

‘WE DON’T KNOW OUR DESCENT’: HOW THE GITANOS OF JARANA MANAGE THE PAST

PALOMA GAY Y BLASCO

Queen’s University Belfast

Although Gypsies have often been described as people ‘oriented towards the present’, the question of how their approach to the past might illuminate their particular mode of being in the world has been left largely untheorized. In fact, understanding how Gypsies manage the past is essential to understanding the processes through which they survive as a group in the midst of non-Gypsy society. In this article I analyse how the Gitanos of Jarana (Madrid) work upon the past so as to remove certain past events and periods from the communal gaze and to ensure that others receive only limited elaboration. I also explore the links between these Gitanos’ downplaying of the past in their accounts of themselves and their particular ways of organizing social relations. Therefore, my focus lies on the relationships between the past and the imagined community, and between the latter and its structural supports.

For the fact is that most nonintellectual Rom do not seem to care where their ancestors came from. In all the time I have spent in Harangos, I have never once heard a spontaneous conversation about the geographical or historical roots of their own people. And even when once the Rom engaged the topic in response to my questioning, this was clearly to humour me and did not reflect any interest of their own (Stewart 1997: 28).

Stewart is not the only anthropologist to have remarked on the Gypsies’ sparse interest in their own past as a group, in his case the Hungarian Vlach Rom. San Román (1976: 17), writing about Gitanos from Madrid and Barcelona, explained how they, like other European Gypsies, ‘lack any deeply entrenched traditions about their origins’ (my translation). Because of their illiteracy, she said, their ‘knowledge [of their past] is very obscure and contradictory’ (1976: 16; my translation). In other work, I have described how the Gitanos of the neighbourhood I call ‘Jarana’,¹ in the south of Madrid, ‘produce only highly schematic and comparatively underdeveloped accounts of their past as a group’, and how these accounts are very rarely brought to the fore within the context of everyday life (Gay y Blasco 1999: 50). And yet, it is significant that the vast majority of monographs and edited volumes on Gypsies, whether taking an anthropological or sociological slant, have neglected to analyse the Gypsies’ attitudes towards their origins or their past. The result is that their lack of interest in such issues, whilst widely acknowledged, remains untheorized. This is also the case with works that attempt to reconstruct the Gypsies’ history and that, with few exceptions, have chosen to draw on non-Gypsy accounts and written records (but see Pasqualino 1997).

Given the important role that the concept of social or communal memory plays in anthropological accounts of shared identity, and given the recent proliferation of works on memory and ethnicity in Europe in particular, it is worth asking why authors who are, after all, writing about the perpetuation of Gypsy singularity in Europe, should have chosen not to question in depth the Gypsies' relationship with their past (cf. Acton & Mundy 1997; Gay y Blasco 1999; Lucassem, Willems & Cottar 1998; Okely 1983; Stewart 1997; 1999; Tebbutt 1998; Tong 1998). Our approach (for I include myself in this group) can be accounted for in positive terms: rather than imposing on the Gypsies the Western notion that images of the past are prerequisite for the construction of imagined communities, these works reflect the Gypsies' own interests and world-views which, most often, revolve around the awareness that Gypsiness does not depend on the invocation of memory. However, the fact remains that the question of how the Gypsies' approach to the past might illuminate their particular mode of being in the world has, until now, not been sufficiently addressed (but see Williams 1984: 414–22; Stewart 2000).

In this article I argue that understanding how the Gitanos of Jarana conceptualize and manage the past is in fact essential to understanding the processes through which they tenaciously survive as Gitanos in the midst of an aggressive non-Gypsy society. Instead of assuming that the Gitanos' lack of interest in the past is a consequence of their 'temperament' as a people (Quintana & Floyd 1972), I am concerned with elucidating the dynamics of obliteration and commemoration as they take place in the neighbourhood. These are the mechanisms through which the past is worked upon so that certain events and periods are removed from the communal gaze and others, albeit the focus of some elaboration, are only rarely rehearsed. To this end, I explore the links between these Gitanos' downplaying of the past in their accounts of themselves as part of 'the Gitano people' (*el pueblo Gitano*) and their particular ways of organizing social relations in Jarana. Therefore, although I review briefly some dimensions of the historical positioning of the Gitanos among the non-Gypsies that might be seen as instrumental in having generated a present-oriented form of communal self-representation, my focus lies on the relationships between the past and the imagined community, and between the latter and its structural supports as they play themselves out in present-day Jarana.

How relevant attitudes towards the past are for understanding the particular processes through which groups of people come to act and also to see themselves as such has already been demonstrated by Carsten's analysis of 'forgetting' among Malaysian islanders. Describing a reluctance to talk about the past reminiscent of these Gypsies, she (1995: 318) explains how 'forgetting is an important part of the creation of shared identity', because '[p]ieces of knowledge which are not passed on have a kind of negative significance in that they allow other images of shared identity in the present and the future to come to the fore'. 'Identity' works here as a shorthand to refer to both relatedness and links to place, and hence points more widely to key features of the social and political organization.

Whereas among Carsten's Malaysian islanders 'forgetting' emerged in conjunction with widespread migration at the edges of the Southeast Asian state

(1995: 326 ff.), among the Gitanos the main points of reference are economic, social, and moral marginalization, resistance to cultural and political assimilation, and, in particular, radical intra-community fragmentation and dispersal. Moreover, whilst in the Malaysian case it is siblingship in the present and the future that works as the idiom through which attachment to place and to others is constructed (Carsten 1995: 323), in Jarana the sense of who they are that Gitanos share with each other is premised on the current performances of individual persons and the extent to which these are seen to adhere to the *leyes Gitanas* (Gitano laws), the highly reified Gitano gendered morality (Gay y Blasco 1999). In fact, the people of Jarana not only downplay the past in their accounts of themselves: unlike the non-Gypsies that surround them, they also disregard any notion of shared territory or social harmony as routes to community-making. These Gitanos stress instead what they call their 'way of being' (*manera de ser*) in the 'now' (*ahora*) as the foundation of their singularity. Their perspective is well summarized by Gitano activist Agustín Vega Cortés when he says that 'it is our shared rules that guide our interaction and that are both the basis of our shared identity and the guarantee that we will endure as a people ... One is a Gitano in as much as one accepts and upholds the Gitano laws' (1997: 4; my translation).

In what follows I discuss three interconnected dimensions of the attitudes towards the past of the people of Jarana. First, I deal with their accounts of 'the life of before' (*la vida de antes*), the schematic descriptions of 'life as it used to be' that effectively constitute the Gitanos' shared representation of their collective past. Secondly, I describe their treatment of the dead and their mourning practices. Thirdly, in that description I deal with the personalized reminiscences of individual women and men. Like many other Gypsies, the people of Jarana very seldom refer to the past, whether to talk about their own memories or about the 'history of the Gitanos' (*la historia de los Gitanos*) as a group. Similarly, a whole complex of practices, which include name avoidance and the destruction of the deceased's belongings, ensure that no individuals become part of the communal memory despite the fact that they are emotionally and elaborately memorialized by their close relatives. Most importantly, the people of Jarana themselves make an explicit connection between their active disregard for the past and their understanding of what it means to be a Gitano. Reflecting on his own ignorance about 'the life of before', Colombo, a man in his thirties, explained to me how 'we Gitanos are the only people who don't know their descent. We have always roamed the roads and we had no neighbours who could tell us who we were'. While his statement draws on the one image of the past widespread in Jarana, the nomadic 'life of before', like other Gitanos Colombo was also explicit in his rejection of the past, of territory, and of social harmony as repositories of Gypsiness.

It is this downplaying of the past – a past that is none the less powerfully present in the Gitanos' lives – in favour of present-centred forms of collective self-representation that I explore here. My premise is that in Jarana, as among the Sabarl islanders discussed by Battaglia, the communal obliteration of the past is best understood as a transformation of memory which has 'constructive social effects' rather than as an undesirable form of communal amnesia (Battaglia 1992: 14). I argue that the practices through which the

Gitanos of Jarana attempt to contain the unavoidable overspilling of the past into the present should be seen as essential to the processes through which 'the Gitano people' (*el pueblo Gitano*) is sustained and reproduced, both as an imagined community and as a community realized in everyday life through particular social relations. These practices also involve a particular kind of communal forgetting, whereby information about past events and people is not passed on to the younger generations.

Images of a collective past

Images of the past lie at the core of the processes through which people in Europe come together as groups or communities. Summarizing an argument well established within the anthropology of the region, Zonabend (1984: 203) has explained how it is the 'collective memory' that 'conceives the notion of otherness, where possession of a history that is not shared gives the group its identity' (see also Caro Baroja 1970; Díaz Viana 1988; Karakosidou 1997; Prat, Martínez, Contreras & Moreno 1991; Velasco 1988). In the Burgundy village of Minot, as in Santa María del Monte in rural León (Behar 1986; 1991) or in Talpa in post-socialist Bulgaria (Kaneff 1998), descriptions of current life are always contrasted to what life was like in 'the old days' so that 'Time lived has two sides to it, a present and a past, and the former only gains meaning when related to the latter' (Zonabend 1984: 2).

The attitude towards the past of the inhabitants of Jarana stands in contrast with this European image. Although Gitano daily life involves a continuous and very often verbal reflection on Gitano singularity, the people of the neighbourhood seldom find it necessary to explain what they and their lives are like in the 'now' (*ahora*) by reference to the 'before' (*antes*). How uninterested in their past they are is well illustrated by the answer that Grandmother Ana gave to my enquiries about 'the history of the Gitanos': 'you are rather stupid', she said, 'you could have been a lawyer or a doctor and here you are, *asking about things no one cares about*'. In fact, these Gitanos do not make of the telling of individual or shared memories a communitarian affair and they lack any institutionalized context where a body of myths, genealogies, or legends would be openly or elaborately rehearsed.

It was thus mainly in the form of responses to my questions, and always through brief, stereotyped, and hastily delivered descriptions, that I gained access to the Gitanos' ideas about their shared past, ideas that which crystallize around the a-historical, changeless period of unknown duration that they call *la vida de antes*, 'the life of before'. 'Before', I was told, the Gitanos lived in the countryside, moving from village to village: they were 'always on the roads' (*siempre por los caminos*). They were very poor and had a difficult existence. They stole from the non-Gypsies, whom they call 'Payos',² and suffered at the hands of the Guardia Civil, the rural semi-military police. The 'life of before' was hard and miserable, it was *arrastrada* (low, dragged). Tío Juan, a much-respected elderly Gitano, gave me the following version:

Before, this finished about thirty or forty or fifty years ago, the Gitanos went from village to village. They stayed in a village for a while until the Guardia Civil came to throw them

out. Some *guardias* were polite, others were evil, but very evil. A Gitano woman would be cooking some food over the fire and the *guardias* would kick the pot and break it and spill all the food. Some Gitanos used to make baskets with wicker from the sides of the river. When the Gitanos arrived in a village the Payos would shout: 'the Gitanos! the Gitanos are coming!' They said they stole everything. It is true that the Gitanos would take a hen, or a cabbage, or vegetables from the fields.

La vida de antes tells of a time separated from the present and lacking temporal markers, rather than of a developmental or a generative period: it is a description of a way of life, permanent and unchanging, not of a progression through time. The 'before' it describes extends back from the experiences of some of the older people of the neighbourhood into a static past whose actual depth is of no interest to the Gitanos. As such, it has an undeniable affinity with images of 'the days of long ago', of the 'past without contours' (Zonabend 1984: 2), that lie at the core of the images of the past of small peasant communities throughout Europe. However, among such peasants, as among many urban dwellers (Thurén 1988), '[t]he question[s] people most frequently put to the past are: how did their community come into existence ...?' (Behar 1986: 269). On the other hand, 'the life of before' includes no origin stories, no accounts of how the Gitanos came to be what they are and where they are. And, by contrast with the tales of relatively recent social and political change and modernization so widespread throughout rural and urban Spain (Behar 1991; Collier 1997; Harding 1984; Thurén 1988), the people of Jarana, themselves the protagonists of many of these processes, provide no insights as to how 'the life of before' ended and came to give way to 'the life of now' (*la vida de ahora*). This is the case even though personal memories sometimes blend with and give a dose of experiential force to accounts of 'the life of before'. Fernando, a man in his late fifties who spent much of his life around and across the frontier with Portugal, told me about *la vida de antes* in the following terms:

I really know what it is like to live an errant life. Most people here will tell you [about 'the life of before'], but they really don't know anything, they've always lived in Madrid, perhaps they've gone out to sell trousers or material, watches and so on. But, truly, truly, they don't know what it's like, to stop in a village for only two or three hours, to walk behind the donkey with your child sitting on it tied with a rope so that she won't fall.

Indeed, for most of the inhabitants of Jarana *la vida de antes* recounts a way of life in which they themselves did not participate. The majority, no matter their age, were born and have spent their whole lives in Madrid: many of the neighbourhood's families came to the capital at the time of the 'rural exodus', the huge rural-urban migration movement that, in response to the country's economic recovery and industrial development, swept across Spain during the late 1950s and early 1960s.³ Even before arriving in the cities, most Gitanos were already partly or even wholly sedentary and had been so at least since the end of the nineteenth century (San Román 1994: 35). And yet this sedentary and often urban life that makes up the Gitanos' more recent past is not incorporated into images of the 'before'. The *antes* was simply a period of poverty, hardship, nomadism, and ignorance (*ignorancia*). After the 'before' comes the *ahora* (now) when the Gitanos live better, have proper houses, dress

'modern' (*moderno*), and 'know more' (*saben más*). The distance between the two periods is described through idioms of progress (*progreso*) and modernity (*ser moderno*), but the transition between them is not discussed.

Even though the 'before' and the 'now' act as counterpoints and derive much of their symbolic power from their contrast, it is clear that the hold that 'the life of before' has over the Gitanos' imaginations also resides in the way it resonates with some of the most determining and persistent dimensions of their collective experiences. *La vida de antes* conveys in very striking ways the difference between Gitanos and Payos, and the Gitanos' oppression and marginality, as well as describing their alien status, their slight hold over the conditions of their existence, and their persecution at the hands of the Payo majority. Thus, although today less than 5 per cent of all Spanish Gypsies are nomadic (Cebrián Abellán 1992), forty years of Francoist dictatorship and twenty-five of democracy have subjected them to repeated forced resettlements and to growing control by local authorities, particularly in the large cities of the centre and north of the Iberian Peninsula. Often, as in Jarana, such resettlements have gone hand in hand with compulsory re-education schemes, and again and again the Guardia Civil or the police have acted as the enforcers. Moreover, in many of the districts where they have been concentrated, again including Jarana, the Gitanos' presence has been highly resented and just as in 'the life of before' they have been the objects of constant protests and demonstrations (López Varas & Fresnillo Pato 1995). So, they are well aware that most Payos see the Gitanos as unwelcome interlopers, and the Gitanos resent the many ways control over their lives is taken away from them: Luis, a young man from the neighbourhood, captured the quality of transience that, today as in the past, characterizes much of Gitano life when he told me that 'being a Gitano is an eternal passing without going anywhere' (*ser Gitano es un eterno pasar sin ir a ninguna parte*).

Luis's phrase powerfully evokes the nomadic, harsh Gitano life enshrined in accounts of *la vida de antes*. In so doing, it also cuts directly through to the key concerns of this article. Why, given that the past provides the Gitanos with such powerful images for conveying the experience of being a Gitano, is it not given a more prominent role in their lives and in their self-representations? Secondly, why and how are the Gitanos' recent experiences, for instance of extreme urban poverty or of increasing persecution at the hands of the state, obliterated?

Commemorating and obliterating the dead

In Jarana, 'the life of before' does coexist with the recent, eventful past of people's personal memories. However, in the eyes of the Gitanos this recent past belongs to the *difuntos allegados*, the 'beloved deceased', and it is for this reason that, according to the people of the neighbourhood, it has to be removed from the gaze of the group. Talking about the past, they explain, means bringing the beloved deceased to mind and painfully re-experiencing the tie of love that unites relatives. Indeed, on the rare occasions when they reminisce, the Gitanos produce short, dramatic vignettes that contrast with the stereotyped and static 'life of before' and that are populated by the people,

many of whom are now dead and sorely missed, who shared the event with the teller. Many Gitanos cry when they talk about the past and the beloved deceased, and all appear visibly moved.

We must therefore look to the mnemonic practices through which the Gitanos deal with the dead to find the recent, personal past and hence the discrete, affective pasts that link relatives to each other in the present. In Jarana we find parallels with lowland Amazonia where, according to Taylor (1993: 654), '[w]hile it is true that the dead are very rapidly obliterated as individuals, and that more pains are taken to avoid the past than to celebrate links with it, it must also be said that relations with the dead are undoubtedly subjected to extensive conceptual ... elaboration'. Significantly, it is through such conceptual and highly emotional elaboration that the Jarana Gitanos intentionally contain and eventually obliterate the recent past, thus separating it from the present and from their shared self-representations.

At first sight, much of what people do and say in relation to the dead seems aimed at erasing their memory. Just as they seldom look to *la vida de antes*, the Gitanos are reluctant to discuss loved relatives or companions who are now dead and go out of their way not to make others think of *their* deceased relations, for example by removing as many material reminders of the dead as possible. Sara, in whose house I lived, was always careful not to mention her dead mother-in-law, and particularly not to do so in front of her husband Paco, who had loved his mother, widowed since his early childhood, dearly. Even in his absence, Sara referred to the dead woman either obliquely or through formal kinship terms ('my poor little aunt, may she rest in peace') rather than by her name. And although their flat was small, the room that had been Ramón's mother's remained locked and unused almost to the end of my stay, when Sara asked me to help her dispose of the dead woman's bed. Together we separated, bent, and twisted the various metal pieces, scattering the remains throughout several rubbish containers. But although we transformed the room thoroughly, whitewashing, redecorating, and turning it into a much-needed parlour, Ramón never even looked in. It was, Sara said, simply too painful. For the same reason, shortly after her death four years earlier, the dead woman's belongings had been burnt and her photographs had been either torn to pieces or hidden: there were no photographs of Ramón's mother, or of anybody no longer alive, visible anywhere in the house.

All these strategies, Sara told me, were necessary to save Ramón unnecessary added pain: the beloved deceased must be prevented from appearing in the mind of the living (*para que la difunta allegada no se represente*). It is, then, because one loves that one should strive to forget. And yet it is also because one loves so deeply that one cannot and indeed should not forget: 'no matter how long I live, I keep my dead present (*los tengo presentes*) every day ... The Gitanos never forget their beloved deceased'. I recall arriving one evening at the house of Sara's relative Tío Juan, only to find him and his wife Tía Tula rummaging through a plastic bag holding old sepia photographs of kin dead for decades. Looking at one picture at a time, the couple were sobbing loudly and dabbing at their eyes with handkerchiefs. One photograph in particular made Tío Juan cry harder than the rest. It was very blurred and he, badly afflicted by cataracts, could barely distinguish a fuzzy human form: still, in that

piece of old paper lingered the image of the sister he had loved best, dead thirty years. When their grandson Alberto arrived on the scene, he told the old couple off and blamed them for their unhappiness: 'One should not look at the photos of the dead; see what a state you get yourselves in! You should have burnt them.'

Like sifting through a bagful of old photographs, talking about a cherished kinsman who is now dead, seeing somebody using his clothes, or hearing his favourite song, evokes the most powerful and distressing images and the resulting sadness is so overpowering that it is best avoided. Thus, because Ramón's mother loved to sing, five years after her death Sara and his other kin still avoided singing the songs she liked best or even singing at all in his presence. They did not openly discuss their silence, but its reason was clear to those who had known the deceased, and to them alone. This silent commemorating of the dead, which goes hand in hand with their removal from the eyes of the group, was described to me as a result of grief, something that 'comes from within' (*sale de dentro*), just like fulfilling the promises made to a person now dead or taking on mourning (*luto*). It is only the immediate kin who commemorate the dead in this way, and it is they who mourn: in the case of Ramón's mother, her children, siblings, grandchildren, and her sons- and daughters-in-law. To an uninformed observer like an unrelated Gitano or an anthropologist, *luto* appears as the most visible mnemonic practice. Whilst in mourning, the people of Jarana dress completely in black, always with long sleeves. Women wear black headscarves tied beneath the chin and refrain from using any jewellery or make-up; men grow beards. A person in mourning does not drink or smoke, watch television, listen to the radio, or socialize, and it is imperative that others should show them *respeto* (respect), making sure that they are not disturbed by music or noise: failing to respect the *luto* of others is an offence weighty enough as to justify a full blood feud.

Luto lasts for varying periods of time, depending on the nature of the tie between the deceased and the mourner, and on the latter's emotional disposition. One mourns, Sara and her sister Clara explained, 'until one is fulfilled' (*hasta que te cumpla*); that is, as long as one feels compelled to mourn, independently of others' opinions and pressures. The feelings that should trigger mourning, they stressed, cannot be imposed from the outside, and taking on *luto* has to be a decision arising out of personal emotions that only the individual involved really knows. Fulfilment comes after months or years and, in the case of widows, should never be reached. Clara was adamant: if her husband Lolo died, she would mourn him until her own death. But mourning properly, she warned, is difficult. Rather than doing it half-heartedly, as Paco's drug-addict brother had after their mother's death, one should abstain from doing it at all: 'you'd rather wear *luto* short and good than long and bad'. Wearing *luto*, like refraining from talking about the dead or avoiding the foods and activities they liked, is an expression of love and respect towards them. Tía Tula, explaining why one should take on mourning only if one truly loved the deceased, told me, 'for me to wear mourning all my flesh must hurt'.

The idea of love between relatives, dead or alive, therefore lies at the core of the Gitanos' strategies of simultaneous commemoration and obliteration of the recent past. Tía Tula described this tie of love between kin: 'To us Gitanos the family is the most fundamental thing, that is your father, your mother,

your siblings, your family, your uncles, your *everything*, it is the greatest [thing] there is'. In Jarana, as elsewhere in Spain, the Gitanos organize themselves for political, economic, and sociable purposes along shallow patrigrup (*raza*) lines rarely more than four generations in depth, which come together through circumstance and chance as much as through the application of patrilineal principles (Gay y Blasco 1999; San Román 1976). However, although the Gitanos structure conflicts around revenge and solve them through the spatial separation of the groups involved, the public silence surrounding the dead and the personalized and hence short-lived character of their commemoration put limits on the extent to which feuding works as a mnemonic device.⁴ The kinship ideals through which *razas* coalesce and oppose each other in daily life build not so much on idioms of shared ancestry projecting back into the past as on the belief that love towards each other and towards particular beloved deceased binds relatives in the present (Gay y Blasco 1999: 144-5). Consider the Foros, the largest patrigrup in Jarana and the one that exerts the most control over the neighbourhood. There are two Foro sub-groups living in the area: the Juanes, the sons and grandsons of Tío Juan; the Sebastianes, the descendants of Tío Sebas, an agnatic nephew of Tío Juan who died ten years ago. Since then, and although Juanes and Sebastianes see themselves as two distinct groups of people with different characters and attributes, the Sebastianes have accepted the leadership of Tío Juan. They have done this, they say, out of love and respect for Tío Sebas who, in turn, 'loved Tío Juan very, very much'.

Therefore, just as it is through kinship, and particularly patrigrup affiliation, that social fragmentation is created and objectified, it is through the way they deal with dead kin that this fragmentation is circumscribed to the present and the recent past. One's beloved deceased are kept apart from unrelated Gitanos, who should never refer to them or mention their names or even know about them, and the love of particular groups of people towards particular beloved deceased unifies them, gives them points of reference (food, songs, activities they feel they must avoid) that other Gitanos know must exist but to which they cannot explicitly point. The beloved deceased are in fact treasured and protected above all: the worst insult that a Gitano can hurl at another is to 'shit on their dead' (*cagarse en sus muertos*), and to 'mention their dead' (*mentarle a sus muertos*) is an offence grave enough to justify outright feuding. It is, then, to particular, known beloved deceased rather than to 'the Gitanos of before' that the inhabitants of Jarana feel emotionally attached. Ultimately, however, these individual dead are soon removed from the eyes of the Gitano collective at large, as well as from the eyes of those more distant descendants who did not know them personally, and this kinship-based, intra-community fragmentation fails to be projected onto the Gitanos' images of their shared past. There the Gitanos appear as a homogeneous, undifferentiated group of people.

Downplaying the past: the imagined community and its structural supports

Although the past is powerfully present in the lives of the people of Jarana, it is present in a far from straightforward manner. The commemoration of the

dead, which takes up an enormous amount of emotional energy, and of social and cultural space, is simultaneously highly personalized and geared to the communal obliteration of individuals and of the specificities of their lives. The 'life of before' that echoes key aspects of the current experiences of the people of Jarana is, at the same time, rarely brought to bear upon their daily lives. And other ways of addressing the past, in particular through the notions of history that so much preoccupy the non-Gypsies around them, are of no interest to the Gitanos, who describe themselves as a 'kind of people who don't know about those Payo things'. Thus, much of what people do in relation to the past results in (a) representations of the past being sidelined in their images of themselves as a group; and (b) much information about the past not being passed on to the younger generations, and hence forgotten by the group at large. Understanding the Gitanos' particular way of dealing with the 'before' is thus essential to understanding their particular way of being in the world, including how they locate themselves in time and how they face the non-Gypsies, and how they reproduce themselves as a distinct kind of community.

Similar forms of communal, and in some senses intentional, disengagement from the past have been outlined for the French Kalderash Rom and the French Manouches. Unlike the *gadze* that surround them, these groups lack 'saga-memories' or 'epic-memories' (Williams 1993: 3). Instead, they downplay the singularity of particular past occurrences and see themselves as existing in a timeless present (Williams 1984: 417). By contrast, in Jarana *la vida de antes* often works as a counterpoint to present conditions and the Gitanos sometimes draw on notions of progress and modernity when comparing themselves to their ancestors. However, and like the Rom and the Manus, they remove events and individuals from the communal imagination and emphasize the homogeneity of the 'before' and its protagonists. The dead are depersonalized and remain known only to those who loved them, and *la vida de antes* tells of a dispersed but undifferentiated group of people who shared with each other a way of life and a standpoint in relation to the Payo majority.

This homogeneity in the 'before' extends itself to the 'now', where it is essential in enabling Jarana men and women to come to see themselves as part of 'the Gitano people' (*el pueblo Gitano*). In the neighbourhood, as among Gitanos elsewhere in Spain (Anta Félez 1994; Gamella 1996; San Román 1976), it is the sense of moral correspondence between Gitanos that links the person to the imagined community against a social context governed by strong centrifugal forces, by the weakness of structural ties linking unrelated Gitanos, and, most importantly, by the absence of any notion of intra-community coherence, harmony, or solidarity as premises for the realization of Gypsiness. Indeed, the absence of heroes or figure-heads from the image of 'the life of before', itself resulting from the Gitanos' relationship with the beloved deceased, finds a parallel in the portrayals the inhabitants of Jarana make of 'the Gitanos' (*los Gitanos*) in the present, and of themselves as part of this entity. They see 'the Gitano people' as a scattered aggregate of persons, of undefined size, origin, and location, who, despite the antagonistic relations they have with each other, rule their lives by the 'Gitano laws' and are similarly positioned *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world.

'The life of before' thus tells us in very powerful ways, not only about the experiences of displacement and persecution of the Gitanos, but also about the mutually sustaining relationship between the imagined community and the community as it is brought about in daily life: it points to dispersal, fragmentation, and moral homogeneity as essential to the realization of Gypsiness. Indeed, ever since they first arrived in the Peninsula early in the fifteenth century, relations among Gitanos have been characterized by a strong lack of social and political cohesion and by the absence of any clearly defined frame of communal reference external to Gitano individuals themselves. The first Gitanos are documented as having arrived in Spain in clearly defined groups of up to one hundred people, headed by named 'counts' and 'dukes', which claimed no political affinity with each other: they arrived separately and travelled separately throughout the country (Leblon 1987: 17; Sánchez Ortega 1986: 18; San Román 1994: 13-15). In present-day Spain, dispersal and social fragmentation are equally essential to the Gitanos' experiences of Gypsiness, and a long list of factors divides Gitanos from each other. Among these are region of origin and with it a series of important social and cultural elements, as well as religious affiliation, which separates the growing numbers of Evangelical converts from others, economic differentiation along a very broad spectrum, and kinship affiliation. This last, invoked as the most powerful reason why they must restrict their contact with unrelated Gitanos, in fact is often the idiom through which all other axes of differentiation are expressed.

Fighting among patrigrups is particularly significant. Because they believe that any quarrel, no matter how small, can easily develop into a full-blown feud, Gitanos throughout Spain live with their backs to each other, purposefully restricting daily sociability to their relatives (Gamella 1996; San Román 1994). My Gitano friends said that they would prefer to live dispersed in small groups of kin among non-Gypsies, and that they have only come together into a Gitano-only neighbourhood through the resettlement policies of the local authorities, as has happened throughout Spain. By distancing themselves from their neighbours, these Gitanos assert their association with their kin and reject cohesiveness with non-kin, a cohesiveness which they see as characteristic of the non-Gypsy 'way of being' (*manera de ser*). They also show little attachment to where they live: they ended up in Jarana, but they say that they just as easily might have ended up in any of the other 'special Gitano neighbourhoods' built by the state in the Madrid suburbs.

And here is where this sense of homogeneity, the sense of moral correspondence, among Gitanos that emerges so powerfully within the context of their dealings with the past and the dead comes into play. In spite of all these differentiations and fragmentations, the sense of community that the people of Jarana share with each other and with Gitanos everywhere is extremely strong. As I have shown, this sense is not anchored to any notions of community comparable to those of the non-Gypsies around them: territory, history, and attachment to a state, are all absent from their self-conceptualizations. Similarly, as I have explained elsewhere (Gay y Blasco 1999), the people of Jarana do not see themselves as belonging to a society in the traditional anthropological sense: they have no concept of a structure of statuses that

individuals would occupy and vacate upon death, and also disregard any notion that parochial interests should or would work to the benefit of the group at large. 'Community', as an analytical translation for the Gitano concept of *pueblo* (people), refers not to 'communion' but to 'commonality'.

As in the Gitanos' representations of their shared past in 'the life of before', 'the Gitanos of now' (*los Gitanos de ahora*) as an imagined community is premised on the belief that each Gitano upholds the Gitano morality in the here and now, or the there and then. The emphasis is thus on the person as a performer of the 'Gitano laws', including those that dictate how conflict should be managed, and hence as the generator of the difference between Gypsies and non-Gypsies. The ideal of the group thus revolves around the ideal of the ordinary Gypsy person, and the two are metonymically related: the notion of 'the Gitano people' effectively grows out of the Gitanos' awareness of each other as moral beings. Divisions and fragmentations are not seen as impediments to the realization of this entity, and there is no sense that they must be bridged in order for the sense of moral commonality to exist.

Essential to this emphasis on the person as the creator of the difference between Gypsies and non-Gypsies is thus not only a lack of interest in the physical location, boundaries, and size of the group, but also the strong disregard for the past that has been the focus of this article. In the Gitano case this disregard is best understood as an active concern with the overflowing of the past into the present, which leads to the containment practices that I have discussed in my description of the 'beloved deceased'. This work of containment is one of the key mechanisms through which the Gitano community, understood in the terms I have outlined above, is sustained and reproduced, not only internally but also in the context of the Gitanos' immersion within non-Gypsy society.

Since the Gitanos' arrival in the Peninsula, the boundary between Gypsies and non-Gypsies has been highly permeable: historically, Gitanos have given up the Gitano way of life and taken up non-Gypsy ways, and non-Gypsies have done the reverse, becoming absorbed among the Gitanos with relative ease (Gómez Alfaro 1992: 75; Sánchez Ortega 1986: 32). Today, the people of Jarana talk of 'Payo-like Gitanos' (*Gitanos apayados*) and of 'Gitano-like Payos' (*Payos agitanados*), of which there are several in the neighbourhood, married to Gitanos and bringing up their children as such. In Jarana, being born a Gitano, and a member of a particular patrigrp, represents a potentiality for Gypsiness rather than its fulfilment. Because Gitano ancestry is not and has never been a guarantee of Gitano identity, that identity has to be actively realized by those who call themselves Gitano.⁵ And because it is possible for Gitanos to give up the 'Gitano laws' and take up the Payo way of life, the permanence and continuity of the Gitanos as a people does not rely on the transmission of essences from the past together with knowledge of the origins and trajectory of the group. Rather, containing the past and looking to the present are a way of imagining and constructing the community that is particularly appropriate for a dispersed, illiterate, and marginalized group with fluctuating membership which lacks claims to a territory and which suffers strong pressures to dissolve into the majority.

And yet, this homogeneity and concomitant forgetting of the past are not easy to achieve. Just as notions of moral correspondence and undifferentiation

are essential to how Gitanos create themselves as a group, fragmentations among Gitanos are also essential to their experience of Gypsiness, and are even more strongly felt. Key emotive focuses of these differentiations are the 'beloved deceased' who embody the patrigroup, the particular, the idiosyncratic, as well as specific events in people's lives. Whilst the notion of 'the Gitano people' enables Gitanos to imagine themselves as not alone in their dealings with the non-Gypsies, it is the group of kin that provides the people of Jarana with the actual day-to-day support and emotional and practical validation of the positive value of their difference.

Thus, references to the dead are not used in Jarana to legitimate hierarchies or inequalities in the present. These are mnemonic practices that do not easily fit the standard anthropological picture of the past being a manipulable resource, used to support claims to power or status. Instead, in Jarana the commemoration of the dead has a different, but equally significant, meaning: it tells of the Gitano experience of belonging to and living within the margins of particular groups of kin, and of experiencing all outsiders, both Payos and Gitanos, as threats. Love towards kin – alive or deceased, in the 'now' or in the 'before' – gives this kinship heterogeneity its huge experiential force.

However, this kinship differentiation should not be projected onto the imagined community. Even memories of fighting between patrigroups are relatively short-lived, rarely surviving further than the younger individuals who were alive at the time of the conflict, and the power of feuding as a mnemonic device is concomitantly weak. The dead and their deeds are only memorialized by those who knew them because it is through mimesis that the Gitanos reach out to each other, and it is mimesis that they rely upon for mutual recognition in the midst of a hostile world. When they die, the men and women of Jarana do not leave behind empty slots in the social order: 'the Gitanos' is not a collection of positions or statuses; it is an aggregate of people who perform the same morality in the here and now. Containing the past, and eventually obliterating much of it, enables Gypsiness to remain across space, time, and social transformations, unthreatened by the death of individual Gitanos and by the very different conditions under which Gitanos live throughout Spain.

Concluding remarks

Whilst I was carrying out fieldwork I met Gitanos who sometimes talked about the past in ways different from the ones I have described in this article. They were Evangelical pastors and, on occasion, their wives or other particularly keen members of their congregations. In response to my questions about the Gitanos' origins, they told me that they are in fact Jews who became lost during Moses' forty years of wandering through the Sinai Desert: the Bible is their history. They also described the origins of Evangelism and talked in particular about its 'founder', Luther, who, according to some, was the same person as Martin Luther King. And they gave me a small text written by a Gitano convert, which related the story of Gypsy Evangelism from its beginnings in France in the 1950s (Cano 1981).

The incipient interest in their origins by these Gitanos, who none the less keep the same practices regarding the dead as their neighbours and who talk about 'the life of before' in the same terms, goes hand in hand with a novel way of conceiving 'the Gitano people' and with a novel pattern of sociability. In their sermons, Evangelical pastors go a long way towards rejecting social fragmentation as a path towards the realization of Gypsiness: feuding must cease, they argue, and all Gitanos must unite as both Christians and Gitanos to bring about God's plan for humanity. In Jarana, these converts socialize with non-kin, preach to unrelated Gitanos (but not to Payos), and come together at services and campaigns aimed at spreading the word of God to other Gitanos. In the summer, they travel to join thousands of other Gypsy converts in huge religious assemblies called *convenciones*. They have also set in place the beginnings of a new hierarchy of power and status, which is based on the positions of authority of the Church and which transcends kinship differentiation, allowing some men – the best-known pastors, famed for their preaching or their ability to cure or cast off demons – to exert their influence over hundreds or even thousands of converts.

In light of the material that I have put forward in this article, it is significant that the converts of Jarana, who are proposing to other Gitanos a new model of Gypsiness based on non-Gypsy organizational patterns, have also found it necessary to claim for themselves a myth of origin and a history. A thorough discussion of how Evangelism builds upon and transforms the understandings and practices that I have described here is beyond the scope of this article (see Gay y Blasco 2000). However, it is clear that managing the past is essential to the mechanisms through which the Gitanos come to see themselves and act as communities of particular kinds. How the past is dealt with – whether it is suddenly 'remembered' in the manner of these converts, or privately memorialized and communally forgotten, as with the 'beloved deceased' – points not only to the processes through which personal and group identities are constructed but also, and even more significantly, to the social relationships upon which such identities are built.

Perhaps because expressions of Gypsy identity often appear to be so powerful and unambiguous, scholarly work on Gypsies has too often taken for granted the social relations upon which the reproduction of Gypsiness depends: the perpetuation of Gypsiness is seen as the result of an extraordinary and largely unexplained tenacity in the face of timeless oppression (Gmelch 1986; Hancock 1992; Kaprow 1982; Salo 1979; 1986). Accounts of Gypsy life regularly reduce the Gypsies' understandings of themselves to the stereotypes they hold of themselves and the non-Gypsies, and the actual processes through which Gypsies reach out (or not) to other Gypsies have generally been left untheorized (exceptions include Okely 1983; Pasqualino 1997; Stewart 1997; Williams 1984). By questioning the relationship with the past of the people of Jarana my aim has been to ground the Gitanos' tenacious awareness of their difference in the social relations that sustain it. In particular, I have considered the weakness of frames of communal reference external to Gitano individuals themselves, a trait shared by many Gypsy groups, and have asked how they manage to bring about and reproduce 'the Gitano people'. Contrary to common assumptions in academia and else-

where, the past is central to these Gitano processes of making identity and community.

NOTES

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¹'Jarana' and the names of all persons in this article are pseudonyms.

²The Gitanos use '*Payo*' to refer to non-Gypsies and as an insult. To non-Gypsies, *Payo* is simply a descriptive, neutral word. The dictionary of the Real Academia (1992) defines *Payo* as non-Gypsy and as uncouth villager or peasant. Alternatively, the Gitanos use *paisano* (person of the land) as a less rude euphemism. Both terms emphasize the links of the non-Gypsies to the land and, by implication, the Gitanos' distance from it.

³At least 7.5 per cent of the Spanish population moved from villages to large cities during the 1950s, and 2 million people were displaced between 1961 and 1965 (Cebrián Abellán 1992: 40).

⁴Although knowledge of genealogical connections in Jarana extends as far back as four generations, as among the Manus (Williams 1993: 14), this is a relatively short period of time because of the young age at marriage: 13–20 for women, 14–22 for men.

⁵See Martins-Heuss (1989: 195) for a comparable analysis of the relationship between personal and group identities among German Sinti and Roma.

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'Nous ignorons nos origines': comment les Gitans de Jarana gèrent le passé

Resumé

Bien que les Gitans aient souvent été décrits comme un peuple 'tourné vers le présent', la question de savoir comment leur attitude envers le passé pourrait apporter de la lumière sur leur mode particulière d'être dans le monde est restée hors de la plupart des discussions théoriques. Or il est essentiel de comprendre comment les Gitans gèrent le passé pour comprendre les mécanismes de leur survie en tant que groupe au sein de la société non-gitane. Dans cet article, j'analyse comment les Gitanos de Jarana (Madrid) travaillent sur le passé afin de retirer certains événements et certaines périodes des regards inquisiteurs de la communauté et afin d'assurer que d'autres ne reçoivent qu'une élaboration limitée. J'explore aussi les relations entre la façon dont ces Gitans minimisent le passé dans leurs récits personnels et dans l'organisation particulière de leurs rapports sociaux. Je me concentre donc sur les rapports entre le passé et la communauté imaginée, et entre cette dernière et ses supports structurels.

School of Anthropological Studies, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN. P.Gay-y-Blasco@qub.ac.uk