

Fecha de recepción: 1 septiembre 2019
Fecha de aceptación: 4 octubre 2019
Fecha de publicación: 9 febrero 2020
URL: <https://oceanide.es/index.php/o12020/article/view/39/182>
Océanide número 13, ISSN 1989-6328
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37668/oceanide.v13i.39>

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Transpopular Spaces: Gypsy Imageries in the Work of Van Morrison

Resumen

La obra del autor norirlandés Van Morrison ha pasado relativamente desapercibida por la crítica a pesar de los numerosos elementos sociales, literarios y artísticos que presenta. Entre ellos se encuentra la representación de la figura del gitano como modelo de actuación para unas generaciones de oyentes a quienes les preocupaba el aspecto cultural a la contra, así como los modelos de vida alternativos a los legitimados por la clase media de la época. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar el componente romantizado que se presenta en la obra de Morrison alrededor de su representación del gitanismo, así como observar cómo esos elementos generan primero una función deontologizante y después una resignificación de los espacios en tránsito ocupados por la(s) imaginación(es) de esta comunidad como pueblo nómada.

Para llevar a cabo el análisis se atenderá a varias canciones de la primera época del autor norirlandés, y se explicarán las funciones de representación del gitano en el entorno del espacio y de una epistemología contracultural.

Palabras clave:

Van Morrison; espacio; gitanos; contracultura; música

Abstract

The work of Northern Irish singer-songwriter Van Morrison has gone relatively unnoticed by critics despite the numerous social, literary and artistic elements included in his songs. Among them is the representation of the figure of the Gypsy as a model of action for generations of listeners who were concerned about countercultural dynamics, as well as alternative life models to those that were legitimized by the middle class of the time. The objective of this study is to analyze the romanticized component that is presented in Morrison's work around his conceptualization of gypsyism, as well as to observe how these elements generate, firstly, a deontologizing function in the Gypsy figure, and then a resignification of the spaces in transit occupied by the imagination(s) of this community as a nomadic people.

To carry out this analysis, several songs from the first albums of the Northern Irish author will be examined, and we will explain the function of representing the Gypsy in the countercultural spatial environment of their epistemology.

Keywords:

Van Morrison; space; Gypsies; counterculture; music

A

nd the caravan is painted red and white
That means everybody's staying overnight
Barefoot gypsy player round the campfire sing
and play
And a woman tells us of her ways.

Caravan, Van Morrison

In 1998, as newly incorporated students into a doctoral program of cultural and literary studies in New York, one of the first courses we studied was entitled “European Gypsies”, and was taught by two professors who would over the years become our thesis directors.¹ Having just arrived from the social sphere of Spain, and with a cultural image that was not yet distanced from our own epistemology, we were absorbed by the discussions that took place around the identity and aesthetic image of “gypsyism”. They seemed to us clearly romanticized and not very accurate revisions of the subjectivized reality of the Gypsy from the peninsular epistemology. But after reading several critical approaches on the topic, which generated keen discussions, our critical and cultural sensitivity was modified and provided us with new peripheral readings that opened our minds on the subject. The representation of gypsyism came then as a discourse of identity production, but also as a refuge against the politics of identity. Our questioning of legitimate essentialisms thus became a new focus in our research.

In a critical space such as the one that emerged around the identity construction of the Gypsy, we could observe that the poetic production of Northern Irish singer-songwriter Van Morrison, at that time frequently discussed in the culturalist analysis of Irish popular culture (McLoone 2008, 63), brought significant attention to gypsyism in and around that collective identity which lived in a permanent state of interrogation. Morrison's contributions brought about a great critical richness to the distinctly different levels of the observation and study of gypsyism (Mills 2010, 14). What is more, they did so in a line of immersion similar to what was frequently observed in nineteenth century studies, and, because of their relevance, they too deserved a discussion about Gypsies and otherness.

In the year 2019, more than twenty years later and with a growing curiosity on the subject, we have set out to order these critical annotations and comments, and we decided to consider from a distance the operation of Morrison's poetic productions around the figure of the Gypsy. Observing both his production of imaginary identities and its aesthetic and axiological exoticization, during this long period our research on the topic was culminated with the publication of an article on gypsyism in the work of D.H. Lawrence, *The Virgin and the Gypsy* (Barros Grela 2011), which included the analysis of several Van Morrison's songs from a comparatist approach. As an antecedent to this study, it should also be mentioned that the work carried out by the *Research Group of Irish Studies* at the University of Coruña, around the transnational relevance of Irish popular culture, has underpinned this renewal of our interest in the musical work of the composer from Belfast.²

As suggested in the aforementioned article, the study of a subject that is so seldom frequented in academia as the representation of “gypsyism” in the work of D. H. Lawrence³ was an innovation which required a healthy dose of research temerity. Nevertheless, this approach is not comparable with the more challenging

research project of going into the analysis of the Gypsy in the work of the Northern Irish singer-songwriter. The latter implies an act of faith, as well as the coherent response to an unavoidable academic concern.

The factors against a critical analysis of these characteristics are easily observable from different approaches. Firstly, despite the fact that the Cultural Studies discipline has endowed popular culture with a critical and theoretical apparatus of great relevance (Agger 2014, 70; Samuels 2009, 133) in recent years, the academic justification of this study might still be perceived with some suspicion. The study of a discursive production aimed at popular consumption, such as the songs written by Van Morrison, is still considered non-consequential by some traditional critics (Shuker 2016, 26). Despite the fact that Morrison's music has managed to gain access to a prestigious niche in his field of consumption, his entrance as an object of analysis in university classrooms or in research areas of greater impact has been mostly marginal.⁴

On the other hand, there is an identity distance between the ethnic and cultural perceptions of the gypsies, as interpreted by Morrison in his songs, and the Gypsy culture that has been imposed as a standard in the aesthetic representations of this ethnic group. Clearly, the analytical difficulties derived from this distance is overcome through a current anthropological perspective. It becomes necessary to question the common features that different social conventions have used, not to represent but to *produce* this – or other – ethnic group. In current theoretical trends there is commitment to celebrate the ethnic differences as a way to weaken the acculturizing – and therefore hegemonic – interpretations of what the concept of difference really means.

In this sense, the historiographic, literary, and often romanticized representation of the subject associated with the Gypsy ethnicity has been consolidated in what López-Morillas identifies in Lorca as an aesthetic of myth, not of ideas (1980, 314). In this sense, the present study proposes a critical approach to the discussion around the representability of the Gypsy identity from an Irish epistemology. Throughout the analysis of Morrison's references to gypsyism in his lyrics, we focus on the identification of its actanciality as a *performance* of an extrinsic imagery, assimilated by the culture associated with the Gypsy ethnicity as an idiosyncratic feature.

As we were saying, throughout the different aesthetic stages in which the figure of the Gypsy has been novelized, the Romani culture has experienced a tendency to be associated with a “romanticized” image of its subjects, but also with a marginal and abject image, frequently fuelled by the social imagery that has normally developed around and in opposition to it. Such is the case of some nineteenth-century writers, admirers of travellers and vagrancy, for example George Borrow (1923) or George Smith of Coalville (1883), as well as their best-known successor, the Irish scholar of gypsyism, Walter Starkie (1894–1976). These are historians, ethnographers, and travellers who base their reflections about the Gypsies on their own experiences after having undergone a direct observation of their customs. In their works, it becomes evident that the epistemological distance between the observer and the observed is only marginally mitigated. Nevertheless, the hermeneutical nature of these descriptive and performative narratives is of great interest to the researcher who is concerned with the identity production of gypsyism from a perspective of otherness.

For the analysis of Morrison's lyrical texts, the identity differences among the various groups or populations that make up the taxonomy of gypsyism cannot be ignored. The peculiarities of the romanticising of the Gypsy in the second half of the last century differ significantly from the representations provided by the travellers previously mentioned in a distant chronotope. Thus, Lou Charon-Deutsch, in her study on the process of romanticising the Gypsies in Spain, and the racism that underlies its development argues that "[t]he promotion of Andalusianism with its strong nostalgia for a Romanticized, mysterious past helped to construct a collective national identity while camouflaging unequal relations of power and repressive social structures" (2004, 210).

Similarly, the image of the Gypsies portrayed by the Irish musician surely is the result of a different exposure to the culture of this dispersed population group, as compared to the one experienced by other previous authors who had also been seduced by the "exoticism" of this culture (Mills 2010, 257).

There are various reasons that justify this difference in the representation and imagination of this community.³ In the first place, the geographical context is different, and not distant. In the cases of Borrow and Starkie there had been a geographical displacement included in their experiences, and therefore, a territorial decontextualization, Morrison's approach to gypsyism also includes the nomadic quality attributed to this group of people, but it does so from a domesticity that affects both his subjectivized perception of the Gypsies and a disaffect of appreciation:

Morrison and his party (the "we") [...] are pitched somewhere between the two here, not quite belonging to either side of the equation, being in transit but not perpetually so. The gypsies – a nation without a territory – represent another way of understanding place, nationhood and belonging which sets aside what Sinéad O'Connor described as "what was going on in those times in his country". (Mills 2010, 310)

In the second place, there is a process of legitimization of the obscurity – being carried away by taxonomic temptation – that is attributed to the Romani people. In the work of "The Belfast Cowboy", as Morrison is often called, there are many direct references – and also more subtle ones – to the customs and characteristics that historically have been attributed to this ethnic group. In addition to the compositions that include direct allusions to the ethnic traits commonly associated with the members of this community (physical, social, demographic or geopolitical), the presence of aesthetic elements that move the audience towards the environment of gypsyism – we insist, understood in its artistic and literary projection – is also abundant. As will be seen in the subsequent discussion of some of Morrison's songs, the case of "Brown Eyed Girl" can be paradigmatic in the following terms: on the one hand, the nostalgia that its lyrics give off about a fascination for a lost past that has suddenly reappeared ("I saw you just the other day, My, how you have grown!") merges with the melancholy desire to return to those idealized times: "Cast my memory back there, Lord". Although it is evident that these

references do not explicitly allude to the Romani people, the referential connections produced by these verses in their readers affect the association of the aforementioned aesthetic with the work of the Northern Irish author. This does not mean, as is to be supposed, that the author consciously pursued an identification with the romanticized vision of the Gypsy, but that his lyrical proposals agree with the romanticized representation of the Gypsy people. In fact, the author himself showed his disagreement with the association of his compositions with a specific lifestyle associated with travellers and wanderers: "I was just getting tired of the image bullshit [...] that man of mystery trip and what have you [...] What's that all about? For example, I wrote a couple of songs that had Gypsy references in them... But that doesn't mean that it's a myth or that I'm a gypsy" (Hage 2009, 82).

On the other hand, the multiple references to the obscurity of the context ("brown eyed", "hollow", "rain", "misty morning fog", "old mine"), which have in essence a romantic nature, contrast with the luminous explosiveness that is interspersed among those dark verses, and that accompany a cheerful melody framed in the Jamaican rhythms in the form of Caribbean calypso: "standing in the sunlight laughing", "a rainbow's wall", "waterfall" or "green grass" among others. This light alternation between the melancholic connotations of darkness and the vividness of the bright strokes responds to that contradictory characteristic of the Gypsy's aesthetic representation as a taciturn but jubilant figure. In these terms, Van Morrison's work, which embraces this lyrical approach repeatedly, manifests itself as a referential source in the representation of the transitory spaces – both geographical and epistemological – of gypsyism. This allows for a literary analysis of his songs beginning with his descriptions of the gypsies and his allusions to the nomadic and uprooted life that has traditionally been granted to them.

The discursive approaches considered in this study propose a consideration of these two opposing argumentative lines that have just been mentioned: first, and in a direct and explicit way, a romanticized image of Morrison's work slides over the poetic language of a protagonist in the gloom, hidden, implicit, and who proposes a rhetoric in an insurmountable return to the denial of his own condition. Secondly, although in a more complementary way than the first, the festive and liberating character of the wandering and deterritorialized figure that manifests itself in the history and imagination of the Romani people is also observed.

Consequently, in his repertoire, Van Morrison offers the reader, or indeed audience, an approach to Gypsy culture close to the traditional imagery. The moment in which his first songs that mention the figure of the "Gypsy" are published corresponds to an important historical period, a period in which an important part of Western European and North American youths were anxious to activate a social revolution that would question the traditional values of culture and family. These are the years of the social movement belonging to the hippy revolution and the May 68 transformations (Brake 2013, 130), which were aesthetically defined by a search for the authentic essence of the human being. This search found a source of meanings in the figures that were associated with the personification of human existence: marginalized and self-marginalized from the social culture of consumption; forgotten; silenced; outlawed. In the era of flower power, Van Morrison stands as one of those stamens watered by utopia, although on several occasions he has expressed his rejection of the hippy culture (Wild 1990, page number), for being

virtually imposed to a youth that looked at anti-system and counter-cultural references (Roszak 1969, 7). Richard Mills, in his study on marginal groups of young people, transcribes the words of a London activist from the sixties which portrays the feelings and concerns of the young generation who would listen to the first productions of the Northern Irish singer-songwriter: "...I don't call love what you read in those magazines for women. I hate the people who stay together and play the little games of life. Everybody is playing a little part. It's funny to look at it. I'm not going to play..." (1973, 84).

Wild's words are reminiscent of the ideas that Griffey (2008, 484) and Johnson (2013, 90) develop about countercultural movements. They clearly established a series of parallelisms between the described situations of the characters described by the Northern Irish author in his songs and the new conceptions of society, which the readers of the *Lost Generation*, the *Angry Young Men* and, of course, the *Beat Generation*, received in response to their desire to transcend the knowledge of power and the legitimated discourses of identity. These concerns are summarized in the social movement of "counterculture" that emerged in the third quarter of the twentieth century, characterized by a rebellion against traditional values, and the desire for rebellion against the established system. This is what Morrison addresses through his observation of the natural and the wild, which defined the nomadic groups he observed as liminal subjects in transit. These subjects used their disidentification to respond to the ontological changes desired by Beatnik literary proposals (Hoskyns 2016, 46). This articulation of countercultural aspirations and transitional spaces can be observed in Morrison's compositions through the analysis of some of his productions.

With "Gypsy" (Morrison 1972), Morrison is immersed in a personal interest in finding new forms of celebrating freedom, also identifiable in the nomadic spirit of the romanticized Gypsy referred to by Charon-Deutsch (2004, 73). The dissatisfaction produced by those sensibilities is translated into a need for self-determination and a social "detachment" from daily routines, which Morrison finds in an aesthetic path that leads to the reconceptualization of the Gypsy as a purely romanticized subject. The image of the Romani individual is repeatedly reflected in Morrison's work with different signifiers but identical meaning: that of the unrecognized spirit that travels, oblivious to the fickleness of the materialist world, through transitional spaces and through elements of deterritorialization. Thus, from the first stanza one finds direct references to the Gypsy aesthetic cliché as an entity of mystery and magic that simultaneously produces fear and fascination in the observer, caused by his wayward and nonconformist life philosophy: "You can make out pretty good / When you're on your own / And you know just where you are / When you wanna roam".

The Gypsy, who in this stanza chooses to live alone and wander aimlessly, finds his reverberation in the composer himself, who defines his aesthetic attitude as "I write from a different place. I do not even know what it is called or if it has a name. It just comes and I sculpt it" (Neil 2009, 44). Just as the Gypsy in the song produces his space of existence, the singer looks into the lack of definition of the place with which he dialogues, and then shapes his potential to incorporate it into his aesthetic model.

The same song offers an extensive record of concepts and spaces that inhabit the Gypsy collective imagery, such as "the

moon over your head", "the road beneath your feet", "laying underneath the stars", "two guitars around the campfire" or the final stanza, which affects the timeless freedom of the subject in transit: "No matter where you wander / And no matter where you roam / Any place you hang your hat / You know that that is home, check it out first".

This concern for spaces and non-places – which are, in reality, a problematization of the "contact zones", as conceptualized by Mary Louise Pratt (1992) – fits perfectly within the collective identity production of the Irish imagery, whose writers have constructed a long and important history of migratory movements (Fanning 2018, 65). The same applies to the Northern Irish singer-songwriter himself, who, in his own experience, rehearsed a continuous exposure to displacements and pilgrimages, and whose artistic attitude developed according to the sensibilities acquired in that constant state of transition (Mills 2010, 53).

Previously, the Northern Irish singer-songwriter had already composed songs in which he gave special importance to the figure of the Gypsy. Thus, in his 1970 album, *His Band and the Street Choir* (1970b), the author presents "Gypsy Queen", an allegorical composition in which the poetic voice urges a Gypsy woman to keep on dancing. This image echoes the aesthetic apparatus used by DH Lawrence in *The Virgin and the Gypsy* (1931), although this time with the gender roles reversed. Again, references to topics related to Gypsy aesthetics are repeated to refer to their reconfiguration as free spirits, oblivious to the constrictions of a social space subjected to rules and norms. Through the figure of the Gypsy, the author reviews with those characteristics that seem unattainable to him with a sense of melancholy: "Dance on Gypsy Queen / If it's all night, it's alright / Rave on / Let your love come tumblin' down [...] / Rave on / Right beneath the silver moon".

In these verses, the author takes the "Gypsy Queen" to a seductive position that reproduces the traditional schemes in which an external gaze disidentifies the Gypsy to turn it into an object of desire. This feeling is enhanced by the frustrations of those who have accepted the routine of daily life, and the author perceives in the Gypsy the specific place of transgression that he would have liked to occupy. In fact, the way the poetic voice addresses the Gypsy is by giving her orders, which clearly describe what the speaker's wishes are, rather than the actions of the Gypsy woman herself. The halo of perdition that has been traditionally assigned to women in literature (Hanson 2010, 48) is multiplied in this song by adding her condition as a Gypsy woman, and amalgamate the ideas of prohibition and fascination that have been regular in the depiction of the Romani people. These ideas are present in much of Morrison's production, and are also observed, albeit more indirectly, in "Bright Side of the Road" (Morrison 1979). This song is another attempt to demonstrate the recurring interference of a "carpe diem" attitude, which Morrison portrays through the figure of the Gypsy, particularly in the first compositions of his career: "From the dark end of the street / To the bright side of the road / We'll be lovers once again / [...] And time seems to go by so fast / In the twinkling of an eye / [...] Let's enjoy it while we can..."

The Northern Irish singer-songwriter specifically alludes to the characters' concern to maintain the duality of their relationship, based on the connection between a more traditional and intimate side and a more rebellious and optimistic one.⁶ Those characters that are on the "dark side of the street" are reaffirmed

in Morrison's song as subjects who do not wait for the events of life, but are the ones who make events happen, knowing that "time seems to go by so fast", so "let's enjoy it while we can" (Thomson 2016, 54).

In "Gypsy", "Gypsy Queen" and "The Bright Side of the Road", Morrison describes the protagonists – who can be explicitly or implicitly identified as gypsies – as individuals in transit. They are characters that create their spaces while simultaneously experiencing those spaces, and move away from conventions anchored in social norms. This is the reason why their identity production does not allow them to question the legitimized exotic and idealized image of the Gypsy. This spatial feature defines the representation of the idiosyncrasy of the Western European Gypsy, which Morrison proposes through a system of poetic reticence that reinforces the enigmatic character of the Gypsy he portrays. In "Gypsy", for example, he begins by giving a description of the character he is talking about, and when he considers that the reader is already prepared to identify the subject, he abruptly stamps the identification of the character in an appellative interjection: "Gypsy!".

This characteristic of the narrative, as well as the Gypsy's own characterization, converge with the stylistic tendency of a literary movement that was a clear reference for the Northern Irish singer-songwriter: the American Beat Generation (Mills 2018, 212). Both – Morrison and the American beatniks – share an enthusiasm for the influence of literature and ancient Eastern philosophy in their works, particularly from Taoism, Sufism, and Confucianism (2010, 324).

This study, however, does not seek to delve into the philosophical aspects of Morrison's work; nor does it try to discuss the ethical interrogations posed by the writers belonging to the Beat Generation. Rather, it aims to establish and explain the existing connections of Van the Man's work with the aesthetics of the Gypsy, whose eccentric vision identifies with the one sought by the Beat writers and the philosophical currents that were fundamental in their artistic production (2018, 223). As we have already discovered, Van Morrison expresses his closeness to the interest in gypsyism in his first works, more clearly in his *Moondance* album (1970a), but also sporadically in the following ones until 1974. The Gypsy theme is treated more or less explicitly in "Brown Eyed Girl", "Caravan", "Gypsy", "Gypsy Queen", "Into the Mystic", "It Stoned Me", "Moondance", "Spanish Rose" or "Virgo Clowns", and taking these songs as a reference, we can isolate a series of identifiable features that represent the exoticization of the Gypsy people, features that are fundamental in the work of Morrison.

One of these repetitive traits – which has already been discussed above, at least tangentially – is the condition of the gypsies as nomad subjects, which confers onto them, in the eyes of the author, a certain degree of dynamicity as opposed to the static practices preferred by the middle class in Western society. As Marilyn R. Brown has explained, "Romanticism transformed [the gypsies] into the mythic prototype of the social wanderer" (1985, 21), and Van Morrison seems to reinforce this idea with his descriptions of the Gypsy people. A clear example of this fascination with migration as a way of life and transitional spaces appears in the song "Brown Eyed Girl", in which the author alludes to a classic metaphor of movement to express his nostalgic perception of freedom. Said image is the identification of the characters with migratory birds, a metaphor that on many occasions has served to represent the nomadic character of the gypsies: "Where did we go/

days when the rains came?" ("Brown Eyed Girl").

The same feature is identifiable in at least two other Morrison's songs. In "Gypsy", which is a very detailed description of the singer-songwriter's idea of what it is to be a Gypsy, there is a constant allusion to the territorial disidentification of the Romani ethnicity with any given specific place. But it also refers to the contradictory ephemeral identification of Gypsies with the places – or the places of transit – in which they inhabit for a brief timeframe: "And you know just where you are / when you wanna roam / [...] / Any place you hang your hat / you know that that is home".

The second of the songs that are being analyzed from the perspective of the spatial transitions as a defining attribute of the romanticized Gypsy, "Caravan" (Morrison 1970a), reveals in its title the anticipation to a series of verses focused on the celebration of the Romani lifestyle, and it introduces the allusion to the Gypsy propensity to understand the world as a non-place and to rather see it as a transitional space that can only be inhabited by nomad populations. The song offers a whole series of situations that are defined by the movement, and that have gypsies as the protagonists. When they are mentioned explicitly, they are said to be on the road ("on [their] way"), or in preparation to leave a space. And when they are not directly named in the song, their image remains in the listener's imagination, due to the

And the caravan is on its way
I can hear the merry gypsies play
[...]

And the caravan has all my friends
It will stay with me until the end
Gypsy Robin, Sweet Emma Rose
Tell me everything I need to know
[...]
And the caravan is painted red and white
That means everybody's staying overnight
Barefoot Gypsy player round the campfire sing and play.

dynamic elements used by the author to provide fluidity to the song:

Following the terminology proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (2004, 321), the gypsies described in these songs are developing a function of deterritorialization, since their lack of interest in establishing themselves in a certain place or space contradicts the intrinsic inclination of the human being to become a sedentary inhabitant of a place that they can call home. Instead, the attitude of the gypsies described in the song results in a reconceptualization of space itself – or its deconstruction. Faced with the more static character of the poetic voice, Morrison's description of the gypsies in "Caravan" indicates a desire to share that ephemeral space, in which he integrates himself despite the distance.

Linked to the furtive and itinerant attitude that is attributed to Gypsies in these songs, nature is another factor that appears to reiterate the association of the gypsies with the space they inhabit. And as an extension of it, these songs transmit

~ a sense of hedonism that moves away from the rigidity of urban spaces to be located in more bucolic landscapes (Mills 2010, 13). Thus, in “Brown Eyed Girl” the description of the scenario is

Down in the hollow
playing a new game
in the misty morning fog with
our, our hearts a-thumping [...]

Standing in the sunlight laughing
hide behind a rainbow’s wall
slipping and a-sliding
all along the waterfall [...]

Making love in the green grass.

made from an idyllic location that seems optimal for the purity of the Gypsy feeling against the corruption of the urban world. The same impression can be applied to the lines written by Morrison in “Brown Eyed Girl”, when he describes the instants of the love encounter:

Here, Morrison seeks to find the natural purity that he considers essential in situations of high emotional content. In this way, a distance – that can be explicit or implicit in the text – is created to separate the characters from urban – or simply artificial – spaces. In the same song, and in order to describe the author’s most intimate memory of the woman he is portraying, the poetic voice chooses the location of the green grass behind a stadium, which at the same time produces an approach to an urbanized environment and a distance from it. The song conveys a sense of dislocation between the position of this couple outside the stadium and the people inside the building. Thus, the hedonistic condition is again invoked here from the point of view of nature, which is used to oppose the intensity of the *carpe diem* attitude expressed by the couple against the routine of a contemporary middle-class lifestyle.

The image of fire is another element that acquires a symbolic force of relevance in the exaltation of the purity of nature. The purifying connotation of fire is present in countless historical and literary narratives, and Morrison here reclaims its power of magic and mystery to associate fire with his vision of the Gypsy (particularly in “Gypsy” and “Gypsy Queen”, for example). Repeatedly, there are direct mentions to the campfires, which respond to the image that has been built around the figure of the Gypsies. On the one hand, this fire recalls the purity of an element of nature in its purest state of existence; and on the other hand, its inclusion in the aforementioned songs creates a space and a time that echo its deep connection with nature. The fire thus appears conceptualized as a link between Gypsy characters and nature, affecting the aura of mystery and mysticism that the Northern Irish author recreates around the Romani people.

The identification with nature is also indicated in the song “Into the Mystic” (Morrison 1970), a piece that provides a very accurate depiction of the recurrent comparison between modernity and nature. Embroiled in a series of images that immerse him in nature

(especially the sea, the sun, the wind and the sky), the poetic voice longingly discloses a desire to recover its natural essence, which implies that his current location – spatial or ontological – is far away from those elements. In the alleged return of the character to its natural origins, it will be the presence of the Gypsy soul that he has as a companion that will allow him to transcend to an ephemeral existence and rise to a state of intimate mysticism, which will only be accessible to both of them: “I want to rock your gypsy soul / just like way back in the days of old / then magnificently we will float / into the mystic”.

Through a language that longs for the innocence of a time that has passed, Morrison implies a rejection of the modern way of life in opposition to a more traditional conception, and several of his compositions revolve around the figure of the Gypsy as a vehicle to return to nature in its purest form. Therefore, the contrasts between the authentic and the impostured are, as we have discussed, a recurring theme in Morrison’s work. For example, in other verses of the song “Caravan”, the author connects elements of natural essence with notions that are identifiable with a more urban life model. In the bohemian environment of a caravan, a radio and the use of electric light are abruptly introduced by the author, leading the readers to a state of understanding in which they notice how the inclusion of elements of modern daily life in the way of life of the Gypsy people may be unsuited. This type of intrusion, which is repeated in the work of the Northern Irish author (for example, in “Gypsy Queen”: “Rave on, there beneath the silvery moon/ don’t stop your carburetor”), plays an essential role in Morrison’s interpretation of life. Those two opposing elements merge in the Gypsy subject to offer a questioning of modern values and to provide a reconceptualization of postindustrial commodities as a parodic expression of failure.

“Brown Eyed Girl”, “Caravan”, “Everyone”, “Gypsy”, or “Gypsy Queen” are other songs that use these types of images to evoke the Gypsy’s musicality. This is because one of the main reasons why Morrison used a figure of the Romani people during the early periods of his artistic composition is that the world of gypsyism could not be understood without its connection to dance, and especially without its connection to music (Malvinni 2004, 31). According to Morrison’s standards, nature, space, transitionality, or the problematic relationship between the natural world and the everyday artificial landscapes represent the perfect setting to interrogate one’s emotional identity. That is why he chooses the figure of the Gypsy as an agglutinating element of all these sensibilities, since both in the popular imagery and in the perception of the author himself, the Gypsy’s musical expressiveness brings together the emotional essence of his songs.

This can be seen clearly in the French documentary *Latcho Drom* (1993), produced by Romani director Tony Gatlif, in which he offers an approach to several of the different cultural extensions within the Gypsy spectrum. Most of the social groups represented there are specifically associated with a particular musical variety, and despite the geographical and cultural distance between them, the melodic similarity found among the various groups is evident. This is relevant because it shows clear evidence that music and performance are identity features of the Romani communities, and that these are the aspects taken by Morrison to create his aesthetic environment. In his poetic compositions, Van Morrison reveals the bustling singing of the Romani community, and he imitates it repeatedly. Music works in this case as a palimpsest of the Gypsy identity, which is presented as an exotic and ~

~ mystical being that responds to the author's emotional concerns (Dawe 2017, 41).

There are, therefore, a series of repetitions of certain traits to characterize the Gypsies that can be labeled as recurring in the way they are described in the work of the Northern Irish author. Morrison is particularly interested in connecting the members of this ethnic group – we insist, in his romanticized and, therefore, decidedly racist version (Charnon-Deutsch 2004, 167), with the natural elements found in the transition spaces that they inhabit. It is clear that these features respond to a stereotyped condition of the Gypsy, which coincides perfectly with the interests for folklore and folk music of the Northern Irish singer-songwriter. The formulation of the Gypsy imagery from a literary and aesthetic point of view contributes to the exoticization of the Romani people, and it works in Morrison's oeuvre as a trigger for his concern for several aspects: progress, the abandonment of traditional values, or the loss of the authentic. All of these are circumscribed to the postmodern review of romanticized Gypsies performed by the Belfast songwriter. Furthermore, Gypsies are presented as a paradigm of freedom, but also as the catalyst to the breakdown of social and cultural limitations. They are the epitome of the countercultural currents that were so persistent at the time when these songs were produced, and the exoticization of the characters being described fed the mystery, distance and, therefore, the otherness of the Gypsy people among western communities. Morrison's rewriting of the Romani people as representatives of the ideals provided for those seeking new epistemological references was, consequently, justified by his social vision. Although he continued to perpetuate the stereotypes that surrounded – and still do – the Romani people, Van Morrison also contributed to the proliferation of the ideals of freedom and spatial transitionality by exalting the Gypsy figures as subjects of desire and objects of transculturation:

The ideals of brotherhood and universal love and harmony were well represented in the pantheon of aspirations belonging to the countercultural young [...]. They turned to rural and urban communes not as vehicles for the transformation of society, but out of a need to find places where they could be at peace with themselves and with one another, to become the high beings and the free beings the new culture believed in. (Zicklin 1983, 1)

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3 A few exceptions could be Peter Preston’s *D.H. Lawrence in the Modern World* (1989) or Barnett Guttenberg’s “Realism and Romance in Lawrence’s *The Virgin and the Gipsy*” (1980).

4 There are several important studies that delve into the Irish music scene of the second half of the twentieth century and include Morrison in their research, for example Mark Fitzgerald’s (2016) or R. Elliott’s (2016). But critical monographic studies about Van Morrison’s oeuvre are scarce and limited. Analyses of the representation of Gypsies in his songs are practically nonexistent.

5 The exoticization of the Gypsy will be discussed in this essay to refer to the perpetuation of their otherness according to western paradigms.

6 In fact, this song has been considered as a reply to “The Dark End of the Street”, the famous James Carr’s song that contains a more unequivocal message.

This essay was supported by the following funded projects and institutions, which are hereby gratefully acknowledged: Research network “Rede de Lingua e Literatura Inglesa e Identidade III” (ED431D2017/17), (<http://Rede-Ing-III.eu>), Xunta de Galicia / ERDF-UE; and by the Research Group “Irish Studies”, Universidade da Coruña.

Título:

Espacios transpopulares: Imaginarios del gitano en la obra de Van Morrison

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Notes

1 Lou Charnon-Deutsch and Kathleen Vernon, professors at Stony Brook University (New York).

2 This Research Group, whose coordinator is Professor Antonio Raúl de Toro Santos, has published numbers of studies on Irish popular music. For example, one of their most recent publications is *Words and Music in Irish Literature* (de Toro Santos 2017).