

*Chapter 2*

# The Long Road in Search of a Tzigane Language: Sandra Jayat

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After the horrors of the Second World War and the trauma of occupation, it seemed very unlikely that Paris would once again be that wild party that Ernest Hemingway had experienced and written about. Nevertheless, despite the worst prognoses, as early as the 1950s, the metropolis gradually started to rise from the ashes, encouraged by the arrival of foreigners in pursuit of the mythical City of Light or indeed any dream yet to be realized. The life of Sandra Jayat is one of the stories woven into that Paris, to which many – like her – flocked to heal the wounds of various wars. Jayat was from a travelling Manouche family and settled in what was still the centre of European culture, where she would pursue a long and prolific career as a writer and painter from the early 1960s until well into the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> Her creative purpose had always been to produce a positive, dignifying representation of Romani identity, and this made of her texts and plastic art powerful working tools and instruments of self-assertion. At the same time, her literary language and paintings drew from the common source of the avant-garde movements that were still active

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1 Manouche is the name of a specific branch of the Roma used by many French Romani groups to refer to themselves. For the use of endonyms (such as Manouche, Kalderash or Sinti) and the resignification of some exonyms (Gitano or Gypsy), see the Introduction above by María Sierra. This chapter uses the terms Romani, Manouche and Tzigane (sometimes Zingarina) to refer to Sandra Jayat, terms which the author herself uses to describe her ethnic identity.

in post-war Paris and contributed fresh insights that her contemporaries came to respect and value.

The imaginative effort that sustained her artistic career and the political will underlying the impulse to bring dignity and respect link Jayat to a whole transnational generation of Romani authors and activists whose writing and art became tools used to challenge the stereotypes about their life and culture.<sup>2</sup> Apart from being in tune with the concerns of the transnational Romani movement, Jayat's work also shared some of the intentions attributed to Romani artists and writers, fundamentally the desire to transcend the classic genres while appropriating some of what they had to offer, and to go beyond the labels of primitive or naïf art in order to be considered on an equal footing with canonical Western creations.<sup>3</sup>

This participation in a joint endeavour and a common aesthetic framework did not deprive Jayat's work of a remarkable originality. Setting up a constant dialogue between biography and creation was one of the most distinctive features of her life and career. Her literary and artistic career was always underpinned by re-readings and interpretations of her own experiences, enabling her to contribute *real* personal examples of oppression and marginalization. She did this in her paintings, poetry collections and, especially, two autobiographical publications, *La longue route d'une Zingarina* [The Long Journey of a Zingarina, 1978] and *La Zingarina ou l'herbe sauvage* [The Zingarina or the Wild Grass, 2010], in which Jayat related, in the first person, the suffering that racism had caused her and the sense of liberation she had felt on arriving in Paris.<sup>4</sup> The objective of these accounts of her past went beyond merely providing examples of the sufferings and successes of a Manouche woman of her time. Jayat used them to give structure and meaning to her own life, presenting it as the journey of someone who, after battling against the odds, had succeeded in rising above the barriers imposed by racism, discovered herself as a creator and reached a pre-eminent place in the Parisian cultural scene.

All these characteristics turn the creative journey of Sandra Jayat into an excellent case for considering two interrelated phenomena: firstly, the various readings that Jayat made of herself and the Romani world in her work, a process that was connected to the historic mobilization of this people in defence of its rights and dignity; and, secondly, what remained of her enduring artistic legacy in that Paris of the second half of the twentieth century that became her workshop and her home. This chapter therefore

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2 Paola Toninato, *Romani Writing: Literacy, Literature and Identity Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

3 Tímea Junghaus, "Roma Art: Theory and Practice", *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 59, no. 1 (2014): 25–42.

4 Sandra Jayat, *La longue route d'une Zingarina* (Paris: Bordas, 1978) and Sandra Jayat, *La Zingarina ou l'herbe sauvage* (Paris: Max Milo, 2010).

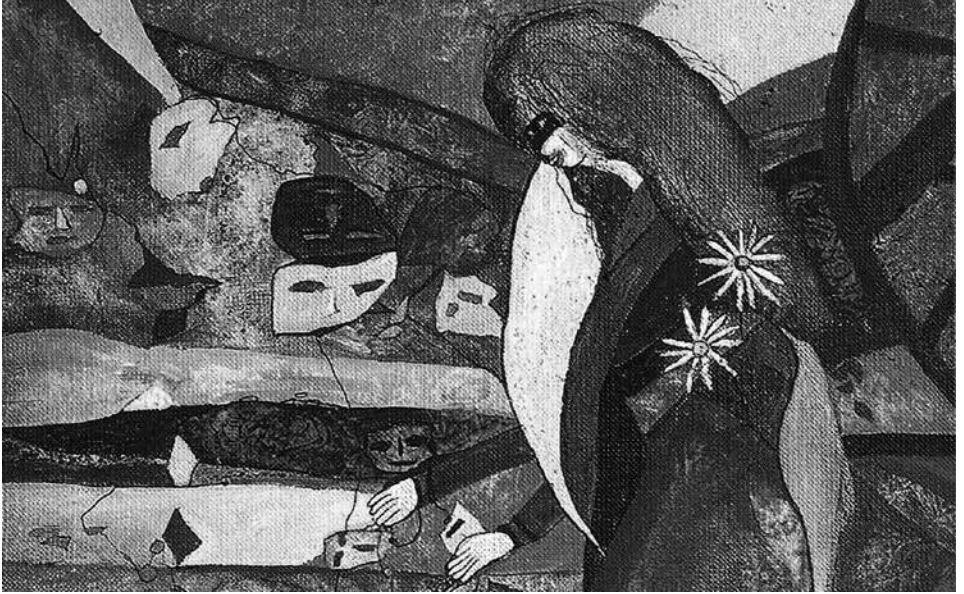


Fig. 5 *La Zingarina ou l'herbe sauvage* (Paris: Max Milo, 2010). Cover illustration by Sandra Jayat. (with permission of the publisher)

covers both the childhood and early youth of the author – given that her artistic and literary work cannot be understood without them – as well as her development as an artist and intellectual in the French capital. These life circumstances are considered here from a dual perspective. The first gives priority to the first-person testimony of Jayat in her works – in other words, it integrates the author's memory into the biographical account that these pages seek to present; the second complements this by putting the references for this autobiographical memory in dialogue with historiographical explanations, not with the intention of correcting them in terms of supposed historiographical accuracy, but with the desire to create a richer framework of reference from this interaction which will help explain the biographical journey.

### La longue route

At the end of the 1930s, Italy became hostile territory for those Romani groups (like Sandra Jayat's family) who used to travel across the north of the country in the spring and summer but settled in a fixed location during the cold winter months. According to an account by Jayat's grandfather, shortly before she was born, some members of her family were arrested by the blackshirts and tortured in the name of the *difesa*



Fig. 6 Sandra Jayat (with guitar) and La Guigne, wife of Django Reinhardt, early 1960s. (source: <https://www.facebook.com/django.liberchies/photos/pcb.904201653039472/904199733039664/> (accessed 2 December 2021); every effort has been made to identify the copyright holder)

*della razza* [defence of the race].<sup>5</sup> With their detention, humiliation and punishment, the group started to suffer the first consequences of the escalating racism that was spreading throughout the country as the racial policy of the fascists gathered strength and supporters.<sup>6</sup> Closely following the remembered testimony of her grandfather, Jayat told how the rest of her family decided to cross into France in search of peace after some family members were imprisoned. It was while they were crossing the border “somewhere between two countries” that Sandra Jayat was born, between 1938 and 1939.<sup>7</sup>

But France, too, had a long-standing tradition of rejection of the Romanies going back to the previous century, which had forced several generations to live harassed by the state control established by the laws of 1912, and in perpetual fear of expulsion.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after Jayat’s group had settled in “a little corner of really good earth that seemed tucked

5 Jayat, *La longue route*, 18–21 and Jayat, *La Zingarina*, 13.

6 Giovanna Boursier, “Gypsies in Italy during the Fascist Dictatorship and the Second World War”, in *The Gypsies during the Second World War: In the Shadow of the Swastika*, Vol. 2, ed. Karola Fings and Donald Kenrick (Paris and Hatfield: Centre des Recherches Tsiganes/University of Hertfordshire Press, 1999), 13–36.

7 Jayat, *La Zingarina*, 35.

8 Christophe Delclitte, “La catégorie juridique ‘nomade’ dans la loi de 1912”, *Hommes et Migrations*, nos 1188–89 (1995): 23–30.

away from the whole world” close to the town of Moulins,<sup>9</sup> the French government issued a statutory order in April 1940 prohibiting the free circulation of the itinerant population (principally Romani groups) in mainland France on the pretext that “vagrant” individuals posed a threat to national security. Following the signing of the armistice agreement and the German occupation, persecution of these groups intensified further with the establishment of a new law that required their internment in camps throughout France.<sup>10</sup> Jayat’s family was split up as a result of this persecution. They all had to leave the places where they had set up camp; some were imprisoned in what Jayat tellingly refers to as “death camps”; others, like Jayat herself and her grandfather, were able to hide in empty houses and abandoned farms in the region. At some unspecified point, probably still during the war, the continuous attacks and abuse aimed at family members who had refused to hide led them all to decide to set off on their travels once more in search of peace, this time to the south of France (i.e. the unoccupied territory where the internment policy did not apply).<sup>11</sup>

The time frame connecting these events with their settling once more in northern Italy is rather hazy. By the time Jayat had turned 14, her group was on the move again through Lombardy, and the reference point is a camp close to Sesto Calende on the banks of Lake Maggiore. Her two most important autobiographical stories both begin here, in this camp, on the eve of her fifteenth birthday, when her grandfather told her that she would be married the next day. The prospect of a rushed, forced wedding terrified Jayat so much that she abandoned the camp where she had grown up: “I am leaving to safeguard my form of freedom and escape the tradition that imposes marriage at the age of fifteen”, states Jayat’s alter ego in one of her accounts.<sup>12</sup>

At some point in her journey, or maybe before starting it, Jayat made it her first objective to cross the border into France and then make her way to Paris to meet a “cousin”, a musician whom her grandfather had talked about for years, Django Reinhardt. During the months it took her to make it to Paris, the news of her flight had travelled more quickly than she had, which meant that she was regularly recognized in the French and Italian Romani camps where she sought temporary refuge. While she was in these camps, apart from receiving all kinds of assistance, Jayat grew familiar with the climate of uncertainty in the other families who were suffering the effects of the restrictions on settlements in the northern part of Italy and the continuous harassment and humiliation from the majority population. Their hatred of Manouches was a phenomenon that she had experienced

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9 Jayat, *La longue route*, 20.

10 Marie-Christine Hubert, “1940–1946, l’internement des Tsiganes en France”, *Hommes et Migrations*, nos 1188–89 (1995): 31–37.

11 Jayat, *La Zingarina*, 36.

12 Jayat, *La Zingarina*, 11.

during the war and was now experiencing again, the main difference this time being that she was alone and not protected by her group. The constant refusal even to give her a glass of water, the threats of ill treatment and the insults turned her journey into a constant battle for survival. She only appeared to feel safe in the company of children, to whom she later dedicated some of her early books – among them, significantly, the one in which she told the story of this journey.<sup>13</sup>

Jayat reached Paris in spring 1955. She managed to survive in the early months thanks to a Jewish family who gave her somewhere to stay in their home and later let her use a small studio in the heart of Montmartre where she started to paint, write and establish her first contacts with the world of art and literature. These early friendships played a crucial role in enabling Jayat to make contact with the family of Django Reinhardt, who had died barely two years before she arrived in the French capital. Even though she was never able to meet him personally, the memory of Django became a constant motif in her work and a strategy that she employed time and again to assert herself in the artistic and intellectual circles of 1950s Paris.<sup>14</sup> Equally important was the patronage of writers, such as Marcel Aymé and Jean Cocteau, both of whom she met in her early years in Paris and whose protection was a decisive factor in launching her career as a self-taught writer and painter.

The 1960s was a time of intense literary activity for Jayat. She started out as a writer in 1961 with her first book of poems entitled *Herbes manouches* [Manouche Grass], with a cover designed by Cocteau and a preface by J.B. Cayeux. Her 1963 book of poems *Lunes nomades* [Nomad Moons] contained a preface by Marcel Aymé and illustrations by Marcel Mouloudji, while the illustration on the front cover of the third in 1966, *Moudravi: où va l'amitié* [Moudravi: Where Friendship Goes], was designed by Marc Chagall. This circle of friends, together with her determination to write in French – a decision that was tied to common practice among French Tziganes ever since Matéo Maximoff had opted to use the majority language to spread Romani culture to a wider public<sup>15</sup> – gave Jayat the opportunity to start

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13 Jayat, *La Zingarina*, 42; Jayat, *La longue route*, 53, 54, 65, 68 and 75.

14 There have been numerous biographies of Django Reinhardt. The standard references are still those by his friend Charles Delaunay, see *Django mon frère* (Paris: Eric Losfeld, 1968) and *Django Reinhardt* (Newcastle: Ashley Marks, 1988). Most of the literature on Django the musician is in French. Outstanding among them are Noël Balen, *Django Reinhardt. Un géant sur son nuage* (Paris: Lien commun, 1993); William Patrick, *Django* (Marseille: Éditions Parenthèses, 1998); Alain Antonietto and François Billard, *Django Reinhardt: rythmes futurs* (Paris: Éditions Fayard, 2004).

15 Matéo Maximoff, *Dites-le avec des pleurs* (Romainville: self-published, 1990). A reflection on the cost of translating Romani oral customs to a majority language such as French can be found in Gérard Gartner, *Matéo Maximoff. Carnets de route* (Paris: Alteredit, 2006), 103–04.

publishing with well-known publishers. *Lunes nomades* and *Moudravi: où va l'amitié* were published by Seghers Éditions, a French publishing house founded by Pierre Seghers, a famous poet linked to the Resistance who became one of the principal promoters of the new poetry in Paris after the Liberation.<sup>16</sup> In parallel with these publications, Jayat was also a driving force behind the work of young writers of her time, as demonstrated in the appearance of *Poèmes pour ce temps* [Poems for This Time] a collection of compositions by promising young Parisians, presented by Jean-Pierre Rosnay and Sandra Jayat, the “poétesse gitane” [Gypsy poetess]. In the introduction to the collection, the showcased poets stated their belief “that it [was] still possible to write poems, to work for a poetry that would not continue to be the privilege of a caste of initiates and closed circles”, and expressed their gratitude to both Rosnay and Jayat for having supported and appreciated their project.<sup>17</sup>

All these activities bore witness to personal affection for Jayat and the appeal she had among the cultural circles of 1960s Paris, their interest clearly ignited by the originality of her poetic imagery, which drew on experiences from her childhood until her early years in Paris. In the first of her books, *Herbes manouches*, Jayat deployed a complete array of symbols relating to the Manouche camps of her infancy and dedicated poems to the *roulottes* [caravans], the guitars and horses, the wisdom of the older folk, the fire that lit up and marked the centre of the camp, and so on. Despite the fact that these images clearly drew on the more bucolic and exotic stereotypes of Manouche life (or perhaps precisely because of it), the critical reception of this first book of poems was positive. Michel-Claude Jalard, an art critic and expert on jazz music, wrote a review for the *Gazette de Lausanne* declaring that, while the author had not yet completely mastered poetic technique, her work could be expected to continue to mature as her vocabulary became richer and her compositions less “systematic”. Nevertheless, despite these typical weaknesses of youth, Jalard was cheered that the “Gitane poetess” had not succumbed to “some third-rate notion of Gypsyism” and defined hers as a “sensibility concerned above all with finding her own voice”,<sup>18</sup> and indeed, the search for her own style seemed to be one of her main unstated purposes in these early works. Thus, with the likely intention of avoiding any “third-rate notions of Gypsyism” and also combating the age-old negative stereotypes about her ethnic group, the poetic discourse of *Herbes manouches* – like a good

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16 Bruno Doucey, *Pierre Seghers: poésie la vie entière* (Paris: Éditions Musée du Montparnasse, 2011).

17 Jean-Pierre Rosnay and Sandra Jayat, *Poèmes pour ce temps. Jeunes poètes 1963*, with an introduction by Jean-Pierre Rosnay and Sandra Jayat (Lyon: Imprimerie nouvelle lyonnaise, 1963).

18 Michel-Claude Jalard, “Herbes manouches”, *Gazette de Lausanne*, 9–10 December 1961: 28.

many of her publications and subsequent painting work – set out to dignify and elevate the Romani lifestyle as Jayat thought of it.

Barely two years later, in 1963, when Jayat published her second book, *Lunes nomades*, her calling to find her own individual voice and demonstrate that her Manouche origin could be a source of inspiration that personalized her work already seemed clear. *Lunes nomades* returned to the same subjects that had already appeared in *Herbes manouches* and included new references, such as the poem dedicated to her close friend “Babik, son of Django”, a direct reference to the artistic genealogy that she sought to emulate. Jayat also began to develop a corpus of symbols of the Romani world that were combined with references to herself in the first person in lines such as, “As a child I used to live in freedom ... At twenty I found freedom in words” or “For a long time / I have been walking on a river of sand”, and titles such as “If I were what I am not / I would like to be what I am”.<sup>19</sup> In any case, it was the composition that opened the book of poems, “Interdit aux nomades” [No Entry for Gypsies] that made the clearest reference, not only to her own life story but also to the imaginary of racism and exclusion shared by French Romanies. Not surprisingly, therefore, its first two lines, “Why not / No entry for the moon” found their way into the title of an anonymous article published in *La Voix mondiale tzigane* [The Tzigane Voice Worldwide],<sup>20</sup> the journal of the Communauté mondiale gitane [World Community of Gypsies], published from 1962 by Vanko Rouda), which was used as a platform to call for the ethnic mobilization of the Tziganes outside France and to report abuses by the national authorities, such as banning nomads from camping freely.<sup>21</sup>

Scarcely three years later, in 1966, that evolution towards poetic maturity that Michel-Claude Jalard had foreseen started to flower with the appearance of *Moudravi: où va l'amitié*, thanks to a more elaborate symbolism and Jayat's more ambitious treatment of her subject matter. *Moudravi* was a nomad sage, a sort of representation of Manouche tradition and a figure that Jayat could evoke as a symbolic interlocutor, to whom she could address her words. The structure and content of this book of poems were considerably more complex than in the previous ones. Instead of focusing only on a sequence of images about Romani life and customs, the central thread of this book of poems is a much more profound humanistic reflection on personal relations. For the first time, the writer was devoting a composition to interpreting her experience as a woman and a Tzigane and calling for men and women in her community to work together: so, in “Femme je le suis” [Woman I Am], she writes, “Woman I remain visible

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19 Sandra Jayat, *Lunes nomades* (Paris: Seghers, 1963), 8, 84, 16, 21 and 34.

20 “Un accord intéressant les Tziganes yougoslaves travaillant en France”, *La Voix mondiale tzigane*, no. 20 (1965).

21 María Sierra, “Creating Romanestan: A Place to Be a Gypsy in Post-Nazi Europe”, *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2019): 272–92.



to suffering / Woman I am, like that tree that resembles you / Look my hands are naked / And they do not pick up the spit from the ground / [As a] Woman, I do not walk an easy path ... Man or Woman / We are human / Come, let us fight together".<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, in other compositions, Jayat sets out her vision of friendship as a site on which to build intercultural dialogue and, in poems such as "L'amitié existe" [Friendship Exists], she pauses to reflect upon the nature of that relationship.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the ones that stand out both for their number and compositional quality are those that explicitly express her longing for a cosmopolitan world, like that of 1960s Paris, in which it was possible to build new friendships based on respect and appreciation of difference. Good examples are: "Chacun est chacun" [Everyone is unique], "Mon ami du Nil bleu" [My friend from the Blue Nile], "Mon frère de Malaga" [My brother from Malaga], "Mon ami d'ailleurs rencontré à Paris" [My out-of-the-way friend I met in Paris], "Complainte du gitan retrouvé" [Lament of the Gypsy that I found again], "Mon ami de Tunis" [My friend from Tunis], "Mon ami gitan" [My Gypsy friend], "Mon ami de Grenade" [My friend from Granada], "Mon ami disparu" [My lost friend].<sup>24</sup> The last part of this collection closes with several compositions that are more introspective and retrospective in tone. In "Au-delà de toutes mes étapes" [Beyond All My Stages],<sup>25</sup> the imaginary of the Manouche world of her childhood is set aside, and she refers explicitly to that moment in her life where Jayat was at the time; integrated into the intellectual circles of Paris and recognized as a *poétesse gitane*, she was wondering about the identity she had constructed in those circles, which had been instrumental in helping her succeed in life. This is how she expresses it in "Qui suis-je mes amis" [Who Am I, My Friends]: "Who am I to you, my friends / a Gypsy, a bohemian / Who relays the voices of a distant past / To mingle with your black-carnation voices".<sup>26</sup> Finally, the poem that concludes the book, "Tout me reste à dire" [Everything Remains for Me to Say] shows Jayat's commitment to growth in her career as a writer.<sup>27</sup>

These anxieties about her identity and future were noticed by her contemporaries. In an interview granted to the official *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* at the beginning of the 1970s, the interviewer stated that Jayat had confessed to her that, "instead of being proud of her success, her family thinks it is 'shameful to write books'". While it is difficult to be sure who she was thinking of when she referred to "her family" (whether her Italian relatives or those who had taken her in when she arrived in Paris), it seemed very clear to the interviewer that rejection had not diminished

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22 Sandra Jayat, *Moudravi: où va l'amitié* (Paris: Seghers, 1966), 16.

23 "L'amitié existe", in Jayat, *Moudravi*, 50.

24 Jayat, *Moudravi*, 119, 132, 54, 134, 137, 140, 142, 144 and 147.

25 "Au-delà de toutes mes étapes", in Jayat, *Moudravi*, 157.

26 Jayat, *Moudravi*, 179.

27 "Tout me reste à dire", in Jayat, *Moudravi*, 193.

Jayat's desire to persevere in her vocation: "and yet she had wanted so much to be successful in her career, to show people that a Gypsy was capable of writing a book". Even so, this determination in her pursuits seemed to have taken its toll: "I do not think that Sandra Jayat has found complete happiness. She mixes with all kinds of *gadgé*, but told me that she does not feel she is one of them. Yet when she is with her own people, she no longer feels one of them either", the interviewer acknowledged in an afterthought that seemed to go back to her composition "Qui suis-je mes amis".<sup>28</sup>

### Between Image and Word

In parallel with this early literary output, Jayat also excelled as a painter in the 1960s. Personal contacts once again played a decisive role. Painters such as Henri Mahé – who introduced her to the use of new artistic techniques such as lithography and fresco painting – and the gallery owner Émile Adès – who exhibited her work alongside that of artists such as Chagall, Dalí and Dedalo Montali – helped her gain access to the artistic community of Paris, although the climate in the French capital during those years was undeniably propitious for it. After the end of the war, the influx of artists had reshaped the aesthetic scene (sometimes referred to as the Second School of Paris), in which artists combined their desire to learn the modern idiom of the avant-garde with the determination to retain some of the cultural difference that would keep their identity alive, all without being labelled exotic, eccentric or passé.<sup>29</sup> In this context that revived the debates between different types of abstraction, between abstraction and figuration, between the very notion of a "school" and individualistic activity, not forgetting the renewed importance of surrealism, Jayat developed as an artist.

Where the poems in *Moudravi: où va l'amitié* were evidence of Jayat's perception of Paris as a world where cultures converged, so her pictorial

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28 Daphne Maurice, "Sandra Jayat, the Gypsy Poetess", *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, ser. 3, 52 (1973): 90. Toninato refers to such misgivings, stating that the attitude towards Romani intellectuals has often been an ambivalent one, admired by some, perceived by others as "risk factors" because their intellectual activity in academic and scholarly circles involved crossing ethnic boundaries. Toninato, *Romani Writing*, 164. The same reluctance to be educated in a different tradition of literacy can also be interpreted as a way of resisting any sort of acculturation: Ian Hancock, "Standardisation and Ethnic Defence in Emergent Non-Literate Societies", in *Language, Blacks and Gypsies: Languages Without a Written Tradition and Their Role in Education*, ed. Thomas Acton and Morgan Dalphinis (London: Whiting and Birch, 2000), 19–23; Martin P. Levinson, "Literacy in English Gypsy Communities: Cultural Capital Manifested as Negative Assets", *American Educational Research Journal* 44, no. 1 (2007): 5–39.

29 Serge Guilbaut, *Paris pese a todo. Artistas extranjeros 1944–1968*, exhibition catalogue (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2018).

expression gave an account, using other media, of the wide variety of forms of plastic expression available in the French capital. The use of dreamlike forms, free association of motifs and projections of her childhood memories onto her paintings was clearly linked to the aesthetics of surrealism and expressionism,<sup>30</sup> which were still clearly flourishing in the middle of the century, and gave Jayat the opportunity both to express herself and obtain financial benefit from her creations. Among the defining characteristics of Jayat's visual art, the most original and significant was the dialogue between her literary work and her painting. A good example of this is the way that she added writing to her canvasses, which not only had a decorative function but also hinted at her vocation as a writer. It was a feature that placed her firmly in the same line of formal experimentation typical of the historic avant-garde movements, Cubism in particular, which was preoccupied with the artistic value of the non-pictorial.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, symbolic motifs such as the hand referred directly to the creative work of writing and design, while some images, such as guitars, dancers or birds, for example, were taken up again and reinvented in the form of a visual imaginary that was used to refer to the Manouche world of her childhood. The complementarity of pictorial and literary elements was far from unusual in the Parisian intellectual circles that Jayat moved in, and it may have been the example of friends, such as Marc Chagall himself or Jean Cocteau, which influenced her decision to develop her creativity using different forms of expression. What seems clear though is that she herself was aware of it and fostered among the critics a view of her written and graphic output as different facets of an artistic career with no boundaries between genres. From there she asserted: "When I write a book, it is like my painting ... words ... sentences somewhat closed, but I do not feel claustrophobic".<sup>32</sup>

This dialogue between painting and writing was possible because Jayat continued working in both fields. In the 1970s, her literary activity was aimed at children, like other contemporary Romani authors, such as the Swede Katarina Taikon. Jayat was conscious of the role that children's literature had played in creating and spreading a view of Romani groups as "uncivilized" (immiserated, irrational, illiterate),<sup>33</sup> and decided to put together a set of images that would present the harmony and virtues of the Gypsy world, recovering certain elements from the oral tradition of her community that

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30 Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 165. For a description of Jayat's style, see Sophie Aude, "Image et langage dans les œuvres d'artistes roms contemporains", *Études Tsiganes* 36, no. 4 (2008): 10–37.

31 Nikos Stangos, *Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

32 Ariette Laurent-Fahier, "Sandra Jayat: un destin exceptionnel", *Créations* 52 (1991): 30.

33 Jean Kommers and María Sierra, *¿Robo de niños o robo de gitanos? Los gitanos en la literatura infantil* (Seville: Editorial de la Universidad de Sevilla, 2017).

had been distorted, obliterated or were simply unknown as far as the majority culture was concerned. These interests found expression in the joint publication of two tales, *Kourako* and *Les deux lunes de Savyo* [The Two Moons of Savyo] in 1972. These tales for children told stories of young Romanies who left their camps to go on a journey, the first in search of a magic guitarist who lived in the midst of nature, the second to reach “the moon of the Tziganes”. In both cases, the figure of the Gypsy was a sublimation of positive aspects of her culture that Jayat also considered to be defining characteristics: the desire for freedom as the driving force of life, music as a form of emotional expression of the people, the connection with and respect for nature as a fundamental principle and the notion of “the journey” – individual or collective – as a means of learning and personal growth.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from persisting in her efforts to present the positive side of the Romani world, these works were a way of preparing the ground for her book *La longue route d'une Zingarina*, published in 1978, which was again aimed at children. In this tale, Jayat for the first time transformed the memories of her childhood experiences into an autobiographical story that supplied the essential references for discovering what her life had been like before she arrived in Paris. Setting aside the references it contains to specific events, it should be stressed that this 1978 tale is both autobiographical fiction and an exercise in reflecting on her own process of transformation between the time she abandoned the camp at the age of 15 and the moment she crossed the French border some months later. Probably the most interesting and distinctive feature of *La longue route d'une Zingarina* is Jayat's description of the feelings of Stellina, the main character in the story and her alter ego. The meaning of her journey on the road to Paris soon loses the sense of a “flight” and turns into a kind of initiatory journey. Jayat's figurative use of “the road” was connected to countercultural literature, an exploration of the metaphor of the journey as the search for individual and collective identity, following the Beat trail in *On the Road*. The same image of the journey also linked up with its figurative use in Romani literature symbolizing travelling. It can be seen in the work of authors such as Ronald Lee, Iliaz (or Iljaz) Šaban and Rajko Đurić, who used the metaphor of “the journey”, “the path” or “the road” to stress the forced exiles of their groups, or to demonstrate pride in their itinerant nature.<sup>35</sup> These figurative uses are more deeply rooted in Romani authors writing in French, who have commonly employed the motif of the journey to refer to the “existential nomadism” that characterizes their culture and, hence, their literature.<sup>36</sup>

In *La longue route d'une Zingarina*, Jayat uses Stellina to depict both the cruelty of the marriage being forced on her by her family and the lack

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34 Sandra Jayat, *Kourako suivi de Les deux lunes de Savyo* (Tournai: Casterman, 1972).

35 Toninato, *Romani Writing*, 92–97.

36 Julia Blandfort, *Die Literatur der Roma Frankreichs* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

of understanding of the *gadje* [non-Roma] who repudiated and insulted her as she made her way to Paris. At the same time, her story also mentions feelings of physical and emotional security in the various camps of distant relatives who had offered her shelter and fed, clothed and looked after her. The story is constructed therefore as Stellina makes her way through two worlds: the hostile, dangerous world of the *gadje*, and the world of the Romani families and camps, which could be oppressive places because of the weight of tradition or refuges that afforded a temporary escape from the abuse and intolerance of majority society. In the course of this journey, Stellina gradually acquires what the writer considered to be all the most important traits of her people (fighting for freedom, special sensitivity to nature, empathy for Roma and non-Roma, and so on) until she herself is the very embodiment of the ideal Tzigane.

To a large extent, these three works of the 1970s marked the culmination of Jayat's career as a writer. After the 1970s, and particularly in the 1980s, she tended to channel her energies more in the direction of consolidating her career as a plastic artist and promoting cultural projects in collaboration with other Roma. The friendship she established with another artist, Gérard Gartner, was a determining factor in this endeavour. The son of a Manouche mother and a Kalderash father, Gartner built his creative career as a self-taught sculptor through his close friendship with Alberto Giacometti. By 1980, Gartner, like Jayat, had a large network of contacts in the Parisian art world and was determined to use them to work in support of Romani artists. Hence, at the beginning of the 1980s, they both started to consider the possibility of organizing an exhibition that would show the world the many ways in which Romanies were developing their creativity.<sup>37</sup>

These plans cannot be separated either from the collective efforts that had been forged over the previous ten years at three World Romani Congresses (1971, 1978 and 1981) or from the exciting prospects that the agreements reached at these meetings offered. Furthermore, movements for the defence of cultural specificity had promoted other types of projects directly related to the plastic arts by Roma. As Ágnes Daróczi points out, a large number of Romani visual artists started to organize themselves in the early 1970s to demand that their work should not simply be labelled as primitive, naïf or folk art, and that it should receive the recognition and social prestige it deserved beyond the specific Romani community to which the artist belonged. Those efforts bore fruit in the first National Exhibition of Self-Taught Artists of 1979, which was organized by Daróczi herself and shown in the Pataky Gallery in Budapest.<sup>38</sup> This first exhibition had

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37 Jayat, *La Zingarina*, 241.

38 Menyhért Lakatos, Ágnes Daróczi and Zsigmond Karsai, *1st National Exhibition of Self-Taught Artists* (Budapest: Népművelési Intézet, 1979); Ágnes Daróczi, "Roma Visual Artists in Hungary and Europe", in *Meet Your Neighbours: Contemporary*

a strong impact among European Gypsy artists and, although Jayat does not mention it, it seems likely that its philosophy and approach inspired the *Première mondiale d'art tzigane* [First World Exhibition of Tzigane Art] that she and Gartner were planning.<sup>39</sup>

With the institutional support and funding of the Ministry of Culture and the Paris City Council, Jayat and Gartner obtained permission to hold the exhibition at the *Conciergerie* in May 1985. The official narrative of the exhibition was intended to show the diversity of Romani art, principally European. Among the many works included were those by the Italian Renaissance artist Antonio Solario, nicknamed “Lo Zingaro” (c. 1465–1530); Otto Müller (1874–1930), a painter of the German *Die Brücke* expressionist movement; Serge Poliakoff (1900–69), a Russian expressionist who settled in Paris; Django Reinhardt himself; Torino Zigler, a contemporary of Gartner and Jayat; and works that tended to expressionism and allegory.<sup>40</sup> Most of those represented, principally those who worked before the twentieth century, had not used their work to assert their identity as Romani. Nevertheless, their inclusion as part of the official narrative of the exhibition served to demonstrate not only the originality and quality of the alleged transnational Romani art but also the thriving genealogy of the style, developed right at the heart of the most important European plastic arts movements of Modernity.

The *Première mondiale d'art tzigane* was the project in which Jayat's commitment to seek recognition for the Roma in art was most obvious, but it was not the only one. In the years leading up to the end of the century, Jayat continued to invest her efforts in her painting, producing works for galleries and merchants, constantly asserting the distinctiveness and originality of her ethnic heritage. Some of the galleries where her paintings were exhibited during those two decades included the seventeenth *Salon de l'Île-de-France* in 1984, the *Beaux-Arts du Grand Palais* biennial in Paris in 1985, the *Galerie des Muses* in Paris in 1985, the *Salon international d'art contemporain* in Anvers in 1985, the *Musée Bourdelle* in Paris in 1992, the *Modern Art Museum of China* in 1994 and the *Jacob Javits Center* in New York in 1998. Her prestige as an artist led in 1992 to her being asked to design a special issue of French stamps with the theme “*Les Gens du voyage*” [the Travelling People]. As *Le Monde* put it, a few days before it was launched, the painter had chosen to “depict a guitar, some musical notes and a white bird of freedom to symbolize the culture of the *travelling people*”.<sup>41</sup>

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*Roma Art from Europe*, ed. Tímea Junghaus and Katalin Székely (Budapest: Open Society Institute, Arts and Culture Program, 2006), 18–25.

39 Junghaus, “Roma Art”, 25–42.

40 Association des initiatives tziganes, *Première mondiale d'art tzigane* (Paris: Association des initiatives tziganes, 1985).

41 Anon, *Le Monde*, 28 November 1992.



Fig. 7 “Les Gens du voyage”, postage stamp designed by Sandra Jayat, 1992. (every effort has been made to identify the copyright holder)

Her commitment to the art world continued to develop in parallel with her career as a writer, by experimenting with genres that she had already practised in the past: poetry, the short fictional story and the novel. In *Je ne suis pas née pour suivre* [I Was Not Born to Follow, 1983], Jayat returned to poetry to develop that Manouche imaginary based on the symbols of freedom, communion with nature and brotherhood, which were displayed both in her writing and the accompanying illustrations.<sup>42</sup> Her next two narrative works, *El romanès* [The Romani, 1986] and *Les racines du temps* [The Roots of Time, 1998] are stories about Gypsies, narrated in the first person by Roma. These stories are halfway between realistic fiction and autobiography. While *El romanès* relates the experiences of a Spanish Gitano, Romanino, “El Romanès”, during the Second World War, *Les racines du temps* is a story for young people about the adventures of Libèra, a young Romani girl, as told by a wise old man, Ribeiro Verde, to a boy, Maggio. By introducing Roma of various nationalities as main

42 By the beginning of the 1980s, the dual perspective in her work of the visual and the literary had become one of its most admired qualities. Anne-Marie Tassel and Alain Antonietto, “Sandra Jayat. Quand les mots ne suffisent pas je peins”, *Études tsiganes* 1 (1984): 1.

or secondary characters in these stories (the meeting between Libèra and her friends Solaro “el Gitano”, Livio “the Manouche”, Tomass “the Gypsy” and Vassile “the Rom” is especially powerful), the writer was portraying the world of the Roma as both transnational and cosmopolitan, in which the roads they travel and the camps of other Romanies are meeting places.

Finally, in *La Zingarina ou l’herbe sauvage* (2010), the writer distanced herself from fictional and semi-fictional children’s tales to resume the story of her own life, using the experiences of Stellina. Instead of continuing the account she had started decades earlier in *La longue route d’une Zingarina* (1978), which concluded as the heroine crossed the border between France and Italy, the new book starts with Stellina refusing to be forced into marriage and running away from the camp and, this time, goes as far as the early years of the young girl in Paris. While the subject matter remains the same, the second work is no longer a children’s book, but one aimed at adults. Jayat’s purpose is to explore further the meaning of her journey from the north of Italy to Paris, but concentrating this time on the encounters that took place along the way, which are once again the central element used to organize the account.

Hence, unlike the 1978 work, the centre of interest of *La Zingarina ou l’herbe sauvage* is the transnational dimension of Jayat’s culture, the possibility of dialogue between Tziganes and non-Tziganes, and mutual understanding from the point of view of difference. For Jayat, the affinities she struck up during the journey, and particularly those when she arrived in Paris, were proof that those with a “Tzigane spirit” could adapt well to contexts that were completely alien to their own way of life, in which what was valued and celebrated was precisely their ethnic difference. In this new book, Jayat even found space to take up the history of the Nazi persecution of Roma, but linking it this time to the persecution that the Jews also suffered. *La longue route d’une Zingarina* had omitted all reference to that particular issue, whereas *La Zingarina ou l’herbe sauvage* – written at a later stage in Jayat’s career, when there was greater knowledge and awareness of the *Samudaripen* (the Romani Holocaust) in the world’s Roma population – included a reflection on it in the form of a story. Upon her arrival in Paris, Stellina lodges with a Jewish family whose mother believes that the young Manouche girl is Sarah, her own daughter lost in the Nazi horror. This situation – a fictionalized transcript of Jayat’s own experience – leads Stellina to recognize that, while some parallels can be drawn between the suffering of the two peoples, hers has a unique history that should not be overshadowed by anybody else’s: “even though we have suffered the same oppression that has set up camp in the present and will remain indefinitely in the present, I am not Sarah!”<sup>43</sup>

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43 Jayat, *La Zingarina*, 141. The two works are compared in Cécile Kovacschazy and Julia Blandfort, “Dialogue des cultures: réflexion sur l’identité romani à travers les



In *La Zingarina ou l'herbe sauvage*, Jayat collected together and strategically reformulated many of the key themes that she had exploited repeatedly in her earlier works. The ideas of the journey, change and freedom that had been appearing since her first books returned to the forefront once more, but were this time derived from past experience that she narrated in the first person. Her own life was presented as an inexhaustible source of tales and stories that demonstrated the possibility, and especially the duty, to foster a mutually enriching dialogue with other ways of life. Jayat illustrated this dialogue with continual references to the intellectual figures who had supported her – and thanks to whom, as she would highlight in due course, she had come to have a role of some importance as a member of the Parisian cultural scene. The search for legitimation as an intellectual of the time was undoubtedly one of the tacit objectives of this later work. *La Zingarina ou l'herbe sauvage* not only presented Stellina (Jayat) as yet another member of the scholarly and bohemian circles of Paris during those years, but implicitly demonstrated that her success in those environments had come about because she had known how to use her ethnic background to good advantage as a characteristic that distinguished her in a positive sense from the rest.

## Conclusion

The importance of Sandra Jayat in today's French cultural scene appears to be beyond question. The awards for her work from the 1970s are proof of the stature and credibility of her intellectual output and of the impact of her work in the cultural field.<sup>44</sup> It is no surprise that, in the majority of cases, her work has been highly praised for the originality of the form and content of its discourse. Her childhood supplied images and subjects to reflect upon, while the creative freedom of Paris in the second half of

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romans de Sandra Jayat”, *Études tziganes* 46 (2011): 205–15. On the determination to have one's own story of the Holocaust that would not be confused with or fade into invisibility beneath the better-known account of the suffering of the Jews, see Ian Hancock, “Uniqueness of the Victims: Gypsies, Jews and the Holocaust”, *Without Prejudice: International Review of Racial Discrimination* 1–2 (1988): 45–67.

44 Grand Prix de la littérature enfantine [First Prize for Children's Literature], 1972; Medaglia d'oro dalla fondazione fra Scrittori, Poeti, Pittori e Giornalisti per la Pace nel mondo [Gold Medal of the Foundation for Writers, Poets, Painters and Journalists for Peace in the World], 1976; Prix International Toulouse Lautrec de peinture [International Toulouse Lautrec Prize for Painting], 1978; Grand Prix du Livre for her poetic work, Stockholm, 1978; nominated member of the National Committee for the defence of the memory of racist and anti-Semitic persecutions perpetrated by the *de facto* authority known as the “Government of the French State”, 1998.

the twentieth century encouraged her to probe and explore the possibilities of genres and different forms of artistic expression that were previously unknown to her, but which she ended up adopting as tools for her own particular purposes. From her handling of literary genres such as poetry or storytelling, or the visual languages of Expressionism and Surrealism, arose a hybrid style in both form and content. The use of French to tell popular Manouche legends that she had learnt in Italy, introducing the oral narrative tradition into her texts, integrating visual imagery based on the Manouche camps and conveyed in a Parisian avant-garde style, endowed her work with a unique quality that earned her the recognition of her peers.

Nevertheless, the main purpose of Jayat's career was not (or was not only) the conquest of fame as a creator and intellectual. Her works are proof that the visual arts and literature are valuable tools for promoting empowerment that complement the struggles of social movements. Jayat's contribution to the collective commitment of emancipation has been to raise the profile of an ethnic heritage that she considered to be undervalued and misunderstood, and which she sought to valorize as a cultural resource and source of inspiration for Romanies and non-Romanies. Her career therefore unfolds in the liminal space between two worlds that she always considered herself to belong to: bohemian Paris, the epicentre of majority European culture, and the Romani world, an inexhaustible source of raw materials that enabled her to understand herself and to interpret the world around her.

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