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A 'DIFFERENT' BODY? DESIRE AND VIRGINITY AMONG GITANOS

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This article addresses anthropological conceptualizations of 'sex' (as biology/nature) and 'gender' (as culture). Anthropologists find it difficult to conceptualize gender except through a binary and reproduction-oriented view of sexual difference. Using data collected among Gitanos (Spanish Gypsies), the article illustrates how to understand the physicality of the body without abandoning the idea that maleness and femaleness are culturally constructed. Although these Gitanos see heterosexual difference as the basis of personal identity, the bodily element through which they define femaleness – the *honra*, or Bartholin's Glands – occupies no place in popular Western or anthropological imaginations. This article describes practices and understandings that contribute to the creation of Gitano femaleness. Just as the experience of being a woman or a man varies cross-culturally, so the body also differs.

Early in my fieldwork among Gitanos (Spanish Gypsies) in Madrid, Aunt Tula, an elderly woman of great influence, told me that she had decided to explain to me 'how the Gitanos get married'. She opened a drawer and took out a small and withered plastic bag. Inside were three white squares of cloth which she carefully spread over her bed. 'Among the non-Gitanos', she said, 'there are no decent women. But with us, in order to get married, you have to prove that you are pure. We take the virginity out of women's bodies with the handkerchief. These are the handkerchiefs of my daughters-in-law'. She passed her finger over the handkerchiefs, which were marked with round yellow stains, and added: 'You see, each of these two has three roses. In this one there is only one and some blood; the girl was too closed and we stopped. My daughters-in-law are decent, even Rosa who eloped. Rosa was a virgin, a good woman. This is what you have to take to England: let the English know we Gitanos are decent'.

The extent to which biological sexual difference determines cultural constructs has traditionally been one of the key analytical dilemmas in the anthropology of gender: although anthropologists have tended to emphasize the transformative power of culture, the idea that some attributes of human bodies 'cannot be ignored and *require* interpretation' (Errington 1990: 17) has remained a basic premiss in the literature. Although the 1980s were marked by a revision of earlier and more deterministic standpoints, as Moore has recently pointed out 'one fixed position remained and that was the division between sex and gender ... Underlying that idea was a notion that although gender was not determined by biology, it *was* the elaboration ... of the *obvious facts* of biological sex difference' (1994: 12, second emphasis mine; see also Haraway 1991: 134).

In the late 1980s Collier and Yanagisako had suggested that, in order to move forward in the sex-gender debate, it was necessary to focus on how relations between men and women are viewed and organized in particular contexts without assuming that they are everywhere structured by the fact of their 'difference' (1987: 15). According to them the task of feminist anthropology was to uncover the

> specific social and cultural processes [that] cause men and women to *appear* different from each other. Although we do not deny that biological differences exist between women and men ... our analytic *strategy* is to question whether these differences are the universal basis for the cultural categories 'male' and 'female' (1987: 15; second emphasis mine).

What they called for requires a paradoxical mental exercise because, as they themselves explained, anthropological ideas about gender revolve around the role of the sexes in physical reproduction. I agree with their view that the primacy of binary sexual difference has not been sufficiently interrogated. Our relativism has failed either to transcend, or to come to terms with, the seemingly unavoidable: all cultures distinguish between men and women, and what is a man but a human being with a penis, and a woman but a human being with a vagina?

In fact, anthropological debates keep coming back to a binary and reproduction-oriented view of what sexual difference is: discussion is still dominated by the culture/nature dichotomy[1] with 'nature' coming to assume the form of a fuzzy yet universal 'biological' foundation (Cornwall & Lindisfarne 1994; del Valle 1993; Errington 1990).[2] And yet, for some time now we have been aware of the growing body of historical evidence that makes it clear that the boundaries, content and significance of the terms 'nature' and 'biology' have changed through time and are still changing (Butler 1990; 1993; Haraway 1991; Laqueur 1990; MacCormack & Strathern 1980). It is generally acknowledged that we need to pull anthropology out of what Gagnon and Parker call the 'sexological approach' which, mainly between 1890 and 1980 and still in much of anthropology today, portrays sex as a 'natural force' as against culture or civilization, and within which heterosexual images dominate theories of sexuality (1995: 7).

However, this awareness – which has been a key catalyst in the development of feminist theory – poses problems for those anthropologists who find it necessary to link their analyses of 'culture' and 'discourse' to 'social relations' and 'materiality': because of the central position that the nature/culture dichotomy has traditionally occupied in anthropology, its de-stabilization can easily be seen to threaten the comparative aim of the discipline by depriving it of the body and biological reproduction as fundamental points of reference (Broch-Due *et al.* 1993; Collier & Yanagisako 1987; Moore 1993*a*). The key difficulty seems to be to incorporate into our analyses discoveries about Western categories made by 'sister' disciplines and by comparison with other societies (Broch-Due *et al.* 1993; MacCormack & Strathern 1980). This difficulty remains despite ample evidence that cultures differentiate people according to widely diverse criteria, and in ways that are not consistent with the 'sexological' paradigm (Collier & Yanagisako 1987; Herdt 1981; 1982; Moore 1994: 13; Ortner & Whitehead 1981; Strathern 1988; 1995; Whitehead 1981).

The limitations of current approaches become apparent not only when they are set against the ethnographic record or contextualized within the history of Western thought – both of which debunk the superficial fixity of 'biology' or 'nature' – but when recent developments in the understanding of contemporary Western sexuality are taken into account. Perspectives from feminist and gay and lesbian studies have come together in the view that 'distinctions between male and female bodies are mapped by cultural politics onto an *only apparently clear biological foundation*' and that as a consequence 'sex/gender systems are always unstable sociocultural constructions' (Epstein & Straub 1992: 2; my emphasis). The idea that there is more to the Western body than the dichotomous, heterosexual ideal suggests constitutes yet another impetus that forces anthropologists to reconceptualize 'sex' and 'gender' as categories of analysis.[3]

I want to place the Gitano ethnography that follows within this context of theoretical unease and indeterminacy. This ethnography illustrates very simply and vividly the possibility of refining our analytical tools. Like other peoples in the West, the Gitanos of Jarana, the neighbourhood of Madrid where I carried out my research, strongly emphasize a fixed heterosexual differentiation as one of the key bases of personal and social identity. Yet such differentiation does not refer to the same bodily elements which other Euro-Americans – including the non-Gitano Spaniards – emphasize. Instead, Gitanos assert the existence of the *honra*, a tangible, physical feature which they say is located inside women's vaginas. The *honra* is pivotal to Gitano identity, but it does not correspond to any of the elements that define femaleness in either the popular Western or the social anthropological imaginations. The Gitano case makes it necessary to take account of the *physical* aspect of the processes through which gender is 'culturally constructed'. It also points to the cultural specificity of sex itself.

Butler has insisted on the need to conceive gender not only as a cultural inscription on sex but as 'the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established' (1990: 7; see also Haraway 1991). The pages that follow constitute an anthropological rendering of this strategy: as basic, lived categories that organize our experiences and world-views – 'that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility' (Butler 1993: 2) – the sexes of which Butler speaks do not correspond to equivalent conceptions in the world-views of the Gitanos of Jarana. My aim is to point to some of the processes through which these Gitano categories are produced, so as to contextualize the notions of sex, body and nature as Haraway suggests (1991: 184). To this purpose, I draw both on what these Gitanos told me and what I observed as an anthropologist, and on my own experience of learning to behave as a 'proper woman' according to Gitano standards. Investigating the *honra*, together with the awareness that Gitano women not only view but also experience their bodies in ways that differ greatly from the way I perceive and experience mine, has made me face the issue of how to deal with the apparent malleability of the body's 'physicality' – an issue that has its anthropological roots in Mauss's notion of 'body techniques' (1979). Anthropologists, who are often required by the fieldwork experience to 'learn' the *habitus* of the people among whom they work, are placed in an excellent position to apprehend the contingent character of bodily views, practices and experiences (Okely 1983: 45).

The Gitanos of Jarana

The neighbourhood where I carried out my fieldwork, Jarana,[4] is located in the southern outskirts of Madrid. There are sixty-five Gitano families – around 300 individuals – living there, together with nine non-Gitano families and six mixed ones. Before being moved to Jarana in 1989 they had lived in shanty towns or in temporary housing also provided by the local government in various peripheral areas of the city. Like other Gitanos in Madrid, they had moved or been resettled several times (Montes 1986).

In Jarana, the Gitanos make up a fragmented community: links with related Gitanos who live outside the neighbourhood are stronger than those forged with neighbouring non-kin. As happens with Gitanos elsewhere, interaction among different patrigroups is characterized by open distrust, and unrelated Gitanos tend to come together only at weddings and funerals.[5] Moreover, these Gitanos lack an elaborated verbalized historical memory (see San Román 1994: 5) and make only minor investments in durable valuables: whereas Payos (the Gitano name for the non-Gitanos) produce and accumulate consumer durables, the Gitanos focus on the exchange and fast consumption of goods that are produced by others. These goods tend to be treated as non-durable and are rapidly discarded. In Jarana, the Gitanos seem to be permanently engaged in the 'celebration of impermanence' (see Kaprow 1991)[6] and, as I explain below, it is within this framework that they have made of the body a key medium in the construction and experience of their shared identity.

The Gitanos of Jarana are part of the 200,000 to 400,000 Gitanos that are said to live in Spain (Fresno García 1993; San Román 1994; Vázquez 1986).[7] Unlike many Gypsy groups elsewhere, who are nomadic and/or speak Romany, most Gitanos are settled and speak only Spanish. Like other Gypsies, however, they experience strong pressures to assimilate into the non-Gypsy majority.[8] Most engage in 'peripheral' occupations and many do so within the 'informal' sector of the economy: in Jarana, they earn their livelihood through the street-selling of flowers and clothing, calling for scrap or scavenging at the rubbish-dump. Payos relate to them as neighbours, customers or providers of social services.

Lastly, the Gitanos, as well as the Gypsies more widely, do not form a homogeneous group.[9] At least six different sub-groups have been identified in Spain,[10] and there are also important variations in occupation, level of economic well-being and of sedentarization, patrigroup membership, religious affiliation[11] and type of housing (Ardevol 1986; San Román 1976; 1994). This heterogeneity makes the pages that follow a portrait of a specific group of Gitanos based on a particular fieldwork experience, rather than an analysis of the Spanish Gitanos as a whole or of the Gypsies more widely.[12] The word 'Gitanos' works as a shorthand to refer only to those who live in the neighbourhood.[13]

Sex and personhood in Jarana

The Gitanos of Jarana think of persons as gendered/sexed: as either *mujeres* (women) or *hombres* (men). In their understandings the distinction between women and men is portrayed as given, fixed and unquestionable. This difference, however, is not simply a result of men's and women's bodies: men and women alike stress that women are more evil and have less capacity for *conoci-*

miento (understanding), and hence deserve less respect from others than men – characteristics that make it right that women should be 'below' or under the authority of men. Bodily features combine with these non-bodily elements to make up the basis of the Gitano categories 'woman' and 'man'. And, although these two categories can be broken down into finer and very significant classifications, they make sense primarily in relation to each other.

Gitano understandings are different from the North Euro-American ones that usually serve as the basis for cross-cultural comparison within anthropology. Strathern explains how the 'abstract possibility of a common measure against which comparison proceeds is part of what makes Euro-Americans imagine equality between the sexes' (1995: 48). This possibility of equality is strongly rejected by the Gitanos, who view it as a negative feature of the Payo life-style. The Gitano ethos is based on the assumption of 'kinds of people', with 'kind' receiving as much emphasis as 'people'. This makes the discriminations between Payos and Gitanos and between men and women the very basis of their worldview.

From a classic anthropological standpoint, the Gitano notions of 'man' and 'woman' appear to be at once categories of gender and categories of sex: as gender categories they encompass and transcend understandings about bodily difference; as sex categories they are made up of culturally specific ideas about the body that emphasize the genitals and focus on sexual activity and sexual pleasure, and on their appropriate management. The distinction between the two dimensions is, however, purely analytical: the Gitanos do not separate one set of understandings from the other, and the type of genitals individuals have is seen to point to the positions they can and must take throughout their lives. And, although they are aware that *la homosexualidad* (homosexuality) exists, the Gitanos view it as something that happens among the Payos, and do not acknowledge the possibility that ambiguities in the man/woman distinction, or non-heterosexual practices could occur among themselves.

Childhood and the sexed body

The Gitanos make good use of modern medical technologies, so that the sex of a child may be determined either before or at birth. The categories are already hierarchically ranked: men are thought to be 'better' than women, and to have better lives. Thus, in Jarana boys tend to be much preferred over girls, and the news that a woman is carrying a girl is usually received with disappointment. From the moment of birth, adults emphasize and celebrate the child's genitals, particularly in the case of boys. As well as conveying to the children a particular evaluation of the categories 'woman' and 'man' or *niño* (boy) and *niña* (girl), their attitudes encourage them to be proud of their genitals – and to develop a self-identity in which the genitals explicitly occupy a central place.

The words that define the genitals – *pija* (penis) and *chocho* (internal and external female genitalia) – can be defined as 'neutral' in the sense that they do not carry inherently polite or rude connotations. They are used as loving terms of address to children and often become nicknames. They are also made to stand, in a metonymic way, for the male or female children – thus, pregnant women are often asked whether they are carrying a *chocho* or a *pija*. Together with their

points of reference, these are among the first words to be learned. Affection to children up to the age of five or six is shown by rubbing or grabbing their genitals, or by kissing and biting them there.

> Clara took her nephew David, who was then two years old, in her arms and praised him, saying 'how handsome you are!' On hearing this he got down from her lap, pulled down his clothes and said 'yes, look', pointing to his penis and expecting further praise.

Although both boys' and girls' genitals are treated with fondness, the boys' are particularly celebrated: mothers love playing with their young sons' penises, photos of naked boys aged two or three are hung in the walls of most Gitano houses, and young boys are very much encouraged to be proud of their penises. The fact that boys are preferred to, and given preference over, girls and the greater – and more joyful – attention given to their genitals are essential in the creation of these early masculinities and femininities and coherent with other practices that also contribute to the process:

> David's parents and relatives consistently favoured him over his sister Nina. During my fieldwork, when he was two and she was six, she was very often made to give him her toys, or to leave her mother's lap when he wished to sit there. Many of the references made to David's masculinity served to advance his privileges as did the mention of Nina's femininity: because she was a *moza* (young woman) she had to 'give up' so that he, a boy, could 'have'. She fought and resented this, but could not deny the fact that he was a boy and she was a girl. She witnessed the adults around her displaying David's penis and, like them, she often praised it.

Nina and David exemplify how the language of the body may 'extinguish discourse ... in a subjectively experienced consent which is equally an acknowledgement of the rightness of things as they are' (Godelier 1986: 232). Their case illustrates how, through the management of the male and the female body in daily life, the categories *mujer* and *hombre* are phrased as relational and hierarchical, and come to be involved in unequal relations from the very moment of birth. That is, they have clear social and cultural bearings, rather than being restricted to the mere – or 'neutral' – identification of given differences.

Pleasure, desire and control: dual standards and Gitano identity

To the Gitanos of Jarana, then, men and women are different kinds of people with different positions in life. Their representations of sexual intercourse (*chivar*), on the other hand, point to areas of similarity. The Gitanos view sexual desire as part of the make-up of male and female persons and they portray intercourse as – at least potentially – enjoyable for both, and an activity to be inherently coveted. Sexual desire is thought of as very difficult to resist and the wish to have sex is often identified as a motivation for action. In the Gitanos' verbal statements it is the body that appears as the subject that enjoys sexual activity, and both pleasure and desire are located in the body or in parts of it: 'may your body enjoy it', 'my clam (vulva) is itching', 'she loses her ass after him'.

Joking is the context in which *chivar* is most often described as pleasurable and also tempting. Much sexual teasing and play takes place, often between sisters- and brothers-in-law, and between cousins, both married and unmarried. Women chatting on their own very often jokingly boast about their pleasure and desire, about those of their husbands, and about the frequency of their sexual relations.

> On a summer afternoon, a group of about twelve women of different ages – some married and some unmarried – were chatting, jokingly but also seriously, about sexual relations. They teased Pili – a woman in her late teens – about her husband's absence on a trip and her missing 'that'. She said that 'now that I feel like it, I can't do it, I want it so much I wake up earlier in the morning'. All the other women laughed. One said: 'with the kind of life we women lead, this is part of the little bit of goodness we have, the only time when we really enjoy ourselves'.

In fact, whether women state that they enjoy sex or that they do not, the idea that it should be enjoyable is not contested even in more 'realistic' contexts – such as when they discuss their own personal experiences with women friends and relatives.

While being grounded in the perception of intercourse as enjoyable, and of sexual desire as integral to what men and women are like, Gitano morality puts great stress on control. This is the key element that differentiates Gitanos from Payos – who are granted equal sexual desire but whose immorality is unquestioned and constantly underlined. This emphasis revolves around a dual moral standard: women should dominate their wishes much more than men. They should remain virgins until marriage and they should always be faithful to their husbands. Men, on the other hand, improve their social standing by demonstrating that they are active sexually, although this display should never be indiscriminate – adultery and rape, for example, are strongly condemned – and increasing age should be accompanied by increasing self-control. Because of the strict family monitoring of women's sexual behaviour, unmarried men are encouraged to establish sexual relations with Payas (non-Gitano women), and are expected to have sexual experiences before marriage. Male post-marital infidelity is tolerated within limits, so long as it is with Payas and not with Gitanas.

In Jarana male sexual prowess is particularly celebrated during *mocedad*, the period in the life cycle between childhood and marriage. The Gitanos associate sexual desire with lack of self-control, which is acquired with age and increasing wisdom or knowledge (*conocimiento*), so that young men are expected to follow rather than dominate their wishes. Their physical appearance is consistent with these attitudes. Through their dress and bearing they make themselves appear proud, self-confident and aggressive. Most of them take great care of their looks, wearing expensive-looking clothes, shiny shoes and jewellery. They make their mothers or sisters iron their shirts and trousers carefully, and put gel on their hair, which many grow down to their shoulders and only cut after marriage. The Gitanos see strong and curly hair as a sign of beauty and strength in males and females of all ages. In men, long hair is associated with youth and its implications, such as impulsiveness, and with activities such as going out dancing or drinking in Payo bars and discos. The *mozos'* attitude is usually defiant and even arrogant: their manner exaggerates the proud bearing of the married man, their bodies straight, hands in pockets and chest forward. They are fast to respond to challenges, and few lose an opportunity to provoke a young Paya sexually.

Gitano aesthetics also stress the sensual character of female bodies, particularly during *mocedad*. The Gitano ideal of femininity is closer to 1950s Hollywood images of women – plump, curvy, with big breasts and big buttocks – than to the thin and vaporous visions that populate Western women's magazines today. Unmarried women make themselves attractive by putting on very tight

blouses that emphasize their breasts, and skirts that are long but also very tight and that sometimes have long slits so that part of the leg is shown. They wear a great deal of make-up and large, shiny jewellery, and they curl and/or dye their hair, holding it high at the top of their heads so as to display its length and abundance.

However, women enhance their status by simultaneously displaying sexual continence. During childhood, girls are dressed in trousers and miniskirts by their mothers: because their sexual morality is not yet significant they can dress like boys or like the Payas. At the river in summer, when unmarried and married women bathe with loose dresses that cover most of their bodies, girls wear bathing suits. With the transition to *mocedad*, by contrast, the adequate performance of gendered morality becomes significant: from then onwards the way women dress, sit, walk and generally bear themselves becomes both a sign and the very embodiment of their moral worth. Their appearance is expected to be at the same time feminine and Gitano.[14] Payas are said to show too much of their bodies – they want to provoke the men into having sex – and wear trousers like men. This is consistent with what is thought to be their general attitude: Payas are well known to boss men around. Gitanas, by contrast, should not wear trousers, bathing-suits or miniskirts, and are also expected to show their continence in their posture: when they sit – always careful not to show their thighs – most women pull their skirts forward and tuck them behind the calves, even if they are long enough to cover the knees and the procedure is unnecessary.

Women who become too conspicuous are heavily criticized: they are called *roneadoras* (flirty) and are accused of wanting to have sex. The way women dress is one of the fields in which power is negotiated. Hence, unmarried women rebel against their parents and boyfriends and married women fight against their husbands over the definition of what it is proper for them to look like.

> Sara, like other married women I know, has a 'clandestine wardrobe': particularly 'sexy' skirts, blouses and dresses that she wears only when her husband is away on trips. However, the day we secretly left the neighbourhood together to meet my non-Gypsy friends at Madrid University she was particularly cautious not to wear too deep a cleavage or too tight a skirt so as not to look too *agitanada* ('gypsyfied'). When I was back in Cambridge, she sent me a letter in which she told how 'free and freed' she had felt during our escapade. On the back she had made a drawing of ourselves, holding hands, smiling broadly and wearing trousers.

The Gitano emphasis on female control over sexual desire revolves around a key fact: although it is possible to marry by elopement (*escaparse*) or with a wedding (*casarse con boda* or *bien* – well) the Gitanos of Jarana invariably link marriage to the loss of female virginity. Thus, a woman should marry the man who first has intercourse with her, or the man *for whom* she is deflowered at the wedding ceremony where proof of her virginity is produced and displayed. The word *moza* (unmarried woman) is a synonym of *virgen* (virgin) and the opposite of *casada* (married *because* non-virgin). A woman who is known to have lost her virginity by having sex with a man is no longer a *moza* or treated as one. Unless her partner acknowledges his responsibility and cohabitation follows, she loses the respect of the Gitano community and becomes an object of scorn. The strength of the link between female virginity and marriage is revealed by the fact that the word *casarse* (to marry) never refers to remarriages after separation or widow-

hood; these take place with a certain regularity even though, particularly in the case of women, they are not regarded with approval.

This emphasis on proper sexual behaviour gains much of its strength through comparison with the Payo life-style. To the eyes of the Gitanos the Payos break all moral rules and particularly those that have to do with relations between women and men. Payas are thought to be extremely promiscuous, to be 'all pigs' who 'like to have man after man in a night'. Gitanos *know* that Payas never marry as virgins: they have sex with many men both before and after their marriages. They have many male 'friends', some of them Gitano, and Payo men tolerate this attitude and are ridiculed for it. 'Evils' such as pre-marital sex and divorce are thus rampant among the Payos because the women lack self-control and the men fail to control them.

In the absence of a clear knowledge about the size, situation and physical confines of their community, Gitanos see the boundary that separates them from the Payos as essentially moral in character: Gitano group identity revolves around the assumed propriety of individual performance, which in turn is conceived in terms of gender. The male and female bodies contribute to dictating the kind of behaviour expected of individuals and are read as indices of their success – through such aspects as dress, posture, or, as I show below, by examination of women's genitals at their wedding ceremony. And, though both men's and women's bodies are used in the construction of difference, men and women enact the superiority of the Gitano community in different ways.[15] Women physically embody righteousness by showing at once the sensuality of their bodies and their control over it. Men demonstrate the immorality of the Payos by having sexual relations with Payo women.

The female body

From classical times onwards, throughout southern Europe the breaking of the hymen has been considered the sign of the loss of female virginity (Sissa 1989).[16] This is certainly a powerful idea among many Spanish people today,[17] although its validity is being challenged by alternative folk-medical models. Among the Gitanos of Jarana, by contrast, virginity depends on a combination of several elements. Gitanos firmly believe that old Gitanas are able to deduce the kind of sexual relationship a girl has had from the aspect of her genitals. Throughout fieldwork, women – young and old, married and unmarried – often described to me how old Gitanas are able to tell whether a girl is *abierta* (open) as opposed to *entera* (whole); that is, whether full intercourse has taken place, or whether she has merely been *rozada* (rubbed) or *picoteada* (pecked) because the couple have been 'playing around that area' without actual penetration. In young girls, the area surrounding the entry to the vagina is believed to be pink and glossy, and to turn dark – brown, grey or black – with the contact of the penis and other objects such as trousers or tampons. As they become older the genitals of women are thought to turn 'harder', more difficult for a man to 'open': 'those ones have to be opened with a screw-driver, they no longer have it tender'.

Hence, for a girl to be considered truly untouched she has to have rosy, tight external genitals. However, she is thought to be a *virgen* (virgin) until her *honra* is

spoilt or lost: the Gitanos of Jarana believe that inside the body of a virgin woman there is an *uva* (grape), a white or greyish hard grain the size of a small chick-pea which contains her *honra*. This is a yellow fluid which is spilt and hence lost when a woman is penetrated by a man for the first time or when she is deflowered by a professional woman at the wedding ceremony. By contrast with the *honra*, the Gitanos pay relatively little attention to the hymen: it is considered together with the entrance to the vagina and the surrounding area, and contributes to make it appear untouched and tight. They thus view it in a way that is closer to that of modern doctors – as flesh that makes the entrance to the vagina narrower – than to the popular southern European belief in a membrane that seals the woman's internal genitals (Sissa 1989). Similarly, and although it is a widespread idea even today among many Spaniards, the Gitanos of Jarana do not treat blood shed during intercourse or in the wedding ritual as the sign of loss of virginity:[18] blood is said to appear either when the woman is old and therefore 'hard to open', or at the wedding ritual if it is performed by an insufficiently experienced woman. Bleeding is thus evaluated negatively and, in descriptions of wedding ceremonies, is consistently downplayed.[19] Answering my questions, Clara wrote to me:

> Only rarely they [the professional women] draw blood, only if the girl does not stand still, and some women know better how to do it than others. The *honra* is a yellow stain, we have talked about this before, you were telling me that the yellow liquid could grow again [during fieldwork I suggested that the *honra* could be lubricating fluid] and I told you that it cannot, and that when you have been with a man, even if only two or three times, the old women can tell.

The Gitanos put as much emphasis on the fact of virginity itself – which to them implies decency and virtue – as on the preservation of its proof. As well as using the word *honra* to define the physically tangible proof that a woman has never had any sexual relations with a man, they also apply it to the decent behaviour that its existence in the body of a young woman demonstrates; hence the adjective *honrada*, which can be translated as decent or virtuous in a sexually-oriented way. The term situates key attitudes, dispositions and intentions inside the female body. A woman's body testifies to her behaviour and becomes the location of her worth: 'the woman carries her *honra* [proof of her decency] inside her body'. Young women are thus expected to protect their genital virginity, and to take much care not to spoil their bodies through any practices, besides sexual contact with men, which might mark their genitals: they should not wear trousers, ride bicycles, use tampons or allow medical examinations of their vaginas because all these things 'take a lot from you', and Gitanos insist that once a girl's genitals have become dark, it is not possible to know how it happened, so that her reputation suffers even if she denies having sex with a man. The girl who is 'open' cannot undergo a wedding. Although she theoretically can if she has only been 'rubbed', the mere idea is contemplated with disgust.

The wedding ceremony, the form of marriage that the Gitanos rank highest, is structured around the demonstration and celebration of the virginity of the bride: the groom receives only marginal attention. Its central part is the *ajuntamiento* (from the verb *juntar* – to join): the examination of the girl and her defloration by the *ajuntaora*, a professional woman who charges for her services and who is also called to check whether a girl is untouched if her family have doubts

about her behaviour. Only married women are allowed to enter the room where the defloration takes place. Once there, the girl is told to lie down on her back and a cushion is put under her buttocks, so that she can be easily examined. The *ajuntaora* makes her spread her legs apart and opens the external labia with her fingers so as to examine the colour and tightness of the internal genitals. She confirms that the girl is untouched and states so: 'She is as when her mother brought her into the world'. Other old or experienced women take a look to verify her statement. The *ajuntaora* then deflowers the girl with a white handkerchief which she herself has bought and adorned with ribbons or lace: she wraps it around her forefinger, pushes it into the vagina and 'bursts' the 'grape', taking the *honra* out in the handkerchief. She repeats the procedure – usually two more times – so as to obtain yellow stains which are called 'roses' or 'flowers': she ties knots in the handkerchief and, when they dry and are undone, they do in fact resemble flowers. The *honra* of the woman is said to stay for ever on the handkerchief, even if it is washed or bleached. Although women often describe their weddings as ordeals, they also proudly emphasize the number of *honra* stains they produced.

The Gitanos make it clear that if the bride happens to have her period at the time of the wedding the *ajuntamiento* cannot be carried out: the blood would make it impossible to see whether *honra* stains had been produced or not. Then the *ajuntaora* limits herself to ascertaining the virginity of the bride from the aspect of her external genitals. Similarly, when the bride starts bleeding as a result of the deflowering procedure itself, the *ajuntaora* stops and the handkerchief is left with only one or two stains on it. This does not affect the bride's evaluation, but is nonetheless considered 'a pity'.

After the *ajuntamiento* the Gitanos celebrate the bride's proper behaviour. The women cry with joy, sing, clap their hands and throw pink and white candied almonds over the girl's belly and legs. The Gitanas are adamant that the almonds stand for joy. Then comes what is considered the most moving moment of the wedding, when first the girl's father and later other male relatives and friends take her in their arms – holding her around her thighs, so that the man's face touches her belly – and 'dance her' while men and women throw almonds at them and sing traditional songs that praise the bride's behaviour and emphasize how greatly her family is honoured by it (see Pasqualino 1995). Meanwhile pairs of men 'dance' the groom and the rest of the people throw almonds at them. A group of men may take the groom and toss him repeatedly in the air. This part of the ritual is followed by the feast itself, when people dance, sing, eat and drink, some of them for two or three days.

Desire and the elopement

In spite of the stress they put on female virginity, Gitanos believe that courting couples will experience sexual desire for each other. They tolerate this sexual contact so long as it is 'from the waist upwards' – meaning that the girl's genitals must remain in good enough condition to undergo the strict examination that a wedding involves. Couples who exceed this limit are felt to be wanting in self-control. Because the girl's body is thought to reveal whether she has had

any genital sexual contact, Gitano custom demands that couples who 'play below the waist' elope.

Like weddings, elopements follow a typical rite of passage sequence. The couple 'escape' and take refuge in the house of one of the boy's relatives: there they announce that they have married – that is, that they have had intercourse. They remain for a few days at the relative's house until the boy's parents decide to bring them back home: among the Gitanos of Jarana, post-marital residence is virilocal. The couple's perceived lack of restraint, and the elopement to which it is thought to lead, are viewed very negatively. Although eloping is always considered a good alternative to the Payo life-style – approximately every second couple marries by elopement[20] – it ranks much lower than a wedding in the Gitanos' evaluations.

Marga and Pedro eloped in April 1993, after being betrothed for five months. I heard several accounts of their motives. (1) Clara, Marga's sister, told me that Marga had threatened to leave Pedro. He was very much in love, wanted to have sex and put pressure on Marga to elope. (2) Sara, another sister, explained that the couple had had some sexual contact. Marga was still 'whole' but they ignored the extent of the damage. Sara advised Marga to elope. (3) On the day after the elopement, I was with Marga when she explained to two Gitanas that Pedro's family had threatened to break off the engagement, so that the couple became frightened and eloped.

Regardless of the motivations actors and their families may claim, other Gitanos always suspect that the true cause of an elopement is that the couple have failed to exert enough control over their desire. Eloping, however, is differently judged, and bears different implications, in respect to the boy and the girl: 'to us a man and a woman are not the same'. Gitanos often state that a boy who tries to get as much as he can from his girlfriend is simply behaving according to his disposition. Boys do not need to keep their affairs secret as girls do, and their families very often know which girl or girls a boy is courting.

Simultaneously, however, the ideal for a man is to marry a woman for whom he is her first boyfriend. Men lose face if they are willing to marry women who may already have been to bed with someone else. Of the wedding ceremony it is said that the bride is 'deflowered' *for* the groom. The saying, 'the last one gets all the dribble of the previous ones', ridicules men who marry women who have been betrothed before.

In the case of women, it reflects negatively to be engaged more than once. In discussions of particular elopements, it is usually the girls who are most harshly condemned. Their families are said to be offended by their behaviour and their parents usually let a few weeks go by before forgiving them and agreeing to see them. And yet, it often happens that girls are engaged for a period – even a couple of years – then for some reason break up, become engaged again to someone else and marry. Gitanos, however, picture this as a sign of the modern deterioration of morality of which they often talk. They contrast this moral decline with a stereotypical picture of 'how things used to be'. Thus, when women's behaviour is evaluated, their readiness – even eagerness – to engage in sexual relations is condemned and interpreted as a failure to conform to proper Gitano standards: 'They [the girls] are pigs, they like it a lot. Of course! He starts touching here [the breasts] and here [the genitals] and your clam starts itching, then you have to pack and go'.

Lastly, there is a series of images that portray women as in a stronger position than men: a girl can lie to her boyfriend, making him believe that he is the first man with whom she had sexual relations and so forcing him to elope with her when he is in fact 'covering the hole made by someone else'. Thus, the fact that young men lack the knowledge to distinguish a virgin from a non-virgin woman – knowledge that is the privilege of older women – is thought to be the only factor enabling young women to escape the 'trap of virginity' while remaining within the Gitano community.

Conclusion: the honra *and anthropological interpretations*

> It is not enough to argue that there is no prediscursive 'sex' that acts as the stable point of reference on which, or in relation to which, the cultural construction of gender proceeds. To claim that sex is already gendered, already constructed, is not yet to explain in which way the 'materiality' of sex is forcibly produced ... *Which bodies come to matter – and why?* (Butler 1993: xi-xii; my emphasis).

During my fieldwork in Jarana I approached three Spanish doctors to find out which anatomical feature provided the anchor for the Gitanos' ideas about female bodies and female virginity. I was told that there was none, that the *honra* did not exist, and that it was all in the Gitanos' imaginations – or in mine. I began to feel even more uncomfortable with my material than I already was: although I had been given innumerable accounts of 'the wedding', had seen several handkerchiefs, and had been taught to distinguish the genitals of a virgin woman from those of a non-virgin, I had never witnessed a defloration because the couples who married during my stay in the neighbourhood had eloped. When the doctors, one after another, informed me that there was no biological explanation for the *honra* my confidence begun to disintegrate. I started to speculate whether the Gitano women who had told me about 'the wedding' and with whom I had discussed both their bodies and my own had lied. After all, I knew well that Gitano sociability is made up of shifting layers of knowledge and exclusion from knowledge: because of my age, gender and ethnic identity I have always been an outsider to the community, even to my closest Gitano friends.

It was at this point that the sex/gender debate became particularly urgent and puzzling for me. On returning from the field I searched the literature for other examples of societies which conjured bodily features 'out of nothing'. Some texts described how the body was purposefully transformed to become a metaphor for issues that concerned particular societies.[21] Many others described 'strange' beliefs to do with generation and reproduction. Yet others provided theoretical discussions which glossed over the tangible character of matter and treated the body only in its relation to language or 'discourse'.

I did not find what I was looking for, and I felt caught between the down-to-earth approaches that tended towards essentialism, and the constructivists – who wrote mainly outside anthropology. In fact, I was trapped within the very parameters of the debate: within the opposition between construction (or 'culture') and essence (or 'nature') (Fuss 1989; Moore 1993*b*). Although my material seemed to push me in the constructivist direction, the 'biological' quality of the *honra* kept disturbing me. I found it difficult to think of something that seemed so tangible as the result of 'discourse'. And yet the fact that the Gitanos

produced physical evidence for something that to Payo eyes did not exist, and made of it the centre of their social identity, forced me to question the extent to which people can create the 'real matter' that is the body.[22]

Thus, and perhaps because my material did not allow me to take either a radical constructionist or a radical essentialist approach, I came to focus on the concept of 'experience'. That meant asking what characteristics of the body people imagine, how the body relates to other practices and understandings, where its meanings come from and how it intertwines with other aspects of social life. This stance, which feeds on Mauss's notion of 'body techniques' – 'the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies' (1979: 97) – does not imply that one should ignore how the actual physicality of their bodies shapes people's possibilities and experiences. Instead, it makes it necessary to consider how bodies that are always social or cultural position people in different ways within different contexts – an outlook that does enable cross-cultural comparison.

In this sense, the material above makes it clear that the Gitanos do not have a conceptual dichotomy that would correspond to the anthropological distinction between 'gender' and 'sex'. This fact is central to the way in which they experience their bodies, their personhood and their identity as a group. As Moore (1994: 13) describes in relation to Nepal, 'social differences between men and women ... [are] located in the body as natural differences' – and I take 'natural' to mean unquestionable and hence perceived as given. My view of the Gitano situation is reminiscent of Laqueur's interpretation of European pre-Enlightenment attitudes towards the body

> [W]hat we call sex and gender were ... explicitly bound up in a circle of meanings from which to escape to a supposed biological sub-strate – the strategy of the Enlightenment – was impossible ... *it was precisely when talk seemed to be most directly about the biology of the two sexes that it was most embedded in the politics of gender, in culture* ... Sex before the seventeenth century, in other words, was still a sociological and not an ontological category (1990: 8; my emphasis).

Gitano ideas about the genitals are loaded with understandings about what people belonging to the categories 'woman' and 'man' are thought to be like, and the behaviour that is expected from them. This is made explicit in speech, and is also visible more implicitly in practices such as dress and ways of showing affection to children. The *honra* is perhaps the most powerful example: it shows how behaviour, status and worth are collapsed into a tangible bodily element which works metonymically – rather than metaphorically – as an index of gendered personal dispositions. As in the pre-Enlightenment world that Laqueur discusses, to be a man or a woman among the Gitanos is 'to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role' and not just 'to *be* organically one or other of two incommensurable sexes' (1990: 8). Gitano ideas about the bodies of men and women – roughly corresponding to what anthropologists have called 'sex' – intertwine with a world-view that tends to conflate bodies, persons, their motivations and their actions, and with a historical and political situation that locates the Gitanos within the wider setting of Payo 'society'.

Stating that the body is only accessed within a cultural framework requires a detailed explanation of the processes through which such experience is produced. This question is as relevant for analysing modern Western phenomena

such as 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' as it is for analysing the Gitano material. Above, I have outlined how we can gain some insights into the Gitanos' experiences of their bodies through their views of sexual desire and control, their relationship to the Payos, the ways they dress and move and the treatment they give to the bodies of their children – all elements of a general emphasis on gendered moral performance that centres on sexual activity. However, at the centre of these practices and understandings lies a particular view of the female body.

I considered the *honra* an unsolvable mystery until I met an anatomist who reviewed my material and explained that he believed 'with ninety per cent. certainty' that what the Gitanos call the *honra* corresponds to what doctors trained in the Western tradition call the Bartholin's Glands (Peter Abrahams, personal communication 1996). These exist inside the vaginas of all women, in the inner labia. They are a main agent contributing to the lubrication of the vagina during intercourse. When pressed they evacuate their content at the base of the hymen. A standard Spanish manual of anatomy describes them as follows:[23]

> These vulvo-vaginal glands are relatively small in girls, grow rapidly in size during puberty, present their greatest development during adulthood, and wither gradually with the decrease in sexual activity. These formations have therefore a purely genital signification. Their volume varies from being that of a pea to that of a small almond, and it is often different in each side of the vagina. Most often they are grey yellowish in colour ... Their consistency obviously changes with the amount of secretion they have produced: they are hard and resistant when their cavities are expanded by the liquid that they discharge; on the other hand, once they have evacuated their content they become soft and flaccid (Testut 1931: 1215; my translation).

The parallels between this description and the descriptions of my Gitano friends are obvious: both refer to tangible, observable entities, yet both clearly consist of what anthropologists call 'cultural constructions'. However, the Bartholin's Glands occupy no place in the Western popular – as opposed to scientific – ideas of biological femaleness. As a consequence, they play no role in anthropologists' models which, as we know, draw heavily on Western folk constructions.

Neither the *honra* nor the Bartholin's Glands correspond to what have been described by anthropologists as the 'obvious facts of biological sex difference' (Moore 1994: 12), those attributes of human bodies that 'cannot be ignored and *require* interpretation' (Errington 1990: 17). The assumption that such attributes exist and that they are everywhere and always the same would make an understanding of the Gitanos impossible.

The key question that we have to ask ourselves is 'Which bodies come to matter – and why?' (Butler 1993: xii). In English popular discourse, as in Spain among the Payos, a woman is a woman because she has a vagina, breasts, and certain quantities of the right hormones, not because she has Bartholin's Glands. Among the Gitanos, a woman is a woman because she has – or has had – the *honra* inside her body. Just like the anthropological vagina or penis – and unlike the Bartholin's Glands – the *honra* is a 'constitutive construction'. This means that within their own particular cultural contexts, these elements have acquired the 'character of being "that without which" we could not think at all'

(Butler 1993: xi). The *honra* is not simply an anatomical feature: it is the centre of a whole series of practices and understandings that constitute Gitano identity and Gitano social life. Rather than conceptualizing 'nature' as uniform and 'culture' as separated from or opposed to it, we have to elucidate the processes through which particular physical features come to be culturally meaningful, processes that vary in each case. Just as the experience of being a woman or a man is different in different societies, so the body also differs.

NOTES

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1 Although the validity of the dichotomy within anthropology was effectively questioned as early as 1980 (MacCormack & Strathern 1980).

2 For instance: 'By "Sex" I mean a particular construct of human bodies, [the] one prevalent in Euro-America ... By "sex" I mean to point to human bodies, but I do not want to give it too much content or I will begin unintentionally to re-invent Sex ... by "gender" or "gender system" I mean what different cultures make of sex ... thus Sex is the gender system of the West' (Errington 1990: 27).

3 For approaches from biological anthropology see Haraway 1991; Kano 1992; Small 1993.

4 All names, with the exception of Madrid, have been changed.

5 This distrust is linked to the Gitanos' institutionalization of conflict through feuding.

6 The expression 'celebrating impermanence' was coined by Kaprow (1991) to refer to the attitude to material culture of the Gitanos of Saragossa.

7 The estimates for Madrid range between 16,000 and 50,000 (Montoya 1987: 40).

8 See Calvo Buezas 1990; Cebrián Abellán 1992; Fresno García 1993; Gay y Blasco 1995; GIEMS 1976; Gómez Alfaro 1992; Liégeois 1987; Montoya 1987; Pasqualino 1995; San Román 1976; 1986*a*; 1986*b*; 1990; 1994.

9 See Kaprow 1982; 1991; Liégeois 1987; Okely 1983; Salo 1982; San Román 1986*b*; Stewart 1988; Sutherland 1975.

10 Gitanos from Castile – including the ones who live in Jarana – and Extremadura are distinguished from Andalusians, Catalans and non-Catalans who have migrated to that region.

11 Traditionally, the Gitanos have exhibited a rather wide variety of religious beliefs and practices (Jordán Pemán 1990; Pasqualino 1995; San Román 1976). From the mid-sixties onwards many have taken part in a massive movement of conversion to Pentecostalism common to many Gypsy communities throughout Europe (Williams 1991). Discussion of the effects of the expansion of Evangelism upon gender relations is beyond the scope of this article. I limit myself to practices and understandings shared by Evangelical and non-Evangelical Gitanos.

12 The earliest written references to the Gitanos come from the fifteenth century (Sánchez Ortega 1986). Most scholars consider the Gitanos to be Gypsies. However, the question of 'who' the Gitanos – and the Gypsies more widely – are has been the focus of much academic debate (Ardevol 1986; Fraser 1992; Gómez Alfaro 1992; Leblon 1985; Mayall 1988; Okely 1983; San Román 1976; 1986*b*; 1994; Stewart 1988).

13 In spite of the comparative potential of this material, my aim is to address the sex-gender debate rather than discussions surrounding the ethnic or cultural unity of the Gitanos or of the Gypsies, or the literature on the Mediterranean and on 'honour and shame'.

14 For similar understandings among Gypsies elsewhere see Okely 1977, and 1983 (England); Stewart 1988 (Hungary); Sutherland 1977 (U.S.A.).

15 See Okely (1983) for comparable material among English Gypsies.

16 For alternative non-European understandings of virginity, see Boddy 1989; Delaney 1987; Lindisfarne 1994.

[17] I draw on my experience as a middle-class Spanish woman from Madrid, and on my fieldwork in a Southern Aragonese village in 1990 and 1991.

[18] San Román (personal communication 1995; 1996) has described the same practices for Gitanos of Madrid, Barcelona and Andalusia. Pasqualino, who has referred in passing to *'le mouchoir ensanglante'* (1995: 179) has also, in another context, remarked the absence of blood on defloration handkerchiefs (personal communication 1997). Variation in practices and understandings among different Gitano groups is likely.

[19] San Román encountered the same attitude among the Gitanos with whom she worked (personal communications 1995; 1996).

[20] Out of forty-nine Gitano women from Jarana, aged between 14 and 80 at the time of fieldwork, twenty-four had married with a wedding and twenty-five by elopement. Gitanos marry with a wedding or by elopement from the age of thirteen onwards. These customary marriages are not binding according to Spanish law.

[21] See Boddy 1989 and Talle 1993 for two examples to do with virginity and female circumcision.

[22] I use 'real matter' to correspond to Fuss's interpretation of Locke's 'real essence', which 'connotes the Aristotelian understanding of essence as that which is most irreducible and unchanging about a thing', by opposition to 'nominal essence' which 'signifies ... a view of essence as merely linguistic convenience, a classificatory fiction we need to categorize and to label' (Fuss 1989: 8).

[23] This kind of description should itself be considered in relation to the cultural and historical framework within which it was produced. Testut (1931) describes the Bartholin's Glands as the female counterpart of the male Cowper's Glands. This indicates an underlying logic in which male and female are analogous: an understanding of the body – as primarily human and secondarily female or male – that belongs to the realm of medical discourse. For the Gitanos, on the other hand, the *honra* has no male equivalent: it defines women and it is defined by being found only in women.

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Un corps 'différent'? Désir et virginité chez les Gitanos

Résumé

Cet article adresse les conceptualisations de 'sexe' (en rapport avec les categories biologie/nature) et de 'relations entre les sexes' (en rapport avec la culture). Les anthropologues ont des difficultés à conceptualiser les relations entre les sexes sinon à travers une vision des différences sexuelles binaire et orientée sur la reproduction. En utilisant des données recueillies chez les Gitanos (Gitans espagnols), cet article démontre qu'il est possible d'appréhender le corps sans pour autant abandonner l'idée que la masculinité et la féminité sont des constructions culturelles. Bien que ces Gitanos fondent l'identité personelle sur la différence hétérosexuelle, l'élément physique par lequel ils définissent la féminité – la *honra* (glandes de Bartholin) – n'est pas reconnu dans l'imagination occidentale populaire ou anthropologique. Cet article décrit les pratiques et les conceptions communes qui contribuent à la création de la féminité Gitano. De même que l'expérience d'être femme ou homme varie d'une culture à l'autre, le corps aussi est différent.

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