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THE MULTIDIRECTIONALITY OF ROMANI IDENTITY IN DAMIAN LE BAS' *THE STOPPING PLACES*

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Abstract
The romanticised and stereotyped construction of the Romani people absorbed by mainstream society has contributed to the obliteration of their cultural complexity and their ensuing alienation. The present article analyses how the memoir *The Stopping Places* (2018), by the British Romani writer Damian Le Bas, makes a case for the borderlessness of his people. It is the main purpose of this study to underscore Romani identity as inherently multidirectional, hence allowing for a relational, intercultural dialogue aimed at transcending the long-standing Romani vs. non-Romani tension. For this purpose, Le Bas' network-like journey across some key stopping places is read as an endorsement of the synchronicity and interconnectedness characterising our present world. His narrative is an empowering attestation that foregrounds the fruitful interactions between the Roma and other cultures and sets the assumedly distrustful and protective Romani as an example of cultural flexibility.

Key words
Damian Le Bas; Romani; Romani literature; memoir; multidirectionality; cultural flexibility

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1. Introduction

The interconnectedness characterising present-day society has given way to a global debate forum to which previously neglected collectives can and must contribute. It could be postulated that the pivotal element of such a dialogic gathering is synchronicity. In the words of Irena Ateljevic, this key constituent of our globalised society is a phenomenon "whereby people sharing similar levels of consciousness are engaged in parallel intellectual universes around the globe, and articulate related ideas, but often express them in different wor(l)ds and terminologies" (2013: 207). What Ateljevic might want to stress is that, even though there arise unavoidable and perhaps necessary idiosyncratic divergences, this synchronous reality typifies a horizontal, relational discourse that binds together all the individuals and collectives engaged in it. In this context, such a horizontal dialogue appears to have enabled assumedly minoritarian ethnic groups to cooperate in the synchronic endeavour mentioned above.

The specific collective that will be addressed in this article is the Romani people, also known as Roma. Little is known about their culture and worldview, and the main reason behind this opacity is the exploitation of stereotypes. As Yaron Matras puts it, "the knowledge that negative stereotypes of them prevail has often acted as a deterrent to approaching mainstream society and trying to explain who they really are" (2015: 158). One of the factors contributing to the general slanted perception of this community is the romanticised lens through which they were approached in the literature written during the first industrial revolution and the Victorian period. Ian Hancock warns readers that this is a fictional *image*, and not an accurate depiction of an actual individual (2002: 64). However, we have absorbed this representation to such an extent that it overrides fact and common sense (Matras 2015: 5–7). Such distorted portrayals, together with their secular distrust of assimilation, play a decisive role in the invisibility of the Romani people, to the degree that they have long been relegated to the margins of society. Not surprisingly, they have been traditionally excluded from the categories of modernity and cosmopolitanism (Silverman 2012: 44).

A widespread belief among critics is that there is little writing—fictional and non-fictional—by the Roma that offers an insight into this ethnic group's worldview, that the bulk of literature on the Romani people has been written by outsiders (Okely 2017: 65). In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, one of the Roma's most acknowledged contributions was a corpus of orally transmitted folktales (Lapage 1999: 18). Yet, there is evidence of the growth in the twentieth century of a written Romani literature that aims to meet the relational demands of our present age. As Paola Toninato points out in her seminal monograph *Romani Writing: Literacy, Literature and Identity Politics* (2014), this literature is polycentric and has a "mediating potential" geared towards a mutual understanding among the diverse Romani communities and the dissolution of the communicative gap between Romani and non-Romani peoples (2014: 3–4). Contemporary literature thus emerges as an enabling practice whereby the Romani people may communicate with other collectives, sharing equal respect and challenging prevailing stereotypes. In consonance with this mediating goal, Roma writers often opt for autobiographical genres such as the memoir. Self-referential genres prove particularly useful for the relational enterprise as their essential goal is, in Couser's words, "to make identity claims" (2012: 13). Generally speaking, recently published memoirs such as Mikey Walsh's *Gypsy Boy* (2009) and Maggie Smith-Bendell's *After All These Years* (2013) help make Romani experiences visible in two main ways: they assert the multilaterality of Romani identity and foster an integrative dialogue between Roma and non-Roma societies.

The present article seeks to contribute to the visualisation and assessment of this emergent Romani trend in Britain. Bearing in mind Toninato's contention about the mediating quality of Romani texts, I analyse Damian Le Bas' *The Stopping Places: A Journey Through Gypsy Britain* (2018), with the aim to demonstrate that the network-like structure of this memoir plays a key role in illuminating the complexity and multidirectionality of Romani culture, debunking any traditional stereotyped views on these people as isolated, savage and/or strangers. Besides celebrating the hybridity and polycentrism of the Roma, Le Bas' road journey and its subsequent narrativisation will be read as a harbinger of a multilateral dialogue between societies: the network of 'stopping places' he drops by is representative of the intercommunication between communities regardless of their origins. Therefore, the recognition and declaration of Romani multidirectional identity—with a reassessment of Romani roots as rhizomatic, in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's sense of the term—may pave the way for a more inclusive and democratic participation of this ethnic group in the synchronic cultural paradigm of present-day society.

2. The polycentrism of Romani identity: Towards a more flexible model

The debate around Romani identity and the origin of this ethnic group is unquestionably puzzling. It is widely believed that they originated in northern India. This view has been supported by historical linguists, who have perceived connections between the Romani language, ancient Sanskrit, Hindi and Punjabi (Fraser 1992; Hübschmannová et al. 2000; Hancock 2010). However, the insufficiency of historical records makes it imprudent to pinpoint an exact place of origin. Far from giving a distorted genealogy that lends itself to speculation, the unfeasibility of identifying a precise Romani homeland stresses a beneficial trait of their identity: its borderless and rhizomatic nature.

Before plunging into the intricacies of Romani identity, the notion of the rhizome as introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari should be briefly discussed. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari explain that the 'rhizome' nominates a mode of relation involving "the aparallel evolution of two beings that have absolutely nothing to do with each other" (1987: 10). Developed when postmodernism was in full bloom, this notion has played—and still does—a vital role in contemporary critical theory, as it has enabled cultural studies to better trace the movement from post-Enlightenment hegemonic discourses of identity to models that bring to centre stage the ceaseless and horizontal dialogue between cultures. The rhizome brings together rather than separate on account of difference or hierarchy, hence underscoring a polycentrism that reminds us of our present-day age's interconnectedness. In the words of Simon O'Sullivan, "[t]he rhizome is anti-hierarchical and a-centred. [...] The rhizome precisely fosters transversal, even *alogical*, connections between heterogeneous events" (2002: 84; emphasis in the original). In its potential to engender a network of connections, the rhizome is remarkably conceived of as a map: "The rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21).

The interpretation of the rhizome as a map is a key idea that must be foregrounded from the outset of the theoretical discussion, as Le Bas' perusal of the Roma's cultural identity in his memoir takes the form of a roadmap. As is shown in the literary analysis to be conducted later, Le Bas' route significantly mirrors the architecture of Romani identity, a multidirectional set of roads that show the long-lasting influence of different communities. The flexible and open-to-redefinition itinerary narrativised in his work can thus be read as a realisation of the theoretical notion of the rhizome, with its ability to enhance intercultural relations. At the same time, the rhizome-like map of Romani stopping places enables Le Bas to make a case for the relationality of his ethnic group's cultural identity. The close bond between the rhizome and relationality is brought to the fore by the Martinican critic Édouard Glissant. In *Poetics of Relation*, he borrows Deleuze and Guattari's concept to both discuss and celebrate the multifariousness of Caribbean selfhood and Creole identity. He puts in stark opposition the 'root' and the 'rhizome', arguing that, while the former notion entails fixedness and even totalitarianism, the latter underlines relationality (1997: 11–18). Approaching the literary representation of identity through the lens of the rhizome seems, therefore, crucial to unpack the long-neglected (hi)story of intercultural relationships that has given shape to such a complex identity as the Roma's.

To start with, an interesting theory that brings to the fore the Roma's multifariousness is Donald Kenrick's hypothesis. He puts forth that, at some time between the seventh and tenth centuries, Indian immigrants from manifold tribes intermarried in Persia, ultimately coalescing into a people collectively known as the Dom, a term that later transmuted into Rom (2004: 4). Likewise, Jean-Pierre Liégeois takes account of these Romani migrations to the west, which he traces as far back as the ninth century, and explains that, by the end of the fourteenth century, the first groups of Roma had set foot on European soil (2007: 17–18). In the case of Britain, the first reference to the Roma dates from the early sixteenth century and it is registered that they established themselves in Scotland[1] (Reid 1999: 31; Liégeois 2007: 20; Le Bas 2018: 261). From the sixteenth century onwards, it seems that there was considerable bonding between Scottish Travellers and other Romani organisations such as Welsh, Irish and English (Reid 1999: 32). In addition to such exhaustive interactions, it has been estimated that there was mating between the newly arrived Roma and the local people (Henderson 1992: 174). Yet, in these accounts, the polycentric identity of both the Romani newcomers and their offspring was to be downplayed. The construction of the figure of the English Gypsy was tinged with satire and suspicion, and hence a stereotypical depiction of this ethnic group emerged at the same time as they were labelled as alien (Timbers 2016: 1).

The prejudiced conception of the figure of the Roma has contributed to their long-lasting marginalisation and utter exclusion from mainstream culture. Their assortment of cultures has consequently been overlooked, and one of the products of such indifference is the nomenclature used to designate this group. More often than not, they are referred to as 'Gypsies', and it is not unusual to find this term uncapitalised. As Matras remarks, "'Gypsy' is a concept that has been created and shaped by outsiders" (2015: 21). Indeed, it derives from Old French *gyptien*, which is a clipping of the term *Egyptien*. Besides being coined by non-Roma societies, this exonym stemmed from a misconception: on their arrival in Europe, they were believed to be Egyptians. Such misdiagnosis provides further evidence of the general disdain towards a people whose response was a camouflage of their language and cultural values. Taking into account the more than justified concealment of their culture, it is not surprising that there is little acknowledgement and use of the appellation 'Romani', not even in academic writing. This is a self-appellation that puts the stress on their status as speakers of the Romani language, also known as *Romanes*. As Anne Sutherland remarks, the term *Romani* comprises "Gypsies and other groups who identify themselves as Gypsies" (2017: 9). Put another way, it is widely used and accepted among the diverse Romani communities—especially in its adjectival form—because it is not restrictive and, what is more, it enhances their linguistic and cultural roots. As regards the term *Roma*, its use is increasing exponentially. Nevertheless, Hancock warns us that it has a narrower meaning—that of 'married Romani male'—and so it is not accepted by the totality of groups (2002: xix).

Although Romani people are cautious when it comes to protecting their culture, they are progressively showing inclination to sharing their (hi)stories. The dialogism and synchronicity of the present-day dominant cultural paradigm could act as a catalyst for a progression: from isolation to visibility; from occupying marginal space to actively participating in the ongoing dialogue among societies. In this respect, Matras establishes that, though being traditionalist, at the same time they are "a model of cultural tolerance and flexibility" (2015: 227). What ultimately makes the Romani flexible is their inherent borderlessness. They are a historically nomadic people that shares different origins and influences, and it is precisely this cultural multidirectionality that guarantees their respect of and tolerance for other ethnic groups. Considering their potential for a relational dialogue, it is urged that critical Romani voices participate in the creation of a "narrative of a New Social Europe" via (hi)stories that put the accent on intersectionality and solidarity with other marginalised groups (Ryder et al. 2021: 21). Matras makes it clear that solidarity is pivotal in the relationships between Romani communities (2015: 205). However, it should be asserted that Romani affinity is not merely restricted to cooperation between the Roma. Through their dialogic connection with other undervalued ethnic groups, it acquires a transnational dimension that is revealing of their evolution towards a more flexible model. Not coincidentally, such transnational solidarity could be said to dovetail with their multidirectional identity: their cultural heterogeneity may facilitate their being agents of social change, and so literature should reflect and celebrate the many-sidedness characterising their identity.

3. Le Bas' memoir and the assertion of liminality: Boundlessness as a harbinger of multidirectionality

In a 2019 interview by Isabel Taylor, the British writer and journalist Damian James Le Bas (born 1985) starts by reflecting on the secretiveness that helps safeguard the Romani culture and acknowledges: "For some Gypsies, the written word carries this legacy of threat. Generations only encountered writing in the form of the summons, the eviction notices, the warning against trespass" (Taylor 2019: para. 1). The association between writing and exclusion unavoidably entails that some members of this ethnic group still perceive Romani writing in a negative light, all the more so as this practice could be regarded as a betrayal of the protectiveness that they had long been preserving. Even before Le Bas had drafted the structure and contents of his enlightening memoir *The Stopping Places* (2018), certain relatives scathingly criticised his idea of disseminating the Romani culture through writing: "But I hadn't even started writing it yet and they were accusing me of writing a book I had no intention of writing. We don't speak any more" (Taylor 2019: par. 1). In spite of such blazing judgement, he eventually wrote a compelling memoir that ties in with the demand that critical Romani voices lay bare to their cultural history while engaging in a boundless dialogue with other silenced communities.

The limitlessness inherent to this cultural exchange underpins the structural and thematic arrangement of Le Bas' work. Firstly, it should be remarked that it is not merely a memoir *stricto sensu*. Le Bas' memoir takes the form of a road narrative across Britain crisscrossed by such diverse genres as the travel narrative and the essay. This multi-layered architecture has been recently explored as the defining feature of a twenty-first-century literary genre denominated 'Translit'. Coined by Douglas Couplan in his 2012 book review of Hari Kunzru's *Gods Without Men* (2011), the term 'Translit' refers to "a new genre of literature characterised by a fragmented narrative structure which shifts, not only between different periods and places, but also between different genres" (Leggett 2016: 149). The generic fuzziness characterising Le Bas' memoir could be said to mirror the liminality of his people, a similarly multi-layered ethnic group aware of their cultural hybridity and, by the same token, averse to identifying with a fixed homeland. By taking the road as an organising principle, Le Bas is paying homage to the indefatigable wanderings of nomadic groups such as the Travellers. The road of stopping places that the author-narrator takes allows for an infinite expansion that echoes formally the Roma complex cultural identity. While the eleven chapters comprising the memoir focus on some thirty spots, the list of stopping places is immeasurable. As Le Bas' uncle declares during a telephone conversation with the protagonist: "Well, if you go to every stopping place in the country you'll be doing it for a hundred and fifty years, won't you?" (Le Bas 2018: 151).

The lack of boundaries distinctive of the Roma begs for a brief reflection on the key role that memory plays in *The Stopping Places*. Taking into account the adamantine link between memory and identity, Le Bas frequently reconstructs the chronicles on the customs and beliefs of previous generations of Romani Travellers and, at the same time, he displays the recollections of his relatives—especially those of his 'Nan'. This process of memory retrieval helps him integrate Romani experiences into the history of Britain, ultimately putting an end to their marginal and almost invisible position within the dominant culture. Le Bas' endeavour is hence revealing of the multidirectionality of memory, a quality that has been foregrounded by Michael Rothberg (2009). Rejecting the traditional view that memory perpetuates modern social hierarchies, Rothberg suggests considering memory "as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (2009: 3). This change of perspective allows us, in Rothberg's words, "to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others" (5). In line with contemporary society's interconnectedness, this network-like, multidirectional model of memory facilitates the achievement of a rhizomatic dialogue that brings together different social groups rather than separate them. From this multidirectional perspective, Romani identity can be approached as a conglomerate of influences and interactions. Roma identity is multidirectional in that they are the product of an unceasing intracultural and intercultural dialogue across time and space. Their nomadic existence and their concomitance with other peoples—both Romani and non-Romani—challenge prevailing views of the Roma as outsiders, uncivilised and social misfits.

In what follows, I will attempt to substantiate this assertion through the analysis of Le Bas' exploration of Romani identity through his road journey across Britain. As an English Traveller that is concerned about the complexity of his culture, Le Bas sets his sights on finding the links that bring closer apparently conflicting elements such as Englishness and the pride in being Roma. First, there is a perusal of the author-narrator's coming to terms with his hybrid identity and the subsequent dilemma of an individual caught between two cultures (section 4). Then, some key stages in his memorable road journey across the stopping places are discussed. Le Bas' expedition may be divided into two parts, the turning point being the excursion to Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer to see the pilgrimage of St Sara. Accordingly, section 5 focuses on some initial discoveries that cast light on the dialogism and multidirectionality of Romani identity; section 6 assesses to what extent the last stages in the journey point to the possibility of reconciling the assumed differences between Roma and non-Roma, and ultimately leads to a dialogue that underlines relationality, flexibility, solidarity and transculturality.

4. The road of stopping places: Digging deep into the intricacies of Romani identity

Le Bas starts his memoir by reminiscing about a road that runs from Sussex to Hampshire. He refers to this path as "the road from the world I grew up in" (2018: 1). During his childhood, he took this road with his family twice a week to sell flowers in Petersfield. This is the family's main occupation, alongside some businesses such as car-breaking and roofing (4). After several years making this weekly journey, Le Bas started wondering: "Of course, we went to Petersfield to sell flowers, but why there?" (2). Even if there were nearer market towns, the family made this slightly longer journey for the sake of legacy. He could not explain what made Petersfield unique, but still he retained some key utterances from his relatives that justify the relevance of tradition: "'That was where Uncle and they used to stop, look.' 'I can still see me granny sat there'" (3). From the outset, a key parallel between the road and tradition is established. That roadway has witnessed the transit of succeeding generations of English Travellers, and hence it emerges as a spatial and temporal network: on the one hand, it links different locations in the south of England; on the other, it serves to connect the nostalgic character-narrator with his ancestors, thus acquiring a historical dimension.

After briefly foregrounding the symbolism of the roadway from his childhood, Le Bas goes on to discuss the Romani's worldview. He observes that their cosmovision is marked by a strong tendency to polarise opposites by underlining the border between them (2018: 8). This Manichean conception of the world is summarised in binaries such as *black vs. white*, or *darkness vs. light*. In theory, this oppositional outlook on the world is determinant in the configuration of Romani identity: "You can only call yourself a true Romani gypsy—one of the *kaulo ratti*, the black blood—if all your ancestors, as far as you know, are of the tribe" (9). In the case of Le Bas, he is able to trace his ancestry back six generations, all of them being members of the tribe. Nevertheless, this does not make him a *kaulo ratti* strictly speaking, as he acknowledges having mixed blood. What is more, he makes it clear that "over a thousand-year migration it is virtually impossible that there will have been no mingling in the line" (9). As the expert Simon Evans argues, it is unsustainable to advocate Romani racial and cultural purity, since they are "the product of generations of influence and interaction" (1999: 2). At this point in the narrative, Le Bas uses Romani miscegenation as an excuse to discuss some implications of this mixture that justify the multidirectional approach to Romani identity taken in this study. Firstly, he destabilises the clichéd view that all Roma have tanned skin and dark eyes: "I do not look like most people's conception of a typical Gypsy, my blue eyes and fair hair belying my origins, my picture of myself" (2018: 10). Actually, he argues: "My identity was inside me and the outside didn't match up" (10). Secondly, he bitterly criticises the narrow-mindedness of people that, even today, believe in essentialist labels, of which he mentions three: 'half-caste', 'full-blood' and 'mixed race' (10). Le Bas casts aside such tags because, in a way, they make him unsure about who he really is. Eventually, he decides to embrace his world and take no notice of categorisation: "In spite of my confusion over who I really was, I loved our world" (11).

One of the reasons why Le Bas loves his world is precisely its lack of concern: it seems that they always did what they wanted to do without paying attention to categories. Actually, their tireless journeys enabled them to interact with other Romanies whose features were often radically different from theirs: "And there were different faces. Not all, but most of them, looked very different from the surrounding families in this very white corner of the country: the South Downs, built on oceanic chalk. They had darker skin, harder features" (Le Bas 2018: 11). Such a recollection is revealing because it brings to the fore the multifariousness characterising the Romani people. Indeed, as he remarks later on in the narrative, "the Roma in Britain come from several countries—the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Romania are the main ones—and various tribes who often have little to do with each other" (96–97). Such diversity can be seen, for instance, in his subsequent discussion of the Romani lexis, where he notes that "[f]or certain things there were several words" (12). Just as the Romani language has been shaped and reshaped through contact with a multiplicity of cultural influences, this ethnic group's sense of place is regulated by a similarly dialogic interaction. Le Bas argues that the community tells (hi)stories of different locations that "were burned into their consciousness like a network of unseen roots that made them who they were" (12). Invisible though they might be, these places are revealed to have a vital meaning for the Travellers. These affectively charged locations are referred to by the families as 'stopping places', and they even acquire a mythical significance: as Le Bas' grandmother once explained to him, they served as temporary dwellings in the old days of the 'bender' tents and living wagons (13). The stopping places haunt Le Bas-as-child to such an extent that he becomes taken over by their symbolism. In the following years, he will try to make sense of these locations and delve into their role in the construction of the complex Romani identity.

For all its complexity, Le Bas pictures Romani culture as being generally ignored and reduced to stereotypes by his non-Romani schoolmates. At the age of ten, he was insulted on the grounds that he was a "Gypsy", this being one of the first times he heard the G-word (2018: 17). This was one amongst the many conflicts that made him grow aware that he was different, and that he was bound to be tagged as an alien. At first, this ethnic unlikeness produced anxiety and self-consciousness on the protagonist. Episodes such as the teacher's shock at his mother's traditional attire or a schoolmate's puzzlement at his wearing a *pikey* ring at the boarding school made him feel at odds with his identity: "I knew that my Gypsiness would never leave me: that every time someone said 'gyppo' or 'pikey' within earshot, I'd still get that terrible feeling, like a physical punch in the gut" (19). Another conflict stemming from his involvement in the educational sphere is the problematics of identity erasure. The narrative voice remarks his distress at having to fend off his desire to use the Romani language in public; the accommodation of his sociolect provokes the sarcasm of his fellow Travellers, who scoff at his somewhat refined accent (20). This mockery contributes to the protagonist's sense of dislocation within his community, and a mounting frustration with his inability to fit in: "What was this world that refused to just let me belong? Would I ever find some way to be English, educated, but a Gypsy?" (20). This illuminating inquiry evinces that he relinquishes neither of the elements that conform his complex identity; he aspires to become a cultured individual, and by no means does this crave for education entail the obliteration of his Gypsiness. On the contrary, his access to culture eventually enables him to study at Oxford, where he pores over an abundance of volumes on Romani history and culture (21). These materials lay bare the multifariousness of an ethnic group that is unknown to many. This scant general knowledge about the Romani world is illustrated by the lack of references to the stopping places that tantalise the young Le Bas: "When I read these books about Gypsies, it often felt as though something was missing. The more I thought about it, the more I realised it was the stopping places with their secret names that often returned no results when I looked them up on the internet" (23).

One of the reasons underpinning Le Bas' fascination with these hard-to-grasp stopping places is their key role in shaping the subjectivity of his people, without which it is impossible to understand their group consciousness (Le Bas 2018: 23). The existence of these locations may contribute to disproving the view that Gypsies belong nowhere: "[T]he stopping places proved that this assertion was a lie" (24). Still, what actually makes these cryptic places vital is the Romani people's communion with them. They do not regard these venues as a catalogue of places, but as a meaningful network—a "network of *atchin tans*"—, a geographical and mythical constellation that binds together the Romani as a community: "They are historical, topographical proof that the Gypsy philosophy has existed here, that it still does, that it still can" (26). Driven by his yearning for making sense of these fascinating places, Le Bas sets out on a road journey from the south of England northwards. Once the unbreakable bond between these spots and identity construction is taken into consideration, the purpose of the expedition could be read as both a matter of self-exploration and as an attempt to better understand the Romani heritage. What makes Le Bas' journey through Romani Britain particularly compelling for this multidirectional approach is his paramount goal to find in these places a harbinger for overcoming the tension between the Romani and the *gorjies* (i.e. non-Romani people). Torn between the two cultures to which he belongs, the narrative voice sees in this journey the opportunity to mediate between these apparently conflicting societies and eventually solve the problematics of his identity as a British Romani: "I hoped I might find the strength to dissolve—or accept—these old divisions that ran through both the country and myself" (30). The journey's ultimate goal is, therefore, to establish a rhizomatic dialogue between cultures that transcends reductive and simplistic categorisations. This integrative endeavour gains such relevance that, remarkably enough, the need for a rhizomatic dialogue is graphically suggested by the itinerary's trajectory: Le Bas explains that he drives "back and forth instead of keeping to a neat, circular route" (49), and this zigzag path could represent the many-sidedness defining the amalgamated Romani identity.

5. The first half of the journey: Initial interactions and a flash of revelation

Prior to starting his road journey, Le Bas heads for Nan's bungalow and explains his intentions. The experienced grandmother gives him fair warning that it is burdensome to get accustomed to life on the road, but she is willing to read aloud a list of the places where her family had camped with their tents and wagons (2018: 36–41). His first destination is the so-called Messenger's Meadow, to the north of Worthing. This place is significant enough for Nan as it is where she and the family halted when the war broke out (42). This meadow is a revealing instance of what these cryptic places are like. There appears to be nothing extraordinary about them, and seasoned travellers would probably overlook them as they drive across the road: "[H]ere it is, no more than a normal field by the side of a normal road. It fills me with nothing at all, and feels like a poor beginning to my quest" (45). However, these apparently run-of-the-mill locations grow captivating as Le Bas explains the meaning that his people have assigned to them for eons. More often than not, these places have a symbolic value for two main reasons: firstly, they are closely tied to the construction of Romani identity; secondly, the history of these transit sites unveils the indispensable contact between the Romani people and other ethnic groups, such associations accounting for their multidirectional identity. For instance, the narrator discusses that, in rural locations such as Messenger's Meadow, the relationship between landowners and the Travellers justifies the proliferation of English yeoman surnames in whole generations of Roma (46).

The next significant harbour is Horsmonden, a spot located in Kent where a Travellers' horse fair has been traditionally held. For the younger ones, the aim of this event was not so much to do business as to find a potential partner. In addition to this, the narrator points to an often-neglected purpose of the fair: "What the fairs offer is a chance to track the progress of our lives; [...] to exchange a joke, or even simply a wink, with our contemporaries, a look that says 'remember how we were, and look at us now'; a glance that honours the past and present and future" (2018: 60). The glance that the quotation emphasises is inherently multidirectional: firstly, it enables for an all-inclusive debate forum where the attendees will share their experiences; secondly, it encompasses different temporalities. What Le Bas may want to highlight is that such an apparently trivial act as looking triggers the sharing of present and past (hi)stories, a set of narratives that have the potential to influence the future while remodelling the past. This mutation-inducing interplay may be said to attest that Travellers—and many other Romani communities—are not a monolithic ethnic group, but that they are open to flexibility.

Later in the journey, Le Bas and his wife Candis drop by Bramdean Common, to the south of Winchester. Flanked by woodland, a picturesque iron-clad church emerges as the married couple stroll along this stopping place. This building is known as the Church in the Woods, and Le Bas initially observes that it is "even considered to be 'ours'" (2018: 104). The idea of possession implied in this remark stems from the original use of the Bramdean church in the late nineteenth century: "The Church was built in 1883 [...] so that the various people who came and went on the Common would have a place to worship: the 'commoners, charcoal burners and gypsy itinerants'" (111). The nomadic Travellers have found in this quaint construction a sacred area to conduct their rituals and liturgical services with no fuss. Nonetheless, as implied in the latter quotation, the Travellers can lay no claim to this building because there were other communities who could find this stopping place significant. As a matter of fact, Le Bas alludes to the adjoining graves of an old couple to conclude that "Bramdean and its little church are sacred not only to Gypsies" (110). This reluctance to claim ownership of the tin church indicates that, however Manichean and self-absorbed the Romani people might resemble, they are actually willing to engage in a dialogic negotiation between cultures. This potential for flexibility is enhanced by Le Bas' assessment of the Roma's (dis)connection with religion. Their various tribes have been prone to absorbing the leading religion in their respective countries of residence, but this does not translate into a blind adherence to creeds (104). The rejection of a strong attachment to a church might be accounted for by the manifold influences that have given shape to the Romani creed, which is correspondingly multidirectional.

The Roma's innate flexibility is elaborated upon in the two chapters that follow: "The Tongue" and "The Bones". As Le Bas travels across Cornwall, he makes a case for a positive reading of his people's nomadism. Against the long-held view that their peripatetic nature translates into unbelonging, he stresses the beneficial implications of motion. For this purpose, he scrutinises the interaction patterns of the ethnic Cornish by resorting to history and science. It is postulated that, contrary to popular belief, these apparently detached people were not a self-absorbed group that made little contact with other tribes; they originally travelled from the Orkney islands southwards with the aim of surviving. A rooted rather than rhizomatic way of life would probably have threatened their endurance, so they were forced to adapt themselves to an itinerant life. At this point, Le Bas wonders: "[W]hat if this clinging to the trappings of nomadism simply mirrors one of the oldest facets of all human culture: prioritising survival, and moving about accordingly, rather than grimly staying put until whatever end?" (2018: 142). Through this cultural link between this Celtic tribe and the Roma, he succeeds in setting his people's nomadism as an example of adaptability and flexibility. Moreover, he manages to create a historical network between two groups that, despite having settled at different eras and paying tribute to different ancestors, are connected by their perambulatory essence.

The Romani malleability that is celebrated throughout the memoir ties in with their borderlessness and their rhizomatic nature. It is for this reason that Le Bas is struck by the metaphorical padlock fastened to the following stop in his journey: a lay-by known as Bridie's Tan, in East Sussex. The entrance to this stopping place is by prior arrangement and a steel gate prevents visitors from crossing the line. While looking for a way out, he feels disturbed by the warden's glare and deliberates: "Were the Gypsy camps of England always this shut-fast and forbidding?" (2018: 169). The narrative voice is distressed by how inhospitable this specific stopping place is at a time when Romani flexibility and solidarity are more than ever necessary. Nevertheless, this site becomes crucial for this multidirectional journey as Le Bas has a revelation. At the next roundabout, he meets a Hungarian Romani wanderer with a guitar on his back. His name is Pauli and he is interested in knowing his interlocutor's precedence. In the course of their multilingual conversation, Pauli asks the protagonist about his origin three times, and when he replies that he comes from England, the nonchalant man guffaws. Even if they have known each other for less than an hour, Le Bas feels sad that he will never see Pauli again. The impression that this fellow traveller has made on him is by no means circumstantial, as their casual encounter ultimately triggers an epiphany on the Romani sense of connectedness:

> It occurs to me that our sense of connectedness springs as much from the feeling that we are connected, as from the fact that we actually are. The Gypsies are descended from common stock, but so ultimately is all of humanity. Perhaps the difference is not whether you're part of a tribe, but whether you care to notice that you are. (174)

This reflection puts the stress on the key role played by consideration in the recognition of one's belonging to a group. Carried away by the laid-back tone of the conversation, Le Bas' answer to the inquiry about his precedence has been reduced to a single country: England. At first sight, this difference in terms of homeland might set the protagonist and Pauli apart, but this headlong conclusion is discredited by the questioner's laughter. This emotional reaction should not be interpreted as a nervous chuckle or a giggle: it is an amicable laugh that may remind Le Bas that both fellows are connected. Ultimately, the examination of this particular event might be said to have a wider scope: the network linking these two characters is representative of the multidirectionality defining the Romani people. Just as they are connected in spite of their different birthplaces, so the Roma's intricate genealogy translates into a multifarious identity whose complexity can only be grasped when one cares to notice it. In this respect, Le Bas' oversight when assuring Pauli that his family comes from England suggests that he still needs more acumen in order to succeed in his quest. Such insight will be provided by temporarily straying from his roadmap. He will head down to Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, in southeast France, to see the vibrant Romani pilgrimage of St Sara: "I'll see things and get insights about my people down there that I cannot get here, which will put a new—and sunlit—spin on the journey" (182).

6. The second half of the journey: Towards the dissolution of black-and-white certainties

Le Bas conceives the idea of heading down to Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer as he contemplates a little replica of St Sara-la-Kali that his grandmother gives him. The alluring statuette of the Romani 'Black Madonna' prompts his drive to the pilgrimage that takes places every latter half of May in the south of France: "Having the statue there has introduced a pull towards the pilgrimage of St Sara" (Le Bas 2018: 179). The spontaneous expedition to the town of Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer indicates that his road journey is by no means characterised by a tight itinerary. Above all, the network of stopping places is rhizomatic in nature, and this is enhanced by the character-narrator's remark that "[t]he ever-changing land borders of nations are often scant impediment to the movement of the Gypsies" (182). The crossing of the UK-French border will not prove detrimental to his enterprise and hence should not be read as a mere deviation from his journey across Britain. On the contrary, the French venue for the pilgrimage emerges as a microcosm of both Romani multidirectionality and all-inclusiveness:

> There's a dead ringer here for every Traveller I've ever met, anywhere in the world from Jerusalem to Cumbria via Budapest, Alsace, Valencia. The palette of skin colours echoes humanity—from south Asian browns to the pale Scandinavian tones I have always disliked in myself. Almost everyone is grinning or laughing or whistling; a couple of old men seem to be able to manage all three at one. (193)

This event is presented as a synchronic, borderless confluence of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The many-sidedness inherent to the pilgrimage is highlighted by the narrator's use of chroma: the different shades contribute to challenging the slanted view that only the dark-skinned *kaulo ratti* can claim Romani racial purity. At the same time, the colour palette can be read as an attempt to deconstruct and ultimately denounce racial hierarchy. Indeed, it is said to echo humanity, so this is an all-embracing celebration that urges all participants to feel at home. This feeling of belonging is stressed by the laid-back behaviour of the pilgrims. As Victoria Preston remarks, "for the duration of Sara's festival, Roma people who might feel marginalised in other settings are no longer on the periphery, but right at the heart of the community" (2020: 48–49). The pilgrims' deep sense of affinity hence contributes to dissolving any cultural barriers that prevent a rhizomatic interaction between the attendees: from the Spanish 'Gitano' who amuses the audience with his *Bulerías* to the non-Roma Catholic enthusiasts who come to revere St Sara, everyone is welcome to shape and reshape this one-of-a-kind celebration. Even though Sara-la-Kali is the patron saint of the Romani people, this does not make Les-Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer an exclusive, padlocked stopping place like Bridie's Tan. As is the case with the little church in the Bramdean wood, the Romani do not claim this festivity as theirs, and this is further evidence of their cultural tolerance and flexibility.

A revealing moment in this festival is the re-enactment of St Sara's arrival at the French coast. According to legend, St Sara was the servant of the two Saint Maries, the aunts of Jesus who had been banished from Palestine following the Crucifixion. On their haphazard journey with no destination, it seems that St Sara contributed to controlling the oarless boat to eventually land on the shores of Camargue (Dregni 2004: 9). In an attempt to conjure her legendary and brave landing, the procession symbolically immerses the little statue of the Black Madonna into the Mediterranean waters. Le Bas is touched by the significance of this baptism and reflects: "[I]t suddenly seems to be a retrospective sanctifying of the coming of my ancestors to Europe, which thereafter would be their heartland, as well as the place of their greatest woes" (2018: 202). The association between the respective comings of St Sara and the Romani population may be said to strengthen the favourable depiction of this ethnic group provided throughout the narrative. In both cases, what is celebrated is the resilience of people who managed to sail through their journeys and eventually survive to share their stories. Not only did these outcasts live through the woes recalled in Le Bas's meditation, but they ultimately came to embrace Europe as a heartland that shaped them as much as it was reshaped by them. This dialogic influence underlines the multidirectionality of both the identity and interactions of the Romani people, and this quality has crystallised by the end of the chapter devoted to the pilgrimage: "I am watching the Gypsies pass into the world, ambling into the midst of the *gadje*, surfing the changing tides of their falling and rising histories, blended fates" (203). Their rhizomatic interaction with the non-Romani (*gadje*) has given rise to a blending that appears to disintegrate the borders that had previously set these cultures apart.

The celebration of how Romani identity and culture are inherently borderless is resumed in the chapter titled "The Border". On his way to the Bala Lake in Wales, Le Bas drops by a stopping place named Kingsmeadow, near the Anglo-Welsh border. Immediately after pulling up, he meets a fellow Traveller and expresses his bliss on account of the recent building of stopping places in Wales: "It's a good job they're still building sites over here. [...] Unlike the ones on the other side of the border" (2018: 220). His interlocutor answers back: "That ain't no border to us, boy. And never has been. I am a Travelling man, that's what I am. And ain't no border stopped my people making their way" (220). The resolved tone of this experienced man once again points to the Romani multidirectionality, and this message contributes to upholding Le Bas' awareness that "certainty's borders begin to dissolve" (220). He no longer has the dire need to know whether he can be considered a true Romani or a wannabe, and this is reflected in his decisiveness as he revisits the Appleby Fair: "I have been to Appleby four or five times before, but this time it is different. [...] The old desire to prove that I belong is also weakening, its roots receding away" (237). Interestingly, the roots have been replaced by rhizomes, and this is representative of how fluid and multidirectional Romani identity is.

As his fear of social exclusion progressively wanes, Le Bas realises that his insightful journey is coming to an end. The anxiety stemming from his puzzlement at his hybrid identity has given way to a levelling of categorical borders that entails a new beginning for the Romani people. Symbolically, the last stage in the itinerary is the Scottish city of Stirling, which is the first documented stopping place of the Roma in Britain (Le Bas 2018: 277). Scotland was the entryway to Britain that Romani Travellers crossed in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries, and this return to where the relationship between Britons and this nomadic people started implies a sense of circularity. Not surprisingly, this last chapter in the book is entitled "The Beginning". Le Bas mulls over how his arrival at this ancestral setting might contribute to the purpose of his journey: "That in contemplating arrival, newness and opportunity, I might wish away the staid and stodgy consistency of the Gypsy vs *gorjie* tension that has been the norm ever since" (277). The last stopping places on his list represent a "fresh start with new capabilities" (288). The circularity mentioned above should not be interpreted as an impasse in the cultural history of the Roma: by virtue of memoirs such as Le Bas', the contact between Romani and non-Romani people is likely to leave aside suspicion, stereotypes and obliteration, thus embracing dialogism and synchronicity. The idea of beginning that is emphasised throughout the chapter is one that brings new opportunities to the Romani people. Primarily, this new beginning advocates the overcoming of the hitherto unbridgeable gap between Romanies and *gorjies*. This marriage is suggested by Le Bas' foregrounding of a Traveller site named the Tinkers' Heart. Interestingly, this stopping place is known as the Gypsy Wedding, and on the gate leading to this monument there is an illuminating plaque: "A brief explanatory word about how the Travellers used to meet here and wed at the crossroads" (290). In this context of renewal and interconnectedness, the allusion to the crossroads might point to the conciliation of two cultures to whom the establishment of labels and categories had condemned to misunderstanding. Just as diverse Romani populations left behind their differences and intermingled at the Tinkers' Heart, so Romanies and *gorjies* are destined for a synchronic, dialogic encounter.

This potential for regeneration and reconciliation is enhanced by an element of nature that Le Bas collects before putting an end to his journey: "I reach down to touch a tiny seedling that has sprouted up between two huge, python-like roots of a mighty beech, and carefully feel around its roots until it comes free from the soil" (2018: 291). The two snake-like roots could be said to symbolise the tension between Roma and non-Roma, an antagonism that proves venomous in that it has long thwarted a potentially enriching intercultural exchange. By the end of the road journey, this previously rooted confrontation is becoming rhizomatic, and this is evoked by how the seedling comes free from the ground. The communicative barriers that separated these antagonistic cultures are being gradually relaxed, and the blooming seedling is actually pointing to the new beginning explained above. This developing flower is a token of multidirectionality: born at the intersection of two apparently conflicting roots, it allows for their ultimately reconciliation. Le Bas seems confident that the main purpose of his journey has been attained, and hence decides to culminate his adventure by collecting the seedling and remarking its significance: "I'll take it back to Nan's garden to remind me of this day, and of my year in the van: something rooted and green to symbolise the end of the road and of black-and-white certainties" (291). The year in the van has contributed to destabilising the Romani vs. non-Romani tension while underlining the flexible, multidirectional essence of Romani identity. By the end of the narrative, Le Bas concludes by asserting: "*We are all somewhere*" (292; italics in original). The Romani people's multidirectional identity proves an empowering quality that brings to light their cultural complexity and, most importantly, places them at the forefront of such a polycentric world as ours.

7. Conclusion

The Stopping Places is a manifest attempt to unveil the cultural multifariousness of the Romani people and fight back against the entrenched idea that they are outcasts, unsympathetic and suspicious. Taking the idea of the network as a structuring principle, Le Bas criss-crosses the intricacies of Romani identity as he drives across the rhizomatic itinerary of stopping places. Each stopover reveals that the identity of his people is the product of centuries of intercultural communication and mediation, as highlighted by the marriages between different communities, the nomadism linking the Roma to other historical tribes of Britain, and the exchange of stories taking place at fairs. This journey enables Le Bas to overcome his initial puzzlement at being torn between two conflicting cultures and his sense that he does not fully belong to any of them. His epiphany during the pilgrimage to southern France contributes to awakening his conviction that there are no black-and-white certainties. He grows aware that the previously antagonistic cultures that conform his identity are in dialogue with each other, precisely because Romani identity is multidirectional.

The reconciliation suggested at the end of the narrative could be read as a harbinger of intercultural solidarity that ties in with the synchronicity and interconnectedness of our globalised age. In this context, it seems necessary to establish a horizontal dialogue among societies where previously undervalued ethnic groups disseminate their (hi)stories. This state of affairs could pave the way for a boom of narratives on Romani culture written by Romani people. No longer hindered by stereotyped conceptions, Roma writers might feel more willing to contribute to a polycentric Romani literature that stresses their borderlessness. Similarly, research is intended to discuss the thematic concerns and implications of this empowering literature. It could be beneficial to approach (auto)biographical narratives by Romani authors through the lens of Rothberg's model of multidirectional memory. This dialogic relationship between cultural memories can be extrapolated to the interplay between individual and collective Romani testimonies. The representativeness of these testimonial practices could entice Romani critical voices into giving vent to their experiences of gender construction and sexual orientation through literature and the visual arts, thus beating their fear of rejection and social exclusion.

Notes

[1] Willie Reid posits that the earliest reference to the Romani people in Britain can be found in the *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* of the year 1505 (1999: 31).

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