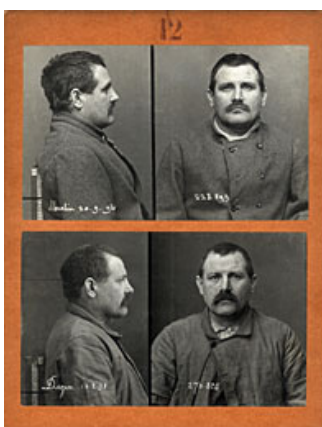


## **The Name of Those Who Travel**

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### one: to be given a name



Fiche anthropométrique  
signalétique.  
No. 12 Moulin/Dazin 1894/1898



All the controversies associated with *gens du voyage* in France are related to the sort of baptism that inevitably comes along with the utterance of that name. Despite the historical efforts of sociologists and anthropologists to find a politically correct, and somewhat accurate denomination for the existing phenomena, problematics arise at the same moment that a term is intended to designate a community that never existed as such. Every now and then, outbursts of impolite sincerity and exasperation make their appearance on media, like the declaration of *monsieur le maire* of Maine-et-Loire, the MP Gilles Bourdouleix, last month of July; «Perhaps Hitler didn't kill enough of them.» Not only the name, *gens du voyage* but the very concept of community is controversial as well, as opposed to a pluralist conception, like professed by Renée Green who argues having a certain trouble in thinking of communities as fixed categories,<sup>1</sup> implying that the words 'Black community' or 'Latino community' are not necessarily useful in order to better approach some social conditions. Similarly, in France, *gens du voyage* do not have a straightforward definition; too often defined in negative terms, by stating first what they are not, as if they were hunted by clichés, under the shadow of multiple types of discrimination or confusion with someone else. To discriminate is to make a distinction and that is precisely what words are for. The act of coining a term is precisely the genesis of inequality, a declaration of the intention to define a boundary; the multiple claims for the contrary are by all means fallacious.

Before *gens du voyage* another juridical designation was in use, SDF (sans domicile fixe), a title that had the problem of leaving outside that part of the population with nomad roots that had later become sedentary, plus those in the ambiguous situation of being semi-sedentary, or semi-nomadic. Thus, in 1969 the term *gens du voyage* made its first

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<sup>1</sup> Professor, artist and filmmaker Renée Green, quoted in Bhabha, H. K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*, p. 3.

appearance in French law<sup>2</sup> in an attempt to draw a reference frame slightly more flexible than the previous condition of 'not having a permanent dwelling.' Besides, the lack of a fixed residence was in obvious collision with other types of mobility, like that required by business travelling for instance, with the accessory difference that the typology of the non-permanent residence of the former is more likely to be a hotel room than anything having wheels. Evidencing that as soon as the term is chosen, correlations arise, professor Emmanuel Aubin suggests that "similarities between the problems posed by the organization of rave parties and those coming from the traditional or occasional gatherings of the *gens du voyage* deserve a particular study of the legal implications,"<sup>3</sup> topic to which he consecrates a section of his book *La Commune et les Gens du Voyage*. By willing to be inclusive, the term sins of being too lax and to allure seas of controversies and contradictions like the ones begun to be enumerated here. Also, at the end of the day, people and municipalities continue to use the word nomades.

*Gens du voyage* is a soft and amicable name; it kindly relates to the imaginary of travelling and to the associated bohemian lifestyle. Besides, it attempts to make reference to some sort of tradition with the aim to show how 'that something' being named had already been there for centuries under other names, and consequently there is a certain history to it. What Homi K. Bhabha called a 'projective' past –a form of the future anterior that happens in some points in time– is what is at stake in the construction of the past that takes place through the coining of a new word. He quotes Raymond Williams: "in certain historical moments the 'profound deformation' of the dominant culture will prevent it from recognizing 'practices and meanings that are not reached for' and these potentially empowering perspectives will remain profoundly unsignified and silent within the political culture."<sup>4</sup> In France, the story of the *gens* is conceived in the same way boundaries are: always from the outside. An operative construction of the past of the other will provoke counterbalances and, surely, crisis of identity. Why this strategy is particularly effective in the case of the *gens du voyage*, is in close relation to the ways in which culture is transmitted, regarding the differences between oral and literary societies.

## **two: orality vs. literacy**

Everyone is a historian in oral societies, in as much as everyone carries the precious fragments of memory. Anyhow, as oral societies do not write their own stories, they are continuously threatened of being written by someone else. The means of communication of oral societies are, in

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<sup>2</sup> Loi n° 69-3 du 3 janvier 1969 relative à l'exercice des activités ambulantes et au régime applicable aux personnes circulant en France sans domicile ni résidence fixe.

<sup>3</sup> Aubin, E. 2008. *La Commune et les Gens du Voyage*, p. 161.

<sup>4</sup> Bhabha, H. K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*, p. 252.

our terms, limited; not able to travel in time or space in the same way as written text does. Thus, oral societies tend to be small and to rely solely on the faculty of memory. In an oral society an old man dying is as dramatic as a library burning. As McLuhan put it, "Terror is the normal state of any oral society."<sup>5</sup> Writing makes possible the growth of the community; instructions can be sent in written orders, and principles and fundamental rules can be written down. It allows the clear supremacy of the law: justice is no longer two parties arguing against each other in front of a wise man, but both parties are brought against the law. Administration permits taxation, because money has to be accompanied by some kind of guarantee, it is the condition for an empire. While the question of a literary society is: is it true? oral societies refer to what others say. In this sense it is easier to intervene in those stories; conspicuously, the titles of the literature on *gens du voyage* regard the matter as from the outside;<sup>6</sup> condition that is even more pronounced in mass media, where articles addressing the correct understanding of the term and its connotations are as numerous as contradictory. When Paul Oliver states in his encyclopedia that "the gypsy nomads of Europe are members of a complex, pan-continental culture,"<sup>7</sup> he is not only referring to a blurred situation in spatial and cultural terms, but mostly to the insurmountable gap that appears when literary societies strive to find what –in our terms– would be a reliable source in order to write about oral societies.



"The best way it the one that we chose"

Literary societies register people in census. As defined by the UN (Statistics Division), "a population census is the total process of collecting, compiling, evaluating, analyzing and publishing data pertaining, at a specified time, to all persons in a country or well-delimited part of a country."<sup>8</sup> Both the allusions to a well-delimited part of a territory and to a moment in time are disregarding modes of life other than sedentary. In 1912, French government created a document to register the movement of people throughout the *République*: the 'carte anthropométrique' or anthropometric card. It was required to everyone without a fixed residence from sixteen years of age, and it included, in addition to fingerprints and two photographs of the card holder; a detailed description of his physical features, which included measurements of the head, length of the ear, kind of nose, degree of pigmentation (small, medium or big), and bust size, all under the pristine motto printed on top: 'Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité'. To write down is to fix, to print is to lock down in space, to an oral culture, speech seems to have the flexibility needed to reflect changing characteristics, such as those of physical

<sup>5</sup> McLuhan, M. 1962. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Like *I Met Lucky People: The History of the Romani Gypsies* (Matras, Y. 2014), *From Victimhood to Citizenship: the Path of Roma Integration* (edited by Guy, W. 2013), or in *Territoires et Minorités: la Situation des Gens du Voyage*, (edited by Drobenko, B. 2005), to quote some of them.

<sup>7</sup> Oliver, P. 1997. *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*, p.1311.

<sup>8</sup> 'Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses,' Revision 2: A General Outline. Demographic and Social Statistics Branch, United Nations Statistics Division. August 2005.



Carnet anthropométrique.



appearance. Indeed, as Walter J. Ong explains in *Orality and Literacy*, “lists as such have no oral equivalent”<sup>9</sup> and the only correspondence of a document would be the return to the reliance on spoken word. That seems today absurd and almost unthinkable, even if, as Ong argues, the evolution in media is directing cultures towards a second age of orality. In the meantime, the anthropometric card in France remained valid for more than fifty years. It was recognized anti-Constitutional in 1969, due to the fact that it forced nomads to stay at least three years in the same location before they were allowed to register a new site. The two documents that substituted the anthropometric card are now abolished as well: the ‘livret de circulation’ for those *gens du voyage* (first apparition of the term in law) with a regular income, and the ‘carnet de circulation’ for the rest. A regular income entitled the owner to have it stamped only once a year, while the second were obliged to register their movements at least every three months.<sup>10</sup> By all means, the carnet constituted some sort of passport to travel within the same country, and it was finally derogated two years ago. From 2012, no citizen is obliged to report their whereabouts inside the country, and after being inscribed in a municipality for at least six months, they are entitled to exert voting rights. Yet, the name *gens du voyage* is still present and still in use, drawing a sharp line between ‘those who travel’ and the rest of the French. This line is sometimes visible, as in the mathematically-limited political influence they can have in any given town: by law, *gens* cannot surpass the 3% of the total voting population. Words fix, and contribute to give shape to the stereotype, one that, by definition, “must always be in excess of what can be empirically proved or logically construed.”<sup>11</sup>

There is no totally logical explanation for some blurred fields that appear around other civil rights and duties that *gens du voyage* have or can exercise. One of those uncertain spaces is education, which is precisely the main power to exert upon them in order to make a long term shift of the situation. As a matter of fact, a significant number of *gens du voyage* do not enroll their children in school (which violates French law), besides those who are enrolled sometimes miss classes for much of the school year, and many of them transfer schools frequently, interrupting their

<sup>9</sup> Ong, W. J. 1982. *Orality and Literacy*, p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> Sudetic, C. 2013. ‘Roma in Political Life: France—Gens du Voyage and the Roma of France’

<sup>11</sup> Bhabha, H. K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*, p. 66.

instruction.<sup>12</sup> Adding another layer, school administrators of some municipalities have refused to enroll gens du voyage children, even if their families reside on private land for significant periods. For this and other reasons, large parts of the population do not learn to read and write, but they now acknowledge that literate societies call oral societies illiterate, which in French is ‘analphabète,’ without alphabet. To ensure the understanding of the two parties, the figure of the mediator becomes necessary, connecting nomad communities with local governments, regulations, and other duties such as rent. The mediator is a negotiator.



Pancarte à l'angle du boulevard d'Indochine et de la rue des Marchais

### three: the gate

Negotiation of the border is at stake in the issue of the garbage truck. One most clear indicator differentiating illegal caravan settlements of those proposed by the government is the existence of a surveilled gate, not to be trespassed by anyone from outside the community. In illegal settlements, security is pursued by the creation or occupation of a closed boundary with one only entrance, subject of permanent control. The architecture proposed by the government follows a strategy of seduction and imposition. Seduction by typological similarity to where *gens* actually live; the new houses are strictly one storey buildings with a generous proportion of plots of grass and free space close to the house where to park the caravan. Seduction by the commodities of having doors and tiled bathrooms. Persuading, symbolic, (ridiculous) rents, like in Brétigny-sur-Orge, where 60€ per calendar month entitle *gens* to a three-bedroom house with garden, green roof and ‘sustainable’ solar panels incorporated. Imposition of what we call a street, with a name and a number, which are the data that appears on paper in documentation. Imposition by the elimination of the gate, allowing the presence of the garbage truck between their houses, or any car or citizen that decides to walk or drive through those new streets. Brétigny is a ‘commune’ in the proximities of Paris, close to the natural reserve *Les Joncs Marins*, which is part of the green belt surrounding the capital. Illegal occupants on those areas, prevent the projects of protection of the belt from being fully accomplished, which at the same time stops the city from receiving European funds. Naturally, it is a very appealing location for *les gens*, and they continuously move in circles around it, scaping the eventuality of being displaced by police. Building homes to relocate them is the best and most reasonable solution French government promotes at the moment. Yet, many of them leave those houses after inhabiting them for a couple years or three, and others plainly reject them, with claims like: “An apartment would be a prison for me” of the musician Sylvie Zigler, known as ‘Negrita.’ In a sense, even if not having a physical gate, housing lots built for the *gens du voyage* are more similar to gated communities than to anything else, in the sense they do create a boundary and a differentiation of inside and outside, *gens* and ‘non-

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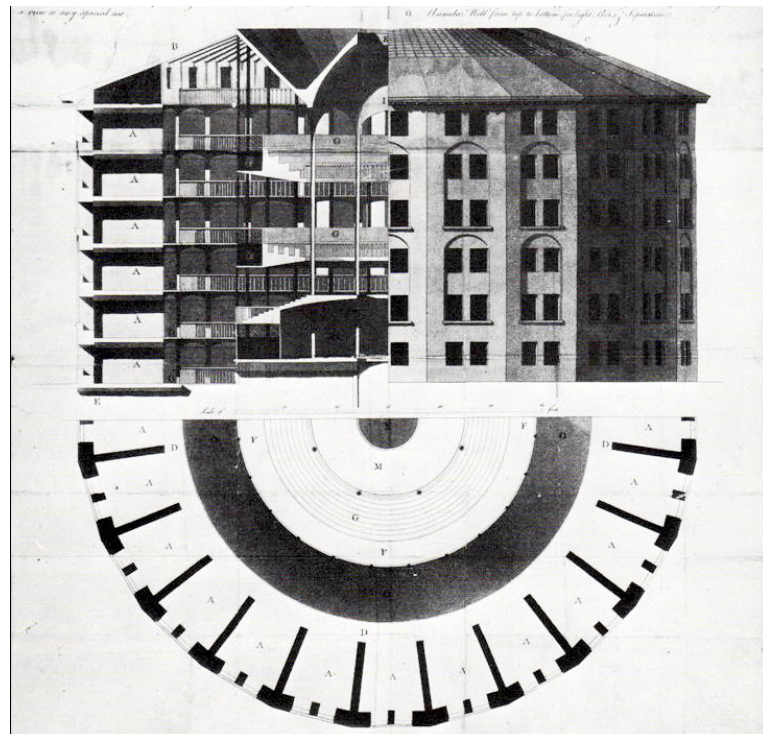
<sup>12</sup> Sudetic, C. 2013. ‘Roma in Political Life: France—Gens du Voyage and the Roma of France’



gens.’ The sense of enclosure comes not only from having their house attached, but also from belonging to an gated community with an invisible gate. Gated communities, following Agamben, “are beginning to look like camps.”<sup>13</sup>

Referring to the Nazi death camp as the paradigmatic instance of the inclusive exclusion produced and occupied by power, Agamben calls its space a ‘zone of indistinction’ (after Deleuze), in which sense “the camp is a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order, but it is nevertheless not simply an external space.”<sup>14</sup>

Reinhold Martin suggests that the connection of gated communities with camps refers to the indeterminate sovereignties that they, too, entail. In gated communities laws and rights are fetishized as a kind of class privilege, rather than as a universal human value. New dwellings of *gens du voyage* are now –paradoxically– more than ever, similar to gated communities; in an evident situation of inclusive exclusion. In a Foucauldian understanding of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, these communities are organized virtually by allowing, but not showing, the vigilance exerted upon them, that was impossible to implement to their previous, closed settlements.



<sup>13</sup> Agamben, G. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p.170.

<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben quoted in Martin, R. 2010. *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again*, p. 11.





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