

The Time of the Gypsies.

By Michael Stewart. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. 1997. xviii, 302 pp.

Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Postsocialism. By Alaina Lemon. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2000. ix, 308 pp.

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The Gypsies are often depicted as a "people without history," a classic but curious diaspora that neither claims nor longs for an originary homeland. For over 500 years, Romani groups have been living throughout Europe, and though aware that once, long ago they came from somewhere else, that "somewhere" has been eclipsed by Europe in memory and experience. Gypsies, as individual men and women, members of families and tribes, holders of certain occupations, speakers of particular languages and dialects, and, most recently, citizens of sovereign states, have established, and continue to live out connections to particular European places. Europe is their home although it has never been hospitable, and the Roma note this contradiction by singing of themselves as the "orphans of the world."

The Time of the Gypsies and *Between Two Fires* are analyses of how and why the Gypsies of Eastern Europe remember, practice, and perform their peoplehood as constrained by their history, a history inscribed by European literati and politicians. Stewart and Lemon point out early in their books that the search for Gypsy origins has been much more important for their European hosts, who can then figuratively, if not physically, relocate the Gypsies to another place and time, than it is for the Roma themselves. Yet, like the Gypsies, Europeans fail to form one undifferentiated mass. Indeed, a major breakthrough in their work is that Michael Stewart and Alaina Lemon ground Romani practices and performances within the borders of specific countries -- Hungary and USSR-Russia, respectively -- and under the impact of their specific policies. Both books vividly show how, individual agency notwithstanding, national imaginaries and political programs shape, in good measure, the contours of Rom social life.

The Time of the Gypsies and *Between Two Fires* reveal that combinations of place and state are vitally important for framing contemporary Gypsy practices and understanding the wide variation among and within Romani groups. Although both Hungarians and Russians imagine Gypsies to be natural performers -- dancers and musicians, as well as thieves and tricksters -- socialist Hungary's policy of proletarianization resulted in a much more dire set of material conditions for the Rom than for those of Russia. The Soviet Union's

policy was considerably less punitive; almost from the outset its emphasis was on Gypsy literacy and the performing arts. Only later were efforts made to assimilate "wild" Gypsies into the unmarked, "civilized" (Soviet-international, i.e. Russian) population.

Although it is *de rigueur* today to analyze any diaspora, minority, ethnic group or indigenous people from within the particular contexts of place and state, such was not always the case when considering Gypsies. Rather than claiming credit for a novel and astute approach, Stewart and Lemon each modestly attribute it to their Rom hosts "who are and speak of themselves as connected to local places and pasts" (Lemon, p. 3). As a result of painstaking research, their discussion of Gypsies is never phrased in essentialized or general terms -- except in regard to the linguistic and social categories constructed and bandied about *within* Hungary and the USSR-Russia. Indeed, Stewart's and Lemon's achievements lie in having problematized Gypsy performance, memory and marginality through skillful demonstration of how Romani social life and historiography are intimately connected to, if not generated by, the programs, practices and policies of nation-states.

Readers of both books quickly discover that Gypsy groups vary in language, religion, education, occupation, dress and home decor, from state to state and within the borders of any one country. Michael Stewart learned that the Vlach, who alone of all Hungarian Gypsies call themselves Rom, refuse to recognize some other groups, particularly the monolingually Hungarian Romungros, as Gypsies. But he was even more surprised to find that they "had no trouble admitting that it was possible to be born a *gažo* (non-Gypsy) and become a Rom" (p. 59). Blood, or descent, was hardly, if ever, mentioned; *romanes* -- the Gypsy way of being in the world -- determined Rom belonging. And Stewart found that just as engaging in particular practices could earn one Gypsy status, *romanes* could also be lost through failure to perform. On a related note, Lemon noticed over the years of her fieldwork that she was not uniformly placed in one unchanging *gazhje* (non-Gypsy) category; at different times and in different contexts, she was referred to differently. Thus, both Stewart's and Lemon's work pose a challenge to what had seemed from prior research to be a Romani cultural given -- an inherent Gypsy insider/*gažo*-*gazhje* outsider dichotomy.

If the boundaries between Gypsies and outsiders are not as rigid and absolute as was once thought, but *gažo* persists as an important category of distinction in everyday discourse, Stewart asks, Who are the *gažo*? His answer is presented as a fascinating analysis in Chapter 7 where readers discover that the term *gažo* indexes peasants, who are people tightly linked to a well-bounded and fixed piece of land -- that is, not just any non-Gypsy. Stewart then shows how the Rom extended this word to include communist bureaucrats and professionals, not because they *are* peasants but because they manifest the same prejudiced

attitudes *as* peasants (p. 126). Questions of race and racism, however, are strikingly missing from this discussion.

By contrast, Alaina Lemon's analysis of the Roma/gazhje divide pivots on the twin notions of "nationality" -- the Soviet Russian gloss for ethnicity or peoplehood--and "civilizedness" -- a pan-European/Soviet category that describes the evolutionary peak of world cultures, as opposed to "wildness" at the bottom. These issues overlap, clash with and/or are fortified by questions of race. Lemon presents intriguing ethnographic examples that illustrate how Gypsy performances are unevenly read by Russians as indicators of nationality or race in different contexts. Whereas theatrical presentations highlight "civilized" aspects of Romani nationality and cultural uniqueness, Gypsies trading in the bazaars and begging opposite McDonald's are lumped together by Russians with Azeris, Chechens, Georgians, and others, to create and confirm a racially marked, internally undifferentiated category of unscrupulous tricksters. Similar to findings about the color line in the USA, blackness in Russia overpowers and blots out all other traits or capacities, including hybridity.

Lemon's penultimate chapter returns to the Romani point of view and demonstrates that Roma and gazhje are shifting terms. Whereas for Russians there are only two kinds of Gypsies, the artist and the thief, for the Roma there are various kinds of gazhje and they may identify with some against others. Is it a racial coincidence that at least one person declared to Lemon, "We are your *negry* [Negroes]. We are treated like a second class here just like your blacks in America" (p. 75)? Or is the identification based on a similar history of victimization, coupled with the dubious distinction of being viewed as natural performers? Lemon concludes that African-Americans, who, I should add, appear to Russia's Roma more as media images than as in-the-flesh human beings, "may be 'gazhje,' yet they are removed from post-Soviet politics, distant from Russian gazhje and thus [offer] other attractive models for creating alternate selves" (pp. 201-2). First by questioning the givenness of the Gypsy/non-Gypsy divide -- including oft-cited pollution beliefs that supposedly worked to produce impenetrable group boundaries -- and then investigating them via long-term ethnography were Stewart and Lemon able to debunk both romantic and deprecatory stereotypes of Gypsies.

What then of those rootless, insouciant Gypsies that have appeared in European literature from the prose of England's D. H. Lawrence to the poetry of Russia's Alexander Pushkin? Stewart informs readers that by the mid-1980s fewer than one percent of East Europe's Roma still traveled (p. 13). Lemon points out that the last Gypsy camp disappeared from Russia decades ago and that, "In 1990s Russia most Roma...had lived their entire lives in a single city, village, or house" (p. 9). *Rootedness* has empirically replaced *rootlessness*, but not in the popular imagination. Hungarians, Russians and the Roma themselves continue to narrate stories of drifting nomads, belonging nowhere but turning up everywhere, as illustrations of the "real Gypsy." Throughout their books, Stewart and Lemon ask why this is so.

Both find answers in a combination of Gypsy performance with the specific cultural histories and state practices of Hungary and Russia. But the authors diverge in their points of emphasis. Stewart concentrates his study of Gypsy social life as an inspired response to economic exploitation and social marginalization. "The Gypsies' fantasy," he comments, "was that they lived easily and luckily, whereas the reality was that they lived in grinding poverty and were subject to multiple disadvantages and repeated misfortune" (pp. 25-26). In tracing the success of Hungary's sedentarization and proletarianization programs, he notes that while the state succeeded at turning Gypsies into wage laborers it failed to turn the Roma into *Homo faber*. Instead, at the end of their eight-hour shifts and at the weekend, Gypsy men forget about their jobs. They use their leisure time to sing songs, tell tales, trade horses, drink prodigious amounts of alcohol, and spread praise and money around to their companions -- all practices that emphasize *romanes*, the (idealized) Gypsy way of life in which thrift, planning for the future, or investing in a piece of land holds no place. *The Time of the Gypsies* conveys a distinctly Marxist impression that the Rom's songs to themselves and their performances to Magyar peasants in the horse market enabled socialist and post-socialist Hungarians to exploit and scapegoat them. The Janus-faced triumph/tragedy of the Gypsies seems contingent on their acceptance and defiance of marginality, creating, in the words of Günter Grass, "gaiety in the face of despair" (Stewart, p. 13).

Alaina Lemon's study of "Gypsy performance and Romani memory" takes a different tack. Whereas Stewart concentrated his inquiry on "the lowest of the low" -- workers and traders living on the margins of Hungarian society -- Lemon entered Gypsy society at its most "civilized," state-supported peak. Beginning with intellectuals at the Moscow Romani Theater, over several visits spanning almost a decade, she developed relationships with a wide variety of individuals from different families and groups in the Moscow suburbs, surrounding villages and in the Ural mountains. Her multi-sited research enabled witnessing of all kinds of Gypsy performance -- in the theater, as extravaganza nightclub acts, through film and in hotel-based weddings, as well as fortune telling and trading at Moscow bazaars and provincial markets and begging at popular hotspots.

Unlike Stewart, for whom performances of *romanes* mask an intolerable socio-economic reality, Lemon's goal is to "track how ideologies about performance reproduce social, and especially racial, categories" (p. 27). In other words, performance is to be studied as a realm of expressiveness in and of itself that is open to multiple interpretations. One of Lemon's most chilling insights is that while the Roma positively perform distinctly Gypsy difference while trading in local markets, their Russian audience negatively categorizes this difference as racial. Russian Gypsies are thereby dissolved into a "black," devious and deceitful, alien and uncivilized mass. Far from disguising economic inequality

through artistic forms, these performances thwart the Roma's claims to a unique, culturally valuable, identity and place.

Nonetheless, Lemon ends her study with the conclusion, "At Home in Russia." The Russian word *dom* signifies in one word what in English is split into two: house and home. These two overlapping but distinguishable concepts, so central to discussions of immigration, diaspora, marginality and aboriginality, are in Russia lived as one. It is true as well that throughout the history of the USSR-Russia many tragically found that their houses were not necessarily peaceful and secure residences. Nevertheless, those houses are the only places that most could call home. Thus, I see no contradiction between Lemon's final chapter and Stewart's, "Marginality, Resistance, and Ideology."

The Gypsies have been in Hungary since the fourteenth century; the Magyars entered the Carpathian basin in the ninth. Likewise, Kiev-centered Rus expanded eastward, south and north to fill present-day Russia, telling a similar tale of settlement and displacement over the centuries. Neither the Magyars nor the Gypsies, nor perhaps the Russians as well, are indigenous peoples, but with their roots intertwined through history, language, custom and citizenship, all are natives of Hungary or Russia. But what does this claim to place mean today in post-Soviet Eastern Europe? Hardly anyone can predict a present just like the past; state boundaries have been penetrated by media images and consumer items, migrating people and travelling cultures, and hierarchies of occupation, civilizedness and prestige have been disrupted and are up for grabs. If this is the case, are the Gypsies in any better or worse position today than they were under communism? Stewart concludes that in Hungary those who have not abandoned *romanes* are "better placed to deal with the more competitive world of Eastern European capitalism...[but] it is this successful adaptation to the new conditions that makes many of their non-Gypsy neighbors so fearful of them" (p. 245). Lemon's final words, although focused more on Romani exclusion from the Russian polity rather than manipulations in the market (p. 234), echo similar ominous sentiments. New state policies abandoning efforts to force assimilation notwithstanding, marginality, if not persecution, continues to haunt the Roma. Such is home for East European Gypsies; they are attached by place, history and citizenship to their bounded countries yet remain orphans adrift in an ever changing, far from generous, world.