

Picturing 'Gypsies': Interdisciplinary Approaches to Roma Representation

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Gypsies/Roma occupy a central place in the collective imagination of the West. They are objects of both revulsion and fascination and have, through the centuries, been pictured, narrated and 'known' *ad nauseam*. The Euro-American obsession with 'the Gypsy' raises important issues regarding the production, authorship and consumption of images of the subordinate Other – issues that are epitomised by academic and political debates surrounding the category itself. For some years now, 'Gypsy' has been rejected by many as an exoticising and derogatory term that reflects the world-views and oppressive practices of the dominant population. In its place has arisen 'Roma', which is meant to reflect the rich heritage and cultural dignity and distinctiveness of an oppressed but also resisting people. 'Roma' also aims to denote the shared Indian origins, common history and identity of political interests of what could nonetheless also be seen as constellation of highly diverse European populations. In this schema the word 'Gypsy' is recognised as a misrepresentation and the word 'Roma' as the more accurate and sensitive way of denoting reality. And yet 'Gypsy', or its local translations such as 'Gitano' or 'Tsigane', remains a preferred mode of self-ascription for many individuals and communities across Europe, either because 'Roma' is too new an introduction or because its connotations of ethnic uniformity make some uncomfortable. The fact is, the origins and relationship of the various European groups who are described by others, or describe themselves as 'Gypsies' or as 'Roma', remain the subject of much debate.

It is impossible and indeed undesirable to impose uniformity in academic writing about people who call themselves, or are called by others, 'Gypsy', 'Roma', 'Gitano', 'Manush' and so on – the people that the articles in this issue deal with. The Gitanos (Spanish Gypsies/Roma) from Madrid among whom I have carried out anthropological research, for example, would never refer to themselves as 'Roma'. Some would consider themselves to be 'the same people' (*la misma gente*) as, for example, the Kalderari Rom or French Manush discussed by Iulia Hasdeu and Jean-Luc Poueyto in this issue, but many others would not.

And so, the authors here have remained faithful to the self-ascriptions of their informants. We have been mindful of the role that academic writing on ‘Gypsies’ has played in the reification of this category and of its deployment in the oppression of the people we are writing about, notably during the Second World War but also at other times. And yet we are also well aware of the potential of the term ‘Roma’ to create, in another kind of reification, reality of a kind that our informants might not necessarily appreciate. With these caveats very much in mind, in this introduction I tentatively use ‘Gypsy’ to refer to exoticising and orientalisating representations, and ‘Roma’ to refer to the conglomerate of populations that would identify themselves as Gypsy, Roma, Gitano, Tsigane and so on.

The difficulties academics and others face in their choice of terminology obviously touch directly on the issues of representation, authorship and effect that are the theme of this special issue of *Third Text*. These difficulties evidence the productive power of representation, as well as the impossibility in the Gypsy/Roma case, to clearly delimit the boundaries of authorship and distinguish between self and Other. It is clear that in the stories we non-Roma (or Gadge¹) tell of Gypsies through literature, film, photography or museum displays, we find ourselves, our desires, fears and preoccupations, our shared and individual ontologies and existential dispositions. And yet as contemporary Euro-Americans, Roma draw from, contribute to, endorse and challenge the same amorphous and boundary-less body of imagery as their Gadge neighbours. The authors in this issue analyse this shared exotic imagination in its varied visual incarnations, and make a fundamental contribution to our understanding of the position of Roma in European society and of their continued marginalisation and domination. Although these writers speak from very different disciplinary standpoints and examine a wide variety of social and cultural phenomena, they all problematise the intertwining of representation, agency and effect in the production and reproduction of the Roma’s oppression.

In Europe the earliest written and/or pictorial references to Roma or Roma-like groups date from the fourteenth century for the Eastern countries and a period spanning the next two hundred years for areas further to the West and North. Since then, visual representations of Roma have drawn on a very limited thematic repertoire which has proven remarkably resilient in both historic and geographic terms. In the sixteenth century, as today, the wandering, free, musical, thieving, lustful Gypsy appears at once as uncivilised, animal-like and predatory (and hence in need of punitive vigilance); and as generous and noble yet child-like (and hence in need of vigilant socialisation and preservation). As dangerous outsiders, Gypsies evidence the rightness of a “blood and soil” nationalism’ in which the ‘very idea of a people conjure[s] up images of a national community with a strong territorial identity’.² As enlightened refuseniks they reveal the shortcomings of a political economy which traps us as it enriches us. These images have instantiated a particular kind of ‘fascinating cannibalism’³ in which a racialised and gendered Other ‘in our midst’ is made both to shore up and to challenge the hegemony of individualism and material accumulation, and the control of the state. The context to these representations was provided at first by the fragile growth of the European nation-states and later by the precariousness of particular regimes. From the beginning of the twentieth century,

1 Gadge is one of the terms that European Roma use to refer to the non-Roma.

2 James MacLaughlin, ‘The political geography of anti-traveller racism in Ireland: the politics of exclusion and the geography of closure’, *Political Geography*, 1998, 17:4, pp 417–35, p 423

3 Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1996, p 10

control over Roma has repeatedly been made into an index of overall state control in totalitarian contexts and of state competence and reliability in democratic regimes.

Throughout these various periods and across the whole of Europe, Gadje have repeatedly debated their projects of society and the self by reference to 'the Gypsies'. From East to West, North to South, 'the Gypsy issue' has periodically galvanised both governmental action and public opinion. So, for example, during the first years of the twenty-first century, as twelve post-socialist countries were preparing to join the European Union, the British tabloids warned of the imminent threat of a flood of Roma economic migrants from the East. A similar 'Gypsy invasion', which had already been predicted with much fanfare in 1999, had failed to materialise.⁴ On both occasions the Roma were described as parasitic, delinquent and predatory, lured by the beneficence of the British welfare system which they aimed to exploit, and as therefore ultimately undeserving and to be kept at bay. In these media depictions of Central and Eastern European Roma, it was the 'pull' and not the 'push' factors that were brought to the fore. And, whether or not a particular group of Roma under consideration was nomadic, it was their assumed lack of ties with any particular territory, their inherent lust for wandering and lack of allegiances to anyone but themselves that were emphasised.

These recent media representations of 'Gypsy invasions' draw on an enduring, pan-European body of Gypsy imagery which recurs throughout very varied representational contexts and has concrete political effects. At its core lies the supposed mobility of the Roma, a taken-for-granted nomadism which turns them into perpetual foreigners. The Gypsies' radical Otherness stems from their perceived lack of roots, from the deeply entrenched assumption that they do not belong here but neither do they belong anywhere else. As Anikó Imré shows in this issue, the image of the wandering Gypsy unifies varied cinematic and musical representations of Roma produced by differently minded European filmmakers and musicians, many of them Roma themselves. Likewise, the Polish and Romanian museum exhibitions of 'traditional Gypsy life' discussed by Peter Vermeersch and by Iulia Hasdeu emphasise movement, displaying caravans and also photographs and paintings of travelling Roma, typically camped by the side of the road, cooking over a makeshift fire. As elsewhere, in these museums Roma are portrayed as perpetually passing by, trapped in an eternal and timeless journey to nowhere. The resilience and dominance of the image of the wandering Gypsy needs to be investigated and its effects closely examined, if only because today the majority of European Roma are not nomadic and because the Roma populations of many European countries have been sedentary for several centuries.

In literary, artistic and museum representations of Gypsies, nomadism tends to be portrayed as a joyful alternative to the constraints of settled life, part and parcel of their assumed ludic disposition, also evidenced, for example, in their 'natural' musical abilities. Likewise in academic accounts nomadism is often described as a form of resistance, as in Imre's analysis of *Latcho Drom* in this issue. Imre identifies in Roma film- and music-making a 'migratory aesthetics', evidence of Roma transnationalism so that 'home becomes something irreducible to national or other borders' and is instead 'inscribed into bodily practices

4 Colin Clark and Elaine Campbell, "Gypsy invasion": a critical analysis of newspaper reaction to Czech and Slovak Romani asylum seekers in Britain, 1997', *Romani Studies*, 2000, 5:10, pp 23–47

and sonic spaces'. And yet, the ethnographic and historical records reveal ample evidence that Roma throughout Europe define themselves by connection to national, regional and local territories and populations.⁵ It is also clear, however, that such self-definitions are most often contested or denied by Gadge and that European states have again and again undermined any links that Roma might have to the people and physical and social landscape around them. In Spain, the case with which I am most familiar, successive governments since the late 1960s have attempted to solve 'the Gypsy issue' by repeatedly and compulsorily resettling thousands of Gitanos. Since 1992 I have carried out research among eighty Gitano families who were forcefully moved to a state-built, isolated, Gitano ghetto in the south of Madrid in 1989. They all had undergone several government-enforced moves before, from one shantytown to another every few years. In the autumn of 2006 the ghetto was demolished and its inhabitants were resettled once again, some in other state-built 'Colonies for Special Population', others in flats among non-Gitanos. They all knew that this would not be the last time they would be, as they explained, 'made to pack up and go, start again from scratch elsewhere'. 'The Gadge', I was told, 'don't want us to put down roots'.

Within a cultural, social and political context in which enfranchisement results from attachment to the ancestral territory of the nation, the image of the wandering Gypsy can only be understood as part and parcel of the dynamics of Roma marginalisation. In their analyses of museum representations of the Roma in Poland and Romania, both Vermeersch and Hasdeu demonstrate how this image depends on its opposite, that of the peasant historically and ancestrally tied to the land. Not only are national populations represented as ethnically homogenous but their attachment to the land is conceptualised as unchanging and continuous, with the result that Roma, viewed as perpetual foreigners and perpetually in movement, are easily disenfranchised. In his article in this issue Huub Van Baar eloquently describes the resistance met by Roma activists in the Czech Republic in their attempts to build memorials on the sites of Roma concentration camps. Because public remembrance is so important in European societies as a sign and a symbol of belonging, the reluctance on the part of the European states to endorse the memorialisation of the Roma Holocaust can easily be seen as refusal to allow them to belong to the nation.

And, indeed, across varied representational arenas Roma are consistently portrayed as outside the nation, as its objects – to be managed and controlled – rather than its subjects. Their assumed nomadism works as an index of their broader and irreconcilable deviance. Iulia Hasdeu tells us that Gypsies are seen to 'belong to an orgiastic space-time out of line with normality'. Unlike primitive, rural or working-class Others, Gypsies are not imagined as ancestors or placed within the same evolutionary scale as Gadge. Their purpose is to allow Gadge to consider themselves, not as they once were, but as they could and perhaps even should be – in Hasdeu's words, they answer a 'bacchanalian need' on the Gadge's part. This role that the imagined Gypsy plays in allowing the Gadge to ponder alternative models of the self is also explored in Caterina Pasqualino's analysis of twentieth-century filmic representations of Roma poverty. European directors from the beginnings of

5 Alaina Lemon, *Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Post-Socialism*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2000; Caterina Pasqualino, *Dire le Chant: Les Gitans Flamencos d'Andalousie*, CNRS, Paris, 1999; Aspasia Theodosiou, "Be-longing" in a "Doubly Occupied Place": the Parakalamos Gypsy Musicians', *Romani Studies*, 2004, 14:1, pp 15–58.

cinema onwards have romantically depicted Gypsies as renouncers and noble savages, and their penury as evidence of their authentic and deliberate Gypsiness. By presenting Gypsies as critics of self-interest and monetary accumulation, these film-makers draw on widespread European ideas about the redeeming nature of poverty.

If the imagined Gypsy provides us with the tools with which to envision our alternative selves, the implications of these representations for Roma groups throughout Europe are concrete and extremely significant. As Peter Vermeersch emphasises, even when they are intended as acts of protest against oppression, artistic and museum representations often draw from and hence reinforce popular representations that place Roma outside the boundaries of normal society. In Gadge accounts the ludic, wandering Gypsy is all too easily transformed into the work-shy, thieving, rapacious economic migrant. And when our sight is directed to the urban Roma in the inner cities, the archaic travelling Gypsy disappears and in its place rises the degenerate shanty-town drug-dealer. And there are also very strong continuities between ideas about Roma that permeate artistic and museum representations and those deployed in the context of governance and policy-making. In my research on the policies through which over the last fifteen years the Spanish state has attempted to deal with ‘the Gypsy issue’ (*la cuestión gitana*), the role that these conceptualisations play in the marginalisation of the Gitanos was all too evident. Social workers, policy-makers and bureaucrats dealing with urban Roma insisted to me on the need forcefully to relocate them to isolated housing states in order to facilitate their compulsory re-education. ‘These Gitanos’, I was told, ‘are indistinguishable from the most deprived and problematic of the urban poor. They are not true Gitanos. They are not nomadic, they have lost all the features that made their ancestors Gitano.’ Because they are ‘chronically immature’ and ‘have no culture’ they have to be confined to the so-called ‘Housing for Social Integration’, a de facto punitive institution designed forcefully to concentrate and remove them from sight.⁶

Approaching artistic and museum portrayals of Roma from the perspective of their articulation with representations formulated and deployed in other contexts draws our attention to the question of effect: the articles in this issue convincingly portray art and museums as arenas where the Roma’s deviance is told, and where their marginality is justified and ultimately reproduced. And yet, in her contribution on photographs of German Sinti taken during the 1930s, at a time when their persecution was stepping up, Eve Rosenhaft reminds us of the methodological difficulties involved in viewing representation as a straightforward instrument of oppression. Whereas it is easy to read these photographs a posteriori, solely in the light of the genocide that they appear to herald, Rosenhaft suggests that we understand them as inherently multivalent and the product of a negotiated encounter between photographer and subject. Emphasising the multivocality and negotiated nature of representation enables us to consider each representational event, from production to interpretation, as political and framed by relationships of power that are specific to each situation. This approach leads us away from a blanket view of Roma as eternal victims, inherently powerless and unable to produce representations and meaningful interpretations themselves.

6 Paloma Gay y Blasco, ‘“This is not a place for civilised people: isolation, enforced education and resistance among Spanish Gypsies”, in *Isolation: Places and Practices of Exclusion*, ed Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford, Routledge, London–New York, 2003, pp 208–21

The analytical standpoint that Rosenhaft suggests is appropriate because of the difficulties inherent in conceptualising both Roma and Gadge as either author *or* subject, agent *or* object in the process of representation. Roma belong to Europe both socially and culturally. Their understandings of the world and their place in it, and their self-representations and views of the Gadge, draw from and contribute to a body of images, beliefs and understandings, which is at once resilient and pan-European, and historically and locally specific. This Roma engagement with the same concerns that dominate the lives of their non-Roma neighbours is made clear by the example of the Spanish Gitanos, whose emphasis on the preservation of female virginity as a sign of communal identity has been interpreted by literati, artists and scholars as evidence of their exoticism and foreignness. And yet, throughout the twentieth century, a similar importance has been given to female sexual morality by Spaniards. During this period, opposing political parties and their supporters, as well as religious and social movements, galvanised themselves around sexual ideologies. For over one hundred years, the Spanish have deliberately and elaborately reflected upon their sexual moralities in the public arena, and have made them into symbols of competing projects of society. Unsurprisingly, living in a world where shared identities have been for decades explicitly defined through the management of sexuality and desire, the Gitanos have likewise made of their own sexual rules the apex of their imagined community.⁷

Crucially, then, the master symbols in the Gadge conceptualisation of Gypsies – such as nomadism, poverty and predatory female sexuality – dominate too the self-representations produced by Roma themselves in film, music and museum exhibitions. The significant questions to be asked, therefore, are why are these key motifs so resilient, how do they move and transform across different milieux, and what are their roles and their effects in different contexts? These are questions addressed with originality and analytical rigour by the authors in this issue. Jean-Luc Poueyto, for example, examines the prominence of the image of the wandering Gypsy in the artwork produced both by Manush youths in the South of France and by the now deceased Manush artist Coucou Doerr. Roma and Gadge, according to Poueyto, share a ‘common exotic imagination’ and it is by drawing on its repertoire that the Manushes represent to themselves their peripherality to the values of the dominant Gadge society. Similarly Hasdeu, analysing the portrayal of Gypsy femininity in a Romanian museum, emphasises the ways in which the eroticisation of Roma women by Gadge corresponds to the representations of femininity of her Kalderash informants. However, in spite of this continuity, Gadge portrayals of Gypsy women are essential to the bacchanalisation of the Roma, and thus to the reproduction of a cultural politics that places them outside the boundaries of ‘proper’ culture and humanity.

Emphasising the Roma engagement with European concerns, values and ideologies raises the question of what the effects are of the representations of themselves that Roma produce. To what extent do they attempt to manage to challenge their marginality, and succeed in doing so, by drawing on an imagery that they share with Gadge? This is a particularly relevant question, given that, as I have explained above and the articles here collectively illustrate, this imagery has been and continues to be instrumental in the marginalisation of Roma. A good vehicle

7 Paloma Gay y Blasco, *Gypsies in Madrid: Sex, Gender and the Performance of Identity*, Berg, Oxford, 1999

for exploring this issue is the analysis of visual representation by Roma political activists who engage with the international language of human rights, multiculturalism and integration in the wake of the expansion of the European Union. Torchin discusses the appropriation of the idiom of 'integration' by a Bulgarian Roma NGO deploying documentary as a political tool. She views these activists as successful in their use of a rhetoric of integrationist human rights through which ultimately they manage to 'articulate and enact belonging'. Vermeersch and Van Baar, on the other hand, are much more ambivalent in their evaluation. For both, the multiculturalist discourses that underlie the visual representation of the Roma past by Polish and Czech activists ultimately work to naturalise the separation of Roma from Gadge. As elsewhere in Europe, in Poland and in the Czech Republic the 'positive' representation of Roma that activists advocate will remain ineffective so long as it is not accompanied by policies that successfully improve their quality of life and that challenge the institutionalised racism that pervades relations between Roma and Gadge.

To finish, then, the articles in this special issue of *Third Text* demonstrate the necessity to examine carefully the relationship between authorship, effect and representation when analysing the production of hierarchy and inequality in Europe. Neither these categories nor their articulation can be taken as unproblematic when studying representations of Roma. Indeed, it is the disjunctures, the tensions and the ambiguities between representation, authorship and effect that prove to be analytically most promising.

As guest editors of this special issue of *Third Text*, Dina Iordanova and I are delighted to have been able to assemble a set of articles of such high quality. Their authors write from the standpoint of very different disciplinary and national traditions, and the collection here includes some of the most incisive thinking on Roma currently being produced in Britain, continental Europe and the United States. All the articles, except Anikó Imre's, were presented in St Andrews in March 2007 at a workshop on 'Representation and Effect: The Roma in Politics, Art, and the Academy', generously funded by The British Academy.

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