

## RECENSIONI

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**Patrick WILLIAMS** | *Tsiganes ou ces inconnus qu'on appelle aussi Gitans, Bohémiens, Roms, Gypsies, Manouches, Rabouins, Gens du voyage...*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2022, pp. 601.

At the age of seven, Patrick Williams discovered the Mānuš world from the counter of his grandmother, who ran a café in a small Creuse village<sup>1</sup>. At twenty-one, he stepped through the door of a little house in Bagnolet and was introduced to the world of the Parisian Roma. The choice of ethnology came later. Drawn into the hustle of romani life, Williams made ethnographic writing his compass, a way of travelling between worlds. *Tsiganes ou ces inconnus qu'on appelle aussi Gitans, Bohémiens, Roms, Gypsies, Manouches, Rabouins, Gens du voyage...* is a declaration of love to anthropology and an inestimable testimony of its critical power.

Published posthumously, Williams' latest work brings together in one volume the two books he finished writing in 2015. Originally self-published, the work now appears under a single cover thanks to the editorial work of Martin Olivera and Jean-Luc Poueyto. The first opus, soberly entitled "Souvenirs", is a crossed ethnography in which two very distant worlds, that of Mānuš of Creuse and that of Parisian Roma, respond to each other.

As a child, Williams became friends with boys his own age, sons of Mānuš, who sometimes stopped off in his village in Creuse. These childhood comradeships developed into solid friendships as he grew out of adolescence. Nini, to whom he dedicated his famous book on Mānuš («*Nous, on n'en parle pas*». *Les vivants et les morts chez les Manouches*, Paris, Éditions de la MSH, 1993), would take him on stormy expeditions to visit his scattered family, living in caravans all over the Massif Central. These trips in an old navy-blue Peugeot van were an opportunity to learn the Manouche language, spoken by his friends in their territory between Limagne and Combraille. The roads travelled by Mānuš are

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1. This text was originally published in French in the journal *En attendant Nadeau* (2022): <https://www.en-attendant-nadeau.fr/2022/10/05/williams-tsiganes-inconnus/>



punctuated by stories and fortuitous encounters: their outings were a time of learning for the narrator and his fellow travelers. Although Nini and Williams' friendship lasted a lifetime, a turning point came: Nini married into a Mānuš family, Williams into a Roma family in Paris.

The anthropologist' entry into adulthood was marked by a new encounter: with the Parisian Roma. While he was studying literature, he was introduced to the *Roma parižoske*—we are not told how, it is one of the mysteries of the book. Williams found himself thrown into a world very different from that of the Mānuš living in Creuse. Very discreet about his marriage to Iultcha, a Parisian Romni woman about whom the reader will know almost nothing, Williams gives a detailed account of his tours in and around Paris with his Roma comrades. After the muddy roads of the Creuse department, the narrator takes the reader to the “north-north-west” suburbs of Paris: Montreuil, Bagnolet, Bondy, Sarcelles, Saint-Denis, Courbevoie and so on. There was no planned itinerary to guide the young men; it was luck (*e bax*) and visits to pubs that kept them wandering.

These two narratives avoid the traps of the conventional ethnographic present: Williams never shows us “the Gypsies”, but a small group of Mānuš in Creuse in the Sixties and a company of Roma in Paris in the Seventies. This first opus is therefore a monographic demonstration of how suspicious any global discourse on “Gypsies” can be. Throughout his career, the anthropologist never stopped saying it in different ways: it is important to “consider each community in a certain place and at a certain time”, and start the ethnographic work from scratch with each new encounter. In the author's own words, the “Souvenirs” book foreshadows all the themes addressed in the second, entitled “Definitions”: “When I reread it, I have the feeling that I've written the same book twice” (p. 15).

The second volume of *Tsiganes ou ces inconnus qu'on appelle aussi Gitans, Bohémiens, Roms, Gypsies, Manouches, Rabouins, Gens du voyage...* is indeed a theory of Romani diversity. Hence the importance of this long-winded title, which the author describes as a “tintinnabulous *ribambelle* of labels” (p. 560). Let's not be fooled by the *trompe-l'œil* typography of the cover page which displays the word “Gypsies”. The book's central idea is to explore the recompositions of Romani worlds throughout various situations, and discuss whether it is possible to speak of a totality and to give that totality a name. The social sciences and common sense use of categories such as “Gypsies”, “Roma” and “Travellers” erases the singularity of those they are trying to name. For over forty years, Williams was considered by the academic world to be the

“anthropologist of Gypsies”. Yet he leaves us with a curious legacy when he writes that “Gypsies” are “neither an ethnic group nor a scientific category” (p. 381) – in short, that “Gypsies” exist only in our representations and prejudices. Those who do exist, however, and with great intensity, are the “Slovensko Roma, Gadjkene Mānuš, Travellers, Gitanos canasteros, Gitanos caseros, Rom kalderaš, Rom čurara, Xoraxané Roma, Gammon Travellers, Cant Travellers, Sinti piémontais, Sinte Eftavagaria, Valštike Mānuš, Gitanos catalanes, Tinkers, Kaale, Calos, Calon Yéniš, Mugat, Nawars, Voyageurs, Rom lovara” (p. 413), etc.

Patrick Williams teaches us that the twentieth century saw the invention of the “Gypsy people”, who would later be called the “Romani people”. Based on the thesis of “Indian origin” inspired by the linguistic discovery linking the romani language to India in the 18th century, the Nazis were the first to give existence to the “Zigeuner Volk”. Williams examines the paradox of a “‘final solution’ as the starting point not of a rebirth, but of a birth” (p. 361). After all, it was only after the genocide that the idea of a “people” led to the emergence of a Romani political movement. History also contributed in part to this fiction by writing a “history of Gypsies/Roma”, when in reality it focuses only on the point of view of states seeking to control heterogeneous groups. The political utopia of a “Romani people” itself remains far from the minds of local communities today, as the author reminds us with some humour: “I remember the comment made by a middle-aged Sinto to his cousin one evening during a peaceful conversation ‘by the fire’ [...]: ‘Ah, did you see? Now they think we’re Roma!’” (p. 561).

But how can one talk about parts if there is no totality? Referring to Peirce and his theory of “unlimited semiosis” (Charles Sanders Peirce, *Écrits sur le signe. Textes choisis*, Paris, Seuil, 1978), Williams highlights the co-signification of the terms “Gypsies” and *gadjé* – those who are not “Roma” – as an oppositional semantic pair. There is no point in trying to define one without the other. As for the problem of the right name, it is insoluble. Well aware that his answer will inevitably arouse astonishment “at a time when all minorities declare themselves in need of recognition”, the anthropologist argues that a human group does not need a name to exist. The totality is the one formed together by “Gypsies and *gadjé*”, despite the tragic asymmetry of their history. Williams delivers a critical lesson of humanity.

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