

Received: 7 March 2023 Accepted: 10 April 2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/disc.v5i1.3000>

## Nomadism as Ancestral Homeland in the Romani Culture

Ana Belén Martín Sevillano<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

*Nomadism is perceived as an essential trait of the Romani ethnic identity, both inside and outside the Romani communities. This paper explores the meaning of nomadism in the Romani culture by considering how this practice has been represented in the sociocultural imaginary. In particular, the paper analyzes the depiction of nomadism in the ethnopolitical discourse and the literary field, both in oral tradition and in written texts. The analysis examines works authored by representative Romani writers, such as Bronislawa Wajs “Papusza”, Mateo Maximoff, Menyhért Lakatos or José Heredia Maya, among others. Finally, the paper considers how in the literary text, the image of nomadism is produced and consumed as a mark of ethnic authenticity.*

**Keywords:** *Literature; Identity; Migration; Nomadism; Romani culture*

### Introduction

The notion of travelling, connected to practices of migration and nomadism/itinerancy, is inscribed in the Romani socio-cultural imaginary as a major ethnic trait. Since Roma left Northern India sometime around the Xth century (Hancock, 2010: 12-3), their subsequent migrations towards the West have been connected to mere survival or to prospects of improved subsistence. Becky Taylor points out that there was no Romani ethnic identity in India, but it was formed when the group left their original country and was perceived as an ethnic other by the different societies it encountered on its way (20). This otherness was reinforced when Roma—progressively fragmented into different groups—arrived in Europe in the XVth century, a time in which nations were defining themselves through processes of demographic control and homogenization (Taylor, 2014: 87).

---

<sup>1</sup> Ana Belén Martín Sevillano, Université de Montréal, Canada. E-mail: [ab.martin.sevillano@umontreal.ca](mailto:ab.martin.sevillano@umontreal.ca)



The migratory movements that have outlined Roma's history are related to the systemic oppression they have suffered, migration being the only way out of danger. Most European states have historically implemented measures that restricted Roma's movements. In fact, many European Roma, such as Hungarians, Polish or Spanish, were subjected to processes of forced sedentarization. Still, some Romani groups developed mobile subsistence practices that allowed them to work independently. Wagons or vans have assisted them in their trading, entertaining or tinkering practices, which usually entailed seasonal itinerancy (Matras, 2000: 32-4), but kept them in fixed locations during winter, due to weather conditions, or even during summer, when they worked in farms and fields. However, itinerant groups have been portrayed as prototypical when in fact they have been a subgroup of Roma.

In mainstream cultural production the image of the wandering Rom(i) as the embodiment of free will was promoted during the Romantic period, when artists and intellectuals thought societal norms limited the individual's potential, idealizing those who did not comply with them. However, the prevalent representation of Roma as unrestrained travellers has reinforced their image of lawless outsiders, even if the majority of them have been law-abiding nationals for centuries (Gay y Blasco, 2008: 299). Paradoxically, the essentialist and exogenous representation of the Romani ethnic identity has informed the very identity Roma have produced about themselves. In ethnically homogeneous societies, the (self)perception of Roma as migrants has endorsed their social otherness and hindered their inclusion.

Thomas Nail has articulated a theoretical ground to analyse the figure of the migrant that departs from a fundamental standpoint: migrants are socially excluded individuals. Nail convincingly argues that this exclusion does not only leave migrants outside a state or territory, but denies them political, juridical or economic rights within one (Nail, 2015: 6). In this sense, Roma have been historical migrants even when deep-rooted in specific locations, hence the importance that the narrative of migration has in their cultural texts. The oppressive measures (from slavery in Romania, to persecution in Spain, or segregation in England) imposed on Roma emerged from the fact that, as ethnic others, they were stripped of any rights, perceived not as individuals but as "bare life" (Agamben, 1998 : 8). In turn, these traumatic experiences detached Roma from the institutions and societies of the nations in which they lived for generations, which explains their mistrust and isolation. As other racialized ethnic groups, Roma have internalized and/or resignified their perceived otherness in their cultural symbols and narratives, developing an alternative view of migration as voluntary independence and not as forced exclusion. Romani



studies specialist Yaron Matras points out that “[m]igration forms a *repetitive pattern* throughout Romani history. It is part of the collective memory and cultural and historical legacy of the Roma as a nation.” (Matras, 2000: 34)

The trauma left by subjugation has made of freedom the chief Romani value, and it lies at the core of the narrative of migration and nomadism that has been transmitted in Romani communities, first through oral textuality and, more recently, through written texts. Roma have resignified and sublimized travelling — migration or nomadism/itinerancy—, transcending the pragmatic reasons behind it, and across the globe they consider this practice an essential attribute of their ethnic identity. Furthermore, nomadism/migration has been transformed in a cultural topos (emphasizing here the original meaning of the term τόπος —tópos— in Greek: place). This topos comprises a time —an idealized past— and a space/place —where Roma belong. While the notion of nomadism recreates an ideal past it also formulates the possibility of a free future. As a place is an elusive one, not territorial and bygone (or yet to come), but it is nonetheless the site where Roma have imagined their nation. The narrative of migration and nomadism in Romani literature expresses the group’s hiraeth. At the same time this narrative formulates Roma’s purpose and meaning as a community, and implicitly confronts the historical social exclusion they have suffered. While misunderstood, rejected, and often criminalized, Roma have shown themselves to possess extraordinary resilience, upheld by their strong ethnic bond and compelling culture, which has had a definitive impact on many of the nations in which they have put down roots, such as Hungary or Spain.

### **The Narrative of Migration in Romani Politics**

The texture of Romani politics is a complex issue not free of controversy. The ethnopolitical mobilization that took place in the second half of the XXth century and bore an emerging transnational Romani civil society has been perceived as an elitist exogenous process, informed by the nationalistic views of a group of Romani intellectuals, and guided by the European Union administrative system (Klímová-Alexander, 2005: 19-21; Nirenberg, 2009: 97-99). Yet, the first World Romani Congress, held in 1971, was a momentous event that pointed out the political importance of connecting detached Romani groups. The congress was infused by a nationalistic zest: their attendees considered in particular the importance of configuring elements that could express the existence of a distinct Romani nation, such as an hymn and a flag. Both devices were selected/created bearing in mind the narrative of migration, which conveys its importance in the formation of a national identity. *Gelem Gelem* [I travelled, I travelled], a traditional Romani song arranged by

Zarko Jovanovic, was chosen to be the official international anthem. Since then, this beautiful song has been embraced by the diverse Romani communities as an element of bonding and belonging. The title and chorus emphasize the figure of the travelling Rom, who is the poetic speaker. In its first verse, “Gelem, gelem lungone dromensa” [I travelled, travelled long roads], the collective poetic voice expresses the experience Roma have sublimized as the most relevant in their history. Similarly, the flag selected in 1971 is used today by most Romani associations, wherever they are located. It features a 16-spoke cartwheel that simultaneously evokes the Ashoka Chakra of the Indian flag, and the *vardo*, the traditional wagon used for travelling that is frequently depicted as the quintessential Romani icon.

The impact of the first World Romani Congress was such that its second edition, held seven years later, was greatly expanded in terms of attendees and represented nations. The outcome was also significant: the creation of the International Romani Union (IRU), a non governmental organization (NGO) that over the last decades has integrated other groups working at local, regional and national levels, shaping what has been called “the Romani movement” (Vermeersch, 2006). Klímova-Alexander highlights that the IRU articulated a nationalistic discourse that manifests in cultural production, and in literature in particular:

(...) IRU intellectuals have also been working towards other nationalist goals such as transforming the ‘low folk culture’ into ‘high culture’ by standardization of the Romani language, publishing both poetry and prose in Romani, writing and staging theatre pieces in Romani, translating Romani works to other world languages and *vice versa*, etc. (2005: 20)

Indeed, some of the tenets of the IRU initial credo are unmistakable embedded in literary pieces written in Romanes or in other languages, particularly by authors born before 1970, some of whom belong to the Romani intelligentsia that made the IRU possible. While minoritarian, the IRU has vastly contributed to the inception and visibility of the Romani ethnopolitical movement.

In the turn of the century Roma’s activism and ethnic mobilization increased from below, ensuing the economic difficulties many groups faced, specially in Eastern Europe, and the mounting racial violence that extended across Europe (Sigona & Trehan, 2009: 7). In 2004, a new transnational NGO was created in Europe, the European Roma Traveller Forum (ERTF), in order to coordinate the efforts of national and local European NGOs. The ERTF represents a wide array of civil associations in the Council of Europe, where it has consultative status. This



coordinated activism is crucial in a sociopolitical context in which discrimination and poverty are still unescapable for many European Romani communities. Kóczé and Rövid highlight the fact that neoliberal governments have articulated a contradictory “double discourse” that theoretically endorses Roma’s integration and equality, but in fact upholds the structural economic and social discrimination they have historically endured (Kóczé & Rövid, 2017: 684-5). All this explains the recent migration of Eastern European Roma towards the Western European countries and the Americas. This modest flow became infamously known in 2009 and 2010, when the French government illegally deported thousand of Romanian and Bulgarian Roma.

Today, Roma activists claim the right of their peoples to have political representation and visibility, as well as to be involved in any decision that directly impacts their communities (Nirenberg, 2009: 103-109). However, with little political clout or economic resources, their independent civil and political organization remains a challenge, both at national and international levels. At the same time, Roma as an ethnic category is a complex one that includes a diverse array of communities that share some historical and cultural features, but that also present many disparities and have different interests. The notion of a unified transnational Roma nation is the product of ethnopolitics at a supranational level and is still developing at a grass-root level (Gay y Blasco, 2002: 173), mainly through local associations working under the umbrella of the IRU or the ERTF. It might indeed be puzzling that an ethnic group that has been historically marginalized and disciplined by the principles that hold together the idea of a nation attempts now to piece together their own nation-state.

Still, the ethnopolitical discourse produced today by Romani instances of representation demands economic and legal rights for all Roma, explicitly or implicitly requesting the recognition of the diasporic condition of the Romani ethnic identity and of their nation (Fosztó, 2003). This diasporic/non territorial concept of nationhood lies on the basis of the common origin of all Roma, as well as their shared experience of marginalization, and the specificity of their culture. By defining themselves as a diaspora, Roma have placed at the center of their ethnic identity the very notion of migration.

### **Migration as Ancestral Homeland in Oral and Transitional Textualities**

The narrative of the Romani diaspora has been produced in various discourses, such as the political, the historical or the socio-cultural ones. This paper focuses on the latter by examining a number of representative literary texts that present migration as an prevailing ethnic trait. In terms of literary production, Roma are known for their

rich oral tradition, kept alive for centuries thanks to collective rites of storytelling that have preserved their social practices, moral values, and cultural memory. Existing collections of Romani oral textuality display their views and beliefs, and not surprisingly migration appears as a prevalent topos. In 1989, Diane Tong published one of the most renowned anthologies of Romani oral stories: *Gypsy Folktales*. It includes oral texts transcribed and translated from different languages, and collected in numerous locations. In particular, *Gypsy Folktales* includes two illuminating stories that convey the centrality of the notion of migration and dispersion in the formation of the Romani ethnic identity. The first one is a version of an Eastern European story that intertwines the theme of travelling with a mythical explanation of the group's dispersion.<sup>2</sup>

### Why Gypsies Are Scattered About the Earth

This happened long ago.

A Gypsy and his family were traveling along. His horse was skinny and none too steady on his legs, and as the Gypsy's family grew he found it harder to pull the weighty wagon. Soon the wagon was so full of children tumbling over one another that the poor horse could barely stumble along the rutted track.

As the wagon rumbled on, veering first to the left, then rocking to the right, pots and pans would go tumbling out, and now and then a barefoot child was pitched headlong onto the ground.

It was not so bad in daylight -then you could pick up your pots and tiny children— but you could not see them in the dark. In any case, who could keep count of such a tribe? And the horse plodded on its way.

The Gypsy traveled right around the earth, and everywhere he went he left a child behind: more and more and more.

And that, you see, is how Gypsies came to be scattered about the earth. (1989: 34-35)

The second tale, precisely entitled "Gypsy origins", was collected in Spain, and addresses the topic of dispersion while ironizing about the widespread stereotype of the lazy Rom. In this interpretation of the Romani life, "(...) Gypsies live or eat by their wits. They have no real assigned place in the world (...)" (*Ibid.* 179) because when God was assigning national territories Roma did not bother to be on time and there

---

<sup>2</sup> Tong extracted this story from a 1986 collection of *Russian Gypsy folktales* edited by Yefim Druts and Alexei Gessler.



was none left for them. Humour and wit are two characteristic traits of Romani culture that appear embedded in the tone and content of many folkloric tales, such as the ones we just referred to. Thus, oral textuality has been a repository of cultural and collective memories, both in terms of the content of the tales and of their rhetoric and style: the narrator's stance, opinion and oratorical strategies mattered as much as the storyline.

In Tong's compilation, stories from many different countries, such as Finland (*Ibid.* 42), Greece (*Ibid.* 66), Mexico (*Ibid.* 118), Russia (*Ibid.* 183) or Latvia (*Ibid.* 198), refer to nomadism and travel as a customary practice that the narrator usually places in the past. This is beautifully exemplified by the Russian tale "St. George and the Gypsies", which is another explanatory legend: "One time St. George was riding along when he came upon a Gypsy trailer. A Gypsy was in the riding seat, pulling on the reins." "Where are you bound for, Gypsy?" Asked St. George. "Where the wind blows", the Gypsy replied". (*Ibid.*183) The wind is an element that frequently appears in many Romani tales, sometimes as an image of the contiguity between Romani life and nature and other, as in this Russian tale, as a metaphor of Romani life: always on the move.

When Tong's stories were recorded, in the second half of the XXth century, most European Roma had long been forced to sedentarism, mostly in rural villages or settlements. No matter how arduous the past was, it underwent a process of idealized reconstruction in which nomadic practices were imagined as a free, natural, and distinctive way of living. As argued before, the past holds the key to the place where Roma belong: the road, the same one travelled by the poetic voice of the national anthem. This road is all the roads and none of them, it is the actual fact of travelling the roads. In their cultural and poetic imaginaries, Roma have not held the idea of a promised or lost land, as other historic diasporas have. Until not that long ago, most Roma did not know their exact place of origin, forgotten when it was not significant any longer. Oral cultures have operated on the limited capacity of human memory; unlike the encyclopedic volume of written cultures, collective oral memory has only preserved what has had meaning for the present of the community, progressively actualizing its content. So why has migration/nomadism been safeguarded in the collective memory of the dispersed Romani groups even long after Roma established themselves in fixed locations? The only plausible answer to this question is that migration/nomadism is still meaningful to Roma. As discussed before, migration (through a number of symbols like the road or the wagon) bestows a space of belonging that Roma have not found elsewhere. At the same time, collective memory keeps alive the fact that migration saved many to escape abuse or death. This memory, preserved in tales about persecution, slavery or the holocaust, has not lost its worth



for the Romani peoples, who have been historically discriminated and often targeted as social scape goats. Therefore, travelling/migration has provided the notion of an alternative safe space, which is significant for a vulnerable, threaten community.

The XXth century process of industrialization and technologization had an enormous impact on oral cultures. New communication tools and media cultures have eroded the Romani oral tradition, but they have also increased Roma's awareness on the value of their culture, which in turn has advanced their participation in written literature. While in the past this was an exclusive practice, accessible only to a reduced literate minority, today Romani literature(s) —texts authored by Roma— is a rising feature in Romani cultural production and an emerging field in many national literatures. In the second half of the XXth century, Romani authors were often political activists or active members of civil organizations that advocate for Roma's rights. It is not surprising therefore that many of the tenets of the Romani ethnopolitical agenda were explored through creative writing. Among other things, these authors addressed the historical representation of Roma in Western literatures as demonized or exotic others by providing new and varied subjectivities, implicitly questioning previous essentialistic representations and portraying the heterogeneous and complex dimension of the Romani ethnic identity. An important feature in these authors' work is the emphasis they place on the value of their own oral literary heritage. This is often done by transferring into their writings the oral folklore of their communities. In fact, some written texts could be considered transitional, since they sit in the middle of the oral and the written literary modalities. This is not just because they integrate legends, myths or tales within a fictional narrative, but also because they implement literary strategies that belong to traditional textuality, such as opting for an experience-based interpretation of events, the use of a colloquial style and register, and the implementation of devices such as repetition and speech formulas (Ong, 2002: 36-50).

In the newer field of Romani Literature(s), which seeks to map and analyze the varied and multilingual production of Romani authors, Bronislawa Wajs (1908-87), known as Papusza, is often referred to as a founding figure. Her work clearly exemplifies the transition from oral to written textualities. Born in Poland to a family of travelling musicians, Papusza was able to acquire basic reading and writing skills in Polish, which helped her transcribe in Romanes her poems/songs (Fonseca, 1996: 3-4,7). The publication of her poetry and her collaboration with Jerzy Ficowski —who studied Polish Roma, and translated and edited Papusza's poems— was considered improper and dangerous to her community, reason why she was banished by the *keris* — Romani





court. This is an extreme punishment that had a dramatic impact on Papusza's life (*Ibid.* 9). Building on the Romani oral folklore (*Ibid.* 5), her work reveals an original poetic imagination and an remarkable sensibility (Ficowski, 2011: 58). Her poems portray the life on the road that she experienced in her early years; imbued with a melancholic tone, they contain numerous images (the wind, the fire, the trees and forest, animals, ...) that stress the connection between Roma and nature, another frequent topos in Romani Literature(s). While Papusza is sometimes the poetic speaker, there is an important use of a plural voice —we/us— that comprises all Roma or, at least, all those in her community. This would be the case of the poems in which she recalls her traumatic experience during the Roma Holocaust, such as “Rafalé Jafâ” [Tears of Blood] (Wajs, 2011: 14).<sup>3</sup> In Papusza's poetry there is specific space of belonging: the forest, epitome of nature. This poetic forest evokes those her family travelled through Poland and Lithuania. In this sense, the forest, as the usual stopping place, is a metonymic image of the road/travelling. The poem “Me na Džáva pre do dromá karík tradénys Chargá Romá” [I will not go again on the roads that Roma travelled] beautifully illustrates this idea:

(...)

May the old roads be lost,  
the roads that took us in all directions,  
where the winds blew.

Away from the man  
with just one leaf, long dead,  
and the fear of seeing his children freeze.

How could I go back to those roads  
in which Roma lived?

Know that our life was odd!

But a Rom would not have changed it

---

<sup>3</sup> Poems' titles and verses in English are my translation from the French version of Papusza's work edited by Jean-Yves Potel and Monika Prochniewicz.

for that of the peasant.

All those years

Roma lived in a dark forest.

So many roads, big and small, they have travelled.

(...) (*Ibid.* 37)

Contemporary to Papusza, Mateo Maximoff (1917-1999) is another decisive figure in the emergence of Romani Literature(s). His work is an illuminating case of the transit from oral to written literature as it lies in the middle of those two modalities. Born to a Manouche (French Roma) mother and a Kalderash<sup>4</sup> (Central European Roma) father, Maximoff lived most of his life in France. He spoke Romanes and actively supported the conservation of this unique language, but wrote most of his work in French. He was a funding and active member of the IRU and a prolific author. It seems quite revealing that he wrote his first novel —*Les Ursitory* (1946)— in prison, where he spent a brief period in his early twenties after a brawl. In his memoirs he recalls how he devised its plot:

Then I remembered a story that my uncle Savka and my paternal grandmother, Lutka, told me and I had loved it.

This story recounts that, in the old days, when a baby was born —and this is still true today— a well respected sorceress made a fire in the tent with the agreement of the mother and the presence of the baby. In a plate they put bread and salt, and beside it a glass of water. And they would invoke the angels. My grandmather told me they were called *Les Ursitory*.

They were three: one was the angel of goodness, the other the angel of evil, and the third one made the decision.<sup>5</sup> (Maximof, 1993 :33)

Maximoff set the plot of his first novel in a distant past that was that of his ancestors, in Romania, and made use of characters, themes and scenarios that belong to the

---

<sup>4</sup> From “kalder” [cauldron] in Hungarian; this extensive Romani group have mostly worked as tinkers, hence their name and also their customary seasonal itinerancy. They have their own dialect of Romanes, which Maximoff spoke fluently.

<sup>5</sup> My translation from the original: “C’est alors que je me suis souvenu d’un récit que mon oncle Savka et ma grand-mère paternelle, Lutka, m’avaient raconté et qui m’avait passionné./C’est l’histoire où l’on raconte que, dans les temps anciens, à la naissance d’un enfant -cela exist encore aujourd’hui—, une femme réputée sorcière, avec l’accord de la mère et en présence de l’enfant, faisait un grand feu à l’intérieur de la tente. On mettait, dans une assiette, du pain et du sel avec un verre d’eau à côté. On invoquait les anges. Ma grand-mère m’adit qu’on les appelait Les Ursitory”.



Romani and Central European oral folklore. The novel does not only refer to or explain the Romani culture, but it also asserts its worth through the qualities that the characters embody. In Romani folklore the *ursitory* are mythological creatures in control of fate, described in the novel as “(...) three angels that three nights after a baby is born come down to discuss and decide on his fate.” (Maximoff, 1946: 11) <sup>6</sup> The oral quality of the novel is reinforced by the predominance of dialogue, which allows the characters to express their views, beliefs, and emotions, implicitly revealing their subjectivity, without the mediation of a narrator. Maximoff uses his memory to recall the legends and life experiences that were orally transmitted by his parents and older relatives. In this sense his work operates as a reformulation of oral textuality — and of collective memory— that adjust to the written text. This is particularly evident in his memoirs, *Routes sans roulettes* [Roads without caravans] (1993), in which the author refers to his youth in the context of the II World War, highlighting the genocide Roma suffered at the hands of the Nazi army. The book opens with a relation of the author’s lineage, which conveys the significance that the ancestors hold in the Romani culture. In fact, despite conceived as a memoir, the narrator speaks often in first person plural, expressing this way how important is for him, as a Rom, his family and his community. In his account Maximoff does not only consider critical life experiences —his own or those of his family members—, but also the Romani way of life and customs, developing an autoethnographic line that runs parallel to the plot. Then again, migration is the main motive that articulates the narrative of Maximoff and his ancestor’s life. And at the source of migration is violence, in the form of slavery for his predecessors or in the form of war and persecution for Maximoff and his family. Maximoff is one of the first and few Roma that have been able to offer a report, in this case through creative writing, of the dramatic and deadly impact of the Holocaust for the European Romani communities.

There are other foundational authors whose work points at the importance of oral textuality, but it fits more the structure, design and style of the conventional written text. Among them is Menyhért Lakatos (1926-2007), an acclaimed Hungarian Rom that published in 1975 the autofictional novel *Füstös képek* —translated into English as *The Color of Smoke*—, a bildungsroman that offers a unique view of what it meant to be Rom in rural Hungary during the first decades of the XXth century. Lakatos’work builds on memory to represent the nurturing milieu in which he grew up, pondering on how Roma have been unjustly rejected and oppressed by the

---

<sup>6</sup> My translation from the original: “(...) trois anges qui la troisième nuit de la naissance d’un enfant descendent vers lui pour discuter et décider de son avenir.”

hegemonic social group. The opening paragraph emphasizes the traditional oral quality of Roma's culture, in which story telling kept alive cultural and collective memories while bonding families together:

One more barely noticeable sigh, then his eyes became fixed into an eternal gaze. Time froze on his stone-brown face, and Tsino Petro became but a memory —a lasting memory of which Tsino Petro's daughter, Old Liza, or *Grandma*, to me, told stories during seemingly endless nights. Her stories conjured up old memories when time was measured not in months and days, but in the flowers that blossomed and the leaves that fell a hundred and one times under and over her father, as she used to say. (Lakatos, 2015: 1)

Oral culture has remained at the center of the work produced by newer generations of writers. This would be the case of some novels authored by Jorge Emilio Nedich (1959), an Argentinian Rom from Ludar—Central European Roma— descent. Raised in a caravan, Nedich discusses the predicament Roma have faced during the XXth century, when traditional practices started to lose meaning for the younger generations. In particular, he considers how sedentarization and formal education created a generational problem in families and communities. In this sense, and in parallel to Maximoff's writing, Nedich usually works out an autoethnographic thread in parallel to the plot. This is quite evident in *Leyenda gitana* [Gypsy Legend], a novel published in 1999 by one of the most important publishing houses in Latinamerica, Planeta. Nedich's literary style literary is an organic fussion between the oral and the written, both in terms of the form, that often reproduces the colloquial form of Argentinian Spanish, and of the content. (Martin Sevillano, 2020: 197)

Finally, Romani culture gravitates around music, an integral part of many Roma's subsistence, but also a vehicle for the transmission of their cultural, emotional and collective memories, and a source of group cohesion. Lyrics are undeniably an important part of oral textuality. Spaniard José Heredia Maya (1947-2010), the first *Gitano*<sup>7</sup> to become a university professor, published in 1976 a collection of poems, *Camelamos naquerar*—"We want to speak" in Caló—, conceived to be sung as flamenco lyrics. The final production of this work integrated the musical performance (recital, singing, and dancing) in a documentary. While Flamenco is today considered an

---

<sup>7</sup> In this article the preferred term has been "Rom", which is widely chosen by most European Roma, who avoid the use of "Gypsy" or its variants "Tzigane", etc... for its traditional pejorative connotations. While ethnic ascription and the appropriate terminology to denote it is an individual choice, most associations, representatives, and activist in Spain maintain the use of the term "Gitano", hence its use in this article.



emblematic genre of Spanish music, it would not exist if it was not for the Spanish *Gitanos*, who have nurtured its practice for generations in the heart of their communities. Its lyrics often consider the experiences *Gitanos* had, which included the trauma inflicted by marginalization. *Camelamos Naquerar* reflects carefully on the institutional persecution of Spanish *Gitanos* from an original perspective, establishing a dialogue between different textual artifacts — legal or historical documents and poetry— and different artistic modalities —dance, music, film—. Heredia Maya’s work suggests the tight connection that exists between Flamenco as oral tradition and literary poetry. (Martin Sevillano, 2020: 198)

### **Contemporary Romani literature(s): Migration as Authenticity**

Travelling/migration is still a dominant theme in texts written by authors born after 1970 and published in the XXIst century. While Roma still seek to migrate due to racial and economic marginalization, only a minority are able to do so. At the same time, traditional trades that involved itinerancy are no longer operational or profitable, so they have been abandoned by most Romani groups. Contemporary authors usually grew up in sedentary communities and received formal education, unlike their self-taught predecessors, such as Păpușă or Maximoff. So how to explain the persistence in contemporary literature of the notion of migration? I believe this is due to a twofolded phenomenon. As I have argued in this paper, migration was internalized as a distinctive trait of the Romani ethnic identity, and as such it was recreated (as a pervasive topos) in Romani cultural production, whether music, visual arts or literature. However, it has also been produced as a quintessential Romani feature in mainstream cultural production. In contemporary texts authored by Roma, this topos is usually addressed to uphold the genuine Romani identity. Referring to the itinerant trades of the ancestors is not only a way on honoring them, as it is customary in the Romani culture, but of asserting their ethnic authenticity.

Additionally, it is important to take into account that, with rare exceptions, there are no Romani publishers or publishing houses specialized in Romani literature. Thus, when an author identifies as Rom(i) or writes about the experience of being such, editors approach their work with certain expectatives in mind, and one of them is finding the topos of migration. In this sense its persistence in Romani literature might partially respond to the editorial filter.

At the beginning of the XXIst century, the emerging visibility of the Romani ethno-political movement had an echo in the media and entertainment industry and in the editorial one. Louise Doughty (1963), an prolific award winning British author from

Romani descent, published in 2003 *Fires in the Dark*, a historical fiction about the Roma holocaust in Central Europe. Three years later she published another novel of Romani theme, *Stone cradle*, a moving fiction about several generations of a Romani family in Britain. Both novels delve into Romani customs and domestic life through well rounded and compelling female characters. Some of the covers of these books display stereotypical images of wagons or poverty that seem to be the marketing strategy to highlight the Romani theme. In other cases, editors have used a much more obvious tactic such as including the term “Gypsy” in the title. This would be the case of *Gypsy boy* by Mikey Walsh (1980) or *American Gypsy* by Oksana Marafioti (1974), two autobiographical works published in 2009 and 2012 respectively, by well-known publishing houses. In the last few decades the use of the term “Gypsy”, and its equivalents in European languages, is considered by many inappropriate due to its traditional pejorative use, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Some individuals or communities, such as the Spanish one, still insist on vindicating and resignifying the term. Thus, its appearance in the title of a book could respond to the personal choice of the author, who opts to identify as such, or could be an editorial choice oriented to call the attention of the non-Roma reader. The narrative in these works is driven by the authors’ ethnic consciousness, depicting new Romani subjectivities, but also incurring in some ambiguities that could be plausibly explained by editorial requirements.

*Gypsy boy* is a compelling account of the early years of a British Romani boy born into a family of proud bare-knuckle fighters. The narrator in first person identifies himself as “Gypsy” from the beginning to the end of the book, which closes with this crowning irony: “You can take the boy away from the Gypsies, but you can’t take the Gypsy out of the boy” (Walsh, 2009: 278). Mikey, the narrator/author, recounts the traumatizing childhood he experienced in a dysfunctional family with an abusive father that never saw him for who he was. His non-normative sexuality became a conflictive issue that was at the source of the domestic abuse he endured. Throughout the book the narrator places his traumatic experiences in the context of the particularities of the Romani values and practices, that are consistently explained and, simultaneously, questioned. In this sense, irony and humor seem to have been some of the coping strategies that Mikey developed. However, he found no other possible way of surviving that leaving his community.

The cover of *Gypsy boy* combines two distinct images that reinforce the stereotype that the title suggests: a boy with a mischievous smile wearing a ragged sweater, and an old traditional *vardo* —wagon— that appears again on the back of the book. The blurb



effectively highlights the essential content of the narrative, but incurs in incorrect statements (“he didn’t go to school”) or ambiguous ones (“the caravan became his world”). The actual storyline reveals that Mikey’s grandparents, who arrived in England from Eastern Europe, bought a plot of land in which his family had his trailer put. So Mikey’s family has been sedentary for three generations even if they lived in trailers that were occasionally moved. While humble, the trailer was a more modern living space than that of the traditional wagon. Unlike what the blurb and the image on the cover might suggest, Mikey never lived in a travelling caravan. Furthermore, when the family moves to a bungalow for a short period of time the narrator states that they “(...) didn’t miss life in a caravan. In the bungalow we now had heat, doors with sturdy locks, bigger rooms and our own garden to play in”. (Walsh, 2009: 55) In fact, it becomes clear that the central narrative in Mikey Walsh’s work is the story of trauma and resilience of the narrator/main character. This has been stitched with a number of images that evoke the existing stereotypes about Roma in England, where they are still called “travellers”.

At the end of the autobiography, the narrator appears as an adult that was forced to leave his family and community once he came out as gay during his teen years. As revealed in the last chapter and epilogue of the book, he writes after a healing process that involved performing, creative writing, and teaching. At this point he has lived in the *Gorgia* (non-Romani) world for longer than he did in the Romani one, but he still speaks of “our people” (*Ibid.* 278). At certain points in the narrative he sits in a liminal zone in which he looks at his original community from the distance:

The Gypsy race is an old fashioned and, sadly, a very bitter one. They live, breathe, sleep, grieve, love and care for only their own people. They don’t like or trust the ways of others and don’t have contact or friendships with other races (...) It is tragic, both for the Gypsies who distrust and hate, and for the other races that ever get to see the more human, generous side of the Romanies. (*Ibid.* 66)

Walsh considers this in the context of the history of persecution and marginalisation that has forced Roma to protect themselves by means of isolation. However, in other occasions this connection is not that clear and the image he presents of the Romani community is not only essentializing, but it also builds on hegemonic representations and prejudices.

Almost all Gypsy men are violent, it’s ingrained in the culture and the life they lead and impossible to avoid. (...) it was a rarity for a Gypsy man to do a good job for



anyone. Especially if money were to change hands before a job was done; in that case the customer would almost certainly get nothing at all. (*Ibid.* 42; 162)

It would be difficult to identify what has been added to the main narrative or what has been edited in it in order to develop a subplot about the ways of the Roma that satisfies certain assumptions of the general readership. The topos of migration/travelling that the cover and blurb insinuate and that certain passages, such as the description of the trailers and camps, suggest is however marginal.

Oksana Marafioti's *American Gypsy* is a memoir with many analogies to Walsh's autobiography, but in this case the narrative of migration is an organic part of the subject matter of the book, which is about displacement and the connection between identity and location. However, editorial work is also visible in the form of certain topics, such as food, that seem to have been integrated in order to fulfill the exotic image of Roma that exists in North America. The narrator looks decades back into her life and assembles a storyline that alternates between two main times and locations: her childhood in the U.S.S.R, and her young adulthood in the U.S.A. The narrator's viewpoint is that of an adult who considers herself at the time of writing an American of Romani (and Armenian) descent, as the title of the book indicates. Migration is addressed when the author revisits her past condition of immigrant in the United States, as well as when she remembers her childhood in Russia. Born into a family of Romani performers, she recalls travelling with her grandfather's ensemble, proudly describing the vibrancy of the Romani musical legacy. Her ethnic identity builds on her origins and her family's cultural practices, but also on the different ways in which she is perceived depending on her location.

Significantly, the book opening is a Romani saying that contains a reference to the topos of nomadism/migration in the group's oral folklore: "We are all wanderers on this earth. Our hearts are full of wonder, and our souls are deep with dreams" (Marafioti, 2012: s/p). In the following page the author firmly sets the ethnic content of the book in a note:

There are well over five million Romani people living in every corner of the world today. We are bound by thousands of years of common history, but our culture is as diverse as our customs and dialects. Although there are many similarities between the clans, the stories in this book are mainly those of my experiences growing up in the Romani community of the former Soviet Union. (*Ibid.* s/p)



Both the saying and the note establish a meaningful departing point for the narrative: the body of knowledge that supports the Romani culture and the location of the author and main character at the heart of the Roma community (indicated with the use of the first person plural subject pronoun and possessive adjectives in the note). At the same time, these initial texts direct the whole narrative and suggest that those life events and experiences that did not agree with this Romani viewpoint were left out.

More recently, Damian Le Bas (1985), an Oxford educated British Rom from a wellknown family of artists and activists, published his first literary work: *The Stopping Places. A Journey through Gypsy Britain* (2018). Le Bas's work recounts his own road trip through the roads that his itinerant great and grantparents used to travel. The author revisits the history of British Roma through information his family transmited to him, but also with that provided by archival sources. The narrative presents the author/narrator's reconstruction of his own Romani identity by looking into the roads of the past.

Romani authors navigate the requirements of a competitive industry that inevitably considers the market/readership in the process of edition and publication. The mainstream interest in an unknown, but familiar ethnic group has fueled the production of autoethnographic narratives in which Roma can offer organic representations of themselves, contesting essensialiting and stereotypical previous ones. The persistence of the topos of migration evokes a customary practice that Roma keep cherishing, despite abandoned long ago. As pointed out by Gay y Blasco, the image of the wandering Rom might in the end ill serve Roma (2008: 299). Its persistence as the natural an original way of Roma hinders the recognition of Romani modern-day practices and experiences. Authors attempt to find a balance between honoring the past and the life of the ancestors and asserting the new and plural possibilities of the Romani identity in contemporary social contexts. In this sense, the literary text can be a paradoxical space where legacy and new ways coexist and produce fresh first-hand images of the Romani community.

## References

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press,
- Doughty, L. (2005). *Fires in the Dark*. New York: Harper Collins.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Stone cradle* (2006). London: Simon & Schuster.
- Ficowski, J. (2011). "J' eus la chance de connaître Papusza" (translated by Natalia Krasicka), *Études Tsiganes*, 4 (48-9) 58-95.
- Fonseca, I. (1996). *Bury Me Standing. The Gypsies and Their Journey*. New York: Vintage.

- Fosztó, L. (2003). "Diaspora and Nationalism: an Anthropological Approach to the International Romani Movement". *Regio. Minorities, Politics, Society*, VI (1): 102-120.
- Gay y Blasco, P. (2008). "Picturing 'Gypsies': Interdisciplinary Approaches to Roma Representation". *Third Text*, 22 (3): 297-303.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2002). "Gypsy/Roma diasporas. A comparative perspective". *Social Anthropology*, 10 (2): 173-188
- Hancock, I. (2010). "Mind The Doors! The Contribution of Linguistics". In: D. Le Bas and T. Acton (eds.) *All Change! Romani Studies through Romani eyes*, Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press. 5-25.
- Heredia Maya, J. (1976). *Camelamos naquerar. Propuesta para una danza de arcángeles morenos*. Granada: Universidad de Granada.
- Klimová-Alexander, I. (2005). *The Romani Voice in World Politics*. Aldershot (UK): Ashgate.
- Kóczé, A. and Rövid, M. (2017). "Roma and the Politics of Double Discourse in Contemporary Europe", *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 24 (6): 684-700.
- Lakatos, M. (2015). *The Color of Smoke*. Williamstown (MA): New Europe Books.
- Le Bas, Damian.(2018). *The Stopping Places. A Journey Through Gypsy Britain*. London: Chatto & Windus/Random House
- Maximoff, Mateo. (1946). *Les Ursitory*. Paris: Flammarion.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Routes sans roulottes* (1993). Romainville: Author's edition.
- Marafioti, O. (2012) *American Gypsy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Martin Sevillano, A. B. (2020) "The Emergence of the Hispano Romani Literature: Memory and Cultural Identity". In: H. Kyuchukov et. al. (eds.) *Preserving the Romani Memories*, Munich: Lincom. 188-204.
- Matras, Y. (2000). "Romani migrations in the post-communist era: Their historical and political significance". *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 13 (2): 23-50.
- Nail, T. (2015) *The Figure of the Migrant*. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press.
- Nedich, J. E. (1999) *Leyenda gitana*. Buenos Aires: Planeta.
- Nirenberg, J. (2009) "Romani Political Mobilization from the First International Romani Union Congress to the European Roma, Sinti an Travellers Forum". In: N. Sigona and N. Trehan (eds.) *Romani Politics in Contemporary Europe. Poverty, Ethnic Mobilization, and the Neoliberal Order*, London: Palgrave Macmillan. 94-115.
- Sigona, N. and Trehan, N. (2009) "Introduction: Romani Politics in Neoliberal Europe". In: N. Sigona and N. Trehan (eds.) *Romani Politics in Contemporary Europe. Poverty, Ethnic Mobilization, and the Neoliberal Order*, London: Palgrave Macmillan. 1-20.
- Taylor, B. (2014). *Another Darkness, Another Dawn. A History of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers*. London: Reaktion.
- Tong, D. (1989). *Gypsy Folk Tale*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Ong, W. (2002). *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Routledge.
- Vermeersch, P. (2006). *The Romani Movement. Minority Politics and Ethnic Mobilization in Contemporary Central Europe*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Wajs, B. (2011). "Chants et poèmes" (edited and translated by Jean-Yves Potel and Monika Prochniewicz). *Études Tsiganes*, 4 (48-49): 14-43.
- Walsh, M. (2010). *Gypsy Boy*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

