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RONALD LEE WRITING THE GYPSY SELF

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Abstract: *The paper will analyse the hybrid identity of the protagonist-narrator, a gypsy adopted by a white Canadian family who sends him to school. Although he has done office work, he decides to re-ethnicize himself by changing his Anglo-Saxon name Ronald with a gypsy one, Yanko. He thus presents himself as the exponent of an ethnic community that is victimized by the dominant majority. In this way his individual life story (stressed by the subtitle, An Autobiographic novel) becomes a collective autobiography. The paper will then comment on his presentation of the dominant majority's stereotypes of gypsies and its refusal to recognise the gypsies as a distinct ethnic community with a right to survival. With the death of Demitro, the last patriarch of the Canadian gypsies, which symbolises the death of gypsy culture, Yanko decides to depart with his family for England, where he hopes to make his voice heard on behalf of this vilified ethnic Other.*

This paper will deal with Ronald Lee's book *Goddam Gypsy*, whose subtitle announces it to be *An autobiographical novel*, therefore a narrative concerned with revealing the formation of the author's self. The adjective "autobiographic" stresses referentiality, but the autobiography is not quite a genuine authentic report, the author qualifying the presentation of his life's drama as "in places fictionalized, a parallel rather than the actuality" (Lee 7). In addition, he introduces it as "the saga of a Canadian-born Gypsy", centred on his "struggle to find recognition and equality" in the land of his birth (Lee 7), a struggle that met with failure in both these aims. As these lines follow the picture of the wise Mundro Salamon, "the Romany ethnic hero who appears in folk tales of the tribes of Rom" (Lee 5), the reader performs an identification of the picture and the protagonist-narrator, who thus appears as a hero who identifies with a racial community that is victimized by the dominant majority. The narrator will consequently chronicle the saga of "the elusive and eternal Gypsy...the child of a former age of nomadism", that the sedentary society constantly tries "to absorb and assimilate" (Lee 5). We can therefore deduce that he will not write only an account of his life, but a collective autobiography as well.

The declaration about his failure may sound surprising coming from a member of the Canadian society, therefore from a country famous for being the first to have introduced and implemented Multiculturalism as an official cultural policy as early as 1971¹. It is therefore important to retain that the book was written before 1971, Ronald Lee's Foreword being dated "London, England, 1970 (Lee 9), although the novel was first published in 1971. As he feels himself to be the voice of a community, the author starts by presenting this community and its history in a Foreword (Lee 10-11).

He estimates the number of Canadian gypsies at 25 000 and that of the U.S. gypsies at 250 000 and that of the total number at approximately 12 million, making up a gigantic global network. Lee mentions four great "nations" of Rom gypsies: Kalderash, or Coppersmith, Machvaiya, Churaria and Lovara "who speak the language called Romanes but with their own peculiar beliefs, customs, tribal laws and ceremonies. In contrast to them there are gypsies that are more localized nationally, such as the

¹ The policy of Multiculturalism was later enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in the patriated Constitution of 1982, and further proclaimed in the Multiculturalism Act of 1988.

Romanichels of England, the Sinti tribes of Western Europe and the gitans of Spain, gypsies that are closer to the cultures of their respective country of permanent residence than the gypsy nations of Rom. From the beginning Lee tells us that the primary dichotomy for the gypsies is Gypsy/Non/Gypsy, us/them, them being implicit enemies who should never be told the truth. Lee compares gypsies with the hippies, their non-gypsy counter-parts, underlining gypsies' invisibility, their lack of ostentatious display used as a chameleonic strategy or trick of survival. Gypsies never fight against constituted authority, Lee tells us, but pretend to accept it, and in the sanctuary of their aloofness, stick to their own law, a "strict code of edicts laid down by the patriarchs and enforced by the *kris-Romani*, the council of Romany elders" (11). Thus he tells us:

In Roman Catholic Countries we are devoted members of the faith; in Arabia, fanatical Moslems; in Spain, ardent supporters of the regime; and in Russia we pay lip service to the communist ideal (11).

It is a declaration that becomes ambiguous on account of the "lip service to the communist ideal", which projects an ironic meaning on the adjectives "devoted", "fanatical", "ardent".

Lee defines the gypsy law as "Romania". It is true that in the *Glossary* he tells the reader that "the word *Rom* and its derivatives are not connected with the country Romania, but with Sanskrit *Rama*, meaning husband. The gypsies are an original people and have not taken their generic name from Romania or any other country which came into existence centuries after the gypsy people" (245) Also in the *Glossary* the author specifies that Romania as the gypsy code is pronounced Romaneeya, and not like Romania (246). But not all readers peruse the Glossary, and the reader on the internet where this excerpt is posted has no access to the Glossary and they may remain with the confused equivalence Rom/Romania, an effect which would be in keeping with the strategy gypsies use, namely that of tricking any non-gypsy. Moreover, as Lee tells us, they "do everything in their power to perpetuate the myth of their non-existence" (10). Later on Lee tells the readers that he was fed up with being interviewed by idiots for whom he was only "some crazy gypsy who made little boats", and the old patriarch Demitro a "senile old duffer talking about the "Rumanians" living in the slums. (234) It is the reporters' confusion that Lee ironically presents but he does not explicitly expose or correct it in the narrative.

Lee then apparently deconstructs in the name of his collective voice the most widespread stereotype about gypsies:

Our music, our art, our crafts, our fashions have been stolen to be presented in the concert halls and museums of the world as Spanish, Hungarian, Czechoslovakian, Russian, French, and so on. All that we have created through the centuries has been taken from us, and yet in popular myth we are the "thieves" (11-12).

It is an accusation that may stick to the memory of those that have no musical or cultural knowledge. At the same time it is amusing to see that, although he is indignant in the Foreword at the gypsies' stereotype reputation of being thieves, Lee is the first to use it in his narrative. When Kolia asks him if he wants to work with him, the narrator replies with a smile: "To do what, steal?" (17) Ronald Lee is a man of some training and speaks 5 languages fluently as he lived in a Canadian foster family from an early age to that of 14. But although he declares "I was cursed to be educated by the Gazhe" (=that is the non-Gypsy) (27), he is frequently proud of his knowledge and education. He displays a lot of historical, even biblical, knowledge, particularly when related to his people. He also refers to Fanon's "Bible of the oppressed" (204) that is *The Wretched of the Earth*, and therefore suggests the postcolonial approach as the best for studying the situation of his people. We shall, then, proceed to follow this hint.

In her article "*Circling the Downspout of Empire*": *Post-Colonialism and Postmodernity* (1989) Linda Hutcheon argued the case for Canada that only the situation of Native Canadians qualified them and their cultural products to be approached from the postcolonial perspective. She does not regard as appropriate the inclusion of Canada, a settler/invasor country, into postcolonial studies and she considers that placing white Canada's experience of colonialism by the side that of countries like West Indies,

Africa or India both trivializes the Third World experience and seems exaggerated to her as regards the white Canadians (Hutcheon, 1989: 155). But other, more critical, Canadian voices have also been heard. Arun Mukherjee endorses Hutcheon's position that only Native Canadians are in a position of postcoloniality but she adds that "nonwhite Canadians from colonized countries are also producing a postcolonial Canadian Literature", likewise excluding white Canadians from this position on account of their privileged status (Mukherjee 217).

A more interesting point is made by Anne McClintock in discussing the term post – in *post-colonial* in her essay *The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-Colonialism"*. The term "post-colonial" may have a historical reference in relation to countries changing status from former colonies to independent states, therefore marking a temporal and political separation; however, in the term "post-colonial theory" it designates a position concerned with the process of decolonisation. But McClintock suggests that if the imperial apparatuses have been apparently dismantled with the removal of imperial governments and their correlative educational systems, still the break-away settler colonies such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, as well as the United States "have not undergone decolonization" (McClintock 295). The critic argues that even if they broke away from the imperial centre, they still function within the old imperial ideological systems particularly as concerns Indigenous peoples and non-white immigration. Even though their organizing principles and their policies regarding race and citizenship have changed, the change is not as deep-going as it is claimed as long as they figure their "national" history as the history of white settlement and they perpetuate it in discourses of "national identity". She thus considers that neither USA nor Canada can qualify as "post-colonial". In the case of Canada McClintock underlines the incompleteness of a national project of recognition and amendment of the long practised assimilative policies regarding the First Nations peoples or of various practices of exclusion and protectionism. Some acknowledgement and redress has been made as in the case of the brutal internment of the Japanese-Canadians not only during but even after World War II (in September 1988 the Canadian Government at last acknowledged in an official Apology its unjust treatment of this minority in the 1940s). There has been a recognition of the cruel history of residential schools for Aboriginal children and of the wrong practice of eugenic sterilization of "mentally deficient" people in Alberta and British Columbia for a period of 50 years (1920-70). Other examples of historical practices of exclusion McClintock mentions are the ever heavier head taxes imposed on Chinese immigrants at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20 centuries, the 1964 bulldozing of the Africadian community of Africville in Halifax, Nova Scotia, instances of anti-Semitism – all directed towards building Canada as a "white dominion", all these instances show in McClintock's opinion that Canada is not post-colonial yet.

The critic emphasizes the general impression that the post- in *postcolonial* underscores "the pastness of colonialism" (McClintock 294), thus obscuring "the continuities in international imbalances in imperial power" (295) because the position suggested is "after" or "outside" or "beyond" the colonial, neo-colonial and imperial systems that it critiques. Building on McClintock's arguments, Cecily Devereux argues that the "pastness" of the situation cannot be sustained when all anthologies in Canadian universities are still "predominantly Anglocentric" and give a long literary narrative of colonization as "our" literature (184). Devereux recommends Steven Slemon's definition of the work of postcolonial theory as "a mechanism by which [a] text can be seen to advance its own oppositional reading of English cultural imperialism" as well as its present-day forms of neo-colonialism (Devereux 101) that is aiming to identify imperial "continuities" not in terms of time but of power. In this light we can regard Ronald Lee's presentation of Canadian culture as an oppositional reading from the perspective of a victimized minority.

Ronald Lee has a hybrid identity: although Romany is the first language he learned to speak, English is the language of his education, and his general linguistic medium, so when the narrative begins, he had forgotten much of his mother tongue (17). His hybrid identity is metaphorically suggested by his wish to make a career as a model ship building where his Romani craftsmanship inheritance combines with his passion for history and scientific precision, which I think is the result of his (Western) education. Lee uses English for his novel and therefore he appropriates the symbolic colonizer's language. I think we can say that the process of attempted assimilation that Lee accuses Canada of symbolically parallels that

of colonization. In writing his novel Lee appropriates the dominant culture's language and generic form of representation in order to "interpolate [gypsy] experiences into the dominant modes of representation" (Ashcroft et al.: appropriation), but at the same time he very frequently switches to the Romany language and even adds to his narrative a *Glossary of Romany words and expressions* (241-48). It is a practice that not only confers authenticity to his novel, but also empowers the members of his community². Substituting Romany for Mennonite, I could say with Amy Kroeker, that Lee's hybrid linguistic product "both articulates specific [Romany] identities and creates a place for the expression of those identities within the larger scope of "Canadian Literature" (Kroeker 241). Language as an essential element of cultural identity is foregrounded by Lee's narrative in the important episode of the protagonist compiling together with the patriarch Demitro Romany – English dictionary that never finds a publisher (135). It is an enterprise that would promote mutual cultural knowledge and communication, but which is not encouraged by the dominant society of that time.

The novel recounts a decade of the author's life, its most important episodes between 1958-1967 that take place in Quebec (mostly in Montreal, Ronald Lee's birth place) and Ontario (mostly in Toronto). The first centres round his encounter with Kolia, an itinerant repairing mechanic of kitchen equipment, with whom he establishes a long partnership and a lifelong friendship. The contact with Kolia's family re-emerges Lee into Romany traditions and it is here that he symbolically re-ethnicizes himself by getting the gypsy name of Yanko. This first section also recounts the two friends' marriages. Yanko marries Marie, an Indian girl of Mohawk background, a member of another outcast social minority, a fact that corroborates the appropriateness of the postcolonial approach to Lee's autobiographical novel. Marie tells him that first the Indians had been pushed into reservations, where there was nothing but cold, hunger and unemployment. Then they had come hopefully to the white man's cities, only to be driven into the slum ghettos (49). Lee exposes the hypocrisy of Christian teaching in the mission schools about "the white brotherhood" (48).

The two Founding Nations share a racist attitude, and Ronald Lee exposes the French Canadians' ingrained fear of Amerindians when Marie is called "une sauvagesse" by Kolia's landlady (48). Yet he himself comments as follows on Kolia's behaviour at his mother's deathbed: "like the primitive he was, he was trying to contest the unalterable" (139) The Indian voice is inscribed in the narrative through Marie, who bitterly denounces the Canadians' exterminatory practices to her race. From the descriptions she hears, the Nazi death camps "sound a lot like reservations... but the Germans were more merciful. It took only a few seconds with a bullet. Canada is taking generations to do it with my people" (62). When the narrator tells her she'd do great as a fortune-teller on the reservations, she sadly mourns for her people, "We Indians don't have any future"(63).

It is a prophecy that has been proved wrong. The "extinct race" theory has turned out to be totally false as in the new millennium the Natives are the quickest multiplying segment of population in Canada; and also they have put in a lot of land claims and even if their court cases will apparently take decades to be solved, the Indians definitely have a future.

In the next four sections the narrator gives an account of his settling back in Montreal after his marriage living on peddling imported Hindu goods. Then, cornered by the economic pressure of an increasing family (he has 3 children) he becomes a fence (=dealer in stolen goods), a burglar's accomplice, and even a pimp, taking money from Cherie in order to pay for his wife's medical care. He is saved from a dangerous life of crime by suddenly getting a well paid theme director's job at Expo 67 (the theme is the wild life of Canada, and therefore he has to supervise the display of stuffed wild animals).

He accepts the job but "incognito" (83), hoping to he will be able to further his career as a model ship builder or museum curator. However his radical socialist friend Bill accuses him of having been bought out by "the capitalist swine" (180); he himself perceives his gesture as his "symbolic emasculation" (184) and ironically comments on it: "Canadian man, like Samson, has to be ceremonially

²The narrative also interpolates French, Spanish, Italian words thus conveying a textual vivid impression of Canada as a multicultural society.

castrated if he is to serve the Establishment rather than challenge it” (184). But finally he understands that “whatever culture there is in Canada, is French” (83), and that there is nowhere for him to go in Canada as an individual who wants recognition for his talent and training, on the one hand, and for the ethnic culture he belongs to, on the other hand. So Lee decides to move to England with his family in the hope of finding there a society that will allow him to fulfill both his aims.

The parting scene from the dying patriarch Demitro who symbolically stands for the death of gypsy culture is juxtaposed with the climactic fight in a restaurant where “Indians, Blacks, hippies, new letters, artists and other outcasts” (214) get in by trick, and vent their “common hatred “on their “common enemy” (217) in a tremendous scuffle. Individuals belonging to oppressed minority groups explode together, each fighter’s hatred having a different motivation, fed by their individual memories:”I remembered Jilko, Kolia, the old man, Pavlos, and how we had put our first born baby girl in a cardboard box on top of a bureau so the rats couldn’t get at her until she was old enough not to be smothered by the cats we bought to protect her” (217). The fight reaches epic proportions but then modulates into the mock heroic as the narrator evokes Marie’s charge at Cherie, the attacker managing the tear off all her victim’s clothes, and leaves her naked.

The sections of the narrative are preceded by pictures of Tarot cards featuring the Romany ethnic hero Mundro Salamon (8), *O Del* the Gypsy god or universal intellect (43), *O bengro*, the lesser god or carnalized man (59), *E zelani devlaika*, the green goddess or the dangerous aspect of the moon (143), *O bango west*, evil man who worships monetary power (173), *E zor Devleski* or the power of universal intellect (209). These pictures and the explanatory texts introducing them lend the narrative an epic dimension: the hero’s progress can be allegorized into the battle of intellect for a good cause, and his course involves overcoming dangerous lures like the attraction of the flesh and the power of money. Thus the ending is an open ending regarding the hero’s individual and collective quest, yet it still implies a victory over Mammon and hence the decision to continue the quest elsewhere.

A large part of the narrative dwells on Lee’s support of patriarch Demitro’s “losing battle to get certain petty by-laws altered or new statutes introduced that would enable the Canadian-born Gypsies to make an honest living within the frame work of their traditions and way of life” (103). Lee idealizes the gypsies to a great extent, gives vivid descriptions of their traditions (such as hospitality and cleansing rituals, collective feasting and dancing, their traditional jobs and activities, including fortune-telling and promiscuous sex) and regards them as “the last people to be dehumanized” (89) in this “civilization based on power and capital instead of on intellect and wisdom”, a civilization whose collapse however he prophesies (72). But he does not treat the Canadian gypsies as a monolithic group. First he divides them into two large groups, that keep Machiavelically backstabbing and squealing on each other to the police (102). They are led by two quite different patriarchs, Burtya and Demitro:

Demitro was much older than Burtya, much wiser and more philosophical. Burtya was stronger, more pragmatic and violent. Demitro could read and write, Burtya was illiterate. Each ruled his respective vitsas, or tribe, in his own way and each tribe managed to survive and multiply in Canada. Demitro thought more like a European gypsy and tried to make his people follow the older, more honest ways. Burtya, on the other hand, was Canadianized and ready to try and swindle or penny-ante racket, if he thought he could get away with it by paying off somebody somewhere (102).

Demitro would like to form a gypsy representation committee of gypsy responsible elders (109) to approach the government to make them aware of the gypsies’ problems. He would like to make the official institutions treat the gypsies as individuals, not vilify them as a group: “If one of Burtya’s women steals, they refuse to give licenses to any Gypsy regardless of whether they steal or not. Only a few of our women are thieves...” (109)

But the dominant society can view the gypsies only in stereotypes, and hypocritically hide their own abuses. Thus Miss Percival, “a reporter who has experience in reporting from the minority viewpoint” (a daring career at the time, which attracts her ironic name) (111) interviews Ronald Lee and old Demitro. Her article she “did say that some of the women were pickpockets but failed to mention that

the police arrested them for prostitution” (121); it likewise does not include Ronald Lee’s opinions or anything from the detailed report on the Gypsies in Czechoslovakia that the narrator has given her. She also fails to see his point that making it a matter of education and getting better jobs will simply do away with the gypsy culture:

I’m educated and I’m here, so is my wife. Demitro himself is literate. It’s not a matter of education, my friend, it’s a little thing called prejudice and fear of the unknown. Gypsies will assimilate eventually, like any other minority, by way of the slums, vice, the destruction of their culture and self-respect, but not as Gypsies. The Gypsy by his very existence is the very negation of all the hypocritical values that society holds dear. He can’t be allowed to exist as, he has to be lobotomized like any other nigger before he can enter the white man’s world (116).

In his chapter “Narrative and Social Space” of his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Said underscores how the representation of things, particularly of the things deemed inferior in the areas of gender, class and race, has been shaped by certain institutions like the press, the educational system and literary works; that is why recent criticism has concentrated on the institutional forces in modern societies that have set limits on the representation of what are considered naturally subordinate beings, thus representation itself being concerned with and playing a role in “keeping the subordinate, the inferior inferior.” (80) This is exactly what a gypsy cannot stand, he wants to be his own boss, and Ronald Lee claims his right to his traditional customs and culture.

After becoming the delegate general of the Canadian Gypsies to the World Romany Community based in Paris, Yanko has another interview with a reporter who invites him to her place. This reporter is portrayed as a temptress, a woman trying to seduce him. It may metaphorically hint at the idea that the dominant culture tries to seduce the members of minority groups into assimilation, but it also suggests another stereotypical image of the racial other, which was already identified by Edward Said in *Orientalism*:

I saw only too well that in the eyes of people like her I was nothing but an interesting human stud, the native who would do all the horrible things to her that a white man wasn’t allowed to do. Like Marie was always saying, “They like to screw Indian broads, our red ass is supposed to be horny” (132).

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha emphasizes that, for a colonized society “to be recognized, it needs to shape its identity on difference rather than on its essence, on a discourse that undermines stereotypes attributed by the colonizing power. Therefore in order to assert its power, the colonized should fight against an already existing pattern and should build a counter identity which would represent it as a distinct society (Bhabha 1994: 165 – 170). And this is exactly what Ronald Lee has tried to do in his autobiographical novel *Goddam Gypsy* in an autobiographical novel which writes not only his gypsy self, but the collective self of the racial minority to which he belongs. After a search on the Internet, we can now fill in the open ending of *Goddam Gypsy*, his only fictional work: Ronald Lee has returned to Canada and continues to make claims on behalf of the Canadian gypsy community in an officially multicultural Canada³.

³ Using the Internet to find whether Ronald Lee has written other books on his culture, I did find his name mentioned as the author of an article given under the logo of Roma Community And Advocacy Centre, Toronto, Ontario, Canada whose director he is. His name also appears in an item about a symposium on what is presented as the plight of the Romani people hosted by Carbondale University, (Illinois) in September 2002. This event was backed by **Senator Paul Simon** of Illinois, a keynote address was delivered by former Illinois Attorney General **Ramsey Clark** and the Romani side of this symposium were Romani activists, **Ian Hancock** of Texas University and **Ronald Lee**, a Rom from Canada, and author of the book *Goddam Gypsy*.

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