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Roma Art as Postcolonial *Contact Zone*: Re-Enchanting the World by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas

Abstract

This essay presents analysis of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas's work *Re-Enchanting the World*, presented in the Polish pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2022. As an interpretative tool it uses the term "contact zone", created by Mary Louise Pratt, to describe the hybridity of post-colonial culture. Like post-colonial art, contemporary Roma art also makes use of visual and textual images of people called "Gypsies" produced by European ethnologists and historians in the 18th and 19th centuries. This gesture of transformation is characterised by a critical perspective and an intention to restore the subjectivity of the people affected by this image. By way of comparison, the essay presents an example of current conceptualisations of the history of Romani literature, in which the heritage of "Gypsy studies" is uncritically acknowledged as the historical heritage of the Roma.

1. Introduction: *Contact Zone* in Postcolonial and Romani Studies

In her monograph *Imperial Eyes: Travel Literature and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt demonstrated how the writings of European travelers from the mid-18th-century onward produced images of remote parts of the world in order to neutralize the processes of colonization. According to Pratt, transformations in travel writing intersected with other forms of knowledge and expression and were correlated with shifts in capitalist economy (Pratt 2008, 5). Pratt was also interested in how the peripheries responded to this narrative as well as in discourses that emerged from this dialogue.

The global travelogue colonial discourse and the local ways in which it is absorbed resemble the forms of representation that Western European culture produced for local communities of people called "Gypsies". Just as the colonial discourse was enmeshed with the dynamics of capital-

ism, the discourse of “Gypsy Studies”, which portrayed Roma people on the margins of mainstream society, was linked to the emergence of a modern model of citizenship (Lucassen 1996). Grounded in the modern European perspective, the colonial discourse resembled a complex trend of describing the “Gypsy” community, which emerged at the end of the 18th century and became a multi-contextual and dynamic response to political changes in Europe. This complex system of knowledge, together with the network of its distribution in universities, scientific societies, journals, as well as in the press and literature, is—in many respects—analogue to Edward Said’s construct of Orientalism by virtue of its binary formation, interdisciplinary approach, and scholarly authority (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007, 153).

The contemporary and past situation of Roma communities has been frequently analyzed with postcolonial tools. It has been mentioned in migrant studies (Kostka 2019), art history (Junghaus 2013), literary studies (Toninato 2020) (Kledzik 2023), sociology (Kocze, Nidhi 2009), and anthropology (McGarry 2017). Roma communities in different parts of the world are believed to have been victims of the same forms of exclusion/representation as people of different skin color, former slaves, or their descendants. However, the discursive and institutional underpinnings that have historically legitimized the process of excluding Roma people from civic societies in order to then offer a method of reintegrating them on condition of adherence to a particular social pedagogy, have not yet received critical attention on the same level as colonial discourse. At the same time, the mechanism of discursive construction of “Gypsy” culture and the image of the “Gypsy” in European culture as a hermetic phenomenon have been comprehensively described in imagological works analyzing exoticized portraits of “Gypsy” men and women (Bogdal 2010) (Brittnacher 2012). However, in my view, a comparative analysis of the construct of “Gypsy culture”, as a counterpart to the orientalizing account of the inhabitants of the colonies, makes it possible to see post-colonial practices in contemporary Romani art, in which two essentialisms—of colonial oppression and of anti-colonial resistance—meet and intertwine (Silverman 2022).

In *Imperial Eyes* Mary Louise Pratt devoted a monograph to this very phenomenon: the clash between the colonial narrative and its transformation by the subaltern. The researcher was interested in “transculturation”, or, in her definition, the way conquered or marginalized populations select and transform patterns that the dominant or metro-

politan culture has transmitted to them. Although these communities are unable to “control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying degrees, what they absorb into their own, and what they use of it” (Pratt 2008, 6). This encounter between colonial discourse and its re-writing by those affected by that discourse occurs, as Pratt writes, in the “contact zone”, which makes it possible to assimilate, process, respond to or reject the image of the colonized. The “contact zone” is defined as:

Space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other, and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. (Pratt 2008, 6)

Pratt’s notion of the “contact zone” captures the way in which the conquering and the conquered are shaped by their mutual relationships. Paola Toninato has applied this concept to Romani studies and defined it as: “the border zone where Romani and non-Romani languages and cultures come into contact” (Toninato 2020, 171). In my perspective this is also a space of intertwined “Gypsy Studies” and contemporary Roma discourses. In the postcolonial perspective, the “contact zone” becomes not only an area of mutual exchange and translation, but also an area where colonial and anticolonial discourses become visible and sometimes deconstructed.

Both aspects of the “contact zone”—a fusion of the Romani and non-Romani worlds and intertwining the colonial, exotising discourse of “Gypsy studies” with intimate microhistory—are present within Małgorzata Mirga-Tas’s exhibition *Re-Enchanting the World*, presented at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas is a Polish-Roma artist who in various ways plays with colonial discourse by deconstructing and transforming it into a narrative affirming her local Roma community. Her artistic idiom, particularly the work presented at the Biennale, is a particular kind of Romani, post-colonial rewriting, which also reflects the shift of emphasis that often appears in post-colonial works from the global/national/ethnic (generalizing in multiple ways) to the local/private. She also shows which elements from the complex knowledge system of “Gypsy studies” can be accepted by the Roma artist and under which conditions.

Re-Enchanting the World also carries other meanings: the title of the exhibition is a reference to Silvia Federici’s work with the same title, *Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Fed-

erici 2018). Federici, in criticizing the world of global capitalism, affirms relationships between women; she thereby endorses collaborative work as alternatives to the economic world, as well as a project of society without hierarchies and divisions between the space of nature and culture and of building ties with all Others, including animals, plants, and inanimate matter. This element of equality, pacifism, and working together is important to the private story told by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas. It also echoes the philosophy behind the creation of her works, which are produced collectively, in a female, family community.

The composition of Mirga-Tas's Venice exhibit was inspired by Renaissance frescoes by Francesco dell Cossa and other 15th-century painters from the school of Cosmè Tura from the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara (cf. illustration 1).

Mirga-Tas reproduced the interior of this palace's famous Hall of Months using patchwork tapestries. This added a new interpretive context to her work, one related to the universality of the European representation of the Roma, and its timeless and transnational character. In Mirga-Tas's artwork, which is modeled on the tripartite design of the frescoes, the tapestries in the lower section tell her family history; the middle section shows women involved in Roma emancipatory movement and symbols of the zodiac signs; and the top section is a reworking of etchings of "Gypsies" by the 17th-century artist Jacques Callot (cf. illustration 2).

The postcolonial "contact zone" becomes visible between the upper and lower sections of Mirga-Tas's work. In the former, the artist used canonical scenes from the lives of the people called "Gypsies" based on Callot's sketches, characteristic of the pre-modern portrayal of these people as known from late medieval city chronicles and Renaissance painting. In turn, the lower section of the frescoes shows images from the lives of Roma and non-Roma relatives of Mirga-Tas. These are scenes from her family home in Czarna Góra. They depict mainly women, their common activities, and their working together. Scenes from daily life of residents of Czarna Góra are contemporary, but also date from the past: for example, the one showing a potato harvest. Some of them coincide with Callot's prints: for example, the scene of a card game.

Below, I will try to characterize the specifics of the "contact zone" between the colonial discourse of "Gypsy Studies" and the artist's family microhistory. I will place this dialogue in the broader context of the contemporary reception of "Gypsy Studies".



Ill. 1: Hall of the Months, Museo Schifanoia, Ferrara, courtesy Musei di Arte Antica di Ferrara. Photo: Daniel Rumiancew



Ill. 2: Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Re-enchanting the World (March), 2022, textile installation (fragment), 462 x 387 cm. Photo: Daniel Rumiancew. Courtesy of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas

2. The Colonial Model of “Gypsy Culture” Reused in the Work of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas

As recognized by art historians, the image of people called “Gypsies” in Western art has been subject to numerous deconstructions by contemporary Roma artists (van Baar 2020), (Junghaus 2013), (Weyhert-Waluszko 2013). Their focus is mainly on the ethnographic status of the art produced by Roma artists, resulting from it being seen in line with colonial discourse: anything “Gypsy” becomes equated with being naïve and premodern.

As it was in the case of colonial discourse, the image of the “Gypsy”, since 17th century simultaneously produced and consolidated by Western literature and visual arts, had its scientific underpinnings. The first to bring attention to the problematic notion of “the true Gypsy” constructed by early ethnographers, historians, and anthropologists was Thomas Acton. Published in 1974, his book *Gypsy Politics and Social Change* marked the beginning of a criticism of “Gypsy Studies” and an important cornerstone of Roma political activism. Acton suggested that the Gypsy Lore Society, founded in Liverpool in 1888, was the flagship model of the ideology of “the true Gypsy”. He named several interconnected elements as the most important features of this academic construct that Gypsy Lore created and promoted:

- Origins in India. This foundational thesis for traditional “Gypsy Studies” was first advanced in the late 18th century based on a selective comparative analysis of the Hindustani language and the language of the Hungarian Roma (see also: Willems 1997). All other features of “true Gypsy” identity were based on the idea that “Gypsies” are a non-European community, and therefore their culture should be defined in opposition to European cultures.
- Cultural hermeticism. According to Gypsy Lore scholars, “oriental” origins implied that ethnic homogeneity was preserved only under restrictive conditions. “True Gypsy” culture was accessible to a few outsiders who were ready to confront its otherness and able to win the trust of people called “Gypsies”. “Gypsy” discourse in English, for example, called such people “Romani Rye”, following the title of George Borrow’s trendsetting series of books from the mid-19th century.
- Exotic customs, resulting from non-European origins. “Gypsy” cultural rituals related to the taboos of sexuality and death were of particular interest to scholars of “Gypsy Studies”.

- Nomadic lifestyle and the reluctance to establish lasting ties with the land and majority society. (Acton 1974, 87–93)

Nomadism was the most important element, aside from Indian ancestry, in shaping how “Gypsy” people presumably differed from European national societies. It was used to explain a number of other properties of “Gypsy culture”, for example, its oral character and lack of historical memory. In particular, these two factors—the lack of written records and the lack of memory of the past—were counterpoints to the curriculum of philology studies emerging in European universities at the end of the 19th century. The dogma of “Gypsy nomadism” was based on another important assumption: that only natural space, i.e., located away from modernized areas, is the place where “Gypsy culture” can fully manifest itself. If “Gypsy people” were to be removed from this space and placed in another, modern one, this culture would disappear.

While stressing the exotic and uncivilized nature of “Gypsy people”, “Gypsy Studies” sanctioned the practice of portraying them in circumstances that Western European discourse associated with depicting other species, that is, visually, presenting their anonymous portraits to make anthropological features and unusual clothing visible. “Gypsies” were presented performing physiological activities or with the intent of disclosing their instinctive (so-deemed “irrational”) lifestyle. Literature and early folk studies stressed their ability to communicate with the world of nature, which was lost in settled societies but attributed to the “Gypsies” portrayed as speaking the “language of animals” or possessing the ability to control the weather (Brittnacher 2012). Additionally, the artifacts of “Gypsy” folk culture that were produced or co-produced by “Gypsy Studies”, especially “Gypsy” songs and legends, depicted “Gypsy” people in a natural setting, and thereby functioned as evidence of their close relationship with nature.

The combination of features and ways of portraying the community of people called “Gypsies” since the Enlightenment often relied on gossip, anecdote, or counterfeit evidence. This has been the case since the first early ethnographic work on the subject, still a source of direct or indirect references today: the treatise by Heinrich Moritz Gottlieb Grellman entitled *Die Zigeuner. Ein historischer Versuch über die Lebensart und Verfassung* (English title: *Dissertation on the Gipsies: being an historical enquiry, concerning the manner of life, family economy, customs and conditions of these people in Europe, and their origin*), published in 1783

in Göttingen. In the spirit of Enlightenment democratism, its author deliberately linked the colonial process with his work on “Gypsy people”. He wrote that, while Europeans were bearing the burden of civilizing peoples outside their continent, they were overlooking a local, neglected group with similar needs:

We send Apostles to the East and West, into the most distant parts of the Earth; and, as will be shown below, into the very country, to the brethren of the Gipsies [sic!], in order to instruct the people who know not God. It is not inconsistent, for men to be solicitous for those who are without, and to throw off and leave to chance those, who, equally wretched, have brought their errors home to us. (Grellmann 1783, 80–81)

Grellman’s work opened with a lecture on the reasons why European societies used different terms to refer to “Gypsies”. This part constituted a homogenous, unified “Gypsy” subject of scholarly discussion. It was crucial for Enlightenment scholars to determine to what extent “Gypsy identity” constituted a racial phenomenon, that is, to what extent “Gypsy people” should be treated as biologically determined, according to the ideas of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a researcher of racial differences who collaborated with Grellmann (Blumenbach 1793). Therefore, the subject was then further clarified by a physiognomic description, harking back to craniological research. Grellmann closed the section on the differences between “Gypsies” and the majority society with a detailed account of customs related to food, drink, marriage, education, illness, death, burial, ancestry and language, the “Gypsies” path to Europe, and their place in European history. The conclusion of Grellmann’s dissertation provides a commentary on the assimilationist policies of Empress Maria Theresa and Emperor Joseph II, which were enforced with uneven consistency against “Gypsies” in parts of the Habsburg Empire in the second half of the 18th century.

Much like in other portrayals of colonial Africa, South America, and other areas that were targets of European imperialism Grellmann looked at the people called “Gypsies” as if he were a designer of modern civil society. A scholar educated by an Enlightenment liberal university (Willem 1997, 34–35), he was interested in the possibilities of creating a system that would constitute a community of people of all classes. For this reason, the passage on physiognomy and the “Gypsy race” is central to his work. It typifies the representative colonial link between skin color and the predestination to be “savage”, which in turn created the need for European interference. Black skin—evoking associations with

the inhabitants of overseas colonies—was, on the one hand, proof of the non-European origin of the group he studied, while on the other—in view of Enlightenment pedagogical thought—it was shown to be impermanent, a consequence of neglect, possibly even seen as repulsive: “Their dark brown or olive colored skin with their white teeth appearing between their red lips, may be a disgusting sight to an European, unaccustomed to see such pictures” (Grellmann 1783, 10). However, the color was a simple result of poor hygiene, according to Grellmann, and not an intrinsic biological trait. The effective protection and nurture of the modern state, which should take care of those whom earlier regimes had neglected and exiled to the margins of civilized society, had the positive outcome, in Grellmann’s view, of producing useful citizens who were indistinguishable, for instance by their appearance, from other members of the community:

Experience also shows us that it is more education and manner of life, than descent, which has propagated this black colour of the Gipsies, from generation to generation. Among those who possess music in Hungary, or serve in the Imperial army, where they have learnt to pay more attention to order and cleanliness, there are many to be found, whose extraction is not at all discernible in their color. (Grellmann 1783, 10)

The resemblance of “Gypsies” as described by Grellmann to the inhabitants of areas colonized by Europeans was not limited to skin color. It also encompassed such important characteristics as absence of religious beliefs, impulsive behavior, exotic customs, and appearance used by European visual arts of the 17th and 18th centuries to create picturesque landscapes (Toninato 2020).

Grellmann’s work had already been a publishing success by the end of the 18th century, and was soon translated into English, Dutch and French. In “Gypsy Studies” in the centuries that followed, it was deemed a rudimentary source of knowledge about the history, customs, and language of the people called “Gypsies”. Not only was the information in Grellmann’s book widely quoted, copied, and adapted, but also its structure was applied in similar cross-sectional “Gypsy Studies” books, also written in the 20th century. Grellmann and his many followers established “Gypsies” as a homogeneous group with common physiognomic features and customs and a common history.

As shown by Wim Willems in his groundbreaking work *It the Search of the “True Gypsy”*, Grellmann had almost no contact with people called “Gypsies”, and his knowledge of them came from anecdotes, press ar-

ticles, fiction, and visual art (Willems 1997, 61–65). In the mid-18th-century, the western European image of the “Gypsy” was shaped by such works as *La gitanilla* by Miguel de Cervantes, *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding, and the stories about the famous robber Cartouche (Bogdal 2011, 122–123). In the visual arts, however, creations by Caravaggio, Georges de la Tour, Francisco Goya, and Jacques Callot were influential in shaping the image of the “Gypsy”.

Les Bohémiens or *La Vie des Egyptiens* by Jacques Callot, a series of four etchings dating back to the 30s of the 17th century, present four scenes from the lives of people called “Gypsies”: the passage, the feast, the avant-garde of the march, and the stopover (the fortunetellers). Enlightenment scholar Heinrich Grellmann did not refer directly to Callot’s work, but in his influential monograph he replicated many of the elements highlighted in it as “Gypsy”: theft and divination, exotic appearance and dress, lack of hygiene, life on the road, non-European ancestry. As an aside, it should be added that the theory developed by Grellman about the origin of “Gypsies” from the Indian Peninsula was formulated in opposition to the thesis reproduced by Callot about their Egyptian ethnogenesis.

The two etchings presenting marching people show figures of men, women, and children dressed in fine, bizarre, long coats and large hats



Ill. 3: Jacques Callot, *Les Bohémiens* or *La Vie des Egyptiens*, fragm. [*Le Halte des Bohémiens: Les Apprêts du Festin*], District Museum, Tarnów, Poland, public domain.

with fluffy feathers. They walk or ride on horseback, carrying weapons, vats, baskets and other items. They are accompanied by animals. The etching depicting a stopping place shows people eating meat roasted over a campfire, playing cards, and repairing damaged clothing. A woman, who is visibly pregnant in an etching depicting the march, gives birth under a tree, assisted by a group of female companions.

The last etching shows a stop at a roadside inn: some of the members of the “Gypsy” group break into the building, some of them escape from the owner chasing them with a stick. Women are presented as fortune-telling to other guests of the inn.

All four etchings have been provided with rhymed distiches that draw the viewer’s attention to the characteristic elements of “Gypsy life”:

These poor beggars, rich in fortunes, have nothing with them but things to come.
 They are not brave emissaries who wander in foreign lands.
 You who take pleasure in their words, guard your people, your money and your guns.
 At the end of the road they find their destiny, that they have come from Egypt to this feast.

Callot’s works, from their early reception, were perceived as a realistic record, based on the actual experiences of the artist, who as a 12-year-old presumably ran away to the “Gypsies” and spent some time with them (Sullivan 1977). The realistic reception of Callot’s prints was also influenced by their 19th-century reception. Walter Scott used ekphrasis to describe one of them in his novel *Guy Mannering or: The Astrologer* (1815) (Bogdal 2011, 188) (Brittnacher 2012, 39).

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas has made transformations of Callot’s artwork an important part of her *Re-Enchanting the World*. She selected a number of scenes and then recreated them in the form of large-format tapestries, sewn from colorful materials of varying textures and patterns. She chose details from Callot’s work, depicting walking figures and figures riding horses, a childbirth scene, a meal around a campfire, the skinning of an animal, as well as broader panoramas, such as a break-in at a country inn. Her presentations are not exact reproductions of Callot’s prints: she decided to add some elements but also to omit others. Regardless, the resemblance between the 17th-century prints and her tapestries is clear and recognizable enough to be considered a form of re-writing the classic visual narrative about people called “Gypsies”.

Under Mirga-Tas’s needle, scenes of “Gypsy life” literally and figuratively take on color: they become particular, narrated stories with indi-

vidualized characters. Instead of a wandering and camping crowd, we see distinguishable characters in colorful costumes with visible facial expressions. The hardships of wandering life become clearer: we see that some of the wanderers are not wearing shoes, and that there are children among them who are carried and carted off in various ways. We can more clearly see the emotional ties linking the figures depicted by Callot: a female figure who assists a woman in labor tenderly pulls back her hair; a young mother lovingly wraps her infant in a burlap.

As we read in the catalogue of another Mirga-Tas exhibition, which also includes variations on Callot's works, the artist "processed the portraits of her own ancestors created by non-Roma four hundred years ago" (*Travelling Images* 2022, 223). Thus, in the image of "Gypsy life" produced by Callot she perceived her ancestral history, which she recognized and rewrote in her own way. This intention has also its material aspects: through the materials with which she copied Callot's works. These include fabrics collected in the artist's hometown of Czarna Góra in southern Poland, taken from her closet and the closets of her family members.

In this way she symbolically tamed one of the first proto-ethnological, visual narrations about the Roma, made it dynamic and lively, softened its one-dimensional, exoticizing character, but also humanized it by showing empathy to people depicted in humiliating contexts (e.g. the labor scene). One of the curators of her exhibition, Wojciech Szymanski, wrote that "This reappropriation of ancestral portraits created four hundred years ago is, at the same time, an exercise in identity, the restitution of history and regaining control over contemporary ways of constructing a Romani visual narrative" (Kusek/Szymanski 2022, 66).

Similar to the process of coloring black-and-white photographs, Mirga-Tas's stitching of Callot's works resulted in the scenes he presented being easier to imagine for the modern viewer. Mirga-Tas did not question the whole visual narrative about people called "Gypsies" but drew attention to its hitherto under-emphasized, hidden elements: the beauty and dignity of the marchers, emotional ties between the group members, hardships and joys of life on the road.

A similar style of reception, stressing the realistic character of Callot's visions, is represented in Ethel Brooks' commentary: "In these etchings, Callot depicts four elements of encampment: the search for a stopping place, the work involved in setting up camp, the process of preparing meal at the end of the day, the packing up camp and moving on. Each of these etchings, for me, is about making a home and what I have else-

where called keeping body and soul together. We Romani people have kept body and soul together through our work, our bonds with each other, and our love: from fortune-telling to horse-breeding, recycling and metalwork, we have labored to make our home in the face of violence” (Brooks 2022, 115–116).

Ethel Brooks admits that Callot’s etchings present stereotypical “Gypsy life”, but she wants the viewers to look closer, to see some authentic features of Roma culture, which can be translated into the language of contemporary critical theories: “Romani feminism in the family” (Brooks 2022, 116), “human and non-human connections” (Brooks 2022, 116), “connections within communities, with the place itself and its natural and man-made elements” (Brooks 2022, 116). “Romani women brought fortune-telling to Europe, reading palms and reappropriating the tarot” (Brooks 2022, 122), she says, repeating one of main stereotypical features of the “true Gypsy woman”. In this way, parts of the early modern visual “Gypsy lifestyle” summary by Callot become incorporated into the Roma identity discourse. The elements of the imagined collective identity, which for Callot’s contemporaries and for the author of the sketches himself, gave rise to fear, contempt, and fascination for people called “Gypsies”, in Mirga-Tas’s artwork remain a sign of Roma heritage, but with an opposite, affirmative valuation.

Thus, the artist takes on Grellmann’s Enlightenment narrative of people neglected by state institutions. She looks at these people with compassion and concern—as to her ancestors. Still, one of most important element of the Romani staffage that Mirga-Tas has incorporated is life close to nature, which, according to the Enlightenment Romani scholar Grellmann, was a consequence of exile:

They had been accustomed in their own country to live remote from cities and towns; now they became still more inhabitants of the forests and outcasts, as, in consequence of the search, which was made after them, or at least threatened to be made, they judged themselves to be more secure, in deserts and concealment, than they would have been in frequenting the places of abode and having free intercourse with the civilized inhabitants. (Grellmann 1783, XIV)

This act of appropriation also shows that contemporary Romani art can constitute a platform of dialogue for the communities that have been addressed by the discourse of “Gypsy studies” in different parts of the world. This discourse, similarly to colonial discourse, acts as a normative center. As indicated by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen

Tiffin, the comparatist potential lies in identifying this code, whereby it is possible to study “the effects of colonialism in and between writing in english [sic!] and writing in indigenous languages in such contexts as Africa and India, as well as writing in other language diasporas” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2002, 23).

Re-writing and appropriation of the colonial visual discourse about people called “Gypsies” is also Małgorzata Mirga-Tas’s way of dealing with the conception of world art both as analogous to the Goethenian conception of world literature (Eckermann 1837, 315–330) and as a colonial idea of an ethnographical museum (as opposed to global art) (Davidsson 2017, 3). In one of her exhibitions, *Atlas*, she directly engages in a dialogue with the global, universal vision of “the Gypsy” by showing its three common aspects present in world literature and art: the costume, the hand (fortune-telling), and the picturesqueness (*Travelling Images* 2022, 105–131). In *Wesiune thana* she played with the concept of the ethnological museum as a common place of presenting Roma artefacts (*Travelling Images* 2022, 26). Mirga-Tas analyzed the context in which the houses of Roma blacksmiths relocated from her native village were placed in a Polish ethnographic park. Through her transformations of this exposition, the mechanisms that distinguish ethnographic museums from contemporary art museums became apparent: the former is focused on the past and cultural differences, while the latter exudes progressiveness and community. Modifying the classic ethnographic exhibition, the artist pointed out that Roma art is usually automatically classified as naive, folk, and non-progressive.

3. Including “Gypsy Studies” in Contemporary Romani Studies

As shown above with regard to Mirga-Tas’s tapestries, Romani identity discourse and Romani art, similarly to discourses and arts in other post-colonial cultures, face the challenge of reworking the mainstream knowledge about the people called “Gypsies” regarding their origins, culture, customs, etc. Discussions center on which of the components of “true Gypsiness” developed by “Gypsy Studies” enhance the affirmative self-narration of the community of today’s Roma: whether it is Indian ancestry, a history of expulsion from Western European cities, nomadism, or a special bond with the world of nature.

The need to address this problematic heritage also applies to contemporary Romani Studies, which rarely look to postcolonial studies for inspiration to write a new history of the Roma and their cultural heritage. While art and identity discourse freely dispose of postcolonial tools of hybridization and mimicry, in academic discourse the situation is more complicated. Below, I will give two examples in which the refusal to recognize “Gypsy discourse” as colonial discourse, or the failure to recognize elements of colonial discourse in past narratives about people called “Gypsies”, leads to the reproduction of colonial narratives and skewed scholarly conclusions within Romani Studies.

The first example concerns the synthesis of the history of “Gypsies” on the European continent. Grellmann’s work constructed a historiographical narrative, which has been replicated by “Gypsy Studies”, about the people called “Gypsies”: it brought together information from late medieval city books, which indicated that these people had aroused fear, loathing, and curiosity since their arrival at the gates of Western European cities. This narrative, with references from historical sources, is still replicated today in countless contexts, and treated as a “history of Roma/Gypsy people” rather than a selective reading of medieval sources filtered through Enlightenment state conceptions. In the 19th century it was reproduced and developed by Paul Bataillard (Bataillard 1849), and in the 20th century by Martin Block (Block 1936), Jerzy Ficowski (Ficowski 1953), and Agnus Fraser (Fraser 1992). To this day, many dissertations on the history of Roma begin with a historical section about the arrival of people called “Gypsies” to Europe and their dispersion and persecution in Western Europe. We can still encounter instances when this section is treated as a historiographical synthesis, rather than an Enlightenment construct that theorists of the time used to criticize pre-modern state institutions.

The second example concerns the importance of the folklorist texts collected in the “Gypsy Studies” paradigm for the new history of Roma literature. In the work *Roma Writings. Romani Literature and Press in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe from the 19th Century until World War II*, texts such as translations of the Bible into Roma languages made on commission of evangelical missionaries (Marinov 2021, 43–44), or collections of songs and poems edited by folklorists (Zahova 2021, 13), have been identified with Roma literature and even gained the status of the cornerstone of independent Romani culture. The universalizing assumption of such a literary history is that Romani-language writing

(even produced by scholars of “Gypsy Studies”) is a tool for the emancipation of Roma elites and a document of this process (Zahova 2021, 3).

The identification of the discourse of “Gypsy Studies” with Roma literature/art has only a seemingly affirmative function. It claims to be locating the roots of the latter where the roots of most national literatures lie, namely, in the 19th century. However, this leads to a number of misunderstandings, stemming from a failure to take into account the postcolonial condition of contemporary Roma communities. The narrations that are supposed to be affirmative turn out—from today’s perspective—to be exoticising.

Without taking this into account, the noble intention of restoring agency to the Roma becomes the opposite of itself. A case in point is how *Roma Writings* presents a woman described in the treatises of one of the influential Austro-Hungarian scholars of “Gypsy Studies” in the late 19th century, Heinrich von Wlislöcki. Gina Ranjičić, his alleged “Gypsy wife” and the author of the “Gypsy” songs and fairy tales published by Wlislöcki, as proven by Martin Ruch and Wim Willems, was a persona invented by her mentor (Ruch 1986) (Willems 1997, 182–188). Zahova notes this fact: “There is a lot of uncertainty and doubt about the authenticity of Gina Ranjičić as a personality and as the actual author of the poems attributed to her by Wlislöcki” (Zahova 2021, 13). However, she then goes on to say that:

Undoubted, however, is the fact that references to her are nowadays forming narratives about the first Romani language literary writings. No matter whether she was a real or invented personality and author of these poems, Gina Ranjičić is today considered by many as the world’s first Roma poetess. Her poems in Romani language have been reprinted from the works of Wlislöcki and published in Roma poetry collections (Taikon 1964) and anthologies (Acković 2012), and even in mainstream literary periodicals, as ‘Gypsy poems’ (Birtingur 1966). Roma activists’ writings refer to Ranjičić as the first Roma poetess, and, despite the lack of any documentation of her as a historical figure, the Roma Museum in Belgrade has commissioned for its collection a portrait of Ranjičić that is accompanied by the explanation “this is Gina Ranjičić, the first Roma poetess, in the way we imagine her appearance.” (Zahova 2021, 13)

Wlislöcki’s fabrication was not an isolated incident in the world of Romantic folklorists. The most famous example of such a counterfeit that had a cultural effect was the *Poems of Ossian*, a collection of purportedly medieval Celtic songs created by James Macpherson, which was foundational to British Romantic poetry. The key question, however, is one that flows from a postcolonial standpoint: to whom were Gina Ranjičić’s

Gypsy songs, created by Heinrich von Wlislöcki (Wlislöcki 2020), addressed (and for whose needs were they created)? Their audience was Austro-Hungarian academics and the Western European international Gypsy Lore Society. Thus, Gina Ranjčić and her poetry had been fashioned to fit “Gypsolorist” expectations that its critics briefly referred to as the benchmark of “true Gypsiness”.

Contemporary Romani Studies, aware of the fact that the history of “Gypsy studies” is full of such falsifications and formatting, might look to postcolonial studies in order to critically revise art and literature created under auspices of “authentic Gypsyism”. Academic work, as opposed to art, does not have the possibility to reuse this system of knowledge in any meta-context; it has to either deny it or put it into critical perspective. The story of creating, taking over and reformulating the visual image of people called “Gypsies” can also be told with artistic methods. *Re-Enchanting the World* by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas artistically develops the “Gypsy Studies” heritage in a postcolonial direction.

4. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas’s Work as Postcolonial World Art

In addition to processing some of Callot’s narratives about people called “Gypsies”, there are also postcolonial conclusions from Margaret Mirga-Tas’s work about the (in)possibility of completely rejecting of the criticized orientaling, colonial discourse.

Postcolonial art in general puts emphasis on autobiographical themes, seeking “words and forms to fit their experience” (Boehmer 2005, 217) by underscoring “the need for a lively heterogeneity of styles and speaking positions in their work” (Boehmer 2005, 219). It so often stands against European realism, retrieving “suppressed oral traditions, half-forgotten histories, unrecorded private languages” (Boehmer 2005, 220). Postcolonial art it is a thoroughly hybrid medium, which straddles private histories and local traditions and the colonial narratives.

Contemporary Roma art is part of postcolonial art and world art that is no longer defined in the spirit of a universalist, 19th-century concept consolidating the hegemony of European national societies, but rather as a discourse affirming localness, family histories, and histories of rootedness. In Mirga-Tas’s case, this aspect is revealed in the lower strip of tapestries dedicated to her family hometown Czarna Góra. Sewn using

the same technique as Callot's work transformations, they present scenes from the everyday life of her family and *mise-en-abyme* inserts related to the creation of the exhibition. The scenes depict figures sewing Mirga-Tas's works, women chatting and drinking coffee, hanging laundry, sewing and repairing clothes, playing cards, collecting potatoes, plucking a hen's feathers, and a funeral. These are typical scenes from the life of a Polish rural community, and there is not a trace of the exoticism, strangeness, and otherworldliness so characteristic of Callot's works.

In the case of these scenes, the textiles from which Mirga-Tas's works were fashioned are of particular importance. Taken from the wardrobes of the depicted are "appropriated materials infused with energy" (Warsza 2022, 90), but also mediums of microhistories. The narratives captured on the tapestries not only contradict the stereotype that "Gypsies" are a group devoid of collective memory and uninterested in their own history, but also affirm a history different from that proposed by the broad cadres of imperial discourse, a more human history that speaks of a vision of "an intimate world, full of feelings and values, based on communities of like-minded people" (Domańska 2005, 23).¹ Microhistory as a method is rooted in the attempt to incorporate peripheral or marginal events, figures, and communities into the historical picture.

This is a method suited to the writing of history on the margins, where documentation may be scant. It assumes that the lives and activities of the subaltern classes need not be told in the aggregate, but can be seen (at least some of them) in the particular (...). Microhistorians see this particular focus—the individual, event, or text—as a uniquely situated nodal point of social, political, economic, and ideational forces. In this way, and perhaps most radically, microhistory undermines the model of historical "centres" and "margins" in the first place (Murray 2004, 411).

The compositions of everyday life scenes from Czarna Góra are partially based on the photographs taken by Mirga-Tas's family member and Roma activist Andrzej Mirga. Before becoming an advisor on Roma issues to Polish and international institutions, he studied ethnology at the Jagiellonian University and authored a comprehensive study of the situation of Roma in Poland after the WWII (Mirga 1998). The series of photographs was taken in Czarna Góra in the 70s. Including these pictures into Mirga-Tas's artwork symbolizes regaining control over Roma

¹ "świata intymnego, pełnego uczuć i wartości, który oparty jest na wspólnotach ludzi podobnie czujących"

visibility, which in the form of sketches and photographs legitimized “Gypsy studies” discourse in numerous (proto)ethnographic books. They replace the outside perspective with the internal one of the portrayed community, thereby fulfilling one of the postulates of postcolonial poetics (Buckley 2005).

In Roma aesthetics, as a type of a postcolonial aesthetics, the search for one’s own identity becomes another example of local knowledge (Geertz 1983). In the postcolonial world, locality does not cease to exist, but becomes an important strategy of resistance not only against a homogenous image of the “Gypsy” but also against globalization. Reformulations of the concept of world literature towards the affirmation of localness and deconstruction of the literary canon lead in the same direction. Mirga-Tas, creating frescoes for her own Renaissance palace, not only captured scenes from the life of the local Roma community from the village of Czarna Gora. In compliance with the rules of postcolonial aesthetics, she also included in them an element of untranslatable otherness (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2002, 236). Such an element in postcolonial literature usually manifests itself in language, its orality, non-obvious linguistic constructions, and incomprehensible formulations (Bassnett 2006). A viewer from the majority culture has a sense of incomplete understanding and uncertainty, while one from the former subaltern culture feels that their language and culture are institutionalized. Roma recipients of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas’s art, confirming a similar procedure performed by the artist, testified that her works contain elements legible to those immersed in the culture of Małgorzata Mirga-Tas’s community, incomprehensible and invisible to viewers functioning in (for example, Polish) majority culture.

Given the artist’s Polish and Roma identity, the significance of Mirga-Tas’s Venice exhibition goes beyond the concept of a national pavilion and continues previous projects concerned with the visibility of the Roma at the Venice Biennale and, symbolically, in the international arena of contemporary art. The most important of these was the Primo Padiglione Roma project from the 52nd Biennale in 2007 titled *Paradise Lost* and curated by Tímea Junghaus (Wagner 2007). The “paradise lost” in question meant a confrontation with the Enlightenment idyllic image of “Gypsy life” as a modern utopia. This utopia, as I have tried to show above, applied not only to the people called “Gypsies”, but also to non-European communities subject to the processes of colonization as European colonialism and imperialism were advancing. Change in

colonial discourse shifted to “Europeanizing” the conquered areas and communities, that is, to “civilizing” them. Some elements of this utopia included different strategies of orientalizing and exoticization of the Other, whose iconic symbols (such as colorful costumes, fortunetelling props, etc.) became “rewritten”, in the works presented in the pavilion. The essential message of the 2007 Roma pavilion was a critique of nation-centric art, taking place through and by means of transnational Roma community. The project was thus a unique way of capturing Roma identity: as simultaneously homogeneous and diverse, progressive and essentializing. *Re-Enchanting the World*, the exhibition held in the Polish pavilion, also proved that there is room for such projects in the once nation-centric space.

5. Conclusion. Mirga-Tas and Postcolonial *Contact Zone*

Elke Boehmer writes that the goal of postcolonial writing, on the one hand, is “the emphasis on historical reconstruction; the ethical imperative of reconciliation with the past” (Boehmer 2005, 221). On the other hand, as Boehmer notes, indigenous writers “see themselves as still-colonized, always-invaded, never free of a history of white occupation.” Postcolonial art is “a medium through which self-definition was sought” (Boehmer 2005, 217).

In this essay, I have tried to prove that this postcolonial “contact zone” is a constitutive feature of contemporary artistic Romani discourse and one of the most important characteristics of its aesthetics. I defined postcoloniality as a way of transforming the discourse of “Gypsy Studies” that came into being in the 18th century, which has many common features with the discourse of European colonization. Until now, research has approached the postcoloniality of Romani art as a feature stemming from the post-colonial condition of Romani communities, namely, their centuries-long marginalization and exclusion. However, as I have shown, Romani art mainly results from the typical inability of postcolonial communities to completely reject the orientalizing, exoticizing mode of representation produced by European modernity. As is the case with post-colonial communities, the reworked discourse of “Gypsy Studies” can become an important element of the Roma identity narrative.

The model of “true Gypsiness” created by “Gypsy Studies” was based on a set of traits—an idea reproduced by many scholars, amateurs, and academics—that perpetuated the notion of “Gypsy” otherness and exoticism. That model was persistently used in academic works, popularization works, fiction, and visual arts. Since those traits were constitutive of almost every aspect of “Gypsy life”, they also defined the requirements that “Gypsy art” had to meet, especially various types of folk art. “Gypsy” scholars studied the biographies and works of “Gypsy” folk poets and properly shaped and transformed them to fit the pattern of “true Gypsy” identity.

One should be aware of the research context in which these biographies were created. Referring to the body of knowledge produced by “Gypsy Studies” about the people called “Gypsies” is one of the most important challenges of contemporary Romani art. Postcolonial artists face a similar task as they grapple with a colonial discourse that has been partially assimilated and rewritten by their local communities. This assimilation and transformation take place in the “contact zone”, a space in which a hybrid, dialogic, and heterogeneous postcolonial subject is constituted. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas’s *Re-Enchanting the World*, created for the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2022, is one example of such a “contact zone”. Mirga-Tas has made a multi-level postcolonial rewriting of the etchings of 17th-century artist Jacques Callot, while acknowledging Callot’s story and restoring subjectivity to the characters he depicts and agency to herself as an artist portraying the Roma. Due to the technique used to transform Callot’s work and represent Mirga-Tas’s family history by sewing tapestries from pieces of fabric, the project has autoethnographic potential. As such, it also involves “partial collaboration with an appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror” (Pratt 2008, 7).

Romani contemporary art, as exemplified by the Mirga-Tas’s exhibition, is ready for a critical rewriting of the “Gypsy Studies” paradigm. The legacy of “Gypsy Studies”, still sometimes uncritically incorporated into the framework of current Romani studies, awaits a similar process.

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