

Roma in a Temporal Suspension: Delaine le Bas's *Romani Embassy* as a Poesis of Romani Utopia

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Gypsyfication has constructed Romani populations as the ultimate European Other. In this article, I investigate the legacy of centuries of dehumanisation and othering, the mutual dependencies of Roma¹ and non-Roma and the figure of Roma at a temporal impasse. I argue that Gypsyfication and the conceptual gypsy, which represent the imagined and fantasized Roma and, in my article, a form of visual and aesthetic contamination, create a sense of Roma as being suspended in time, in a set of predefined identities and visual representations, but also temporarily suspended from contemporality. By setting Delaine Le Bas's ongoing performance of Romani Embassy and the fortune teller as a metaphor for the artefact that Roma have become and as a key figure in the passage in the present, I conceptualise the waiting room of Romani histories. In this space, the fortune teller as an ambassador becomes a key figure in the poesis of Romani utopia and futurity but also a figure who aids in deconstructing the feeling of affective entrapments in the impasse in the present (Berlant, 2011). In this article, I argue for a new politics of being and becoming, one in which identity formations that could not have been imagined by Gypsyfication are dis-identified with and self-articulated in a space where a temporary community was enabled by Le Bas's performance at Maxim Gorki Theater one fall evening in 2017.

Introduction

Temporality is a key concept and a metaphorical entrance point into discussions about articulations of orientalist Romani identities in this article. By

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¹ The use of Roma/Romani in this article is aligned with the Critical Romani Studies guidelines on the use of terminology. Roma is used to refer to the people as a whole and is to be used without articles. The adjective of the noun is Romani, and Romani is the name of the language. For more information visit: <https://crs.ceu.edu/index.php/crs/about/submissions> (accessed: 27 Jun 2023)

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revisiting three concepts: Gypsyism as a specific form of Orientalism towards Roma, the role of the Romani ray as the figure of epistemic authority and the conceptual gypsy as a form of aesthetic and visual contamination, I question how temporality is theorised in relation to Romani identities and argue for queer and feminist performative interventions, which are laden with the potentiality to re/imagine Romani identities and visibility outside of the borders of coloniality. As critical and decolonial interventions in the field of Romani studies have led to backlash against some Romani scholars and their allies, the analysis is mindful of power dynamics and hones the affective dimensions of the process of othering and the transformative turn that the impasse enables in a reflexive and self-situated manner. Furthermore, by analysing Delaine Le Bas's ongoing performance piece, *Romani Embassy*, I approach the deconstruction process by analysing the role of the fortune teller as an ambassador and central figure who brings forth a new set of potentialities. I argue that the fortune teller challenges power dynamics and enables reflections on the interconnections between affect, the performative landscape and the audience as a meaning-making community (Dolan, 2005). Situated in the space of an impasse in the present (Berlant, 2011), the fortune teller becomes not only a figure who ushers in a transition and enables a decomposition of the legacy of the conceptual gypsy but also a figure of uncertainty. In the analysis, I embrace the analytic potential of uncertainty and question what happens in that space by looking at the performative space as a metaphor for the waiting room of Romani history, where the fortune teller indicates the ambiguities and paradoxes of the artefact that Roma have become. In order to overcome colonial legacies, I offer an analytical exercise in which I identify several types of identification: negative identification, disidentification and self-envisioning, in which each form of identification is a form of healing and thereby becomes a poesis of Romani utopia.

Gypsyism: A Short Definition and Overview

Gypsyism, as a specific form of orientalism towards Roma, and the conceptual gypsy as a product of this discursive process, stem from eighteenth-century academic discourses, and their impact on Roma remains to this day. The conceptual gypsy might be one of the most persistent forms of aesthetic and visual contamination that has consequentially marked Roma as being the antithesis of contemporality and has been a tool for distancing Roma from national identities for more than three centuries. Gypsyism is defined by Ken Lee (2000: 34) as a discursive formation that stems from the

study of the ‘Gypsy’ in Heinrich Grellmann’s (1783) book *Die Zigeuner*, later translated into English, Dutch and French, thereby creating a transnational phenomenon. ‘The Gypsy’ became ‘a discursive subject for systematic study, based on what [Grellmann] saw as rational and coherent arguments’ (Lee, 2000: 34). The rational and coherent argument was that ‘Gypsies’ are a nomadic horde, among others (Lee, 2000). This image of a horde is one of the first notions of Romani identities in academic knowledge production, where Roma are reduced and thereby dehumanised. Such a depiction of a collectivising term, *horde*, in a temporal sense, can be aligned with Fabian’s (2002) critical reflection in which terms like these serve a political agenda of ‘primitivizing’ the other and creating temporal distance in which those who ascribe the term to a group of people exert Western domination and are part of a colonial project. Lee (2000), in a comparative study of Said’s conceptualisation of Orientalism with discursive representation of Roma in European academic knowledge production, further creates epistemological parallels between Orientalism and Gypsyism, defining the latter as a discursive formation stemming from asymmetric power relations, such as political, economic, cultural, intellectual and moral, which in turn reconstitute and preserve the predisposed unequal exchange, further asserting that the Oriental within was constructed at the moment of discovery that Romani populations originate from India (2000: 132). Gypsyist orientalisation exists in various forms in the European discursive landscape, including media and art (Junghaus, 2006, 2014; Mladenova, 2015; Tremlette and Le Bas, 2022).

The Function of the Romani Ray in Gypsyism

One of the most important roles in this system of oppression is the function of Romani ray,² or Romani rye in some sources, a figure who, within the subject, has enjoyed unchallenged epistemic authority over the image and knowledge production of Roma. The conceptualisation of this figure can be traced to George Borrow’s (1857) book *The Romany Rye*. According to Lee, this figure was an outsider whose ‘familiarity and generosity’ towards the “Gypsies” gave him a favorable and honored status among them’ (2000: 139). Idiomatically, Romani ray also meant ‘Gypsy scholar’, that is, a person who studies Roma. Lee adds that the exploitive nature of the relationship

² Appears also as Romany Rye or Romany Ray. I use the adjective *Romani* with the noun *ray*, which Hancock and Karanth trace to the episteme from Romani word *rai*, which denotes ‘a person in position of authority, including “lord” and “policeman”’ (2010: 215).

between the Romani ray and the communities they infiltrated is best captured in Thompson's article 'Christmas Eve and After', in which he states 'they were our Gypsies, and we were their Rais' (1909: 9). The relationship signified in this utterance resembles one of master and slave more than one of academic and respondent. Additional arguments regarding exploitation, including sexual exploitation, are found in Hancock (2010), who refers to correspondence between Augustus John and Scott Macfie, dated 1908, that implies that one of the ways of obtaining the title of ray is by 'coupling' with a Romani woman. This finding indicates that sexual exploitation needs to be included as a specific form of violence used to obtain 'credibility' as a Romani ray and thereby obtain status and power as a researcher in scientific communities.

Arguably, such practices are representative of the role the Romani ray enjoyed and the power of 'expertise', backed by the 'scientific community' and a 'gang of peers'—previously also referred to internally as a 'confraternity' (Hancock, 2010: 215). Under violent circumstances, they determined and defined authenticity and belonging, thereby shaping discourses on identities and belonging.

The Backlash Toward Critical Romani Studies Interventions

Twenty-three years after Lee's (2000) definition of Gypsyism, the field of Romani Studies is experiencing a paradigm shift, which can be traced to the formation of Critical Romani Studies in 2018. While critical scholarship by Roma scholars and activists and their allies is increasing (Acton, 1998, 2015; Bitu, 2009; Brooks, Clark and Rostas, 2022; Fraser, 1995; Kóczé, 2015; Matache, 2016b; Lee, 2000; Le Bas, Damian and Acton, T, 2010; Hancock and Karanth, 2010), backlash to critical knowledge production is noted. Feminist knowledge production and activism have contributed to this paradigm shift (Beck and Ivasiuc, 2018; Kóczé, Zentai, Jovanović et al., 2018; Van Baar and Kóczé, 2020). These transformations can be partially traced through emancipatory tendencies and the unification of knowledge production about Roma in both academic and activist circles. The manifesto and declaration *Nothing About Us Without Us* (eds. Bogdán, Dunajeva, Junghaus et al., 2015) is one such emancipatory move.³ It is

³ The purpose of this special issue, which is a result of a workshop organised by the European Roma Rights Center in 2015, was to both communicate the right to self-determination and the participation of Roma in civil rights, policy making and academic knowledge production and to critically investigate previous decades of Romani Civil Rights Movements. It argued that knowledge production regarding Roma

argued that situated, reflexive and feminist knowledge production are of lesser value due to their lack of objectivity and are therefore marked as biased (Kóczé, 2015; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2018). While Hungarian-Romani feminist and scholar Angela Kóczé (2015) notes that this lack of objectivity is used to maintain the hegemony of non-Roma knowledge producers over Roma-related knowledge production, Polish-Romani anthropologist Mirga-Kruszelnicka claims that knowledge production by Roma is marked as ‘NGO science’, which she sees as a form of scientific racism inherited from Gypsylorism (2018: 13). Michael Stewart (2017) joined this debate with a critical reflection problematising the closed research paradigm, under the pretext that by using post-colonial and feminist/intersectional theories and critical race theory, Romani scholars are attempting to challenge who may and may not speak on the subject of Romani Studies. I would argue that scholars of Romani heritage are asking for a place as equals, dignified and appreciated for the knowledge they bring into the field as scholars who undergo the same peer-review criteria as any other published author.

The Visuality of the Conceptual Gypsy

Gypsylorism, over a period of three centuries, has not only claimed the epistemic authority that formed a field of study; its impact has been tangible in the politics of visual representation. The circumstances of this politics is somewhat described by Tremlette and Le Bas (2020) in *A Gypsy Revolution: The Ongoing Legacy of Delaine and Damian Le Bas*, in which they state that the idea and image of Roma is defined by external influences creating representations grounded in othering and exoticisation. Lee (2000: 131) argues that these representations stimulate the formation of mental images that are triggered when the discourse occurs, while Selling (2015: 120), in *The Conceptual Gypsy Reconsidering the Swedish Case and the General*, links this representational politics to antiziganism — as a specific form of racism towards Roma. Both Selling (2015) and Lee (2000) argue that the conceptual gypsy does not necessarily stem from real experiences formed in encounters with Roma and can be a product of fiction and fantasy. In Selling’s (2015: 120–121) view, the image of the conceptual gypsy can also be circulated in the absence of Roma and projected on anyone who exhibits the conceptualised

should be done with Romani communities, and advocated for alliances with Romani LGBT movement and gender studies perspectives.
<http://www.errc.org/roma-rights-journal/roma-rights-2-2015-nothing-about-us-without-us-roma-participation-in-policy-making-and-knowledge-production> (accessed 24 Feb 2023).

properties. The function of the conceptual gypsy, in Selling's interpretation, has been to justify discrimination and various assimilation projects over time and space.

This absence in forming representations is also noted in trans* scholarship. Halberstam (2005: 186–187), by tracing the emergence of transgender bodies in visual representations, argues for awareness of historic and social differences where bodies occur, including in art, aesthetics and artistic practices, while acknowledging systematic connections and relations among discrete cultural practices. This is aligned with situated knowledge and intersectional feminisms. Critical Romani studies can, in my view, benefit from Halberstam's approach. Halberstam's analytical intervention regarding transgender bodies, where the exotic other is represented in visual forms, can equally be applied to representations of the conceptual gypsy.

Understanding generalisations, therefore, marks an important step in understanding the conceptual gypsy in the domains of the aesthetic, the conceptual and the representational. Tracing the pathways of generalisations is a methodological approach that Berlant, in *Cruel Optimism*, defines as the process of 'how the singular becomes delaminated from its location in someone's story or some locale's irreducibly local history and circulated as evidence of something shared' (2011: 12). Most crucially, the process of tracing the singular to the general is a process of giving materiality to otherwise seemingly non-material phenomena, such as scenes and gestures, which will later be analysed in a sequence of the artist as the fortune teller in the embassy that I view as the waiting room of Romani history. Following Berlant's (2011) method, I trace how the generalised knowledge about the fortune teller is re-interpreted in *Romani Embassy*. Furthermore, I investigate the relationships between the spectator as an affective and relational being in a performative space—a scene—and a context in which the performer and spectator share a desire to impact and be impacted by a shift in the aesthetic. Hence, this article also concerns itself with the aesthetics of the conceptual gypsy—that is, its deconstruction through a triangulation of academic literature, art and activism. To synthesise, the conceptual gypsy is to be understood as a cluster of articulated dispositions taken from specific locales and generalised in the form of a homogenised identity. This article is a step towards identifying how these images became caught in suspended animation, a sensation that other scholars, such as Norwegian historian Anne Minken, have ascribed to 'cultural continuity' in Gypsyologist scholarship (2009: 432). According to Minken, cultural continuity has had the effect of ossifying and stereotyping, in which Gypsyologist scholarship has a

tendency to consider any form of cultural change within an ethnic group as a sign of degradation in comparison with the original (2009: 432). The metaphor of Roma frozen in time bears witness to how a set of singularities that are context-dependent and historically and socially conditioned can become a generalised truth.

In the next section, I introduce Berlant's (2011) concept of the impasse in the present. This concept aids in deconstructing the notion of Roma as suspended in time. Set in dialogue with Delaine Le Bas's performance of *Romani Embassy*, I argue that the analysis of the ethnographic material brings forth a deconstruction of the conceptual gypsy from a queer and feminist perspective in which the stereotypical is first situated in a space of tension, where the impasse becomes what I call the waiting room of Romani history, in order to take the fortune teller out of the domain of the conceptual gypsy and offer a self-crafted politics of representation that is grounded in values embedded in the performative space of *Romani Embassy*.

Delaine Le Bas's *Romani Embassy*

Delaine Le Bas is a multidisciplinary artist of Romani heritage. Le Bas's work engages with a broad field of topics, from spaces of belonging and nationhood to interventions in existing artwork that represent what I call the aesthetics of the conceptual gypsy (for examples of this work, see Tremlette and Le Bas, 2020). *Romani Embassy* is an ongoing performance and installation inspired by the *Aboriginal Tent Embassy* performed in 1972 outside Parliament House in Canberra, Australia. In an interview conducted with the artist in 2023, Le Bas reflected on positioning her performance as a practice of creating inclusive spaces: 'I've been trying to just create some space for all of us, because I think that there is such a definite idea of who we are as people, that everyone thinks they know exactly who we are and what we are, and I think that we are so radically diverse as a community, in so many ways'. This concern for creating spaces that embrace differences stems from the artist's own experiences of alienation and the healing and nurturing that she received from her queer uncle and her grandmother:

I feel like I don't fit in so many ways because of physically what I look like. That's always put me in a strange position even within my own family. [...] You're an outsider within a group of outsiders in a way. [...] You're this other within a group of others in a way. [...] So a lot of work has been about making space for anyone who feels they are in that position, really.

Le Bas creates a queer and utopian aesthetic of belonging that helps envision a futurity that is different from the present-day politics of belonging. Le Bas has performed *Romani Embassy* in several countries, giving the performance a transnational character. *Romani Embassy* has appeared in the UK, Sweden, Poland, Spain and Germany, where in 2017, I watched her performance at Maxim Gorki Theater. The embassy at times appears as a structure (a plywood box or a tent), while at times the performer's body becomes both a metaphor and an embodiment of the embassy. The Berlin performance stands out for its embodiment of the Romani fortune teller, which is a central point in the analysis in this article. The uniqueness of the performance lies in its appearance in a variety of contexts, often reclaiming important political events. Le Bas's performance has also been part of the FutuRoma Roma Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, an art exhibition in Italy. Daniel Baker, the curator of FutuRoma, perceives *Romani Embassy* as a counter-narrative to the reductive ways that Romani culture has been both constructed and understood. Baker also adds that *Romani Embassy* is a way of escaping oppressively narrow and predetermined pathways in favour of a 'radical and progressive vision of Roma to come' (2019: 8). While I've argued elsewhere for, amongst others, Le Bas's work as a counter-narrative to racism in 2019, what I mean by the counter-narrative is that I situate this invocation of futurity as a utopian space of self-articulation and disidentification, in which disidentifications represent a reading of oneself into a 'moment and object' (Muñoz, 1999: 12) and break the 'expected momentum of internalisation that is to be embodied and reproduced' (Muñoz, 1999: 19). The fortune teller is a figure that is disidentified with in the performance, opening the space for more complex forms of identification and positionalities unimagined by the dominant culture (Muñoz, 1999). I argue that politically queer interventions such as these broaden understandings of the conceptual gypsy as a reductive set of predictive experiences within which a Romani person is destined to find confinement. Hence, *Romani Embassy* is a process and an embodied intervention in space, body and time, through which the fortune teller creates a disruption in temporality, enabling a pathway outside the confines of the impasse, or the waiting room to contemporality. How is this achieved? I set out by linking Delaine Le Bas's performative utterance with the concept of the impasse in order to answer the question of what material purposes the figuration of the conceptual gypsy has, from a queer feminist perspective. Next, I tie the impasse to embodied experiences that the artist articulates in the form of scenography with the embassy and the shift towards a queer feminist aesthetics of emancipation and disidentification. Then, I explore and analyse the transactional nature of the

conceptual gypsy. Lastly, I offer the fortune teller as a figuration of a politics of queer futurities and utopias in/through performance.

At Romani Embassy



Figure 1: Romani Embassy (2017). Source: Arman Heljic

The audience is standing in a waiting room. In front of us is a plywood box reminiscent of a church confession box, with a carved-out window on the entrance door and a sign saying 'Romani Embassy' on the door handle. Inside the embassy is a chair, a Romani flag, a hand-painted cloth with an image of Mickey Mouse and handwritten excerpts from the Declaration of Human Rights. People make their way slowly towards the embassy. In the

interview, I learned from Le Bas that the windows behind the embassy were not painted by her or Damian Le Bas but by artist Dan Perjovschi (2017).⁴ The painted windows add a feeling of solidarity in times of different forms of violence.



Figure 2. Dan Perjovschi (Untitled, 2017). Source: Arman Heljic

The audience waits in anticipation. From an adjacent room, Le Bas slowly approaches. She is dressed in a shimmering, golden, hand-embroidered silk dress with hand-stitched roses, a silver mask over her face, a scarf covering the top of her head with bright fiery orange-red locks of hair shooting from underneath it and white Dr Martens boots. The room fills with excitement as the audience quiets down and whispers, –‘Look at her!’, ‘She is here!’, ‘Is she a fortune teller?’. I think to myself, *if she is, then she came from tomorrow to tell us something about today*. Slowly, Le Bas approaches her embassy, taking off her boots and entering the space barefoot. Not a single word is uttered. I make my way through the crowd to take a closer look. As I approach her, I see her holding a ‘crystal’ ball in her hands. In that moment, I become

⁴ For more information about the art work: <https://www.berliner-herbstsalon.de/en/dritter-berliner-herbstsalon/kuenstlerinnen/dan-perjovschi> (accessed 19 Jun 2023).

aware that the fortune teller has become a symbolic embodiment of representation.

As Berlant would say, ‘We have a situation here’ (2011: 5). In theorising temporality, Berlant mobilises two important concepts in reading historical presents: the situation and the event. Berlant (2011: 5) defines the situation as laden with the potentiality to unfold forms of ethical socialities and radically open situations. The situation in *Romani Embassy* can be read as an occurrence in the waiting room that has a triple effect: first, it brings to the consciousness a sense of what Berlant calls a state of ‘animated and animating suspension’ (2011: 5). In waiting for the performer, one is faced with the multilayered visual and material parts of the performative scenography—which I consider to be the landscape of transformation—in which several layers create a sense of radical openness to draw the audience into the contextual background of the performance. Berlant describes the uncertainty of what might happen in the moment it happens as ‘a genre of unforeclosed experience’ (2011: 5). The unforeclosed experience in the *Romani Embassy* performance is the fortune teller, who animates the feeling of suspension, both as part of an atmosphere set in the performative landscape and as an embodiment of a representational politics that is encompassed by the discursive field of the conceptual gypsy. Placing Berlant (2011) and, at the centre of a new aesthetic, *Romani Embassy*—specifically the fortune teller—into a dialogue, I argue that the performance creates a sense of social time, a type of sociality and an atmosphere of destabilising what the conceptual gypsy signifies. This potential is well described in Jill Dolan’s *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*, in which she argues that performance provides a place of temporary community in which people come together ‘to share experiences of meaning making’ and imagine spaces of a better world and a more radical humanism (2005: 5). *Romani Embassy* became such a space of meaning making. In the interview, Le Bas claims that the intent of the performative space was to engage with the audience and create a sense of community and belonging. This temporary community of meaning making, I argue, creates a sense of a forward-drawing futurity. Perhaps a different queer futurity that is not here and now, which Muñoz describes in *Cruising Utopia* (2009), with a promise of a Romani queer utopia that encompasses radical difference in a space that is imagined. As Le Bas states in the interview, ‘[A] Romani embassy is something that doesn’t exist. I am sitting in something that is a construct. It’s not a reality’. Read with the performance statement that due to the fact that Roma don’t have a nation state or ‘one homeland’, nor an embassy to represent them in times of distress, *Romani Embassy* becomes ‘an information point, a living archive, an

embodiment of reclaiming the stolen artefact that we have become'.⁵ I argue that, as a constructed and imagined space, the performance should be read as a poesis of Romani utopia.

While Gypsyism positioned fortune telling within the domain of witchcraft and magic (Buckland 1966, 1998; Leland, 1891; Wiener, 1909), in the interview, Le Bas states that her fascination lies in the fact that the fortune teller juxtaposes acceptance and non-acceptance, enabling the artist to question how these live next to each other. Le Bas further adds that as 'Gypsies' travelled across England, they also told fortunes:

Very often what they [the women] would do is that they'd tell fortunes. They would go year and year back to the same people. They had an ongoing relationship with someone who's also the other, but you have a relationship with them, which for many other forms of being, the other is not... every other relationship is a taboo, isn't it, but this relationship seems to be okay.

Hence, Le Bas uses the fortune teller to transform this ambiguity by negotiating the thin lines between acceptance and non-acceptance, which relies on a sense of trust that Le Bas sees in this relationship. Further along in the analysis, I will look at this process of transformation, but next, I will look at the concept of the impasse in the present, which represents the first stage in the transformation process.

The Conceptual Gypsy as an Impasse in the Present

Time is, among many things, a personal sense of duration. For me, time as an analytic category is important in the relationship between feeling duration, endurance and the plasticity of survival mechanisms. In this article, time is also a relational concept that stems from intimate encounters between artefacts, visualities, experiences, affects, histories and individualised events, which, as mentioned above, are epistemologically rooted in a predetermined set of experiences. The conceptual gypsy is a cluster of time-bound instances rooted in a historical socio-political dynamic of orientalisation/othering that emerged under a set of circumstances. The interpretation of these circumstances has been recorded, transcribed, canonised, circulated and reproduced as a set of generalisations. The conceptual gypsy, therefore, is a set of relations embedded in the power dynamics described in the introduction. In the absence of Roma in the conceptual gypsy, this set of relations creates an atmosphere of Romani subjectivities being suspended

⁵ Source: <https://www.berliner-herbstsalon.de/en/dritter-berliner-herbstsalon/performances/romani-embassy> (accessed 8 Jun 2023).

in time. The remaining question, however, is what creates this sense of Roma being suspended in time?

Berlant sees *impasse* as ‘a formal term for encountering the duration of the present, and a specific term for tracking the circulation of precariousness through diverse locales and bodies’ (2011: 199). Hence, the *impasse* relates to what I see as the first stage of the transformational process, which, in essence, is a space for transforming the self in relation to the legacy of the conceptual gypsy. The conceptual gypsy is a form of distribution of precarity, and the *impasse* is a space for realising that. As such, it creates a sense of being suspended in time. This feeling of being suspended in time—in the case of this article, being suspended as a product of someone else’s imagination—creates a feeling of movement-in-place, which Berlant defined by tracing the etymology of the word *impasse*: ‘[T]he *impasse* is a *cul-de-sac*—indeed, the word *impasse* was invented to replace *cul-de-sac*, with its untoward implications in French. In a *cul-de-sac* one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the same space’ (2011: 199). This definition relates to the conceptual gypsy in several ways, with several implications. The definition speaks to Lee’s (2000) and Selling’s (2015) observations that the conceptual gypsy not only takes space in canons of knowledge production and epistemologies but also in the mental space of those who produced and disseminated it in the form of fantasies, after which it became an image that is brought out of the register by the general public. However, what has not been a field of study and research is what this does to someone identifying as Roma. One possible interpretation is that some Roma might relate to this space as an entrapment. Within this entrapment, a circulation of stereotypical representations takes place. These representations then create a sense that the only way of being in the world is the one signified by the conceptual gypsy. In *Romani Embassy*, however, a shift takes place. In a Berlantian sense, the conceptual gypsy becomes a holding station filled with anxiety and laden with the inability to pinpoint the exact cause of this uncertainty. Uncertainty is often considered negative, but the conceptual gypsy at an *impasse* in the present has the analytic potential to open up in directions that are unknown. Uncertainty here, in my view, is an analytic category that indicates utopian potentiality (Muñoz, 2009), which will be taken up in the analysis at a later stage.

This way of building relationality towards the conceptual gypsy enables a space for decomposition, and in essence, the *impasse*, thereby the conceptual gypsy, is a delay in time that demands action. Berlant states, ‘That delay enables us to develop gestures of composure, of mannerly transaction, of being-with in the world as well as rejection, refusal, detachment,

psychosis, and all kinds of radical negation' (2011: 199). Hence, the beauty of the waiting room of Romani history invoked by *Romani Embassy* is that it is laden with the potentiality to leave this conceptual space, where the impasse is an exit station, but not with only one prescription for how to exit. What one person finds necessary might not work for another. Uncertainty leads to relief, as the conceptual gypsy as an impasse in the present is marked by the unbearable pressure of repetition, injustice, violence, misrepresentation and visual contamination. I argue that in order to arrive at this space and develop a gesture such as the fortune teller taking a seat in *Romani Embassy*, which leads to a self-envisioned way of being-with in the world, one still needs to reject the dispositions of the conceptual gypsy. By self-envisioning I (Heljic, 2022: 45) mean a performative practice that is grounded in transgression yet it is non-oppositional. It is a form of identification that escapes the representational narrative of the conceptual gypsy, and is not a reactionary form of identification, but rather an inward-looking practice. The impasse not only enables this practice, but also requires understanding the nature of the affective, material and social dimensions of the conceptual gypsy and what the implications are for the quotidian. This, in my understanding, happens at the impasse.

Theorising the conceptual gypsy as a second stage in the process of reclaiming the artefact that Roma have become has the potential to articulate ways in which the conceptual gypsy has formed spaces for relational identifications. By relational identifications, I mean a relationship of the discursive field that surrounds Roma, which creates spaces for exchanges in which the self is articulated. The types of identifications that happen in this space are habitual in the sense that there is a set of visualities and discursive subjectivities and experiences that is available to be identified with. Another feature is self-intelligibility, or how some Roma create an understanding of themselves and their environment through the field that the conceptual gypsy enables. In other words, what happens in the waiting room of Romani history is a transformation in awareness of the self, how it is oriented in the world and in relation to the conceptual gypsy. It also marks a change in the relationship to the ways one inhabits one's body in spite of the legacy of the conceptual gypsy, however incoherent and disrupted these articulations might seem, even to the agent of this embodied articulation. I argue that the performative embodiment of the ambassador who became the fortune teller is not only a paradigm shift in conceptualising Romaniness; it is a shift that all the described aspects of the performance create in consciousness and fill with the utopian potentiality that appears on the horizon of possibilities. In the queer and transformational horizon, for a brief moment, in a glitch of

time, one becomes aware of the complexity of the past, the present and the potentiality with which the future is loaded. At this stage, I focus only on the impasse of the present as a (mental) space of transformation in a process of *becoming aware* or as a form of *awakening*. This awakening is facilitated in a temporary space of belonging and community in an affective exchange and in relations that *Romani Embassy*, and the fortune teller as a reclaimed and disidentified artefact, represent.

If we place Le Bas and Berlant in a conversation; that is, if we analyse the performative utterance that, in the performance of *Romani Embassy*, Roma are a 'living archive, an embodiment of reclaiming the stolen artefact that we have become' (Le Bas, 2015), within a theoretical framework of the impasse in the present, we need to start with the etymology of the word *artefact*. On the one hand, the Oxford English Dictionary (2023) defines *artefact* as a human-made object of cultural and historic importance and, on the other hand, as a product of a scientific observation or experiment that is not naturally present but is rather a result of a preparative or investigative procedure. Although to some extent, these represent an interesting paradox, I will limit my interest to the first definition. How is a cultural artefact in this context important to understanding the power dynamics discussed so far? I argue that, in a queer phenomenological sense, if we look at how that artefact (Romani identity) has been directed, staged and interacted with, we arrive at an understanding of the bounds and borders of the conceptual gypsy and its impact on contemporary discourses on Romani populations and the politics of representation.

The conceptual gypsy as an artefact is designed to be gazed upon, observed, wondered about and analysed. When an ethnic group becomes an artefact, it waits for someone to do the interpretation.⁶ As someone who is of Romani heritage, I feel that the atmosphere surrounding the artefact is less one of admiration or awe. The gaze is often hostile. The analytical eye observing the artefact looks for cracks and flaws. *What is too much?* might be the question. *What is authentic?* might be another. This hostility sometimes manifests as an expression of doubt. At times, the gazing subject is certain of the heaviness materialised in the discourses of the conceptual gypsy that surrounds it. At times, the observer shouts, violently interacts, expresses outrage and determines that a specific artefact does not belong to the

⁶ This is a mental exercise of thinking about the borders of the conceptual gypsy via the artefact metaphor. It is not a claim that this is the only way one can interpret articulations and negotiations of Romani identities. It is one interpretation. Also, it is to be read against the formulation of the conceptual gypsy that I discussed in the introduction.

context of what is considered civilisation. An artefact animates. It has the power to animate hostility. *Romany Embassy* animates the performative landscape, which is a witness of the context of violence that surrounds the narrative, and the fortune teller, who creates a space to transform this narrative. The fortune teller as an artefact is also a paradox. The fortune teller represents the conceptual gypsy as a figure that offers the promise of a futurity and hope in exchange for money. As such a figure, she is linked to deception. Deception is within the bounds of the stereotypical and a figure of entrapment. The fortune teller is an object of cultural and historic interest. Such an object is evidence of imposed identity formations. These impositions are a result of the Orientalism and othering described in the introduction. Furthermore, the living artefact encapsulates a historic and temporal dynamic of inequality and discrimination, one which, I argue, has the antithesis of contemporality at its core. Thus, the 'Roma' encompassed by the conceptual gypsy are in temporal dislocation, belonging to the past, in romanticised musings of the vagabond reserved for, in many cases, the exploitation and exploration of 'freedom' narratives by dominant cultural domains. This form of freedom seems to be reserved as a promise only for non-Roma, and when Roma lay claim to this freedom for themselves or criticise these cultural stereotypes or cultural appropriations, it often ends in backlash. Hence, in my queer heart, Domaine Le Bas's performative utterance represents a moment of temporary relief, a gift of articulation against a backdrop of violent and oppressive regimes that have rendered Romani identities as always situated in the past or primitive.

The waiting room of Romani history makes palpable the anxiety that an analysis of temporality exposes. In the performance of *Romani Embassy*, the atmosphere and affective exchange bridge a heavy historiography of colonial, Orientalist and Gypsyologist pasts with a violent present, and take it to the potentiality for a queer futurity. Thereby, this map of relations, as well as the reflections of individual faces at the point of the fortune teller's mask, become witnesses and an archive of evidence for a new form of resistance. This artistic practice, I argue, traced through an intimate network of affective pathways, blurs lines between performer and audience, which further enables a type of intimacy and a sense of belonging in a community. This type of intimacy, as an outcome of a sense of belonging, is not foreseen by the conceptual gypsy. The conceptual gypsy, due to the nature of unequal power relations in the knowledge production field, was never in dialogue or community with Roma. The sense of community makes *Romani Embassy* a queer slippage, thereby holding the present 'open to the attention and unpredicted exchange' (Berlant, 2011: 199), a present that is embodied

in the aesthetics of the fortune teller. The fortune teller becomes a form of aesthetic mediation that is a form of translation between singular and general patterns, not in a sense that looks for evidence, as Berlant has well described, but rather as a new opening that traces 'longing and belonging to create new openings for how to live, and to offer the wild living or outside belonging that already takes place as opportunities for others to re-imagine the practice of making and building lives' (2011: 197–198).



Figure 3: *Romani Embassy*, Maxim Gorki Theatre, Berlin (2017).
Source: Margarethe Makovec. Courtesy of Delaine Le Bas

In the Waiting Room of Romani Pasts and Presents

As it happens, my relationship to the conceptual gypsy is ambiguous. While agreeing with Selling (2015) that the conceptual gypsy is the source of anti-gypsyism, I argue that at the core of resolving the theoretical dilemma of overcoming representational violence is a re-visiting of the concept and a mapping of the (inter)disciplinary impacts it has in order to build comprehensive knowledge about the techniques of forming the European other—in order to overcome it.

The fortune teller, as an artefact and an aesthetic mediation, is first a form of negative identification. She interrupts the asymmetric power relations and halts the process of exchange defined in Lee (2000) above, in order to transform the orientalist gaze, in an affective process of distancing, in the process of transition towards another, more uncertain stage in the process of identification, disidentification and self-envisioning. This is marked as one moment in the process of transitioning/transformation. This process of identification is enabled by intimate and engaged performative gestures and also by the fact that the fortune teller represents the figure of a socially acceptable relationship that is otherwise marked as taboo. This acceptable form of relationship is, according to Le Bas, based on trust—that is, on the fact that the fortune teller is there temporarily, is moving to another place soon, but is also returning. This makes the fortune teller reliable, as there is no risk that she will expose the contents of the seances to the locals. The fortune teller also embodies attachment and desire. Le Bas states, 'What are you hoping for when you go to someone to tell you your fortune? There's a want and a gratification in that, really. You're trusting someone who is seen a bit as a pariah in society'. I argue that a desire to know one's future is grounded in a sense of hope and a promise of a better futurity. That brings me to argue for an affective reading of the fortune teller as an object of desire and, ambiguously, an underlying reading as an object of disgust personified by the underpinnings of the fortune teller as an embodiment of the conceptual gypsy.

Berlant (2011) explains that an object of desire is to be seen as a cluster of promises, which means that the fortune teller is an object that carries a promise that is making or will make something possible for us, whether that be a promise of a better future, health, love and prosperity or a resolution to a problem. Furthermore, the fortune teller represents a person, while objects of desire can also be things, institutions, a text, a norm, etc. Berlant's (2011) conceptualisation of the object of desire unravels a complex network of power relations embedded in the fortune teller: personal, relational,

institutional, temporal and affective, with the normative and textual binding them together. This unravelling of power relations is embedded in the practice of the fortune teller's reading of the fortune. Le Bas describes the practice of fortune telling as follows: 'Fortune telling is as much about how you're reading someone else in what they are saying, how they are standing or sitting, how they are presenting themselves. Physically, we give so much away. Not just by looking at the clothes we're wearing, but also how we carry our bodies'. Therefore, when a fortune teller reads a fortune, I argue, she is aware of the social, political, circumstantial, affective and symbolic entanglements of the person who sits or stands in front of her. In terms of *Romani Embassy*, this means that the performative reading of the contextual happens in the waiting room of Romani history, in the performative landscape: the embassy, the ambassador and the painted windows.

At this point, the performance opens to an analysis of disidentification, in which the Declaration of Human Rights, the indicated contextual violence and the fortune teller are in a process of re-working and re-reading. Rather than figures at the centre of the discourse that Roma are the antithesis of contemporality, this iteration is a vision of futurity in the present and is a glitch in the present that Berlant defines as an 'interruption amidst a transition' (2011: 198). In a way, the fortune teller in the performative space of the waiting room opens up a space for deconstructing the unequal power distribution signified by Gypsyism. As the power relation is discursively based on a fantasized investment in the fortune teller, I argue that the investment is not only descriptive and cultural; it is indicative of a relationship of dependency. This dependency is manifested not on behalf of the precariat—Roma—but in the investment of the majoritarian subjects, Romany rays, Gypsyism or the representatives of dominant cultural domains. It aims to sustain the narrative of progress and contemporality, modernity or civilisation, futurity and freedom at the expense of Roma. This relationship is ambiguous; its power dynamics render Roma precarious by reversing the narrative of dependency. On the one hand, dependency is projected onto Roma, under the pretence that Roma are not capable of taking care of themselves due to a lack of skills, a lack of objectivity in scientific enquiry, a lack of refined artistic skills, etc. On the other hand, some Roma make use of this and rely on this dependency in the sense that this narrative is mobilised when set under critical reflection.

A simple example is critical reflections about the lack of progressive and inclusive queer and queer feminist politics with Romani representation. Some of the circulated arguments are that due to the fight against racism and precarization, scarce resources need to be directed towards anti-racist

campaigns first, in order to move towards LGBTQI rights, or that there is a danger of diluting the causes that are at times heteronormative and nationalist. Matache, in 'Roma in a Time of Paradigm Shift and Chaos', the introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Poverty and Social Science*, identifies that 'the stories of the oppressed speak one to another, not only about the intersectionality of different facets of their identities, but also about ways that their economic status, gender or sexual identity undermine and call into question their contributions in their own movements' (2017: 54). In addition, Mate (2022) argues that there is a lack of visible recognition of LGBTI people and feminists in the past fifty years of Romani activism, the reasons for which are intersectional, including intragroup differences, social status, disability and sexual and gender orientation, which often lead to normalised exclusion and at times public shaming and scapegoating. Therefore, performances like *Romani Embassy* put practices of inclusion and belonging into practice; even if they are temporary, they still have the power to create a politics of being in community, not only despite differences but because of them.

To summarise, every discussion about the ways the conceptual gypsy affects social fabrics should be a reflection of the complex social, historical, political, gendered and sexualised nature, to name a few, that is embedded in an unequal relationship of power, characterised by distancing, violence (economic and physical), holocaust, slavery, forced sterilisation, unequal access to education, homo/lesbo/bi/transphobia, segregated schooling, etc. The fortune teller is an important step in the process of deconstructing ambiguous and affectively charged exchanges. It is the fortune teller who invites a recognition of belonging in radical difference rather than rejecting that difference and seeing it as a weakness. Finally, in the words of the fortune teller Le Bas herself, '[...] there's room for all of us [...]. We are stronger together than on our own. There are many voices. We should celebrate the radical diversity that we represent. Because it is quite radical'. In closing, an invitation to belonging in radical difference is a radical and queer poesis of a futurity that is not yet here and only existed once, then and there, at Maxim Gorki Theater.

Conclusion

In this article, the main focus of analysis has been temporality in relation to Romani identities and politics of belonging. The subject of this is the fortune teller, the main protagonist in Le Bas's performance of *Romani Embassy*. I started with a contextual analysis of the discourses surrounding Romani

identity formations, Gypsyism as a specific form of Orientalism towards Roma in Europe and the figure of the Romani ray as the epistemic authority who regulated not only scientific discourses but also impacted representational politics. These, I argued, are forms of visual and aesthetic contamination. Setting off by tracing counternarratives in academic and activist discourses, I reflected on the dynamics and the backlash in the field of Romani Studies towards situated epistemologies, feminist knowledge production and critical interventions made by some Romani scholars. This further opened the door to finding a research gap. I argued that art and cultural production are at the forefront of transformative politics and are a significant source of knowledge production. Thereby, my analysis was set in a triangulation of art, activism and academic knowledge production.

While looking at the performance of *Romani Embassy*, I argued that the performative practice—the situatedness of the performance in terms of the performative landscape—opened the ground for tracing singularities that have become generalisations. The pattern tracing marked a beginning in the process of decolonising the Gypsyist tendency to homogenise Romani identities and reflected a process of slowing down time, in which it became apparent that aesthetic and visual contaminations are cyclically reproduced and occur as a transnational phenomenon that has impacted Romani lives for more than three centuries. The conceptual gypsy defines the time of the ‘gypsy’ as both a metaphor and a paradox. It is and it isn’t a signifier of temporality, while in essence it is indicative of a space. This space can be, but is not limited to, one space, but it signifies a space of dislocated movement without moving. It is somewhat slippery, as it transgresses national borders, yet it is part of Orientalist dreams of the ultimate European other, Roma. It is and is not embedded in flesh, yet it is a space in the Orientalist imagination, one that belongs to the holder of the resources of knowledge production, the Romani ray, and is a signifier for diametrically opposing power relations regarding what is to be known and who has the right to know it. The paradox is that it has nothing to do with time, yet the time of the ‘gypsy’ is an everlasting circular reproduction of toxic generalisations. It is dependent on and causes dependency. It is a metaphor, in Le Bas’s performative utterance, as ‘we have become a living artefact’, rather than being described as vivid, diverse, resistant, strong, capable, knowledgeable, loving, hopeful, dreaming subjects.

Romani Embassy, I argued, created space to contribute to a body of knowledge on the politics of relationality and belonging, in which I deconstructed the ways the fortune teller was represented and offered three stages in the process of reworking the conceptual gypsy: negative identification, as

a process of distancing; disidentification; and, finally, self-envisioning. These processes took place in the waiting room of Romani history, which I conceptualised with help from Berlant's (2011) concept of the impasse in the present, in which identitarian dispositions represent a sensation of suspended animation, a movement without moving. In an analysis of this affective exchange, I realised that the asymmetric exchange of power creates a sense of paralysis in which some Roma might experience entrapment in the waiting room of Romani history. I argued that the dispositions offered by the conceptual gypsy offer the potential to be decolonised, first through rejection, then disidentification and finally through an inward-looking process of self-identification. As one of the rare figures that mitigates the position of acceptance and non-acceptance by majoritarian societies, the fortune teller, with the affective bonds she enables, creates a sense of utopia in performance and a community with the audience. I offered a reading of a queer utopian narrative of futurity that is encapsulated in Le Bas's statement on belonging in radical difference.

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