

# Darkland, Fairyland, Gypsyland: ‘Gypsy’ Heterotopias and Barthesian Prestidigitation

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## Abstract

This article examines myths that have been disseminated through arts and culture about so-called “Gypsies”, confining them to “anti-worlds”. There is always a “glamour that enwraps the Gypsy race” (Sampson 1935a, 10). Romantics and some nineteenth-century writers considered them to be positive symbols of resistance to newly born capitalism and rampant industrialization. This constituted a sort of “légende rose” (Descola 2019, 13), or pink legend, as Philippe Descola put it about Achouars, that is, a very positive gaze upon a people yet labelled “primitive”. However, this article intends to focus on the negative “black legend” (*Ibid.*), the idea that “Gypsies” form a dark and hostile people belonging to a dark and hostile fantasized territory. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century playwrights first depicted “Gypsies” as thieves, monsters, or inferior beings displaying dubious morality. They were ascribed mysterious powers, and “Gypsy” women were depicted as witches connected to their natural and dangerous territory, an occult Gypsyland. In all cases, they were shown as somewhat uncivilized (Grellman 1787, 24) and primitive beings, very much attached to their own traditions: a figure of the “Orientals within” (Lee 2000, 132). This Gypsyism – understood here broadly as an orientalism about “Gypsies” – imposed a vision about them, now deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the *gadjos*. “Gypsies” of fiction have been created and re-created until they occupy, in the Western imagination, foreign and/or dark territories yet these are situated inside Europe. Surprisingly, they can be found to this day wandering in books and movies, in other spaces or “espaces autres”, and in fetishized beyonds or heterotopias (Foucault 1966, 31). “Gypsy” characters inhabit the margins of the dominant societies of the countries in which they settled centuries ago, as if constantly bringing along with them, in the fantasies of the *gadjos*, their own frontiers which would isolate them from the rest of the population; or they live in exotic Gypsylands inside the very West. Their assigned territories are “absolutely different”, they are counter spaces, or “contre-espaces” (Foucault 1966, 24), constituting a huge reserve of imagination, “une grande réserve d’imagination” (Foucault 1967, 36). A “Gypsy” para-history thus has been told and written over and over again, “evacuating” (Barthes 2010, 240) the history of *Gypsies*, and questioning the role of artists and responsibility of social players. This article will also seek to raise the issue of “double consciousness” (Du Bois 1903, 8) among “Gypsy” Travellers.

## Keywords

- Gypsyism
- Heterotopias
- Mythology
- Romani Studies

“*Kon mangel te kerel tumendar roburen chi shocha phenela tumen o chachimos pa tumare perintonde.*”  
 “He who wants to enslave you will never tell you the truth about your forefathers.”  
 Ian Hancock (1942–)

“It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments.”  
 Franz Boas (1858–1942)

## Introduction

In his foreword to *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes (1915–1980) exposed his project: he sought to track down, “in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse [...]” (Barthes 1957), “*Tabus idéologique*” (Barthes 2010, 9), which has helped broadcast “the falsely obvious”, “*de fausses évidences*” (Barthes 2010, 9), in the press, pictures, and films. To Barthes, these discourses formed a set of myths, which imposed themselves on the public, and revealed some aspects of the societies that generated them. This article seeks to look into myths which have been imposed onto what Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) called the “collective consciousness” (Émile Durkheim 1893, cited in Engel 2015, 95) about so-called “Gypsies” in the West, and more particularly in anglophone countries. The terminology “Gypsy” Travellers will be used to speak of real-life “Gypsies”. As we shall see, the imagery conveyed and imposed is somewhat similar when it comes to non-“Gypsy” Travellers: Irish Travellers. Their embodiments in fiction belong to the same category in the mind of their creators, that of the “exotic Other[s]” (Lee 2000, 132). Those myths are made of stories told and retold, forming, in the words of the French anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) a “collective work”:

*Je ne veux pas dire par là qu'à un certain moment, à une certaine époque, il n'y ait pas eu quelqu'un qui ai d'abord raconté une histoire, mais cette histoire n'est devenue un mythe qu'à force d'avoir été entendue, répétée, entendue, répétée, réentendue, et rerépétée, et ainsi de suite, et être devenue une création collective par toutes sortes d'ajouts, de suppressions [...] (Lévi-Strauss, quoted in Maniglier 2018, 16'07”).*

I don't mean that at a certain point, at a certain time, there wasn't someone who first told a story, but this story became a myth because it was heard, retold, heard, retold, heard again, and retold once more time, and so forth, until it became a collective work with all sorts of additions and removals [...] (author's own translation).

Throughout this collective work they have been depicted as somewhat uncivilized and primitive, in a manner that reminds the reader of Orientalist attitudes towards the Orient. “Gypsies” of fiction indeed have been created and re-created to systematically inhabit in the Western imagination foreign and/or dark territories yet situated inside Europe. In books and movies, they can be found wandering

spaces simultaneously real and imaginary, alternative realities, what Michel Foucault (1926–1984) would define as *heterotopias*: “Heterotopia had the power to juxtapose in one real location several spaces” (Foucault, 1967/1984, 46–49). I would like to argue that in the mind of the *gadjo* (non-Gypsy), “Gypsy” Travellers live in those alternative realities hovering between reality and fantasy, and, as the Irish linguist John Sampson (1862–1931) put it, there is a perpetual “glamour that enwraps the Gypsy race” (Sampson 1935a, 10). The dominant societies where they live have thus defined themselves in opposition to what Radmila Mladenova calls the “gypsy” mask”, that is, “a meta-term to denote an abstract cluster of attributes that underwrites the ‘gypsy’ role and its universe, the mythic anti-world of *gypsies*” (Mladenova 2022, 217). Mladenova’s anti-world echoes Foucault’s “contre-espaces” (1966, 24), or counter spaces, places of utter transgression. For the *gadjos*, it is a *mundus inversus* gone wrong. Those myths have little by little concealed the socio-historical existence of “Gypsy” Travellers, replacing it with a “Gypsy” para-history. A “prestidigitation” (Barthes 2010, 240) took place, an “evacuation” (*Ibid.*). Their existence seems to be now fixed forever in “absolutely different” territories, dreadful spaces constituting a huge reserve of imagination, “une grande réserve d’imagination” (Foucault 1967, 36). The persistent making of this occult Gypsyland questions the role of artists and the responsibility of social players. It also raises the issue of “double consciousness” (Du Bois 1903, 8) of “Gypsy” Travellers. The sociality of the arts lies at the heart of both issues, the resolution of which may very well also be a “collective work”.

## Figures of Wicked ‘Gypsies’

In fifteenth-century Paris, a group of beggars belonged to the criminal underworld. They lived in one of the city’s numerous *courts of miracles*. They elected a king of the beggars – reminding us of such characters as Peachum in *The Threepenny Opera* by Berthold Brecht (1928), Charles Dickens’s Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (1838), or Clopin Trouillefou, king of the criminal outcasts in Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831). They were depicted as fake beggars and crooks and were much feared. Authors of the time, such as the poet François Villon (1431–1463?) placed the so-called “Gypsies” – or “Gipcians/Egipcians” newly arrived in Paris (probably as early as 1437) at that time – within those *courts of miracles* and the Parisian underworld:

*A Paris, au cabaret de « zygaut »  
Je passais hier en partant au boulot  
Chez les tziganes on travaille a chaud [...]  
Quand tout à coup, je vois jouer l’escroc [...]*  
(Villon cited in Manolesco 1980, 99)

In Paris, yesterday,  
I walked by the « Zygaut » cabaret  
At the Gypsies, we work promptly [...]  
When suddenly, I see a crook act [...]  
(author’s own translation).

Several books were written about the Parisian underworld of the time, such as *La Vie généreuse des Mercelots, Gueuz et Boesmiens* [The generous life of the hawkers, paupers and bohemians] (1596). Books written about the Parisian underworld of the time, as well as those “courts of miracles” were a source of inspiration for Victor Hugo (1802–1885) when writing *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. The terms “hawkers” (notions dealer) and “bohemians” are vague. In Hugo’s novel, Quasimodo is said to have been born into a tribe of “Bohemians” or *Gypsies*, whereas Esmeralda is said to be the daughter of French-Romani street dancer, a “gitane”. Yet, a plot twist has it that if Esmeralda is a virtuous character, she proves to be not “Gypsy” in the end, and Quasimodo, born into a Romani tribe, is of monstrous appearance. This monstrous appearance may remind readers of Caliban from William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1611):

What have we here? a man or a fish? dead or alive? [...] A strange fish! Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man. Any strange beast there makes a man [...] Legg’s like a man! And his fins like arms! (Shakespeare 1610, 96).

He is deformed as well as immoral; his name Caliban suggests the colour black, or blackness, in Angloromani: “Caliban appears to be derived from the Gipsy cauliban, ‘blackness’” (Chambers 1930, 494). Darkness indeed came to be a real leitmotif when it came to “Gypsy” characters, and darkness of the skin often meant darkness of the soul. For example, Ellis Wynne (1671–1734), in 1703, referred to the “Gypsies” as a “lying, tawny crew” (Wynne 1703, cited in Jarman and Jarman 1991, 36), thus linking their complexion to their tendency to lie, or, in another passage, to their madness: “‘Throw the tan-faced loons to the witches, bade the King” (*Ibid.*).

In 1605, Ben Jonson wrote *A Masque of Blackness*, in which actors appeared in blackface to pass as Africans. In order to get rid of their blackness, three African ladies must find a country ending in “-tannia”: “That they a land must forthwith seek, Whose termination, of the Greek, Sounds TANIA” (Jonson 1605, 546). The country proves to be neither “Black Mauritania”, “Swarth Lusitania”, nor “rich Aquitania” (*Ibid.*) but England: “This land that lifts into the temperate air, His snowy cliff, is Albion the fair” (*Ibid.*). It is an earthly paradise: “Britannia, this blest isle” (*Ibid.*), as well as an island, that is, a heterotopia *par excellence*, “A WORLD DIVIDED FROM THE WORLD” (*Ibid.*). England is a central, localized utopia, surrounded by purifying waters:

[...] You shall observe these rites:  
Thirteen times thrice, on thirteen nights,  
[...]  
You shall [...] steep your bodies in that purer brine,  
And wholesome dew, call’d ros-marine:  
Then with that soft and gentler foam,  
Of which the ocean yet yields some  
Whereof, bright Venus, beauty’s queen,  
Is said to have begotten been,  
You shall your gentler limbs o’er-lave,

And for your pains perfection have:  
 So that, this night, the year gone round,  
 You do again salute this ground;  
 And in the beams of yond' bright sun,  
 Your face dry, – and all is done (*Ibid.*).

Andrea Stevens speaks of “Britannia’s whitewashing waters” (Stevens 2009, 409), a comment which is relevant to the Elizabethan attitudes towards exotic peoples, should they come from Africa or internal peripheries such as the fantasized Gypsyland. In 1621, Ben Jonson wrote a masque entitled *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* in which a group of “Gypsies” sing and dance to entertain the court. In this second masque, *gadjos* also played *Gypsies*. They painted their faces, probably aided and abetted by the apothecary John Wolfgang Rumler (?–1650), who had created a walnut-based greasepaint or makeup for this effect – so it was this time an early example of yellowface. In the masque, “Gypsies” are stereotypical – thieves and fortune-tellers – and again of monstrous appearance, being compared to a “wretchock”, that is, an imperfect creature, or to an evil spirit, and to an animal living off cheese mould:

The famous imp yet grew a wretchock; and though for seven years together he was carefully carried at his mother’s back, rock’d in a cradle of Welsh cheese, like a maggot, and there fed with broken beer (Jonson 1621, 620).

“Gypsies” in Ben Jonson’s masque are sometimes designated as *Moon-men*, whereas Caliban, in *The Tempest*, is a “Mooncalf”. Superstition had it during the Renaissance that the moon would cause foetal deformities. Thus, “Gypsies” in the Elizabethan era were depicted regularly as deformed creatures, which supposedly reflected their dubious morality. Indeed, the pseudoscience of physiognomy was very much considered valid at the time, so showing “Gypsies” as deformed amounted to marginalizing them both physically and morally, rejecting them outside of the sphere of the respectable noblemen they had come to entertain. The “metamorphosis” of the title is the transformation, both physical and moral, of “Gypsies” through contact with the noblemen, thus cleared of their yellowness:

The gipsies were here,  
 Like Lords to appear,  
 With such their attenders,  
 As you thought offenders,  
 Who now become new men,  
 You’ll know them for truemen (Jonson 1621, 620).

Living in England alone could trigger a physical reformation of *Gypsies*, a belief still ingrained well into the nineteenth century:

The climate of England is well known to be favourable to beauty, and in no part of the world is the appearance of the Gypsies so prepossessing as in that country. Their complexion is dark, but not so disagreeably so (Smith 1880, 18).

But if “Gypsies” were not lucky enough to be reformed by *gadjos*, they would take their deformities to hell along with them:

Shortly there appear twenty demons, like Scotchmen [...] which turned out to be Gypsies. ‘Ho, there!’ cried Lucifer, ‘How was it that ye who know the fortunes of others so well, did not know that your own fortune was leading you hither?’ No answer was given, for they were amazed at seeing here beings uglier than themselves (Wynne 1703, cited in Jarman and Jarman 1991, 36).

English landscape painters always depicted them on the margins, and often *on the dark side of the landscape*, as in *Sketch on a Bank with Gipsies*,<sup>[1]</sup> by J. M. W. Turner (1809). Damian Le Bas notes about this painting that “you can barely see the “Gypsies” referred to in the title. They’re in an area of land and shadows so dark, that it could be underground. It could be an underworld” (Le Bas 2022, 3’52”). To Peter J. Howard, “the boundaries [...] are so often the critical interest. [...]. The outlaw and highwaymen, from Robin Hood to Dick Turpin, lurked in forests and operated on heaths” (Howard 2016, 219).

From the first decades of their arrival in western Europe, fictional “Gypsies” have been wrapped in metaphorical darkness. They were thus associated with criminal outcasts or described as monsters/immoral beings. They were demonized and rejected into other territories, other spaces, yet inside Europe, thus becoming foreigners in their own land. When “Gypsies” left those other space and crossed the borders separating them from Gadjoland, the world of *gadjos*, they brought along with them blackness/yellowness and abomination. Yet, *gadjos* believed they could reform them and rid them of their Gypsiness. In Foucauldian words, those “Gypsy” territories are heterotopias of sorts: they are mostly real, but they are also composite figments of *gadjos*’ imagination. They are fantasy spaces: a “court of miracles” (almost Russian dolls, a heterotopia within a heterotopia like a “Gypsy” cabaret in Villon), or an island (Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*). For instance, Ben Jonson’s “Gypsies” have just returned from a fair, a word whose etymology is revealing. Coming from the Anglo-French *feyre* (late thirteenth century), it became in modern French “foire”, and the adjective “forain”, meaning showmen Traveller. It also gave the English adjective “foreign”, circa 1300, *ferren*, *foran*, *foreyne*, in reference to places, “outside the boundaries of a country”.<sup>[2]</sup> If Paris is a moveable feast, fairs are moveable heterotopias, situated outside of town yet inside a territory, at the edge of Gadjoland. They are enclaves inhabited by eldritch creatures, spaces shrouded in mystery and places of many fleeting fantasies:

*Telles sont les foires, ces merveilleux emplacements vides au bord des villes, qui se peuplent, une ou deux fois par an, de baraques, d’étalages, d’objets hétéroclites, de lutteurs, de femmes-serpent, de diseuses de bonne aventure* (Foucault 1967/1984, 48).

1 Tate, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-sketch-of-a-bank-with-gipsies-n00467>.

2 Online Etymology Dictionary, “foreign”, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=foreign>.

And thus are the fairs, these wonderful empty sites on the edge of towns, inhabited, once or twice a year, by shacks, stalls, heterogeneous objects, wrestlers, snake-women, fortune tellers (author's own translation].

To Washington Irving, "Gypsies" are idle creatures "always to be found lurking about fairs and races" (Washington Irving, cited in John Sampson 1935, 11). These "Gypsies" are folk figures, looming and hovering at the frontier between the two worlds, sometimes even creeping into Gadjoland or hiding in the middle of it. They betray fear of the outsider, threatening the social order and the morality of the space they are depicted as invading or feeding upon.

## Figures of Wild and Occult *Gypsies*

We already mentioned Irish linguist John Sampson (1862–1931) who wrote that there is a "glamour that enwraps the Gypsy race" (Sampson 1935a, 10). Some sort of mystery. The term has first had to do with magic and has indeed come to be associated with the (*Gypsy*) Travellers: "glamour was a literal magic spell [...] associated with witches and gypsies and, to some extent, Celtic magic" (Strawinska 2013, 168). Walter Scott (1771–1832) himself mentions this association, which he attributes to the "Scottish peasants":

Besides the prophetic powers, ascribed to the gypsies in most European countries, the Scottish peasants believe them possessed of the power of throwing upon by-standers a spell, to fascinate their eyes, and cause them to see the thing that is not. Thus, in the old ballad of Johnie Faa, the elopement of the countess of Cassillis, with a gypsey leader, is imputed to fascination:

As sune as they saw her weel-far'd face,  
They cast the *glamour* ower her (Scott 1838, 245).

And the ballad *Christie's Will* (1825) "includes the phrase 'glamour'd gang' used to describe a group of *Gypsies*, which uses the power of a spell to ruthlessly trick a certain teacher (Strawinska 2013, 168). Thus, many "Gypsies" of fiction proved to be "enwrapped in glamour". This is, for instance, the case of Meg Merrilies, who became a stock "Gypsy" character in Victorian Britain. Sometimes she matches the romantic ideals of a life outside industrialization; she is a noble savage, living freely and in harmony with nature:

Her brothers were the craggy hills,  
Her Sisters larchen trees –  
Alone with her great family  
She liv'd as she did please (Keats 1818).

Or she seems to inhabit an interspace between nature and the supernatural:

[...] her tall figure [...] seemed almost of supernatural stature. We have noticed that there was in her general attire [...] somewhat of a foreign costume, artfully adopted perhaps for the



purpose of adding to the effect of her spells and predictions, or perhaps from some traditional notions respecting the dress of her ancestors. On this occasion she had a large piece of red cotton cloth rolled about her head in the form of a turban, from beneath which her dark eyes flashed with uncommon lustre. Her long and tangled black hair fell in elf-locks from the folds of this singular head-gear. Her attitude was that of a sibyl in frenzy, and she stretched out in her right hand a sapling bough which seemed just pulled (Scott 1815, 71).

A female oracle, a “sibyl”, she is also repeatedly depicted as a witch. The stick she is holding is later in the book said to be a “wand” (Scott 1815, 472). She is also called an “Gipsy-hag” (Scott 1815, 37) by the Dutch captain in the book. Being an old woman, wearing a foreign cloak, and holding a “sloethorn cudgel” (Scott 1815, 20), she has all the attributes of a modern Cailleach, the Hag of Beara, a Celtic divinity (see, again, the definition of the word “glamour” above). Her hair, “dark elf-locks”, “shot out like the snakes of the gorgon between an old-fashioned bonnet” (Scott 1815, 20). In European folklore, “elf-locks” are made by fairies on sleeping people, so she also belongs to the world of fairies. Just like heterotopias “had the power to juxtapose several spaces”, her character seems to be the result of a composite construction, some sort of juxtaposition of mythological characters (prophetess, witch, sybil, hag, Cailleach, gorgon) belonging to several folklores (Greek, European, Celtic...), besides her character being inspired by a real-life “Gypsy” queen or Phuri Dai<sup>3</sup> Jean Gordon. On top of it all, her character, having “traditional notions” and wearing “an old-fashioned bonnet”, betrays the Orientalist or rather Gypsylorist(ic) attitude of the author in her supposed attachment to traditions, theorized at the end of the eighteenth century: “The Gypsies are an eastern people, and have eastern notions. It is inherent in uncivilized people, particularly those of Oriental countries, to be strongly attached to their own habits” (Grellman 1787, 24). Elaborating upon it, Ken Lee defined Gypsylorism as such:

Whilst Orientalism is the discursive construction of the exotic Other outside Europe, Gypsylorism is the construction of the exotic Other within Europe – Romanies are the *Orientalists within* (Lee 2000, 132).

Meg Merrilies belongs to the community of *Border Gypsies*, that is, “Gypsy” Travellers living between England and Scotland, at the farthest reaches of the kingdom, a kingdom at the edge of the kingdom. To the *gadjos* in the novel, beyond the aptly named river Eden, marking the frontier between Meg’s Gypsyland and Gadjoland, lies hell. Ellis Wynne, again, wrote: “Shortly there appear twenty demons, like Scotchmen” (Wynne 1703, cited in Jarman and Jarman 1991, 36). So, Border “Gypsies” are twice outcasts: as Scots, then as “Gypsies”, thus belonging to a periphery within a periphery. Unjustly accused of kidnapping the young Bertram, Meg is expelled from the domain: “Yes; there’s thirty yonder, from the auld wife of an hundred to the babe that was born last week, that ye have turned out o’ their bits o’ bields, to sleep with the tod and the blackcock in the moors!” (Scott 1815, 72). Meg is a “Gypsy” queen whose gypsydom is limited to the moor, her supposed natural environment, as in Keats. Heathcliff, too, is a “gipsy brat” (Brontë 1847, 37), and he belongs to the moor, or heath, as his name suggests. Moreover, he does not only belong to the Yorkshire moor, but he also becomes one with this wild landscape:

3 “Phuri dai: a senior woman in the band. The *phuri dai*’s influence was strong, particularly in regard to the fate of the women and children”, in *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/phuri-dai>.

*Il y a le roc de Penistone, c'est Heathcliff. Le roc de Penistone fait rêver la petite Catherine Linton, [...] mais bien sûr elle n'a pas le droit d'y aller. Le parc du manoir où elle vit est fermé par une grille, et cette grille, on ne doit pas la franchir. Le roc de Penistone, c'est encore une fois Heathcliff, qui lui-même est une concrétion de la nature. Il est le roc, il est l'aridité du désert, dira Catherine, [...]. Il est la dureté du silex [...]* (Jordis 2017, 45'22").

There is Penistone Crag, this is Heathcliff. Little Catherine Linton dreams of the Penistone Crag [...] but she is not allowed to go there. The park of the manor house where she lives is closed by a gate, and one must not cross it. Penistone Crag, this is once again Heathcliff, himself a natural concretion. He is the Crag, he is the barrenness of the desert, says Catherine [...]. He is himself the roughness of the flint [...] (author's own translation).

His enemies try to reject him out of doors, to the untamed wildness: "Your presence is a moral poison that would contaminate the most virtuous: for that cause, and to prevent worse consequences, I shall deny you hereafter admission into this house" (Brontë 1847, 114). In one of the filmic adaptations of the novel, Hindley addresses him in those terms: "Get that Gypsy out of here [...] You're not for a civilized house!" (Kosminski 1992, 24'30"). According to Pauline Nestor, Heathcliff inhabits a British Frontier between civilized and uncivilized realms:

The high level of violence in the novel, accessible it seems to almost every character, also challenges assumptions about the restraining limits of civilized behavior. Perhaps Heathcliff occupies such a liminal position, perceived as bordering at times on the beast, at other moments on the devil, that we are not shocked by his 'half-civilized ferocity' (Nestor 2003, xxviii).

He is depicted by *Gadjo* as an inferior being, half-beast/beast, half-human, dweller of an untenable ontological heterotopia:

'Off, dog!' cried Hindley, threatening him with an iron weight used for weighing potatoes and hay. [...] 'Throw it,' he replied, standing still, 'and then I'll tell how you boasted that you would turn me out of doors as soon as he died, and see whether he will not turn you out directly.' [...] 'Take my colt, Gypsy, then!' said young Earnshaw. 'And I pray that he may break your neck: take him, and he damned, you beggarly interloper! and wheedle my father out of all he has: only afterwards show him what you are, imp of Satan. – And take that, I hope he'll kick out your brains!' (Brontë 1847, 39).

Heathcliff is an "imp of Satan": he is thus bestowed the same offensive moniker as "Gypsies" during the Renaissance (Ben Jonson 1621, 620), and at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Wynne 1703, 36). At the end of the twenty-first century, the imagery remains similar. "Gypsies" are "savages" whom *gadjos* endeavour to keep at bay, in an outside space, as iterated in the series *Peaky Blinders*. Here, Darby Sabini, a British-Italian gangster at war with the eponymous gang of Travellers, loses his temper:

**Darby Sabini** Everybody makes fucking jokes. I didn't know you had no sense of humour! [...] So, for a few fucking jokes you fucking invite a tribe of savages into the city and just fucking clog the fucking gates! (Knight 2014, 37'41").

The “Gypsy” mask” is not solely worn by actual ethnic “Gypsies” but more widely by those considered as exotic Others. This is the case with Irish Travellers. Gypsyland and “Tinkerdom” (McPhee 2017) are neighbouring territories. In the movie *Into the West*, a neighbour of the Reilly family, trying to have them evicted, exclaims: “We have to keep things civilized!” (19’48”); at a later stage, a business and horse trainer fumes: “Those Travellers have the devils on their side!” (Newell 1992, 1.09’13”). The two heroes, Tito and Ossie, are looking for an Irish Frontier, a mythical West (as the title suggests), a “land of eternal youth”, precisely the translation in English of the magical horse, Tír na nÓg, which appears to take them there, whereas a group of *gadjos* call their dad’s friend “a squaw” (Newell 1992, 1.09’13”). They are depicted by *gadjos* as “savages” of Ireland, echoing the words of Washington Irving (1783–1859), who, almost two centuries before, drew the same parallel, likening “Gypsies” and “Indians”: “They seem to be like the Indians of America”, he wrote, quoted by John Sampson in a chapter of *The Wind of the Heath* revealingly called “The Dark Race” (Sampson 1935, 11).

In another example, in Marina Carr’s play *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), Irish Traveller Hester Swane is first introduced to the reader as a witch:

**Hester** Ah, how can I lave the Bog of Cats, everythin’ I’m connected to is here.[...].

**Catwoman** [...] You’re my match in witchery, Hester, same as your mother was...

(Carr 1998, 273–274)

She is then labelled a “Jezebel witch” (Carr 1998, 280), being thus compared to a foreigner and an intruder from another territory to sow discord and corrupt the king. She possesses soothsaying skills and is connected to the impenetrable and esoteric realm of the bog and its plants – to both of which she owes her power:

[...] Hester’s connection to the Pagan spiritual world is also a real one. The ghost of Joseph Swane asks the Catwoman of Hester, ‘Can she hear ghosts?’ ‘Oh aye’, responds the Catwoman, ‘though she lets on she can’t’ (2.301). Later Joseph approaches her, and, just like the Catwoman, who readily admits her place in the Pagan landscape, she can hear but not see him. Moreover, she can both see and hear the Ghost Fancier when other characters clearly do not. While these instances reveal Hester’s psychic ability, she also demonstrates her association with specific Irish folk traditions. When she is defending her right to stay by the Bog of Cats she tells the wedding guests, ‘I know every barrow and rivulet and bog hole of its nine square mile. I know where the best bog rosemary grows and the sweetest wild bog rue’ (2.314). As Angela Bourke points out a number of times in *The Burning of Brigit Cleary*, the traditional uses of herbal medicine were specifically the traditional uses of herbal medicine were specifically the esoteric knowledge of the fairy doctors. Moreover, Hester’s claim to a secret knowledge of these herbs and the bog itself marks her inert connection to both folk tradition and to the natural landscape from which that tradition derives (Kader 2005, 181).

She occupies a liminal space suggested by the onomastics itself, as in the case of Heathcliff: she is the animalistic Swan/Swane, and semi-mythological Meg Merrilies, made up of several ontological layers. Finally, it should be noted that she, too, is facing injustice and is driven by a desire for vengeance. However, *gadjos* and the pillars of the social and patriarchal order in the play are trying to evict her from

her own heterotopia, the bog, and to take possession of it. They are obsessed with her departure: "Now what I'd really like to know is when are ya plannin' on lavin'?" (Carr 1998, 333), says Xavier Cassidy, a rich farmer, threatening her with a shotgun; while she is only begging to stay: "All I ever wanted was to be by the Bog of cats. A modest want when compared to the want of others. Just let me stay here in the caravan" (Carr 1998, 281). This colonial attitude already lies at the heart of Said's Orientalism, and echoes the connection recently noted by Damian Le Bas between Gypsylorism and its somewhat "colonial tone" (Berkham 2018) adopted towards "Gypsy" Travellers, "a group that exists simultaneously within and outside European society" (Berkham 2018).

The *Gypsies'* language, too, is marginalized: "The *Critical Review* must lament that 'Guy Mannering' is too often written in language unintelligible to all except the Scotch" (Scott 1815/1893). The remark echoes Heathcliff's arrival at Wuthering Heights, in a passage also resuming the association of "Gypsies" with blackness and the underworld:

[...] it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil.

We crowded round, and over Miss Cathy's head I had a peep at a dirty, ragged, black-haired child; big enough both to walk and talk: indeed, its face looked older than Catherine's; yet when it was set on its feet, it only stared round, and repeated over and over again some gibberish that nobody could understand (Brontë 1847, 37).

Ellis Wynne, already, spoke of their "barbarous chatter" (Wynne 1703, cited in Jarman and Jarman 1991, 36). There is something rotten, something devilish in the kingdom of *Border Gypsies*. Meg needs exorcising, and it is the local Sheriff this time who endeavours to do so by his judicial jargon. So three centuries after Ben Jonson, *gadjos* were still depicted as having the power to strip fictional "Gypsies" of their supposed Gypsiness:

The Sheriff received also the depositions concerning what had passed at their meeting the caravan of gypsies [...] The speech of Meg Merrilies seemed particularly suspicious. There was, as the magistrate observed in his law language, *damnum minatum* – a damage, or evil turn (Scott 1815, 73).

However, the narrator in Walter Scott's *Guy Mannering* carries out a reversal of sorts, making the centre the periphery. Indeed, according to Meg Merrilies, a supposed foreign and exotic outsider, it is Dominie Sampson, a minister and tutor, thus a representative of English education and religion, who speaks a "French gibberish", and it is the minister who seems to be now enwrapped in "glamour":

'Get thee behind me!' said the alarmed Dominie. 'Avoid ye! Conjuro te, scelestissima, nequissima, spurcissima, iniquissima atque miserrima, conjuro te!!!'

Meg stood her ground against this tremendous volley of superlatives, which Sampson hawked up from the pit of his stomach and hurled at her in thunder. 'Is the carl daft,' she said, 'wi' his glamour?' [...] 'What, in the name of Sathan, are ye feared for, wi' your French gibberish, that would make a dog sick? (Scott 1815, 467).

Walter Scott, one of the “substrates” (Durkheim 1893, cited in Engel 2015, 95) of this mythologizing collective work, depicts a “Gypsy” heroine, Meg Merrilies, who occupies at once the margins and the centre. Even if the supposed pillars of the social (and patriarchal) order ceaselessly endeavour to reject her towards the edges, her exoticization does not exclude her from the Scottish cultural centre, as Deborah Epstein Nord explains:

In his novel *Guy Mannering, or, the Astrologer* (1815), Walter Scott offers his readers a version of the history of Gypsies that emphasizes their deep and mystical presence in the Scottish past, their intermingling with the Scots themselves, and their vulnerability to the vagaries of historical, political, and economic change. His are not Gypsies of a static and constant character, impervious to alteration and untouched by other people and ways of life, as many commentators in this period imagined them. [...] Scott’s Gypsies also occupy an iconic place in the collective memory of the Scottish people and seem, at times, to stand in for the prized national past that Scott, as an antiquarian, was committed to retrieving. Their association with an ancient and dimly remembered history, a memory of origin, and a complex identity is played out in the novel on the level of the individual experience of the young hero, Harry Bertram, and his connection to the “Gypsy” “sibyl,” Meg Merrilies, one of Scott’s most charismatic and celebrated characters. The memory of this primal figure links Bertram to his past, helps him reconstruct his nearly erased identity, and serves as a confirmation of the need to preserve – or, at least, remember – the cultural amalgam of which the “Gypsy” is a part.

Meg Merrilies, “harlot, thief, with, and Gypsy,” had a life of her own outside Scott’s novel throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and played an archetypal role in popular culture, the meaning of which is all but lost to us. She was the subject of the poem “Meg Merrilies” (1818) by John Keats, inspired another called “The Gipsy’s Malison” (1829) by Charles Lamb, became the central character in a successful dramatization of *Guy Mannering* that featured the fames Sarah Egerton as Meg, and was painted in at least seven portraits between 1816 and 1822. This “Meg-mania,” as one critic has phrased it, underscored the powerful, imposing, and exotic visual qualities of this figure: her great and mannish height; her wild-haired and red-turbaned head; her garb, which combines “the national dress of the Scottish people with something of an Eastern costume”; and her air of “wild sublimity.”<sup>[4]</sup> She is written as a virtual stage character, compared explicitly in the narrative with Sarah Siddons, and always evoked pictorially, as though Scott meant her for the subject of a picturesque tableau.<sup>[5]</sup> But Meg Merrilies also captured the imagination of Scott’s audience as an emblem of fate and a reader of the future – she is referred to an ancient “Sybil” – and as an ancestral figure; neither wholly

4 Author’s note: See Peter Garside, “Meg Merrilies and India”, Scott in *Carnival: Selected Papers from the Fourth International Scott Conference in Edinburgh*, 154–71, 1991.

5 Katie Trumpener discusses the European tendency, whether in literary texts or in visual displays, to imagine Gypsies in static set pieces or tableaux “The Time of the Gypsies: A ‘People Without History’”. In *Identities*, edited by Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 341–343. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

female nor wholly male, she is a woman of “masculine stature”, with a voice whose “high notes were too shrill for a man, the low... too deep for a woman”.<sup>6</sup> Hybrid in a variety of ways – male and female, Scottish and “Eastern” – she transcends distinctions of sex and nation and occupies the position of an ur-parent of original forebear (Epstein Nord 2006, 25–26).

Today, another “Gypsy” character who at once occupies the margins and the centre is enwrapped in an aura triggering a “mania”, from attire to speech: Thomas Shelby, leader of the Peaky Blinders gang in the eponymous series. As with Heathcliff, *gadjos* (his enemies) go to great lengths to confine him in “Gypsy” heterotopias. They do so through guns and also language, saturating their verbal exchanges with excluding names: “Gypsy”, “Tinker”, “Pikey”, “Diddicoy”... As Ian Hancock put it, language is a place of “struggle for the control of identity” (Hancock 2007, 1). The one who possesses the power to name the other(s) masters “the representation of Otherness” (Hancock 2007, 1), as Stephano et Trinculo repeatedly naming Caliban a “Moon-calf” (Shakespeare 1611, 98–105), patriarchs calling Meg Merrilies a “Gypsy” “hag” (Scott 1815, 37–38) – which is also how the white master Prospero calls his dark slave Caliban: “A freckled whelp, hag-born – not honour’d with a human shape” (Shakespeare 1611, 74) – and finally Thomas Shelby’s enemies defining him by the above-mentioned names, often doubled with a reference to the body, the lower body, such as “fucking Gypsy scum” (Knight 2013, S1E2, 54’25”). The “Gypsy” protagonist represents the low, as Said’s Oriental. Yet, Thomas Shelby is an intruder, just like Heathcliff is an “interloper” (Brontë 1847, 39), constantly conquering new territories. “A tent, then a boat, then a house, then a mansion. This is something”, says Winston Churchill in glowing terms (Knight 2019, S5E6, 4’51”). Heathcliff and Thomas Shelby are chiaroscuro characters, navigating between the known and the unknown and thus threatening to erase the borders between the centre and heterotopias, and to destroy the established social order. As Camilla Fojas observes from her filmic perspective:

From the northern perspective of Hollywood, border zones evoke a negative sublime: fear and anxiety about crossing-over into the unknown or of the unknown crossing-over and infiltrating the known. [...] These films generate fear of invisible machinations, that while no one was looking, something or someone has permeated the boundary that keeps things known intact (Fojas 2007, 82).

“Anti-world” and “negative sublime”: “Gypsy” characters are *Gadjos*’ “old-purpose monster[s]” (Halberstam 1993, 337), demonic and deformed. They are the dwellers of counter spaces, Foucault’s “contre espaces” (Foucault 1967, 24). But instead of being “localized utopias” (Foucault 1967, 24), those spaces rather are, in the case of *Gypsies*, localized dystopias. They are also heterotopias of “deviation” (Foucault 1967, 21): “Gypsy” characters are old, mad, immoral, or monstrous, and at times, all of the above at once. They embody *gadjos*’ total fears and taboos, at times being associated with one of the most widespread and fearsome of them all, cannibalism. We know that Shakespeare had read Montaigne and his *Essay, Of Cannibals* (1580), when his imagination begot the character of Caliban. The name is probably not innocent. Two centuries later, when Meg Merrilies appears as a witch in the eyes of Guy, an impressionable *gadjo*, Walter Scott once again deconstructs this mythologizing stance:

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6 George Eliot quotes Meg Merrilies at least twice in letters to close friends, on 27 April 1852, and 30 December 1859, and does so without referring to her source [...] This suggests a certain familiarity with the novel and character.

‘Sit down there,’ she said, pushing the half-throttled preacher with some violence against a broken chair [...]

Meg in the meanwhile went to a great black cauldron that was boiling on a fire on the floor, and, lifting the lid, an odour was diffused through the vault which, if the vapours of a witch’s cauldron could in aught be trusted, promised better things than the hell-broth which such vessels are usually supposed to contain. It was, in fact, the savour of a goodly stew, composed of fowls, hares, partridges, and moor-game boiled in a large mess with potatoes, onions, and leeks, and from the size of the cauldron appeared to be prepared for half a dozen of people at least. ‘So ye hae eat naething a’ day?’ said Meg, heaving a large portion of this mess into a brown dish and strewing it savourily with salt and pepper (Scott 1815, 469).

Heathcliff is described by Nelly as having “sharp cannibal teeth” (Brontë 1847, 178), whereas according to her, “his black countenance looked blightingly through” (Brontë 1847, 178). This strange occurrence of the adverb “blightingly” rejects Heathcliff towards a heterotopia of strangeness, an “uncanny valley” (Masahiro 2012, 28). Approaching the Orient, Mina Harker expresses a similar fear: “There was something wild and uncanny about the place. We could hear the distant howling of wolves” (Stoker 1897, 321). The border between Gadjoland and Gypsyland is once there again marked by a river, the Danube. There is something *Unheimlich* about *Gypsies*, literally at once foreign and necessarily concealed. Characters coming from this uncanny territory carry with them the possibility of contamination of the cultural centre. Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* is helped by “Gypsies” in his project to travel to London. They are confined in the courtyard of his castle, and when they are allowed into it, it is to commit “some ruthless villainy” (Stoker 1897, 47). Critics have often underlined the fear of reverse colonisation (Arata 1990, 623) to be found in the novel. This fear betrays *gadjo* feelings of guilt:

This was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where perhaps for centuries to come he might ... satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless (Stoker 1897, 54).

Nearly 120 years later, *gadjos* continue to collude in confining the *Gypsies*:

**Darby Sabini** Now admit it. The Peaky Blinders is out of control.

**Alfie Solomons** Yeah, they are out of fucking control, mate. They came down the canal and spread like the fucking clap. [...] Just write down peace between the Jews and the Italians.

**Darby Sabini** And war against the Gypsies (Knight 2014, S2E4, 38’40”).

In other words, and as Sabini wondered earlier in his burst of anger, who let in those creatures? This dread of foreign invaders manifested itself in the wolf metaphor or lycanthropy (Arnds 2015, 69), not only about “Gypsies” (who seem to turn into wolves in Stoker’s *Dracula*) but about all ethnic minorities threatening Gadjoland. They have all been demonized. Eventually, a few “Gypsy” and Traveller characters (Meg Merrilies, Heathcliff, Hester Swane, Thomas Shelby) display more complex features than the usual “gypsy” mask and seem to find favour with the narrator/author/reader. Nevertheless, the presence of similarly emancipated “Gypsy” characters in literature and the cinema is much too rare to signify a real change in the perspective. They only seem to show a “mere temporary suspension [...] of hierarchical rank” (Jenks 2003, 165), an incidental transgression of *Gypsy/gadjo* order and that of Romani heterotopias.

## 'A World Divided from the World': 'Gypsy' Heterotopias, 'Gypsy' History, and 'Gypsy' Double-consciousness

The fetishization of "Gypsies" never failed. Fascinated by "Gypsy" Travellers (and the Irish Travellers), *gadjos* of Western Europe have written and rewritten stories and discourses about them now deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the majority culture: "the lorists have handed down as their main legacy a picture of the racial *Gypsy* which has been imprinted firmly in the popular consciousness" (Mayall 2004, 179). According to these myths, they inhabit an exotic Gypsyland, populated with uncivilized beings, or ghastly and dark spaces, situated within Europe, in domestic peripheries.<sup>[7]</sup> Yet, research shows a very different picture of the history of the "Gypsy" Travellers. This is particularly true of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for which there are a plethora of pictures and evidence how the "Gypsy" Travellers played an important role in the economy as well as in the social life of the kingdom. For instance, they fought in the First World War, having their fair share in the defence of the British Empire and the Allied forces:

When news of war came in 1914, many were thrilled: here was a chance to get caught up in great events, to support right against wrong, and [...] to show what you were made of. Abraham Ripley enlisted with the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment); his nephew and best friend, also Abraham Ripley, signed up with the 4<sup>th</sup> battalion, Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex Regiment). The family were stopping at Weybridge when they left:

Everyone went out of the yard to see them off. The two young Abrahams laughed as they waved and walked away into their uncertain future. The family stood in silence until the two had disappeared, then they went back to the yard until only my mother stood looking down the empty lane, even after the sound of their boots and their laughter had died away (Keet-Black 2013, 43).

They never came back. Young Abraham died on the first day of the Battle of Passchendaele, his body torn up by shells, or slipping unnoticed into the treacherous mud, and all that remains is a name on the Menin Gate. His uncle fought on until 1918 and then, only six weeks before the Armistice, he too was killed, and rests in the Quarry Wood Cemetery at Sains-lès-Marquion, east of Arras.

They were not the only Gypsies caught up in the remorseless machinery of war. [...] normally Gypsies supported the war. [...] The Romany did their bit, no better or worse than their *gorjer* brothers-in-arms (Harte 2023, 154–156).

Some of them became national heroes – a fact, however, shown in the BBC period crime drama *Peaky Blinders* (Steven Knight, 2013–2022) through portrayals of the Shelby brothers. The show has been described both as a historical drama and an epic, so again straddling the line between reality and fantasy. Welsh Kale were very active in the field of music. Moving around, they played an important role in preserving traditional Welsh folk ballads. They were among the best musicians of the country,

7 See in this matter Guillaume Sibertin-Blanc, "Les Indiens d'Europe" [The Indians of Europe], 2011, *Lignes* 2 (35): 180–203.



especially harpists – such as Mary Ann Roberts, born in 1841, a harpist, daughter of John Roberts (1816–1894), a renowned harpist as well. Or violinists, such as Matthew Wood, a descendent of Abram Wood (1699?–1799), a Welsh Kale storyteller and himself a fiddler. Welsh Kale regularly won prizes at local Eisteddfodau (Yates 1953, 84); John Wood Jones “gained the silver harp at the Brecon Eisteddfod of 1826 and performed on the harp with applause before her majesty Queen Victoria at the Royal Palace in 1843” (Jarman and Jarman 1991, 68). The Roberts family also performed in front of Queen Victoria at Palé Hall, Llandderfel on 24 August 1889. They were once celebrated. They were not the dwellers of a separate, remote and exotic periphery of the kingdom; at times, they occupied its very centre. In the 1950s and 1960s, many documents show that the (*Gypsy*) Travellers in the UK, in Ireland as well as in the USA not only took a great part in the local economy but also mixed with local people, and so did not belong to those exotic heterotopias constructed by the writers’ Gypsyloristic attitudes. Lois Brookes-Jones, for example, underlines the (*Gypsy*) Travellers’ “intersection with the local mining community, and how working-class history intertwines with [...] Gypsy and Traveller history<sup>8</sup>” (Brookes-Jones 2022, 7’37”).

Pictures also confirm these very testimonies. Nonetheless, why does the majority population continue to favour myths over such tangible objects as photographs? Photographs seem to attest to the fact that “Gypsy” Travellers were there amongst the rest of the population and took part in local economies: “Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it” (Sontag 1977, 5). Roland Barthes spoke of a “certificate of presence”:

*C’est une prophétie à l’envers : comme Cassandre, mais les yeux fixés sur le passé, elle ne ment [...] Toute photographie est un certificat de présence [...] comme l’ectoplasme de « ce qui avait été » [...] (Barthes 2010, 135).*

It is like a backwards prophecy. Like Cassandra, but the gaze fixed on the past, it never lies [...]. Every photograph is a certificate of presence [...] like the ectoplasm of what once was [...]. (author’s own translation).

Songs do, too, such as *The Berryfields of Blair*, written by Belle Stewart (1906–1997) and sung by her daughter, Sheila Stewart (1937–2014), two traditional Scottish singers belonging to a community of Scottish “Gypsy” Travellers. Again, the song describes the non-segregated yearly gatherings:

When berry time comes roond each year  
Blair’s population’s swellin,  
There’s every kind o picker there  
And every kind o dwellin.  
There’s tents and huts and caravans,  
There’s bothies and there’s bivvies  
And shelters made wi tattie-bags  
And dug-outs made wi divvies.

<sup>8</sup> See in this matter Chris Killip’s photographic book *Seacoal* (1984).

There's corner-boys fae Glesgae,  
 Kettle-boilers fae Lochee,  
 There's miners fae the pits o Fife,  
 Mill-workers fae Dundee,  
 And fisherfowk fae Peterheid  
 And tramps fae everywhere,  
 Aa lookin fir a livin aff  
 The berry fields o Blair.  
 There's travellers fae the Western Isles,  
 Fae Arran, Mull and Skye;  
 Fae Harris, Lewis and Kyles o Bute,  
 They come their luck to try,  
 Fae Inverness and Aberdeen,  
 Fae Stornoway and Wick  
 Aa flock to Blair at the berry time,  
 The straws and rasps to pick.  
 There's some wha earn a pound or twa,  
 Some cannae earn their keep,  
 There's some wid pick fae morn till nicht,  
 And some wid rather sleep.  
 There's some wha hae tae pick or stairve,  
 And some wha dinna care  
 There's comedy and tragedy  
 Played on the fields o Blair.  
 There's faimilies pickin for one purse,  
 And some wha pick alane,  
 There's men wha share and share alike  
 Wi wives wha's no their ane.  
 There's gladness and there's sadness tae,  
 There's happy herts and sare,  
 For there's some wha bless and some wha curse  
 The berry fields o Blair.  
 Before I put my pen awa,  
 It's this I would like to say:  
 You'll travel far afore you'll meet  
 A kinder lot than they;  
 For I've mixed wi them in field in pub  
 And while I've breath to spare,  
 I'll bless the hand that led me tae  
 The berry fields o Blair.<sup>[9]</sup>

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9 Belle Stewart (1906–1997), “The Berryfields O Blair”, Songs of the Travelling People, Saydisc Records, 1994, <https://youtu.be/RBHMCTucV8Q>.

On a more tragic note, whereas they have been depicted since the renaissance as criminal outcasts, (*Gypsy*) Travellers have rather been the victims of the criminal underworld, mostly because of their vulnerability. They consistently have been designated as kidnappers of children of *gadjos*, until today, whereas research shows that vulnerable (*Gypsy*) Traveller children have been kidnapped by non-Roma and forced to beg in Milan, London, or Paris, or steal, under threat of being molested by their non-Romani persecutors, such as the Hamidovic family, who were arrested recently.<sup>[10]</sup> In this case, a tragic reversal of values took place, as Canadian Traveller Ronald Lee explained in a passage of his autobiography:

Of all the unwritten histories, that of the Gypsy is the most extraordinary. Our music, our art, our crafts, our fashions have been stolen to be presented in the concert halls and museums of the world as Spanish, Hungarian, Czechoslovakian, Russian, French, and so on. All that we have created through the centuries has been taken from us, and yet in popular myth we are the “thieves” (Lee 1971, 181).

The endurance of such imagery can have devastating professional consequences for “Gypsy” Travellers:

I was convinced I had ability and enough training to be a successful ship model builder or maritime historian with some museum and I had other specialized talents that should be worth something like the five languages I spoke fluently [...] Gypsies aren't ship model builders [...] Gypsies aren't artists, they're fortunetellers or violin players like Jilko, horse thieves or knife-wielding avengers of the slurs against their women. Whoever heard of a Gypsy expert on maritime history and naval architecture? (Lee 1971, 234).

Harrowing social consequences are also generated by this dissonance:

The age-old myth of the violins, the caravans, the earrings, blazing campfires and the savage knife fights over the tribal virgin would come back into its own on T.V., in novels and in the movies, while the real Canadian Gypsies were becoming hoodlums, dope addicts, prostitutes and alcoholics following the natural process of the Canadianization of off-white minority groups (Lee 1971, 233).

Eventually, another troubling consequence of the lasting imagery of Gypsyism is the way the fantasies of *gadjos* about the “Gypsy” Travellers make their way through the minds of the (*Gypsy*) Travellers themselves. It has indeed worked so well, that Gypsyism has given birth to a case of internalized orientalism, or internalized Gypsyism, by which (*Gypsy*) Travellers have internalized the categories of European Orientalism towards them. For example, when Ronald Lee seems to be convinced of the power of Kalderash *Gypsies*:

The old people were just finishing supper when we arrived. The old lady knew we were coming and had made enough for us. The more I lived among these Kalderash Gypsies the more I

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10 See in this matter Olivier Peyroux, *Délinquants et Victimes, la traite des enfants d'Europe de l'Est en France* [Offenders and victims, human trafficking of Eastern European children in France] (2013).

became convinced that they had some kind of telepathy that enabled them to communicate with one another [...] (Lee 1971, 29).

Or when Johnny Dogs (Packy Lee), a “Gypsy” character in *Peaky Blinders* reproaches Thomas Shelby with his alliance with the “Gypsy” Lee family: “Tommy, his people are fucking savages. You know, heathens, Tom, they don’t even let them in the fair” (Knight 2017, 9’32”). The fair is another of those fetishized beyonds par excellence, heterotopia and heterochronia, possessing, as all heterotopias, “an opening and closing system” (Foucault 1966, 32), supposed here to hold the savages at bay. And again, when Polly Gray, matriarch of the clan, adds: “So, this is the plan, Thomas? This is the plan. Bullet with a name on it, help from a bunch of savages” (Knight 2017, 9’52”). This expresses a self-fetishization which English “Gypsy” Traveller writer Damian Le Bas is aware of:

[...] artists often fetishize certain things about Gypsy and Traveller culture [...] I can’t help but take a slightly wry view of it because I feel like we often fetishize the same things ourselves when it suits us. We’re drawn to the same semi-unrealistic images of ourselves as other artists [...] I’ve found that interplay within myself quite interesting (Le Bas 2022, 0’44”).

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), or Paul Gilroy (1956–) have all tried to understand the concept of double-consciousness and “what it meant to be a minority group within a majority culture” (Rutledge 2003, 14). Are “Gypsy” Travellers systematically:

- [...] born with a veil [...] in this [...] world [...] a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (Du Bois 1903, 8).

Like Black history, the history of the “Gypsy” Travellers seems to be made of “two unreconciled strivings; Two warring ideals [...] whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self” (Du Bois 1897). What is the role of the mythologist and what should be done to help reconcile these two selves?

## Discussion and Conclusion

The persistence of the imagery of the “Gypsies” (and Travellers) of fiction is extraordinary. For instance, four centuries after the monstrous Caliban took the stage, and Ben Jonson depicted their metamorphosis, they still are portrayed as freaks, such as Irish Traveller Brackets Sonaghan (Corbett 2013, 36). (See above about the confusion in the myths between “Gypsy” and non-“Gypsy” Travellers, and the superposition of two counter-spaces: Gypsyland and “Tinkerdom”.)

He lit up another cigarette and smoked it quiet to himself, sipping slow the xeres and his eyes squinting. [...]. When it was midnight and Brackets was drunk and relaxed they done something terrible to him. They put the pitch cap on him and Brackets was in agony. They put him on one of their horses and the lord’s friend took Brackets’ horse and they followed in behind Brackets whose head was on fire. The horse Brackets was on knew the way back to the city and the lads were behind shouting and whooping and following this ball on fire that was Brackets. But when Brackets’ horse got near the city the fire went out and Brackets was able to concentrate on his horse not his head. He was able to turn the horse into a field and the men went on straight didn’t know where Brackets had went. Poor old Brackets fell off the horse and he cooled his head in the swamp that was in the field. When he woke up the next morning he seen that in the field was a fair being set up, all the tents, the ovens cooking the chickens. The people in the fair they took pity on him because his head was black. A man with a tent said he would give Brackets a cut if sat in the tent and let the people come in and looked at him (Corbett 2013, 36).

Or, like Kusturica’s *Gypsies*, they are consistently considered to be living “on the edge of modern life”<sup>[11]</sup>: Hancock has traced the manner in which fundamental errors originating with Grellmann have been transmitted through successive writers. He notes that two centuries after Grellman’s assertion that “Gypsies” had “no care about futurity” (1783, 68) and “pass[ed] through every day lively and satisfied” (*Ibid.*), Stewart, an anthropologist who studied Romanies in Hungary, assumes that:

For the Gypsies there is no angel of history, nor is there a past to be redeemed. They live with their gaze fixed on a permanent present that is always a becoming, a timeless now in which their continued existence as Rom is all that counts (1997, 246) (Lee 2000, 137).

Through various “substrates” (Durkheim 1893, cited in Engel 2015, 95), fictional *Gypsies*, living somewhat outside of history, in a temporal no-man’s-(Gypsy)-land, have become stock characters who seems to have replaced their counterparts of the real world. Deborah Epstein Nord speaks of a “dissociation” (Nord 2006, 15), whereas Frances Timbers speaks of a “disconnect” (Timbers 2016, 5). “A prestidigitation took place, which turned reality upside down [...] The function of myth is to evacuate reality [...] It is an evaporation” (Barthes 2010, 240). Their history has been stolen and replaced by a “pseudo-history”

11 *Time of the Gypsies*, “trailer”, 0’25”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cyBXPMurJY>.

(Timbers 2016, 145). Habits (like the “gypsy” mask”) and beliefs die hard. To avoid the prestidigitation that has replaced the history of “Gypsy” Travellers with myths, one can only encourage giving voice to these communities, opportunities for self-representation, as suggested by Ronald Lee:

When he died, the last link with the Gypsy past would go with him except for the manuscripts of folklore, laws, customs and traditions that I had documented. Nobody wanted it here. It was biased, but it might come in handy soon in Europe to light the fire as non-Gypsy authors wrote books telling all about the Gypsies they had never met (Lee 1971, 134).

Indeed:

Although no absolute line can be drawn between mythology and history, it is fair to say that, without history, mythology is allowed to stand in for the written record. In the case of the Gypsies, the absence of writing – especially by the Gypsies themselves – feeds the dominance of the myth in the representation and understanding of Romany existence (Nord 2006, 173).

Thus, an efficient option would be to encourage general audiences to read “Gypsy” Travellers’ autobiographies or semi-autobiographic narratives written by “Gypsy” Travellers, for the most part (but not always) easily purchased or borrowed from local libraries. Let us mention, for example, *Goddam Gypsy* (Ronald Lee 1971); *The Horse of Selene* (Juanita Casey 1971); *Traveller: An Autobiography* (Nan Joyce 1985); *The Last of the Tinsmiths: The Life of Willie McPhee* (Sheila Douglas 2006); *Gypsy Boy* (Mickey Walsh 2010); *Gypsy Boy on the Run* (Mickey Walsh 2011); *Gypsy Princess* (Violet Cannon 2011); or *The Stopping Places* (Damian Le Bas 2018). Recently, Scotland-based and Romanian-born Romani writer Madeline Potter published *The Roma: A Travelling History* (2025). The book was praised by the *Travellers Times* as, “A unique blend of memoir, travelogue and history of an othered and misunderstood people – and a celebration of resistance and resilience” (*Travellers Times* 2025). Yaron Matras described it as, “A book that will inspire and inform. Potter helps us absorb the atmosphere of Romani communities through the stories of prominent Romani individuals sharing engaging and illuminating experience that spans different places and times and offers insights into culture and history” (*Travellers Times* 2025). Or else mythology will always prevail, and “Gypsy” Travellers will always be “[...] stuck in representational limbo, a literary or mythic place unconnected to history or geography, [and remain] in some fundamental way primitive or atavistic” (Nord 2006, 122). Nord then goes on to quote Welsh poet Arthur Symons (1865–1945), who represents the “Gypsies” “as people moved by pure instinct: they live by ‘rote and by faith and by tradition,’ and they remain unchanged and untouched by history or by ‘us’” (Nord 136). Folklorists contributed to the establishment of a “pseudo-history” of the “Gypsies” by lack of a critical attitude towards traditional literature that had been written about the Gypsies:

Whether drawing on popular conceptions of gypsies or inventing a new category of vagabond, rogue literature cemented the stereotype of the gypsy figure. Building on the categories of vagrants, which were a major concern in the late Middle Ages, authors of rogue and cony-catching pamphlets elided the distinction between vagabonds and gypsies. Legendary leaders and a hierarchical organization combined to create the concepts of a dangerous fraternity [...] Not only did this affect the understanding of the gypsy in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries,

but much of the material from rogue literature was accepted at face value by the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries gypsologists and folklorists, who laid the foundation for the history of gypsies (Timbers 2016, 152).

Artists may be the first to blame for this prestidigitation, always favouring the “gypsy” mask”, but it is also the case for journalists:

He'd just done a story on me [...] he handed it to me. He had taken his usual colorful approach. I'd be lucky to get a job washing dishes in Canada after this thing was published. Yanko, the drunken hard-fisted Gypsy intellectual, stood portrayed in all of his barbaric sensitivity (Lee 1971, 234).

Efforts should be made in the field of education of the general public. Ireland recently announced that Traveller culture soon would enter the school curriculum. Indeed, the “collective work” which helped establish the “gypsy” mask” in the collective consciousness has not only been the work of artists but also the work of the general population:

The general population also contributed to the construction of the identity of the gypsies. The public recognized the group's distinct nature, but reconfigured gypsies predominantly as fortune-tellers and entertainers. A disconnect developed between the stereotype of the dangerous pickpocket and thief and the traveler who offered a variety of services to the countryside. In both instances, gypsies were constructed as marginal members of society, which granted them characteristics that were in opposition to ideal Englishness. In general, they were viewed as an occult and dangerous fraternity of vagabonds (Timbers 2016, 5).

An ironical stance on this theft of history was recently displayed in the *gadjology* section of the Barvalo exhibition in Marseilles, imagining a “Gadjolorism” of sorts, that is, the construction of the *gadjo* identity by the *Gypsies*. Cultural institutions have a critical role to play. A “*Gypsy*, Roma and Traveller celebration” takes place in June 2025 at Manchester Factory International. The Museum of Fine Arts in Besançon, France, will host an exhibition about Austrian Romani artist Ceija Stojka (1933–2013) in 2026.

Yet, one can wonder: is exposing myths a way to deconstruct or to reproduce them, by repeating them, thus taking the risk to add yet more lines on the vast book of the “fake” history/History of the *Gypsies*? What is the mythologist's role?

The lasting power of discourses reminds one of the sociality of texts that socio-criticism tried to theorize:

It is in their aesthetical specificity, the value dimension of texts, that socio-criticism endeavours to read the presence of texts in the world, which it names sociality.

*C'est dans la spécificité esthétique même, la dimension valeur des textes, que la sociocritique s'efforce de lire cette présence des œuvres au monde qu'elle appelle la socialité.*

(Popovic 2014, 153)

Between the lines lies a photograph of the period and society that allowed such a discourse to see the light of day. There is a possibility of a shared responsibility of the artists and the consumers of artistic products, who are “consumers of myths” (Barthes 2010, 234). In any case, it is important to be aware of the power of literature and arts in general, which are not autonomous but have an impact on reality through imagination and language, possibly fostering mechanisms of exclusion and oppression (Haupt 2023, 17–18). Is it possible, as Frantz Boas (1858–1942), put it, that “mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments” (Boas 1898, 18)? When authors and directors find themselves outside of the mythologizing tradition, are they offering a permanent reversal, a revenge of sorts against the age-old fetishization of *Gypsies*? The “Gypsy” characters who are invested by their creators with the power to escape their traditional Gypsylands or “Gypsy” heterotopias are all driven by revenge against injustice perpetuated by *gadjos* (Meg Merrilies, Heathcliff, Hester Swane, Thomas Shelby), becoming sympathetic villains. Or is it a “mere temporary suspension [...] of hierarchical rank” (Jenks 2003, 165), in the manner of a carnival or a fair? As Johnny Dogs puts it about Thomas Shelby, are the fictional “Gypsies” “the wild Gypsy boy[s] [...] forever” (Knight 2017, 54’12”), or do these outstanding characters embody a lasting renewal of representations?



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