez Trdina's Notes from the Period 1870–1879*: “They leave a terrible stench in the house where they were staying for a long time, for example, for a day. Everything needs to be scrubbed and cleaned in order to make this infectious odour go away” (Trdina 1987, Vol. 5, Fascicle 2, 240). Trdina was extremely critical of hygiene among Gypsies. In his *Sketches and Stories from National Life*, he remarked that “the filth of the Gypsy cooking cannot be described” (Trdina 1957, 38; Štrukelj 1980, 62). Regarding Gypsy women, Trdina wrote: “We call women who do not sweep house and yard negligent women, Gypsies, skunk godmothers who stink with laziness” (Trdina 1958, 209; Štrukelj 1980, 59). Here, Trdina uses the phrase “to stink like a skunk” to compare Gypsy women to skunks, animals that spray an unpleasant odour when under threat. Skunks themselves do not smell, it is the secretion from the glands near their anus, which they secrete in defence or attack to ward off an attacker, that stinks.

Trdina expresses even stronger disgust and aversion in another observation:

The Gypsies are so disgusting to people that they do not want to eat or drink near them. They are frightened of their long hooves² at the same time. One must thoroughly air, fumigate, mop, wash, and clean everything after them if they stay in a house for a long time because they leave behind a strange, heavy, and unpleasant odour that some have compared to the smell of rotting carrion, but to me, it smells most like tanneries (Trdina 1987, 240; Studen 2015, 26–27).

Similarly, the writer Ivan Steklasa, in the sketch *Gypsies* (1890), emphasises the olfactory distinction that separates the Roma as an ethnic group from the majority population: “It’s disheartening to see grown-up children who cannot resist putting everything they see in their mouths. This leads them to eat everything, even unappetising things like carrion, despite the foul smell” (Steklasa 1890, 76).

According to Studen, the idea of a disgusting stench emanating from dirty and unkempt Gypsies coincided with the era of bourgeois hygiene, which considered dirt as one of the central elements of disgust. For bourgeois moralists and hygienists of the 19th century, dirt and stench

were seen as defining characteristics of the urban and rural underclass, i.e. the dirty and stinking poor. These elements, considered disgusting and contaminating the bourgeois society, also served as a means of social demarcation (Studen 2015, 27). The resemblance to rot, even to excrement, was said to clearly allude to human degeneration in racist views (Bogdal 2011, 311; Studen 2015, 27).

Roma people continue to experience olfactory prejudice today, starting from a young age. Despite all anti-discrimination efforts, society still perceives them as having a bad odour because of unsanitary living conditions, as described by several Slovene authors (Tancer 1994; Janko Spreizer 2022; Lamberger Khatib et al. 2006; Ašič 2022).

In her 2002 book *I Knew I Was a Gypsy – I Was Born as a Roma: Scientific Racism in Roma Research*, social anthropologist Alenka Janko Spreizer discusses, for example, odour as a form of prejudice against Roma. She argues that such prejudices contribute to the construction of ethnic boundaries between Roma and Gadje,³ with body odour being one of the factors that perpetuate these boundaries. The author describes common stereotypes about Roma, such as the belief that Roma have a particular skin odour even when they are clean. During her 1995 field research in Pušča, the largest Roma settlement in Slovenia, Janko Spreizer herself did not perceive any distinctive odour among Roma. However, the local residents dismissed her observations, claiming that as a foreigner, she lacked the olfactory ability to detect it. It was thought that foreigners have a limited ability to detect the smells of local people. In contrast, Roma were thought to “have their own smell even when they are clean, dressed in the newest fashion, and not dirty.” The locals also shared their perceptions of odours from other non-whites, who, in their opinion, also have a distinct smell. Janko Spreizer cites the testimony of a local woman who claimed to have “intensely smelled” Black people from Yemen she interacted with at the study site and learned that they, in turn, thought white people had a “different smell.” She remarked that whites themselves varied in odour, with “southerners,” that is, people from the former Yugoslav republics that lie south of Slovenia, or Scandinavians from the north each having their own distinct smells (Janko Spreizer 2002, 15–16).

The concept of smell is thus not necessarily associated with cleanliness, but is a significant social distinction linked with olfactory ethnic stereotypes, geography (Scandinavians, southerners), and social class. The above description highlights a shift in the perception of olfactory abilities. While anthropological and linguistic literature portrayed non-whites' exceptional olfactory skills as a sign of uncivilisation, even

savagery, the locals' pride in their keen sense of smell demonstrates that they are aware of the critical role it plays and deliberately use it to elevate themselves above foreigners. Anthropologist Janko Spreizer, who came from outside (Ljubljana, just 180 kilometres away), was said to lack the ability to detect the local smell because, based on the aforementioned description, the excellent sense of smell remains within the community. The distinction between the symbolic stench of all Roma and the actual odour Roma emit due to a lack of cleanliness is also illuminating. Additionally, this perception extends to all non-white people. The locals' description of other non-white people's perceptions of odours, however, demonstrates that olfactory discrimination is a significant social distinction linked to both geography (Scandinavians, southerners) and social class. The distinction between our smell and others' smell serves as an illustration of how well-established anthropological binaries – inside and outside, north and south, up and down – manifest in this situation.

Similarly, in his reflections on where Roma come from, where they go, and where they return to, the protagonist of Feri Lainšček's novel *Untouchables, the Myth of the Gypsies* (2008) describes non-Roma or those who have settled down with the smell of their lives:

They absorbed the smell of their yards a long time ago, the women probably smelled of flowers from the flower beds, the men of schnapps from overripe plums, and the children of milk from the local cows. We, on the other hand, always just walked by – strangers, unloved, cursed – not even a little excited, not too sad, sometimes just painfully tired (Lainšček 2008, 21).

This literary description is actually a reversed perspective of olfactory perception, presenting the view of a member of the minority towards the odour of the majority, which Roma perceive as different from their own. Lainšček also uses odours to describe Roma love life, which often resulted in many children, necessitating periods of settling down: "She had what was inviting – like the smell of southern fruit, which was rare, personal, and therefore indefensible fleeting" (Lainšček 2008, 47). "A cherry blossom bloomed and the pistil smelled intoxicating for a while; then a whole bunch of grapes grew on it, the berries of which did not ripen but became more and more sour" (Lainšček 2008, 27). Since many children were conceived outside of partnerships, odour became a tool for identifying the father of a new illegitimate child. This was done using unique Roma interrogation techniques: "And then they sniffed, pulled

on the ear, set verbal traps, offered drinks and stalked suspects whose crotch smelled just a little of sulphur" (Lainšček 2008, 40). Lainšček uses the smell of sulphur in a man's crotch as a synonym for the work of the devil, symbolising a man who seduced a Roma woman already in a relationship and fathered her child.

In 2022, social worker Erika Ašič conducted a survey on the perception of pupils' odour by elementary school teachers. She questioned fifty-four (54) teachers from various Slovene regions about the odours they noticed in pupils, their perceptions of the pupils' odours, how odours influenced their well-being, what they thought caused unpleasant odours, and how they responded when they noticed an unpleasant odour in a pupil (Ašič 2022). Teachers reported a variety of smells they noticed in their pupils, including pleasant smells (perfumes, deodorants) or poorly applied smells that were either too strong or used improperly (e.g. to mask that the body or clothes were not clean). They also reported the smell of smoking (active or passive – for example, when parents smoke and this smell is absorbed by clothes and notebooks); the smell of poor hygiene (unwashed body, unwashed clothes; the smell of poor housing conditions, e.g., dampness, mould, smoke in the house); sweating (sweating after sports was particularly emphasised); excretions (urine, faeces); odours expressing health problems (e.g., tooth decay); and specific odours associated with developmental stages (puberty, when young people sweat more intensely and the odour is strong) (Ašič 2022, 12).

One response referred to the smell of a Roma child:

The Roma pupil's school bag smelled strong and gave off a very unpleasant odour of smoke, food, and urine – the smells in which they lived. Younger brothers and sisters urinated directly on the floor and probably also on the bag. For a long time, I did not find out why it stank so much in the classroom. One day they went to the gym, and I smelled each bag individually to find out where the bad smells were coming from. We changed the boy's bag because the classroom was unliveable (Ašič 2022, 18).

Ašič notes that with the unpleasant smell of the pupils, the teachers' feelings and well-being were also unpleasant and uncomfortable; some even mentioned disgust and horror and body reactions (nausea, unconscious physical withdrawal, shortness of breath). Few teachers reported feeling neutral or slightly negative, but none mentioned feeling comfortable when the pupils smelled bad, which opens up the possibility of bias in their assessment and a different attitude towards pupils with a smell.

Nevertheless, most teachers put aside their reactions to the pupils' bad smell and sought solutions to help the pupils (Ašič 2022, 15), which was also reflected in the teacher's reaction to the unpleasant smell of the Roma child, as the teacher was aware of the poor hygienic and social conditions in which these children lived. Solving the problems of Roma children with the help of other key adults and within the school premises proved effective for Roma children, as teachers indicated that they pointed out the bad smell of Roma children to the Roma coordinator or the class teacher and allowed these children to shower and change clothes at school accompanied by a counsellor, and some teachers even provided clean clothes from their own children (Ašič 2022, 20).

Similarly, anthropologist Anja Mlakar highlights an observation of her relative, who worked at the Paediatric Clinic in Ljubljana and claimed that "Roma children have a different smell that does not disappear even when they are thoroughly washed" (Mlakar 2019, 169). When discussing the odour of Roma children within a healthcare setting, Mlakar provides no additional explanations, such as their medical condition, dietary habits or other factors. Instead, the author attributes this to the perception of a culturally assigned odour associated with the other.

5. Conclusion

The article discusses the olfactory stereotype as a form of racist dehumanisation directed against Roma communities and other marginalised groups. It identifies olfactory stereotyping as sensory racism that dehumanises people, justifies segregation, and perpetuates social exclusion. The article also examines the historical and structural aspects of antigypsyism, including stereotypes and institutional discrimination. It emphasises that the discourse surrounding the perceived odour of Roma reflects anti-Roma racism and has parallels with other forms of racial discrimination. The article examines the harmful stereotype of the Gypsy smell and its role in fostering anti-Roma sentiment, and argues for a nuanced understanding to challenge these damaging narratives.

The cultural significance of Roma odour raises important questions about the intersection of cultural stereotypes, discrimination, and public discourse. When discussing this topic, it is crucial to critically examine how the representation of Roma odour in various sources perpetuates harmful stereotypes and contributes to the marginalisation of the Roma community.

A complex set of comparisons linking the sense of smell to its perceptions, also known as the symbolic lexicon of odours, gives us valu-

able insights into the way we articulate our thoughts about the smells of people and the world. Throughout history, strangers have often been ostracised by associating them with foul odours, a trend that continues today in various interpretations of other people's smells. Groups such as Jews, Roma, Arabs, Chinese, Native Americans, slaves, prostitutes, witches, and the impoverished have been publicly stigmatised because of a unique smell or an unpleasant odour. In general, unpleasant or foul odours are associated with outsiders and social categories such as gender, age, nationality, and skin colour.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Roma were harshly judged by so called civilised Europeans. The latter distanced themselves from Roma and regarded them as unclean, uncultured, and offensive to society. Roma were believed to emit an incredibly unpleasant, unforgettable odour, similar to the smell associated with Black people or animals such as mice and skunks. This foul odour was thought to originate from their unwashed bodies and was associated with their skin colour and their perceived immoral lifestyle. The idea of their repulsive odour aligned with the hygiene standards of bourgeois society at the time, which saw dirt as a major source of disgust and emphasised the importance of cleanliness to avoid disgust. According to 19th century bourgeois moralists and hygienists, dirt and bad odours were often associated with the lower classes of urban and rural society and represented poverty, which was characterised by dirt and stench. This stench also served as a means of differentiation, as it was seen as a clear sign of human degeneration from a racist point of view. Prejudiced ideas about the Roma community, often expressed through references to their odour in various contexts, reveal an awareness of the differences between the majority population and Roma as well as a deep-seated fear of the other. Since olfactory descriptions of Roma are rare, those that exist tend to emphasise ideas of inferiority of Roma. Even more rarely do we find parallels, such as references to the exotic scent of young Roma women.

From an anthropological perspective, the focus on Roma odour can be seen as a form of othering that reinforces the idea of Roma as different or inferior. This can have tangible consequences, including social exclusion and discrimination. Historically, the study of Roma odour reflects prejudices and biases that have persisted over time. It is also important to recognise that the olfactory perception of a particular social group is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by a number of variables such as cultural practices, environmental conditions, health, and individual biological characteristics. Consequently, generalisations about the odour of any group are dangerous because they easily slide into

ethnocentrism and racism and perpetuate the notion of the supremacy of the dominant group. It is crucial to recognise that each individual's perception of smell is highly subjective and varies from person to person. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the potential biases and prejudices when discussing how a particular group of people smells.

Literature, as a reflection of societal attitudes and beliefs, plays an important role in shaping perceptions of marginalised communities. The portrayal of Roma odour in literature can either challenge or reinforce stereotypes, depending on the author's perspective and intent. It is important to critically analyse how these representations influence public perception and contribute to systemic discrimination.

In criminological discourse, the focus on Roma odour intersects with narratives of criminality and deviance, further stigmatising an already marginalised community. It is important to approach this topic with sensitivity, recognising the broader social and historical context in which these stereotypes have emerged. Associating criminality with physical characteristics, including the perception of ethnic odour or stench, has promoted harmful stereotypes and discrimination against Roma communities across Europe. Even though this phenomenon has been observed in general, it is important to consider the specific historical and social context in Slovenia. Here, prejudices about Roma odour seem to have persisted from the 19th century through the post-World War II period, even within law enforcement agencies and state institutions. This reflects a deep-rooted antigypsyism that has been challenging to eradicate. The persistence of these harmful stereotypes in Slovenia highlights the need for a nuanced, country-specific analysis of the ways in which sensory racism and odour stereotyping have manifested and persisted in the local social, cultural, and institutional fabric. Only by examining these dynamics in depth in the Slovene context can we hope to meaningfully challenge and dismantle the deep-rooted prejudices that the Roma community continues to face. Modern research has rejected simplistic biological explanations for criminal behaviour, instead recognising social, systemic, and psychosocial factors as more relevant. However, these ideas endure and cannot simply be erased from memory.

Overall, discussions about the cultural significance of Roma odour in public discourse should aim to deconstruct stereotypes, challenge preconceptions, and promote a more nuanced understanding of the Roma community. By critically examining the ways in which such stereotypes are perpetuated in anthropology, history, literature, and criminology, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable academic environment.

In conclusion, while the Roma odour stereotyping discussed in this article has parallels across Europe, it is crucial to anchor the analysis in the particular historical and contemporary realities of Slovenia. Such localised perspective is essential for developing effective strategies to address the complex, multifaceted nature of antigypsyism within Slovenia and to work towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

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Notes

- ¹ A free library that offers public domain texts and works that are available for legal distribution.
- ² The word refers to their habit of nicking things and comes from Slovenian *stegovati parklje*, which figuratively means to steal.
- ³ In Roma culture, a *gadjo* (male) or *gadji* (female) refers to a person who does not belong to the Roma ethnic group. This term is often used by Roma to refer to their non-Romani neighbours who live in or near their community.

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Vonjalno stereotipiziranje in protiromski rasizem: kulturni pomen 'romskega vonja' v slovenski antropologiji, zgodovini, literaturi in kriminologiji

Povzetek

Članek s pomočjo različnih virov o Romih v Sloveniji prikaže vlogo telesnega vonja in ponazori vlogo zaznanega vonja pri rasni diskriminaciji in ohranjanju razlik med večinskim prebivalstvom in Romi. Kulturni pomen romskega telesnega vonja je kompleksna in večplastna tema, ki jo lahko zasledimo v več virih iz 19. stoletja. Vonj Romov je bil v slovenski literaturi opisan z različnih vidikov. V antropologiji lahko preučevanje romskega vonja zagotovi dragocen vpogled v kulturno dožemanje in stereotipe o romski skupnosti. Skozi zgodovino je prikazovanje romskega vonja v literaturi pogosto odražalo družbene predsodke ter ohranjanje negativnih stereotipov in diskriminatornega odnosa do te marginalizirane skupine. V literarnih delih se poudarja slab vonj te etnične skupine, hkrati pa se Romom pripisuje odličen voh, ki se v prenesenem pomenu uporablja za pretanjeno intuicijo. V kriminološkem diskurzu povezuje romskega vonja s kriminalom poudarja medsebojno povezanost etnične pripadnosti in kazensko-pravnega sistema. Na splošno nam lahko preučevanje opisov vonjav Romov pomaga bolje razumeti zapleteno dinamiko moči, reprezentacije in družbenih hierarhij v slovenski družbi ter ponuja vpogled v načine, na katere so stereotipi in predsodki oblikovali dožemanje romske skupnosti.

Ključne besede

Romi, vonj, stereotip, predsodek, antropologija vonja, Slovenija.