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Representing the Romani Self: Trauma in Autobiographical Narratives

Abstract

Romani literature comprises texts produced in different languages, countries, and distinct communities. Recently, it has transitioned from its traditional oral formulation to the written modality. This transition has been connected to an increased participation of Roma in the social sphere and the development of the Romani ethnopolitical agenda. Deconstructing stereotypes and prejudices is one of the tenets of this agenda, and this entails producing new representations of the Romani subject and presenting reasons as to why Roma have been depicting their own experiences and subjectivities in autoreferential texts. Given the history of oppression that Roma have endured, trauma is one of the main themes authors address when considering their own life. This essay explores how trauma was initially represented in autobiographical accounts by a first generation of Romani writers, and continues to be an important subject in contemporary texts. In particular, the analysis will focus on *Gypsy Boy* by Mikey Walsh, and *American Gypsy* by Oksana Marafioti.

1. On Romani Literature and the Process of Self-Representation

As a social process, the making of Romani literature is connected to the expansion of the ethnopolitical movement that has been developed in the last few decades. In this sense, Romani literature could be certainly considered a *resistance literature* (Harlow 1987, xvii), an artistic tool in which Roma review their history of persecution and marginality, as well as their past and present position in the hegemonic order, while looking into their lives and their materiality. Putting forward new and organic depictions of Romani subjectivities and identities is a crucial element in the ethnopolitical agenda, and a prevalent trait in cultural production. In particular, literary practice teems with self-representation through

different literary modalities or genres, such as autobiography/memoirs, testimony and autofiction.[1] This essay focuses on standard autobiography and memoirs; these two genres are very similar, but while the first considers the narrator's life as a whole, the second focuses on a specific period that holds special significance in the narrator's life or in history (Trezise 2013, 25). Testimony is also an autobiographical account, but differs from standard autobiography/memoir due to its writing and compositional process, which will be considered below. In contrast, autofiction is a fictional account with autobiographical components, such as the projection of the author's identity and experiences in the main character. *Goddam Gypsy* (1971) by Ronald Lee (1934–2020) or *Füstös Képek* (1975), translated into English as *The Color of Smoke*, by Menyhért Lakatos (1926–2007), are well known Romani autofictional novels, but analysis of these works exceeds the scope of this work.

This essay opens with an overview of representative Romani autobiographical accounts produced in Western Europe by authors born in the first quarter of the 20th century. These have been considered precursors or fore parents in Romani Literature(s), and their work reveals the transition from oral to written textualities. Subsequently, the analytical second part of this essay will focus on two contemporary autobiographies written by authors born in the last quarter of the 20th century: *Gypsy Boy* (2009) by Mikey Walsh (1980), and *American Gypsy* (2012) by Oksana Marafioti (1974). The selection of these two books adheres to the fact that they offer a new perspective on Romani identity and subjectivity by considering the particular experiences of singular individuals who grew up in the context of the Romani culture. They are not, as previous Romani autobiographical accounts, representations of experiences shared by other members of the community. However, the analysis offered in this essay considers how the narrative of trauma, which is indeed key in Romani literatures, is embedded in these autobiographical accounts.

Autobiographies and memoirs are non-fiction narratives in which the instances of author, narrator, and main character correspond to the same subject. The narrator presents in first person a selection of life experiences organized in a coherent sequence that usually has a departing

[1] This essay is part of the research project "Depicting the Racialized Self: Autobiographical Narratives in Romani Literature(s)", which explores the different types of autobiographical narratives (mainly autobiography/memoir, testimony, and auto-fiction) that Roma have published to date.

point in the past. From there, the narrative goes into the future, often reaching the present, in which author/narrator is located during the writing process. Following Lejeune (1975), autobiographies imply a tacit pact between author and reader. The label "autobiography" simultaneously conveys an understanding of truth and a given horizon of expectations about the narrative. It implicitly guarantees that all depicted events actually took place, and that the narrator/character experienced them firsthand, unless otherwise specified. The pact extends to the characters, presumed portrays of real people the narrator knew. The reader expects to learn about a series of meaningful events in which the main character had an active role or that had an enduring effect on them. However, as a literary genre, autobiography deploys strategies and devices that modify, interpret, or adapt reality. These devices are internalized by the reader, who assumes them as organic to the narrative. An example of this could be the meticulous description of events, feelings, or objects that belong to the narrator's past (sometimes reaching decades back), and that could not be remembered in such detail. In fact, no reader would expect to find in an autobiographical text a representation of the actual memory process, filled with gaps and uncertainty. Furthermore, this remembrance is a fictional process inasmuch as the narrator recreates these memories in their mind, projecting the image they have now of who they were in the past. This image is necessarily informed by the present and by what happened to the narrator before that. The first step of fictionalization in any autobiographical account happens in the mind's eye of the subject who remembers. This remembering is not random but driven by its textual representation. Autobiographies are aesthetic products; creative writing implies a considerable degree of engineering that points out that any autobiographical account presents a fictional dimension (de Man 1979).

As a literary genre autobiography shifted in the 20th century, when marginalized groups appropriated it and, by telling their lives, questioned the principles of domination and authority implicit in traditional autobiographies. These autobiographies by marginalized groups usually offer what appears to be a seamless recollection of the past: a subject looks back into their life and presents it to the reader as a meaningful process. However, this recollection is not a linear process; events and experiences are not simply recalled but selected following a line of reasoning that the narrator (the subject who recalls) is pursuing. This narrative reason is informed by the present, the location from where the author/narrator decides what should be remembered and what not, and what

can be retold not just in the context of the present, but also considering as well who the reader might be. This collection of memories is therefore to be arranged into a sequence that will be translated into a text, adjusting to an aesthetic editing process. Gergen & Gergen point out how narratives of the self are social constructions in which authors attempt to make themselves intelligible (1988, 17–19); this intelligibility is twofold: for the self (narrator) and for the other. Romani autobiographies are unique in the sense that they depict lives that had rarely been written from a perspective of Roma themselves. Implicitly, they are read against a long tradition of representations and narratives that have reduced, stereotyped, and generally misconstrued Roma and their ways of life. This double dimension is well-defined in the autobiographies studied in this essay: narrators explain themselves as Roma, but also as singular individuals with unique experiences, many of them traumatic.

2. Trauma in Romani Autobiographical Narratives (Testimony and Autobiography)

In the context of their traditional oral culture, Roma have produced a rich oral textuality that reflected, among other topics, on traumatic experiences. Trauma is embedded in the Romani cultural and collective memories. The narrative of trauma has been instrumental in educating the new generations about their past in order to understand their present and prepare for their future. The Romani autobiographical accounts that emerged at the end of the 20th century in Western Europe considered in particular the radical trauma inflicted on Roma by the Nazi Holocaust (Grobbel 2003, 142; Blandfort 2013, 111). These works contained information about domestic or cultural practices that highlight the narrator/characters' ethnic identity, which is the very reason of their persecution. These texts sit in a hybrid zone due to their literary, historical, and political quality, but also because they are often a bridge between oral and written textuality. One of the first Romani Holocaust survivors who wrote a memoir about her experiences in the concentration camps was Philomena Franz (1922–2022), whose work was published in 1985 with the title of *Zwischen Liebe und Haß: Ein Zigeunerleben* [Between Love and Hate: A Gypsy Life]. A number of these autobiographical accounts were not written by the authors themselves, and in terms of literary genre, they are not a standard autobiography, but a testimony. For example, this

would be the case of *Das Brennglas* (1998)—translated into English as *A Gypsy in Auschwitz*—by Otto Rosenberg (1927–2001), and of the series of autobiographical works by Ceija Stojka (1933–2013): *Wir Leben im Verborgenen: Erinnerungen einer Rom-Zigeuner* (1988), *Reisende auf dieser Welt: Aus dem Leben einer Rom-Zigeunerin* (1992), and *Träume ich, dass ich lebe? Befreit aus Bergen-Belsen* (2005)—respectively translated into English as *We live in Secrecy: Memoirs of a Romni-Gypsy*; *Travelers in This World: From the Life of a Romni-Gypsy*; and *Am I Dreaming I'm Alive? Liberated from Bergen-Belsen*.

As in standard autobiography, in testimony the narrative is related to life experiences, and the pact of truth is still a given, but the triad author/narrator/main character is compromised by the fact that the author/narrator is not the actual person writing. In testimony there is a collaborator that has a major impact in the articulation and edition of the narrative. This impact is more extensive than any editorial work performed on autobiographies. The life narrative is usually not directly produced by the narrator but conducted in response to a number of questions that the collaborator has crafted beforehand and that follow a particular logic. Therefore, the narrative is somehow directed by these questions that, more often than not, are left out of the final manuscript. The oral narrative is affected by the person who asks and listens in order to register it later, and also by the circumstances in which the exchange happens. At the same time, the collaborator inevitably interprets the oral narrative in the context of their own culture and experience, which are embedded in the written representation. Finally, the manuscript will follow the same process that any other literary product does, adjusting to variables and interests (those of the author, the collaborator, and the publishing house).

There is one last fundamental difference between autobiography and testimony. In the first, authors speak for themselves about themselves. In the case of Romani autobiographies, authors usually consider their ethnic identity within the group to which they belong, but they reflect about very specific experiences they encountered as individuals. The very fact of writing an autobiography conveys a position of authority, and usually these authors are writers that have other publications that are not necessarily autobiographical writings. Conversely, testimonial narrative focuses on events that were common to the group to which the narrator belongs and on behalf of which she is speaking. Sometimes this collec-

tive subject is indicated in the titles, as it is the case of some of Ceija Stojka's writings.

Contemporary to Franz, Rosenberg, and Stojka, French author Mateo Maximoff (1917–1999) wrote about his life as a young adult during the German occupation of France in his memoirs, *Routes sans roulottes* [Roads without caravans] (1993). Maximoff's writing employs a number of strategies that belong to oral textuality, such as abundant use of dialogue, colloquial style or a compositional logic that follows the plot, inserting constant digressions and allusions. This literary practice implicitly confronts many of the precepts that have prevailed in the literary field. Maximoff's work, as other Romani productions from the same period, embodies the notion of resistance literature not only because its content confronts ethnic oppression, but also because it simultaneously defies standards of the canonic literary methodology (Harlow 1987, xvi), such as the sequential organization of content, the selection of a given representation strategy, or a specific literary style depending on the targeted audience, etc., which in turn poses an obstacle for its mainstream publication.

3. The Contact Zone in Ethnic Autobiography

These initial autobiographical works opened the path for younger contemporary Romani writers (born after 1970) that entered the literary field at the inception of the 21st century. These younger authors show a clear interest in representing the diverse, flexible, and complex condition of being Roma, contesting mainstream essentializing representations that still reproduce stereotypes and prejudices. Their work develops solid literary characters whose life experiences are depicted in the context of the Romani cultures (practices, values, and beliefs), cleverly crisscrossing trauma and culture as predominant thematic traits.

This essay explores these new representations of the Romani self through a comparative reading of *Gypsy Boy*[2] *by Mikey Walsh, and American Gypsy*[3] by Oksana Marafioti, published in 2009 and 2012 respectively. At that time, the Romani movement had reached some social

[2] Hereafter GB in all references.

[3] Hereafter AG in all references.

visibility that coincided with a popular interest in Roma and their ways of life. A telling example of this interest was the British show My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding, a one-off production aired in 2010. Its success had it expanded into two series, a number of spin-offs, and an American version, My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding, premiered in 2012. That same year, the American National Geographic channel aired another reality show, American Gypsies, that depicted the domestic practices and customs of a well-established Romani family in New York (Pusca 2015, 340). The representation and content of these reality shows were controversial as they reinforced racial stereotypes and prejudices (Jensen/ Ringrose 2013).

Established publishing houses, such as those behind the editions of *Gypsy Boy* and *American Gypsy*, joined this mainstream curiosity for Roma and offered literary products that targeted a different audience than that of the reality shows. As the title of these two autobiographies suggest, the author/narrator/main character identifies primary as Rom(ni), conveying the ethnic character of their social identity. While these narratives are driven by the authors' ethnic consciousness and depict the new possibilities of being Rom(ni) they also hold ambiguities and conflicts. The very use of the term "Gypsy", avoided among most European Romani groups due to its pejorative connotation, might actually reveal an editorial marketing choice. Publishers might consider it a more recognizable term to English-speaking readers than the more recent, politically chosen notion of "Rom(ni)". Certainly, despite its exoticized and stereotyped connotation, the English word "Gypsy", as the Spanish "Gitano", is not as derogatory as its equivalent in other Central European languages.

Gypsy Boy and *American Gypsy* are both coming-of-age memoirs that depict the narrators conflictual search for identity within the context of the Romani culture. In both cases, the narrators look back at their formative years, considering the impact that their ethnic milieu had on them at the time. Simultaneously, there is a reflection on the effects that their childhood experiences have had on their current subjectivity and identity. During the writing process the narrators are situated outside their original communities and, in that sense, they are positioned in a liminal space from where they look at their original culture with a certain perspective.

In both autobiographical accounts there is an underlying trauma narrative that the narrators resiliently develop through memory work. Still,

the experiences recounted by Walsh and Marafioti are unique, highlighting the heterogeneous condition of the Romani community, or of any other ethnic group for that matter.

Gypsy Boy is a poignant account of the early years of a Romani British boy whose family tradition of bare-knuckle fighting put extraordinary pressure on him. In the very first pages of the book, the narrator establishes the model of masculinity that has ruled in his family for generations and was, therefore, expected from him (GB, 3). His great-grandfather had started to fight when he arrived in England from "Eastern Europe during the Blitz, poverty stricken and homeless" (GB, 3). As a descendant of survivors, Mikey is supposed to be a fighter, literally and figuratively. However, he struggles to conciliate his gentle temperament with what is expected from him as a Romani male. Mikey's father, unable to see his son for whom he is and disappointed at his lack of fighting aptitudes, exerts horrifying physical violence on him. At 12 years old, Mikey distressfully accepts his homosexuality, knowing it would never be accepted by his father or his community (GB, 200). Throughout the book, the narrator places his traumatic experiences within his family practices, which are explained to the non-Roma readership and often ironically questioned.

In Marafioti's *American Gypsy*, the narrator recounts the "metamorphosis" (AG, 9) that took place when she left behind childhood and motherland—the Soviet Union—in order to settle as a young adult in the United States, a country with a different language and culture. Being "Gypsy" for Marafioti comprises her origins and her family's cultural practices, but also the different ways in which she has been perceived depending on her location. In contrast to Mikey Walsh, the narrator in *American Gypsy* is very cautious about revealing some of her traumatic experiences. While she focuses on the distress that she experienced due to the pervasive racial discrimination in the U.S.S.R., the narrative tiptoes around the trauma that alcoholics and negligent parents necessarily bring to their children.

The authors/narrators of these autobiographies recall and write their life experiences using as a framework the set of values, practices, and beliefs of their ethnic group, making the autobiographic account simultaneously an ethnic one. In this sense there is an autoethnographic dimension implicit in both memoirs that is evident in those passages that address rituals, beliefs, traditions, and behaviours that are meaningful to the narrators and their communities, but widely unknown to the vast

majority. Mary Louise Pratt points out that "[i]f ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) other, autoethnographic texts are texts the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations." (2008, 9) Pratt locates the production of these autoethnographic texts within a "contact zone": a shared space in which conflicting cultures clash but nonetheless, coexist and interact (2008, 8). In this sense, literary practices are digging up a "contact zone" in which Romani authors examine their experiences in societies that have historically oppressed Roma but in which they have actively participated.

In *Gypsy Boy*, the narrator opens up his account by pointing out that his family status within the Romani community depends on fighting; their traditional abilities at it have given them a respect they highly value. The very name that was chosen for him was that of his great-grandfather, who made a life out of fighting (GB, 4). It is relevant that Mikey's mother chose a different name for him, Blake, which remains the private name between them. The mother would be Mikey's shield during his childhood, but in a very limited capacity as she was controlled, and also physically abused, by the father. The day they left the hospital after Mikey's birth, he fell to the floor when the basket that carried him broke due to his big size. Years later, the mother told Mikey how he "did not make a sound" (GB, 6) and his silence persisted for several months (GB, 8). This anecdote advances what would be the narrative reason of the book: the manifestation of what Mikey experienced and felt during his childhood but could not verbalize. Mikey's memoirs are a way of voicing his painful truth, both to himself and to others. Through this process, the narrator intrinsically claims his Romani identity by describing the way he and his family lived, including the rites and celebrations they performed, such as weddings (GB, 24–25), funerals (GB, 57–60; 145–148) or family and community reunions (GB, 33–35;); the traits that are specific to the British Romani community, such as fortune telling and trinket selling (GB, 4; 11) or metal scrapping (GB, 102); the dynamic of life in the caravan and on the different campsites (GB, 18–19); and the specificities of the dialect British Roma speak (GB, 85). These cultural elements appear consistently in all kinds of genres within Romani literature, revealing their distinctive ethnic ethos (Martín Sevillano 2020).

Walsh implicitly questions prejudices and stereotypes that affect Roma in England. He repeats that Roma are not poor (GB, 17; 150), a fact that Marafioti also mentions when she refers to her family's wealthy status

in the Soviet Union (AG, 4). He also addresses the stereotype of the "Gypsy thief" with the character of his aunt Minnie, describing her as a "kleptomaniac" (GB, 25). Shoplifting is therefore presented as an individual behavioral problem, and not as an ethnic trait. However, Walsh's description of the Romani community is not always positive, and there is certainly a tension between the insider he was and the outsider he is at the time when he is writing this autobiography. At one point he refers to the rules that govern the duties of young females (menstruating) in the household as well as the behaviour that is expected from them as a "crazy set of customs." (GB, 191) He considers his own sister "a not traditional Gypsy girl" (GB, 187) due to her not adhering strictly to those practices, the same way he could not behave as expected from a Romani boy.

In *American Gypsy*, the narrator looks decades back into her life and assembles a storyline that alternates between two main times and locations: her childhood in the U.S.S.R, and her young adulthood in the U.S.A. The plot sets off in Moscow in the fall of 1989, when the collapse of the Soviet Union is imminent, and Marafioti's parents are obtaining the legal authorization to migrate to the United States of America. This would be the hinge around which the two storylines gravitate.

The following chart visually conveys the relationship established in the book between time and place, and how the ethnic and national identity of the author varies accordingly:

The narrator's viewpoint is that of an adult who considers herself at the time of writing an American-Romani-Armenian as the title of the book partially indicates. The ethnic character of her account is also conveyed

by the two initial epigraphs: a Romani saying ("We are all wanderers on this earth. Our hearts are full of wonder, and our souls are deep with dreams") and an author's note that firmly sets the ethnic content of the book:

Author's note

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

The insertion of these two texts determines the basis of the narrative—the Romani culture—and place the narrator at the heart of the Romani community (indicated by the first-person plural pronoun used in the note). At the same time, these initial texts establish a direction for the narrative, conveying that it only integrates those events and experiences that match with this Romani viewpoint.

Marafioti's childhood memories revolve around her extended Romani family. Her paternal grandfather, a musician, successfully operated for decades a musical ensemble that was a family enterprise: Marafioti's father was one of its musicians, her paternal grandmother was the leading singer—despite not being Roma—and her own mother, an Armenian, took care of its administration. Music, dance, and performing arts are outstanding elements of Romani culture that explain the stereotype that have reduced Roma to musicians. In particular, for Marafioti these cultural practices are the context of many of her childhood experiences. Additionally, the narrative presents other cultural themes, such as food (AG, 41–44) and traditions (AG, 50–51; 71), that frame the narrator's memories within the Romani culture. Still, the Romani heritage is not the only one that shapes the narrator's subjectivity and identity, as her Armenian heritage is also connected to her childhood memories. Marafioti links both cultures, highlighting their similarities (AG, 92–93), and the fact that they have a common history (AG, 107).

The insertion of these cultural details generates the "contact zone"; this information would not be necessary if the implicit reader belonged to the Romani community. Getting to know the culture from the inside allows the possibility of a new point of view, informed by the knowledge and empathy that derives from the first-person account, which facilitates an identification between the reader and narrator/main character.

4. Trauma, New Subjectivities, and Double Consciousness

Departing from Pratt's notion of the "contact zone" and building on Lev Vygotsky's educational theory, it is possible to read these autobiographies as tools for cultural mediation: "the process through which the social and the individual mutually shape each other" (Vygotsky, in: Daniels 2015, 34). Vygotsky considers literature a mediator of human experience; being literary texts makes them symbolic tools that enable learning and cognitive development (Vygotsky, in: Kozulin 1998, 132; and in: Wertsch 2007, 178). Romani autobiographies display this mediational component through the abundant description of rites, beliefs, material culture, and domestic practices, which implicitly address a non-Romani reader. This instructive dimension fits well within autobiography, a literary genre that entails some exemplary quality.

After Vygotsky, Kozulin points out that "cognition is affected by the possibilities inherent in literary form" (1998, 138). While the content of a literary work has an obvious impact on the reader, there is also an array of embedded devices that have a crucial effect on the reception of the text. The construction of the self the author/narrator displays in the autobiographical account involves a complex psychological process of selection and organization. This intellectual capability is embodied in the narrator's voice, whose effect on the reader is more subtle than the narrative the plot presents. Romani autobiographies present narratives that challenge discrimination and prejudices while reflecting on social and private experiences, and by doing so they implicitly disclose mature, perceptive, and coherent Romani subjectivities and identities. By writing about how their minds and lives have been shaped by certain events and by their ethnic identity, Romani authors claim agency and new social positions. The main characters in these works are Roma with meaningful experiences and a life purpose that stems from their ethnic heritage. Furthermore, as authors/narrators they speak from a position of authority, one that has not been usually occupied by Roma, and certainly not in the literary field, as they were presumed to be inherently illiterate. Writing about themselves, Romani authors face not only the intrinsic challenges that self-representation entails, but also those derived from how Roma characters have been previously depicted.

From a very early age, the main character in *Gypsy Boy* is physically abused by his father, and sexually abused by one of his paternal uncles.

The horror of the facts depicted makes the reader wonder how Mikey came to survive all this and live to tell it. Mikey's mother registers him in a school as a way of keeping him away from the father (GB, 140), but there Mikey has to face a different kind of violence, that of racial discrimination: Roma "[…] were taught separately during the morning […]" at the request of the other children's parents (GB, 82), and they did not mingle "[…] because more often than not our contact with the Gorgia kids ended in an exchange of taunts, insults and scraps." (GB, 117) The narrator reflects from his present position about how Mikey "[…] hated violence […] but could never seem to escape it" (GB, 118).

In *American Gypsy*, Marafioti considers how discrimination pervaded her social life during her childhood and had a long-lasting effect on her subjectivity. While she did not experience this kind of discrimination in the United States, its effects had a permanent echo; hence the fact that the narrator refers to it in the first pages of the memoir (AG, 7). In fact, the experience of discrimination shapes Marafioti's Romani ethnic identity as much as does cultural heritage. In the pages in which she refers her childhood in Moscow, the narrator remembers how she was insulted by school mates (AG, 32–34) or even by strangers (AG, 62–63). It is clear in the text that rewriting discriminatory traumatic experiences was not an easy task for the author, but she keeps a resilient stance and avoids representing herself as a victim. Sheer trauma is barely visible on a few occasions, such as when Marafioti's teenager boyfriend, Ruslan, who grew up with her while touring with the ensemble, was killed in Romania when participating in a Romani protest:

> After one particularly explosive demonstration, Ruslan and a few local Romani got caught up in a fight with some *gadjee* boys. No one knew who instigated the fight, but it ended with the participants scattering to escape the police. Later Ruslan was found dead behind the local pet clinic. He'd been beaten to death. (AG, 69)

The narrator briefly considers how she fell into despair after the loss of her friend (AG, 72), but she does not elaborate on her feelings or the psychological impact this event had on her. In a way it is understood that grief can only be explained by silence. In a similar way, Marafioti refers to other traumatic experiences, such as her parents' alcoholism or divorce, without delving into the internal turmoil she (and her younger sister) experienced. In *American Gypsy* there is an untold narrative of pain that tacitly transpires through the magnitude of some of the events the narrator portrays.

Marafioti's family arrival to the United States was the end of the parents' marriage; during that time, she faced the challenge of learning a new language and understanding a different culture while she underwent poverty and parental neglect, mostly due to her mother's alcoholism and her father's detachment. These experiences are usually lightly depicted, concealing the anguish they certainly generated in the young Oksana. The narrator's stance is a resilient one; Marafioti allows herself to look back into her life only to recover what made her a strong woman, a gifted writer, and a proud Romni.

Throughout the book, Marafioti creates different representations of herself according to age, location, and sociocultural context. However, the narrative viewpoint has more of an impact on the reader than do her depictions of her experiences. The narrator comes across as a wise woman who looks back without resentment or a judgemental attitude. In this sense, the autobiographic narrative emerges as a cultural mediation tool—in Vygotsky's terms. The content of the book offers an attractive account of Romani cultural practices and of the narrator's distinctive experiences, depicting evolving images of herself as she survived them. Still, the most powerful image is the embedded and tacit one of the author/narrator during the process of writing. Marafioti is an accomplished writer with a genuine love for language and literature that is supported by intertextual references, literary devices and, overall, the writing technique. All these elements bring forward a new Romani subjectivity, that of a resilient, poised, intelligent and skilled writer.

In the same way, the narrator in *Gypsy Boy* comes across as a kind-hearted and strong adult, despite he was abused by those who should have loved and protected him as a child. Mikey's account could be easily described as ineffable or indescribable, but remarkably it has been written and read. Inadvertently, the readership can picture the author: a broken child who grew up to resignify his past experiences by writing about them. The very narrative in the first person builds an implicit subjectivity of the author/narrator, the future Mikey, who is not just a survivor, but an actual fighter, in a way his father could not have possibly imagined.

Finally, these autobiographies express the tensions that depicting the Romani identity involves. It seems fitting here to go back to Vygotsky, who argues that our inner speech derives from the internalization of social values and beliefs, which are constantly examined through an internal dialogue (cf. Vygotsky, in: Wertsch 1985, 61). This is particularly

relevant in the construction of an autobiography, a literary modality in which authors ponder how to represent themselves in the social sphere. However, the internalization of the hegemonic social principles and beliefs is problematic when it comes to marginalized individuals. W.E.B. Du Bois used the notion of double-consciousness to refer to the conflictive subjectivities of African Americans, highlighting the ambivalent, dual subjectivity of racialized subjects, who strive to reconcile their ethnic bodies, behaviours, values, and experiences with those of the hegemonic group in their societies. Du Bois's double-consciousness points at the conflictive inner speech of a victim of racial oppression who has, nonetheless, interiorized ways of learning and understanding that stem from the parameters that are at the source of racial discrimination. This tension appears embedded in Romani autobiographies as authors split in two: narrator and character, both racialized subjects but both immersed in the values around which racial hierarchies are constructed.

The narrator in *Gypsy boy* is an adult who was forced to leave his family and community once he came out as gay during his teen years. As revealed in the last chapter and epilogue of the book, he writes after a healing process that involved performing, creative writing, and teaching. At this point he has lived outside his original community longer than he lived in it, but he still speaks of "our people" (GB, 278). However, at certain points in the narrative he sits in a liminal zone in which he looks at his ethnic group from a distance:

> The Gypsy race is an old fashioned and, sadly, a very bitter one. They live, breathe, sleep, grieve, love and care for only their own people. They don't like or trust the ways of others and don't have contact or friendships with other races […] It is tragic, both for the Gypsies who distrust and hate, and for the other races that never get to see the more human, generous side of the Romanies. (GB, 66)

Walsh reflects on how this conservative stance of the Roma is connected to the historical persecution and marginalisation they have experienced, which forced them to protect themselves by means of isolation. However, on some other occasions this connection is not that clear, and the image he presents of the Romani community is not only essentializing, but also builds on hegemonic representations and prejudices:

> Almost all Gypsy men are violent, it's ingrained in the culture and the life they lead and impossible to avoid. […] it was a rarity for a Gypsy man to do a good job for anyone. Especially if money were to change hands before a job was done; in that case the customer would almost certainly get nothing at all. (GB, 42; 162)

Marafioti is not shy about representing her own internalized racism in the past. She confesses that her parents advised her to hide their ethnic origin in school so she would not be bullied (AG, 7), and she learned to conceal this part of her identity, which implied a certain degree of shame. For her arrival in the United States, she dressed in a way that would make her look like an average girl "instead of a Gypsy one" (AG, 11). The young Oksana considered that certain Romani practices, such as panhandling and fortune telling, were at the source of social prejudices against Roma in the U.S.S.R. (AG, 100–101). She was therefore mortified when, shortly after their arrival in the United States, her musician father resorted to mediumship and divination (AG, 101) as a main source of income.

The autobiographical writing process makes explicit the contradictory dialogue between the inner and the social selves that cohabit within an individual. In this case, the first understands certain Romani practices and behaviours, while the second judges and assigns them a social value. Thus, autobiographies offer extraordinary insight on how Roma are repositioning themselves within society with tools, such as literature, that have been used to maintain social prejudices against them. The analysis in this essay highlights that, in terms of literary production, what is told—the narrative—is not more significative than the way in which it is told—the voice and the viewpoint—.

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