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Book Review

Gypsy and Traveller Girls. Silence, Agency and Power

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As its author proudly proclaims, *Gypsy and Traveller Girls* is the first book to give voice to the children of itinerant communities in Scotland (p. 2) and, more importantly, their 'gendered educational experiences' (p. 75). While research exists on GRT (as Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers are officially referred to in the UK) who live in England, Wales and Ireland, no gender studies have ever been carried out on these groups in Scotland. The ethnographic data at the basis of the book are therefore invaluable in their uniqueness. They are interviews with 13 girls, most of them teenagers except for one 22-year-old, and focus groups carried out with them, which reveal a wealth of issues, emotions, reactions to prejudices, sufferings and aspirations in the lives of Gypsy and Traveller girls. Yet, praising Marcus' book solely or mainly for its data would be misconstruing it. The principal value of *Gypsy and Traveller Girls* is the fact that the book deals with the very complex and highly sensitive topic of education and the conflicts and tensions that emerge when young girls belonging to communities outside settled mainstream society enter in contact with its educational system and fundamental ethos. Marcus' book is a reminder that education is never a neutral process. Rather than introducing young adults to the practice of understanding critically themselves and the reality around them, education has a 'moral character' (Pring, 2004: 23 in Marcus, p. 79) and is generally a disciplinarian process whose main aim is to integrate young people into the established beliefs of the majoritarian portion of society. If understood and interpreted à la Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 1970), education is, of course, a humanising asset with 'power to emancipate' (Marcus, p.80, echoing hooks 1994, 2003) and not a 'banking' process aimed at filling empty recipients with information. However, education can often be an instrument of oppression and a way of perpetuating power and social/racial/gender discrimination as in the case of the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were removed from their families to be educated in various institutions and Catholic missions. Education can function to impose a particular stance and ideology, which is the reason behind the condemnation of Western-inspired models of schooling by extremist organisations such as Islamic Boko Haram in Northeast Nigeria, enacted by such ferocious strategies as the kidnapping of young girls attending school.

The conflictive relationship that Travellers and Gypsies have with the mainstream educational system in the UK has a long history, but has recently become a more problematic issue since these communities have been granted ethnic and minority status in the UK under the name of GRT (Gypsy and Roma since 1989 and Irish Travellers since 2000). According to sections 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Gypsy and Traveller children have the very same rights to access education as any other children in Scotland

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(Marcus, 2019: 76). As a signatory to this convention, the UK government has a duty to ensure children of mobile communities do not miss out on educational opportunities. Marcus notes that '[s]ince devolution, (…) the Scottish Parliament has taken a renewed interest in the situation of Scottish Gypsies and Travellers' (p. 95) and this of course is reflected in their attempts to improve education among them. Marcus also highlights the difference between the Scottish and the English systems, where the former favours a broader breadth of learning, while the latter prefers a more specialised and narrower focus. Despite such internal discrepancies, however, the GRT suspicious attitude to education is the same.

It is worth comparing Marcus' study with my own investigation in a different part of the country. In my ethnographic investigation of Irish Travellers in the south of England–first in a transient and later in a permanent council-run site (Piazza, 2021)–the issue of education kept creeping into the conversations I had with the mothers. The general orientation was towards a dislike of schooling beyond the elementary level and a preference for home learning on the grounds that children in education are told things they should not know about and mix with dangerous peers, thus losing their innocence as the excerpt below shows.

> Traveller. No, we haven't got problems in our school where the small kids is going.
>
> Interviewer. Right.
>
> TR. But they want the big kids to go to high school, but we don't want them-we want them in an all-girls school. We would send the girls but we want all-girls school. We would send them, yeah. (…)
>
> Int. Yeah, of course.
>
> TR. We wouldn't send them to a…
>
> Int. Okay, a mixed school, yeah.
>
> TR …boys and girls, yeah. Because there's big 16-year-old boys, 17-year-old, they smoke, they like….
>
> (Piazza's interviews)

The Traveller and Gypsy girls in Marcus' study benefit from Article 12, an organisation that uses government funds to cater to the educational needs of Gypsies and Travellers (not Roma). The scheme is part of a wide network of initiatives including the 2016 United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child that in section 20 addresses the social discrimination and stigmatization that GRT children still experience.

Marcus avoids generalising GRT and presenting them as a 'homogenous entity', rather she insists on the differences that exist between these ethnic groups in terms of 'languages, lifestyles, cultures and ways of expressing their unique identities' (p. ix). Throughout the UK, GRT have been outcast and demonised for being mobile and itinerant; alternatively, they have been exoticised, which is just another way of othering them (Riggins, 1997), through such TV programmes as UK Channel 4's television series *Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* or even pseudo highbrow films as *Chocolat* (2000). Despite being one of the oldest minorities in the country, GRT's existence is continuously under threat. The number of privately and publicly owned sites that are available to them are definitely much below the demand, and numerous laws are passed that restrict the movement of these communities, while at the same time impose forced mobility on them as the few council sites only allow short stays. The resistance to schooling when children grow up is, therefore, plausibly a way to mark the boundary of Travellers and Gypsies' identity and preserve their beliefs and traditions, a way to draw a separation between the society of settled or 'country people' and that to which 'tinkers' belong. In Basso's (1970) classic study, children of a Native American community who attended college outside the reservation were submitted to the rule of silence by their parents during their holiday visits home. Silence was effectively the parents' reminder that although the children were being trained in the big great world outside their community, they were still Native Americans and as such still expected to abide by the community's rules and respect their elders' etiquette. Ostracising and resisting mainstream schooling can be a similar Travellers and Gypsies' identity practice.

Marcus is very subtle in capturing the dilemma the Traveller and Gypsy girls encounter when embarking on schooling. The contrast between a mainstream system focusing on intellectual growth and abstract learning clashes with the girls' original beliefs in learning practical home skills to run a household efficiently and raise children with care and discipline. Islay, May, Dana, Sky, Iona, Fara, and the other girls in Marcus' study are caught between their desire and, possibly, their curiosity to learn at school and their family's expectations of 'honour [ing their] father and mother' (Marcus, 2019: 203), which can include respecting the community's strict attitudes and beliefs about decency and modesty. As I discovered in my study of Irish Travellers in the south of England (Piazza, 2014), mobile families exert continuous control on their children. Their lack of trust in 'gorjas' or settled people stems

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from what they see are their loose morals, from which they want to protect their girls, especially. In one of my interviews, a mother explains how Irish Travellers' morals radically differ from settled people's.

> Traveller. like our children would not be allowed to walk to that shop on their own
>
> Interviewer. they wouldn't?
>
> TR. no…our little girls would not be allowed to go out on their own…like it's a very, it's a very, it's not strict…but….
>
> TR 2. It's safe
>
> TR. yeah. We know where they are. (…) we're more stricter with our children. To be honest we are.
>
> Int. we? As in?
>
> TR. yes. All travelling people is more stricter with their children
>
> Int. yeah
>
> TR. then what others are like…like you wouldn't allow your children to go out…or like you wouldn't leave your children and go out. You wouldn't be able to do it…even, even the girls that are sixteen and seventeen.
>
> (Piazza's interviews)

Viewing mainstream society as corrupt and morally lax, Traveller and Gypsy parents limit the freedom of their girls who are not allowed to leave their community alone. Girls are trained to clean and take on caring responsibilities of the younger children at a very young age, which perpetuates a sexist upbringing. Being an 'honourable woman' is crucial for a Traveller and Gypsy and so is keeping the respect and support of the community. In my study I met young women separated from their spouses who told me they would never look for another man and would devote their life entirely to their children. In the eyes of the community, you cannot remarry or start a new life with a new partner. All this adds, crucially, to the split identity of the girls in Marcus' study who still perceive what they may be missing in their community's confinement when for instance they attend the youth centre. Dana, for example, reports she feels totally different in that space:

> We are really happy here because like when I'm at home I don't get nowhere, and I have to sit on the site, like we're in the trailer all day but then you come here you're actually somebody, and like you're talking to somebody. (Marcus, p. 211)

All this, however, does not rule out a wide variety of attitudes and very different ways in which progress has changed Travellers' and Gypsies' communities. Some of Marcus' participants are daughters of divorced and single mothers. Similarly, in my research some women expressed a new interpretation of marriage, as the excerpt below suggests:

> Traveller. I can't say this around but, you know what I mean, because gypsy people believe in staying, but I don't believe so…if my child wanted to leave her husband I'd say yeah, I'd say give me your baby and now go out and get and education, get a life. (Piazza's interviews)

Travellers and Gypsies, of course, are not the only communities in which young women are torn between different cultures. Marcus is very attentive to establishing similarities with other groups around the world for instance in the area of Islamic influence where the women's condition is complex**.** A recent PhD study conducted by a Saudi female researcher (Shalaan, 2020), for instance, found that women whose education, and learning of English specifically, is supported by parents, and the father in particular, perform much better than those who have to deal with indifferent or unsupportive families. In other words, in order to be successful, education must not challenge the students' original community.

If among Travellers and Gypsies education is contested and resisted for the reasons discussed so far, there are also other more basic reasons for the girls' poor academic performance and high dropout rate. These causes are not to be found in the traditional view of Traveller and Gypsy girls that a woman is expected solely to care for children and should not combine work and motherhood, in other words in their lack of interest in academic learning. Unfortunately, all too often behind a girl's poor attendance or low achievement is the racism to which she is victimised by at school.

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Racism is a socially constructed process whereby social groups categorise others as different and inferior and behave towards them accordingly. Marcus understands racism as a continuum (p. 12) and, following on from Trepagnier (2006), draws the useful difference between 'conscious' and 'dysconscious' racism. The dysconscious person is one who 'has impaired consciousness' and 'an uncritical habit of mind (…) that justifies inequity by accepting the existing order of things as given' (Marcus, p. 82). In schools, Traveller and Gypsy girls are seen as different and are racially discriminated against whether the other students are consciously or dysconsciously, overtly or covertly, racist. Usually associated with skin colour, race and ethnicity, racism towards GRT instead reflects the 'ethnicity conundrum' (Marcus, p. 82) to which for instance Jews, being as white as their persecutors, were also victimised. The social exclusion or marginality of GRT is deep-seated but not based on any objectively apparent physical difference. It is often impossible to distinguish between a Traveller and a 'country person' or 'gorja'. Yet, girls in schools' report being treated differently not solely by their peers but also by their teachers who, they feel, often offer little support for them. Fara, for instance, one of the participants in Marcus' study, complains: 'I think the teachers could have done more, I really do think–as adults they could have done more. I think they should' (p. 189). Similarly, in my own study, the mothers mentioned the racist insults their children received at school: 'Most children feel like oh they're getting picked on they called me a gypsy, they called me a pikey, they don't like me cos they know what I am.' Feeling abandoned and unsupported at school, the girls fall back on their community that becomes the only entity on which they can always rely upon, although, of course, at the cost of having to accept the imposition of traditional female roles.

Traveller and Gypsy girls therefore find themselves in an often hostile or at least unsympathetic educational environment. In such a context, their traditions and beliefs in a different lifestyle are not taken into account and are never considered. Being used to open spaces in a tradition of mobility, the girls feel constrained and constricted in a classroom (Marcus, p. 148), where they are asked to follow a curriculum that is alien to them especially because its applicability to real life is not immediately apparent. When Marcus asks the girls about their understanding of what learning is, the answer is that learning does not only take place in school, but more often outside in the real world. Such an innocent and apparently simple answer is the key to the girls' resistance to and low attainment in the mainstream system. A system that is not made for them, that excludes them for the very reason it rules out the focus on practical skills (e.g., parenting skills) that are so crucial to mobile communities. This reflects another conundrum and brings us back to the anti-schooling or de-schooling movement (from the title of Ivan Illich's radical book *Deschooling Society* (1971), in which the author condemns the 'school factory' in favour of informal and unstructured networks).

The complexity of the educational issue that while encouraging and in fact obliging Traveller and Gypsy youth to attend school, in fact racialises and marginalises them, is elegantly connected in Marcus' book to gender discrimination and sexism. The role of women in mobile communities is generally very traditional and girls are taught from a young age to be good wives and mothers. Some change is of course making its way within these groups and many young people aspire to alter their destiny; not all of Marcus' participants for instance were set on continuing their traditions and two girls even mentioned their desire to go to university.

The crucial point, however, is that sexism, like racism, can be covert (Benokraitis, 1997 and Nieto-Gomez, 1997 in Marcus: 184) and, more crucially, as black feminist bell hooks (2015, p.5 in Marcus, p. 184) contends, not all women perceive sexism as an act of oppression and discrimination. Many Traveller and Gypsy girls see their families as providing a haven of security and safety, comfort and protection, even though the cost of such a safe harbour is their subordination to fathers, brothers and uncles. When I ran some workshops for the young Irish Traveller girls in a permanent site in the south of England with a theatre company engaging in community activities, I was struck by the frequency of phone calls to the young girls' mobiles by their fathers. The fact that we were running the workshop during the homework time and in the council space on the Travellers' site with the authorisation of the families and the liaison personnel clearly was not enough for those men who apparently persisted on controlling their daughters whilst they were in contact with country people, and engaged in their activities. Those intrinsically territorial phone calls were meant to remind the girls where they belonged.

The value of Marcus' book therefore is the adoption of a black feminist intersectional framework that explores the complex relations between identity, power, gender, ethnicity, class and race and analytically traces the discrimination and subordination of which Traveller and Gypsy girls are victim at school, where they are forced to learn subjects not tailored to their interests, and at home and in their communities, where 'hegemonic inequalities' (p. x) dominate. Marcus recognises the complexity and usefulness of intersectionality as a conceptual paradigm that allows for particular 'analytic sensibility' (Cho et al., 2013: 795 in Marcus, p. 112). The choice of this approach is core to and one of the merits of her book. In her words, intersectionality 'allows us to see women in their particular context, without minimizing the effects of differences between different forms of subjugations or concealing one form in another. Rather, each form of oppression informs the other' (p. 113). Marcus underlines that it is not only women of colour who suffer discrimination. Gypsies and Travellers are white Scottish, Welsh, Irish or English yet they are marginalised due to their nomadic habits, even though they are not the only itinerant

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groups that exist (Marcus, p. 7). Whiteness 'should be problematised' (Marcus, p. 115) and always recognised as a socially constructed concept. There are degrees within whiteness and together with working class people, mobile groups are at the low and underprivileged end of the spectrum. 'Whiteness is not a race' (Marcus, p. 115) nor is it an ethnicity - even though GRT are legally recognised as such. One of the other pluses of intersectionality is that it identifies 'within group diversity' (Hancock, 2007:75 in Marcus, p. 115). Girls are seen and see themselves differently even within their community depending on whether they live or whether they are in a transient or permanent living arrangement, whether they occupy 'brick and mortar' homes (as Travellers call them) or trailers. Once again, my own work supports Marcus' findings and reveals strong analogies between Scottish and English Travellers and Gypsies. For instance, in my research I found that GRT residing in the permanent side of a Council encampment developed a discriminatory attitude toward those Travellers who were occupying the transit section of the site. Intersectionality, therefore, even allows us to recognise the discrimination within a group.

The girls in Marcus' book suffer not only from the racism towards itinerant communities at school, but also from sexism at home. Islay, May, Dana, Sky, Iona, Fara, and the others are twice victimised due to two separate discriminatory ideologies: one bred within their own community, the other outside it, in that society with which they are forced to enter in contact; they are relegated to the role of subordinate in two different social spheres, the public one of school and the private one of their homes.

Marcus' study of Travellers and Gypsies therefore proposes a useful integrated vision of their double discrimination. At school, where they are victim of bullying by other students and not protected by their teachers, where their gender identity is threatened by a curriculum that overlooks their future practical needs as women, where they are forced to learn in a context that totally ignores their history and tradition and in a closed space they are not familiar with, where there is no peer pressure so typical at that age, simply because these girls are isolated even in school, immersed in a sea of very different other students. At home, where they are torn between the security provided by their fathers and the oppression that brings along, where they are constrained by the code of honour that limits their choices and inscribes them in a world that is not in sync with modern times, where their gender identity is therefore split between who they are in their home and who they are viewed from the outside or could become in the wide world. Only a feminist intersectional approach can capture all these contradictions that exist between the Travellers and Gypsies and the settled society but also persist within these traditionally nomadic groups

One last point to comment upon concerns the researcher's positionality. Marcus chooses a black feminist intersectional perspective not solely on academic grounds but also because she is a woman of Indian heritage and a third generation Singaporean. Being part of a diaspora and having a diverse background makes her particularly sensitive to issues of discrimination and segregated identity as is the case with Gypsy and Traveller girls. Despite receiving a good formal education and belonging to an ethnic group that values learning very highly, she was able to empathise closely with her participants and their experience of often unconscious gender discrimination and marginalisation. She reports how her interviewees perceived her as a woman not entirely siding with mainstream ethics because of her skin colour and therefore opened up to her more easily. Similarly, as non-British myself, the same was also true in my study when the Irish Travellers I interviewed in England appreciated my slightly different accent, which like theirs, was not mainstream, and the surprise I showed when I spotted the statuettes of the many saints and Virgin Mary they kept in their homes, which are so popular in my original culture. Being a sensitive and participative researcher is a necessary condition in a study like Marcus' that explores a very special community and gives voice to a particularly vulnerable sub-group within it. Feminist sociolinguist Judith Baxter, author of *Speaking Out* (2006), in which she worked on silenced female voices, would have much appreciated this volume because it focuses on those female voices that have been long ignored and shut down. Yet, Marcus does not overemphasise the lack of agency of her girls; instead, she acknowledges their strategies and tactics for how they can make themselves heard, how they can express their aspirations and resourcefulness, how they construct a new identity in the context of the interview and the focus groups interactions in which they are involved.

Marcus' is an important study. I much enjoyed reading it and discovering that her data and findings highlight the similarities between the female Travellers and Gypsies she investigated in Scotland and those I observed in England. The lesson we learn from Marcus' study is about the subtleties and sophisticated forms that discrimination can take, from a racist othering by majoritarian society on the basis of the lifestyle some groups choose (or have imposed), to a sexist relegation of women by their own community triggered by the need to protect them from outsiders. Oppressed both at school and at home, Traveller and Gypsy girls are perhaps the ultimate victims but also, as the debate on victimhood has highlighted, the ultimate fighters.

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