



To Our Community,

Like many people and businesses in America, we have been taking time to consider the part we play in the Black Lives Matter movement. One thing that has come up in the conversation on being anti-racist is the criticism of the word "Gypsy" in our business name. As a business that strives to be anti-racist, we have no intention to do harm to anyone, including the Romani people who might be offended by our use of the word "Gypsy."

According to Wikipedia: Gypsy is a name for the Romani people, an ethnic group of South Asian origin. The Romani, who have Indian roots and heritage, left India around 1,500 years ago entering Europe via the Middle East around 1,000 years ago. They spread further through Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries, separating into various subgroups in the process. They speak Romani, and Indo-Aryan language. Other itinerant groups include the Sinti people, who are themselves the second largest group. The third largest group in Europe is the Yenish, an indigenous Germanic group. As opposed to nomads who travel with and subsist on herds of livestock, itinerant groups traditionally travel for trade or other work for the sedentary populations amongst which they live.

*The Romani are widely known in English by the exonym **Gypsies**, which is considered by some Roma people to be pejorative due to its connotations of illegality and irregularity.*

A Romani professor, Ian Hancock, briefly describes the modern history of Romani people: Most people don't know that seventy percent of the Romani population of Nazi-occupied Europe were murdered during the Holocaust. Or that we're the largest ethnic minority in Europe but have no political strength, military strength, economic strength or a territory. Or, for that matter, that there are over one million Romani Americans.

Romanies were non-Christian and associated with the Islamic threat, were non-white and were on the margins of society. Because of their cultural habits and lifestyle choices, Romanies continue to be a target for harassment, misunderstanding and discrimination.

In May 2001, The Economist stated that Romanies in Europe were at the bottom of every socioeconomic indicator: the least educated, the poorest, the most unemployed, the shortest-lived, the most imprisoned, the most welfare-dependent and the most segregated. The results of a public opinion poll conducted over a 25-year period and published in the New York Times in 1992 indicated that Romani Americans were ranked last out of 58 different American ethnic and religious minorities.

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History proves that the Romani people have been subject to horrible acts of racial injustice, including genocide. During the Holocaust alone, of slightly less than one million Roma believed to have been living in Europe before the war, scholars believe that the Germans and their Axis partners killed up to 250,000. Postwar discrimination of the Romani included mass incarceration, sterilization, and deportation. Racist stereotypes of the Romani still exist today.

Often Gypsy has become synonymous with theft, misfortune, lying, and sexualized women. A racial slur that Americans might not realize is using the word "Gypped," synonymous with cheating or stealing from someone.

According to Merriam Webster Dictionary, *gypsy is a noun that refers to someone who resembles a Gypsy*. Within the last year, Merriam Webster has updated the definition to include that it is "sometimes offensive" to use the noun gypsy. The *verb* gypsy is defined as traveling or roaming from place to place.

It is this intransitive verb "gypsy" that was the inspiration to be our business name. We chose this not knowing it was offensive to some. We did not and do not consider a Gypsy or Romani person to be a negative connotation, but instead positive attributes of their culture, which is of course why we chose it as our business name.

The reference of "Gypsy in our name is to the food truck; *a transitory vehicle that moves from place to place*.

Gypsy has not ever been depicted in our verbiage, logo, or social media as sexualized images or graphics of women, travelers, or bohemian, or as people in general. Our brand as The Organic Gypsy is about highlighting local farmers and showcasing food. It is our understanding that our logo and branding contain flags which are not represented by the Gypsy culture or any (known) group of people. The logo or brand was in no way attempting to mimic or appropriate the Gypsy culture. No logo or namesake could ever represent a culture as rich and diverse as the Romani people.

The word Gypsy has become part of our modern vernacular. There have been over a dozen songs named with Gypsy including modern artists such as Lady Gaga and Fleetwood Mac. Album titles, films, operas, stage musicals, a mountain peak in Washington, software, Netflix and Pakistani TV series, boats, aircraft, Naval ships, books, poems, a European moth, and plays also all have Gypsy in its title. In the United States there are currently over 800 registered trademarks using the word Gypsy. The fact that other people justify the use of gypsy does not mean it is right for us to use it. It does show, however, the widespread use of gypsy to denote things other than the Romani people.

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Since Covid, we began consulting with a black woman who owns a brand storytelling and marketing strategy group. We wanted her perspective regarding the Gypsy name and racism. She researched the topic and came back with the opinion most simply put that "you are always going to offend somebody." As a black woman, she in no way felt that "Gypsy" was a racial slur compared to what she has been called in her life.

The only person I know that has Gypsy heritage I met because I hired her for our website maintenance, product design, e-commerce solutions, and other marketing assistance. Through our business relationship she confided her family's history as Gypsies, which I didn't know when I originally started working with her. Her grandmother, Vartanoush Boghosian, was a Genocide survivor and was taken in by a Gypsy family after her entire family was exterminated. Over the last few years, we have had several conversations regarding this topic with her and her maternal family, including cousins, aunts, and her mother. Her and her family are not offended at all by our business name and find it troublesome that white women are the ones reaching out to our business on what is considered offensive for the Romani.

It is not good vs. evil, Gypsy or no to Gypsy. That's a mythic frame. There are several articles written from both sides. Ultimately, each person needs the opportunity to self-identify as whatever they wish, and it is our job to honor it.

What I am dedicated to is learning more about the perspective of more Romani people. Instead of oversubscribing to our sample size of one family, we are asking more questions. Listening to more answers. I want to hear from people directly if possible and I am willing to pay for their time.

Because we are such a small business serving one community, ideally people are local. It is our local Kalamazoo community that I am most interested in understanding and respecting. If you are reading this and are Romani and live in Michigan and would like to share your thoughts, feelings, and opinions, please email me at info@theorganicgypsy.com.

What does all of this mean? Should we change the name of our business? Is the name of our business creating more suffering? Is the name of our business racist? These are deep questions with complicated answers that we will continue to sit with. I can speak as of today and say that we will not be changing our name as it stands currently. Someone reached out to me and said that changing the name of our business requires "effort." It absolutely requires effort. For those of you that have changed your name, perhaps due to marriage, you have experienced this firsthand. You can imagine across every single account with every vendor, all tax information, all banks, etc this indeed would take effort. More notably though, it would require capital.

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By capital, I mean we don't just "change our name" without a considerable amount of money. Changing the name would require marketing for rebranding, a new logo, new trademarks, updated design for the wrap on our two mobile units, wrap installation for our two mobile units, purchasing a new url, and redirecting all of our customers to find our new name. A conservative estimate of these costs is around \$20,000.

So for now, the question isn't do we change our name or not? It is, do we continue to stay in business or do we close because of our name? Is it possible that we are doing more harm to Kalamazoo than good? These are complex questions that we are asking ourselves.

We are a small business in the midst of a pandemic and economic crash of our industry. When you overlay Covid-19, you will find that we lost 70% of our revenue in 2020 due to the cancellation of large events and weddings. As you can imagine, this is catastrophic. Some of you reading this might be thinking, "they deserve it" or "I don't care if they go out of business." If we lose clients, we lose clients: but we are committed to sustainable ethical business. We are dedicated to the process of learning and charting a new course. My place of white privilege certainly impacts every aspect of this, and I am considering this as well. I do not want to create more suffering and racism in our community and I am truly sorry to those of you we have hurt or offended.

Social media has highlighted anti-racism work around the world, and it has provided a platform for people to organize and share information broadly. There are many personal and professional aspects of becoming anti-racist, many not visible to the eyes of social media. Much of the work that is being done is not on social media. As in our situation, it is easy to comment on a thread with negative feedback people would never say in person.

It is too easy to judge without the full story. Even though this is a lengthy post, it is still not the full story. We need to train our minds and our hearts to hold more, to be more expansive about the variety of ways that we can exercise our power to make things different. Our mission is to continue to engage in the conversation and work to do the most obvious part to support our local community-- and that is to provide nourishing, delicious, and locally sourced food.

Bridgett Blough
Organic Gypsy