# NO GIPSY VENUS- ZOLI, ANOTHER HEROINE OF COLUM MCCANN

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*Abstract: Colum McCann has always been fascinated with the "other", in his previous novels, including "Dancer" and "This Side of Brightness", he combined fiction and history with empathetic deftness to study such varied lives as Rudolph Nureyev and the subway diggers of Manhattan. In "Zoli"he continues his epic exploration of identity to follow the rise and decline of a Romani singer and poet, loosely based on a real-life Gipsy woman, Papusza. Papusza was sentenced to a "Life of Pollution" by Romani society when the Polish government began publishing her poems. McCann switches the action to Czechoslovakia, but the tale is essentially the same.McCann plays with Zoli's torn ego by shifting perspectives. Like "Dancer", " Zoli" begins with its lead as a child entering a new world of Soviet rule. As a girl, Zoli describes her love for the Romani life and idolatry of her Marxist grandfather, her only remaining family member after a Hlinka massacre. He teaches her to read and write, contrary to tradition, and this curious, intelligent girl begins to write her own odes to the Romani life. These early sections are full of stirring, poetic portraits of Romani society and are almost idyllic, even in the face of barbarism. McCann's approach is deliberately didactic. The worst burden, says Zoli, is when "they force us to be what they expect us to be". (see Edward Said, Claude Levi-Strauss, J. Duncan, Franz Fanon, D. Sibley)*

*Keywords: Papusza, Gipsy poet, Zoli, Otherness, exotic*

A winner of Ireland's Rooney Prize for Literature, and a finalist for the IMPAC Award, McCann, had the opportunity to spend nine months at the library researching and writing *Zoli*. [1]His research culminated in a trip to Slovakia where Colum spent two months living in the Romani camps. Having always been fascinated with the "other", it being the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in -group ("Us," the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them," Other ) by stigmatizing a difference – real or imagined – presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination. To state it naïvely, difference belongs to the realm of fact and otherness belongs to the realm of discourse. Thus, biological sex is difference, whereas gender is otherness. The creation of otherness (also called othering) consists of applying a principle that allows individuals to be classified into two hierarchical groups: them and us. The out-group is only coherent as a group as a result of its opposition to the in-group and its lack of identity. This lack is based upon stereotypes that are largely stigmatizing and obviously simplistic. The in - group constructs one or more others, setting itself apart and giving itself an identity.[2]

Otherness and identity are two inseparable sides of the same coin. The Other only exists relative to the Self , and vice versa. The asymmetry in power relationships is central to the construction of otherness. Only the dominant group is in a position to impose the value of its particularity

[1] Zoli, by Colum McCann. Random House, January, 2007
[2] Jervis, J.(1999).Transgressing the Modern. Explorations in the Western Experience of Otherness . London : Blackwell.



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(its identity) and to devalue the particularity of others (their otherness) while imposing corresponding discriminatory measures. Therefore, if the Other of Man is Woman, and if the Other of the White Man is the Black Man, the opposite is not true[3] (Beauvoir, 1952).

Dominated out -groups are Others precisely because they are subject to the categories and practices of the dominant in - group and because they are unable to prescribe their own norm[4]s.

Out-groups cease to be Others when they manage to escape the oppression forced upon them by in-groups, in other words, when they succeed in conferring upon themselves a positive,autonomous identity ("black is beautiful"), and in calling for discursive legitimacy and a policy to establish norms, eventually constructing and devaluing their own out-groups.[5]

Column McCann's previous novels, including *Dancer* and *This Side of Brightness*, combined fiction and history with empathetic deftness to study such varied lives as Rudolph Nureyev and the subway diggers of Manhattan. *Zoli* continues his epic exploration of identity to follow the rise and decline of a Romani singer and poet, loosely based on a real-life Gipsy woman, Papusza. [6]Papusza was sentenced to a "Life of Pollution" by Romani society when the Polish government began publishing her poems. McCann switches the action to Czechoslovakia, but the tale is essentially the same.McCann plays with Zoli's torn ego by shifting perspectives. Like *Dancer*, *Zoli* begins with its lead as a child entering a new world of Soviet rule. As a girl, Zoli describes her love for the Romani life and idolatry of her Marxist grandfather, her only remaining family member after a Hlinka massacre. He teaches her to read and write, contrary to tradition, and this curious, intelligent girl begins to write her own odes to the Romani life. These early sections are full of stirring, poetic portraits of Romani society and are almost idyllic, even in the face of barbarism

After the war, the Communists latch on to the Romani as the face of proletariat revolution. Zoli begins a relationship with an Englishman, Stephen Swann, who publishes her work. To the idealist Swann, who narrates this period, Zoli is the embodiment of the perfect primitive. But when she rebels against his bourgeois use of her talents, he ceases to understand her and she drifts away from us.The Soviets turn Zoli into a poster girl for the forced resettlement of the Gipsies and her people finally reject her. By the time we return to Zoli's narration, her identity is lost and she is a distant figure, though her fear is tangible as she undertakes a torrid flight from Bratislava. By the end of the book she is an aged anachronism, a supposed innovator who, as she tells her daughter, is still traditional and "of those times".

McCann's approach is deliberately didactic. The worst burden, says Zoli, is when "they force us to be what they expect us to be". (see Edward Said, Claude Levi-Strauss, J. Duncan, Franz Fanon, D. Sibley, etc.) Given McCann's expressive writing and incisive examination of identity through perspective, he doesn't need to be this explicit. There are also a few frustrations that keep us from getting close to Zoli. Pivotal events in her earlier life, such as the death of her grandfather or her arranged marriage are skipped over, while her solo escape from Czechoslovakia takes up almost half the book.

Given the ambition of the novel, however, these are small complaints. McCann intelligently poses complicated questions about immigration and identity that are deeply relevant today. His prose is sharp and scintillatingly sensual, and the final moment in which Zoli finally rediscovers herself through music is incontrovertibly moving. If this beautiful,

[3] Beauvoir, S. de (1952). The Second Sex. New York: Alfred Knopf.
[4] Lévy-Strauss, Cl. (1961).Race and History. Paris : Unesco.Mason, P. (1998).
[5] Fanon, F. (1963).Black Skin, White Masks. Harmondsworth : Penguin
[6] Thibodeau, Gigi. 'Growing a New Skin: The Life and Poetry of Papusza,' 2003, <http://kmareka.com/free-literature-online/growinganewskin.htm>.



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thoughtful novel falls just short, it's only because it shoots for the stars and hits the horizon. No doubt Papusza would have approved.

A Gypsy girl in Czechoslovakia is banished by her people after becoming a famous poet. Marienka Novotna, better known as Zoli, is a Gypsy girl born in the late 1920's in Czechoslovakia. She is 6 years old when her family is executed by Fascist soldiers. She escapes with her grandfather Stanislaus in their cart. Against Gypsy tradition, Stanislaus teaches Zoli to read and write. They meet up with another Gypsy encampment. Some of the Gypsies there come from Poland and play giant harps. Zoli has a good ear for words and music. With her best friend, Conka, they sing along when the women play. With the coming of World War II, restrictions are placed on the actions and movements of the Gypsies. The group splits up. At fourteen Zoli is married off to Petr, an old man who plays the violin. She writes songs in Slovak. When their encampment is shot at by German planes, Stanislaus is killed.

After the war, Gypsy music becomes popular. Zoli writes down her songs and so becomes a poet. Her exotism and erotic attractivity as exotism in general, constitutes the most directly geographical form of otherness, in that it opposes the abnormality of elsewhere with the normality of here. Exotism is not, of course, an attribute of the exotic place, object or person. It is the result of a discursive process that consists of superimposing symbolic and material distance, mixing the foreign and the foreigner, and it only makes sense from one, exterior, point of view. As a construction of otherness, exotism is characterized by the asymmetry of its power relation ships: it is Westerners who, during the phases of exploration then colonization, defined elsewhere and delimited exotism. The word exotic has become a synonym of tropical or even colonial. It is out of the question to describe Europe as exotic until minds and words are decolonized. Exoticism is characterized by giving value to the other, contrary to ethnocentric bias. From Homer's fascination with faraway, more or less imaginary peoples to J.-J. Rousseau's nostalgia for the noble savage, from the Romantic Orientalism of 19th -century writers and painters to the primitivism of a Gauguin painting, from curiosity for ethnic tourism to the recognition of specific rights for first peoples, the West celebrates the Other and even proclaims its superiority through multiple forms (that are not always unambiguous .) The taste for exotica was established in the 18th century when exotic turquerie, chinoiserie, japonaiserie

etc. came into fashion. It became commonplace in the 19th century with colonization and spread to the tropical world. Up to that point, it was essentially characterized by the import of exotic products, by their pastiches, and by travel books and then colonial literature. Only certain privileged persons, well-to-do aristocrats or explorers, traveled to experience the pleasures of exotic lands. The development of mass tourism in the 1960s leveled the playing field and made their exotism a major resource for many countries.

According to V. Segalen, exoticism is the pleasure of a sensation that, worn down by habit, is

excited by novelty. But Segalen notes that from the end of the 19th century onward, everything has been seen and radical exotism, the exotism experienced by the first explorers, is dead[7]. In fact, T. Todorov demonstrates that it is paradoxical to value or desire something that is unknown. Exoticism consists more of showing enthusiasm for what has already been seen, said, or painted: what has been marked elsewhere as picturesque and been reproduced as such. The otherness of the exotic is not the brute and brutal otherness of the first encounter; it is the bland otherness, staged and transformed into merchandise, of the colonial world offered up as a spectacle, as in orientalist paintings, human zoos... and exotic dance. Exoticism is less the pleasure of confronting otherness than the pleasure of having the satisfaction of

[7] Segalen,V. (2001).Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetics of Diversity . Durham : Duke University Press



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experiencing the sight of a reassuring version of this confrontation, true to our fantasies, that comforts us in our identity and superiority.[8]

Stephen Swann is born in England from an Irish mother and a Slovakian father. In 1948 he goes to Czechoslovakia as a translator for the poet Martin Stránsky, who prints a literary journal. In 1950 he meets Zoli at Stránsky's printing shop and falls in love with her. He is sent to record her songs on a tape recorder, so that they can be transcribed and printed. He visits the Gypsy encampment regularly.

After Zoli's husband Petr dies, she starts a relationship with Swann, but they have to keep it secret, since it is forbidden by Gypsy tradition. When a chapbook of her songs is published, she becomes famous and gives readings. As Socialism grows, new laws are passed by the Soviet Union. Stránsky is executed. Zoli and Swann travel from town to town to plead against resettlement of the Gypsies, to no avail. Caravan wheels are burnt and tower blocks built to house the Gypsies. Zoli pleads with Swann not to print her full collection of poems, as the Gypsies will see it as betrayal of their culture, but he goes ahead. The Gypsies banish Zoli. She disappears, but later returns to Bratislava. In Swann's apartment she burns all the tapes and original transcriptions of her poems. She takes his gold watch and sells it, then wanders off again. Eventually she crosses the border into Hungary and then into Austria through a lake.

She is found half-dead and taken to a hospital and from there to a refugee camp. Later she leaves the camp and heads west, walking and hitch-hiking. A young priest takes her to the Alpine village of Maria Luggua, where he pays Enrico, a taciturn smuggler, to take her across the border into Italy. They fall in love and Zoli stays in Italy. They have a daughter called Francesca. In 2003, some years after Enrico's death, Zoli visits Francesca in Paris, where she is organizing an international conference about the Gypsies. Francesca pleads with Zoli to perform at the conference, but she refuses. Swann appears, accompanied by a journalist, but Zoli rushes off, still angry at his betrayal of her trust. Back in Francesca's apartment, one of the bands who played at the conference starts playing. After forty two years of silence, Zoli sings for them.

In the novel, the communist government uses Zoli's writing to try to encourage the Romani people to leave their caravans and settle in housing estates. Soldiers chop the wheels off the caravans and burn them. Zoli is scapegoated by her people, expelled from the community and shunned for life. With a knife and the clothes on her back, Zoli walks across Slovakia under harsh conditions to escape to Austria and freedom. She makes her way to Italy and has a family, but loses her voice as a poet.

An exotic singer and poet steeped in her ancient Gypsy traditions, most of the novel is told in her words, beginning with her indelible memories of her family being killed by fascist Hlinka guards when she was 6, their carts driven out onto cracking lake ice.Now a famous singer among her own people, Zoli begins to write poetry, but keeps her poems hidden, for fear of persecution. When Czechoslovakia is liberated by the Russians at war's end, Zoli is in her early 20s, and is becoming a symbol of the country's movement toward socialism.At this point McCann introduces the character of Stephen Swann, a half-Slovak Marxist and publisher who considers Zoli the perfect proletarian poet. Swann and Zoli meet and eventually fall in love, but their relationship seems doomed, enmeshed as it is with the political upheaval swirling around them. After Swann publishes her poems against her will, Zoli is deemed a traitor by her people and banished, sentenced to Pollution for Life.

McCann's story is loosely based on a real Gypsy poet, Papsuza, who was exiled by her people when her poems were published. He has enriched that story with insightful and

[8] Todorov, T. (1994), On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought.Harvard:Harvard University Press



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evocative prose, and in *Zoli* has created a vibrant character who is able to maintain her identity and proud heritage, even when abandoned by those she loves.

One could not find a story more exotic than a Gypsy tale. This tale of a Gipsy girl, based on the life of Papusza, a Polish Gypsy singer and poet who died in 1987, spans seven decades and crosses national boundaries as freely as the Gypsy caravans once did. Above all a strong remembrance of Zoli Novotna, a poet born to a Romani family in Czechoslovakia, the novel also at times represents two other points of view: a Slovak journalist researching the mysterious Gypsy poet, and Stephan Swann, an Englishman who brought her work to the attention of a wider audience, thus earning for Zoli banishment by her people. It is the poet's story that is most compelling—how she survived wartime persecution by the Nazi collaborators, how she moved from an oral to a written tradition, how she fled Czechoslovakia into Austria and later Italy after the Communists halted the caravans—and the author's point of view and tense jumps are puzzling. Swann is complex, but naïve, self-indulgent and unsympathetic. The journalist is one-dimensional. Both provide the outsider's view of Romani society, seeing its idiosyncrasies as the uninformed reader might, but add little to Zoli's rich narrative. In fact, the most rewarding aspect of the book is its language. One recurring image in particular, the icy waters that signify both the death of Zoli's family and her own rebirth in the West, is evocative of the whole of her experience. The final section of the book, in which Zoli visits her daughter in Paris, the hypothetical destination of her escape journey years earlier, is satisfying in that it allows Zoli a certain amount of closure, and crystallizes the old Gypsy legends into a harsher, 21st Century reality.

A novel about a Gypsy woman exiled for betraying her people: the novel shows us the Czechoslovakia in the early 1930s when Zoli, but more essentially, a young Roma girl,who is six years old., and the recalled child voice, which relates part of the novel, will be crisp and accurate, yet dispassionate while narrating the most terrible of events. In the 1930s, Zoli is a young girl, part of a kumpanija, a band of families that moves about the countryside of what was then Czechoslovakia, never staying too long in one place. Raised by her beloved but strict grandfather after most of her family is murdered by fascists, she is taught to read and write, though these acts are considered by the Roma to be dangerous, especially for a woman. Books, even radio, carry the words of outsiders. But Zoli is gifted; she has a voice that sings and a mind that invents and remembers. She and her grandfather escape death and flee to join a group of caravans, a community of cousins, of harpists, a society with music and rules and laws of its ownMcCann moves the story through time and place - present-day Slovakia, 1930s Czechoslovakia, England, Northern Italy, Paris, Hungary, Austria - reflecting the movement of the Roma people themselves. It begins in 2003 with a Slovakian journalist seeking information about Zoli, then moves to Zoli's first-person recollections of the 1930s (addressed, in part, to her daughter), and then on to Swann, an English expatriate who is part Irish, part Slovakian and one of the men Zoli loves. In this way, her tale encompasses the story of Eastern Europe, shifting politics and borders, banishment and exile, the hatred and the murders and then the attempts, under socialism, to rescue the Roma from their nomadic ways. When Zoli is six, the rest of their group is herded onto a frozen lake by fascists who set fires around the ice and wait, with guns, for it to melt. Zoli survives alone with her grandfather. Unusual for a Romani, he admires Lenin and Marx and knows how to read. Even more unusual, he sees that Zoli is taught. Along with Zoli's natural talent for composing songs and poems, her literacy determines her fate, after the terror of war reduces their lives to the most marginal of existences in caves clawed out of mud, subsisting on frozen potatoes stolen from the fields. The war ends when Zoli is 16 and with the spread of socialism, the Roma are suddenly regarded as 'comrades' again. Zoli meets Stephen Swann, a man she will have a passionate affair with, but who will also betray her. He persuades Zoli to publish some of her work. But when the government try to use Zoli to help them in their plan to 'settle' Gypsies,



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her community turns against her. They condemn her to 'Pollution for Life', which means she is exiled forever. She begins a journey that will eventually lead her to Italy and a new life. Zoli is based very loosely on the true story of the Gypsy poet, Papusza, who was sentenced to a Life of Pollution by her fellow Roma when a Polish intellectual published her poems. But McCann has turned this into so much more – it's a brilliantly written work that brings the culture and the time to life, an incredibly rich story about betrayal and redemption, and storytelling in all its guises.

After the war, Zoli emerges as a singer. She is discovered by poet and socialist activist Martin Stransky and his sidekick, Stephan Swann. In the optimistic early days of the construction of People's Socialism, they bring her into the public eye as the "perfect proletarian poet," and the "new Gypsy." Thus, unwittingly, Zoli is made into a representative of her people--a people who chose to disappear rather than participate in any one else's ideas of governance--just at the time when idealism and optimism are corrupted. Swann betrays Zoli, just as socialism betrays the Romani, who are brutally trapped by a regime whose officials burn the wheels of their wagons to end their roaming, then forcibly install them in drab city high rises. Though she fights to prevent this, Zoli is blamed and banished from the tight-knit community which is all she's ever known.

No matter who is telling the story, each path leads back to Zoli. As a gifted poet, she is discovered by a printer and publisher who also befriends the expatriate Swann. Zoli receives permission from the elders to have her poems published in the outside world. But the very work that is celebrated and makes her famous also leads to her unraveling. She finds, too late, that she has been used. But new laws enable the rounding up and resettlement of her people. Banished by the Roma and blamed for their fate, she finds that she belongs to neither socialist nor Roma society[9].The narrative arc of the novel is as intriguing as it is effective. Moving among first and third person points of view and between the 1930s and 2003, McCann traces the romantic, familial, and political history of Zoli, a Roma poet and one of the fiercest women you will ever encounter. From her earliest conversations with her grandfather to the later conversations with her daughter, Zoli exhibits a stunning strength of character and will for self-determination.But this is not hagiography and Zoli is flawed as well. Not as flawed as the society around her and the way it treats people who are considered "other," for this is also a tale of the Roma people, or Gypsies, who have been spurned and shunned throughout their existence.

From the first glimpse of the very closed and self-protective Roma society seen through the eyes of a journalist, to life inside a Roma settlement, to the larger politics of Czechoslovakia, McCann develops a picture of a time that is specific and yet still very relevant to our lives. This is not a treatise on what it means to be an outsider, which Zoli is and becomes more so over the course of the novel, but in its depiction of the talented and heartbroken woman at its core, it elicits our empathy as it tests our varying notions of heroism and loyalty. After the formal act of banishment, she returns to the Danube, to the vicinity of the apartment blocks on the outskirts of Bratislava, where the kumpanija has been forcibly moved. They have ripped out the floorboards of their apartments to build campfires; the wheels from their wagons have been removed, yet they still gather and live outdoors. One night, hidden yet watchful, Zoli "longs to . . . stride into the camp, but she is as separate from them now as she can ever be. She watches the flickering campfires, the cigarettes traveling at mouth level, a rimless wheel of red light moving. I would, she thinks, set fire to all my words just to travel that air once more."

[9] Duncan,J. (1993). Sites of representation. Place, time and the discourse of the Other. In Duncan, J. &Ley, D. (eds.).Place/Culture/Representation. Pp. 39-56. London:Routledge



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According to Lacan, giving ground often happens by means of the best of intentions, for instance Zoli's wish to collaborate with Stránský in giving form to the history and life of her people[10]. Zoli's uncompromising travelling of roads, which always returns to where she started, a journey that is a vicious circle from a transcendent point of view. Zoli discovers and walks on the territory of the Gipsy camps from which her people have fled because of threats and because their homes were burnt down. Sheltering in a hut in the forest, she wonders: 'What might it be like to stay like this for ever . . . moving back and forth between forest and hut, over the empty field, through the colourless rain, eating pine seeds, watching the flame crackle? To lie on the floor and slip down into the boards, to wake again in silence, saying nothing, recalling nothing, with not a soul in sight, to have her name pass silently into the walls of the hut?' (p. 117) She places herself in the position of the reason that lacks in the way of life that rules and gathers power[11], for 'moving back and forth between forest and hut,' and 'slip[ping] down into . . . boards' is a form of gadzi life, and the life led by peasants in rural Slovakia, after all. Zoli, having escaped across the border from Slovakia to Austria with the help of a prisoner in a forest workcamp, lives in a camp for Displaced Persons and meets another Roma, a woman named Mozol, with whose family she lives. When Mozol, whose one desire is to travel to and resettle in Toronto, but who cannot pay the required part of her passage, is in her despair over her lost hopes, Zoli forgets her old life and makes a decision to embody, in Mozol's cause, the dead remains of the worst gadzi beliefs about Gypsies: 'We fall out of rhythms with our earliest ways . . . I even forgot I was polluted . . . and in some ways I had begun to think of myself as Mozol's sister. The decision had no fear. Sometimes you make up your mind about something without knowing why. I knew the town well. I did not like what I was about to do, daughter, but I had forced myself not to think about it. I cut the nerve that twitched in me and went to the dump at the edge of town' (p. 203). Zoli finds a cupboard door on which she carves 'maple leaves and a griffin,' makes 'two grand rubber earrings' from 'parts of a discarded carburettor,' adds a Spanish scarf, picks up pebbles, and later that day sets herself up as a Gypsy fortune teller in an alleyway in town (p. 203). She is successful, especially with young men, and is able to give Mozol enough money to pay for the required part of her journey, but this act is a complex one of looping back through the estranging dimensions of her history. If Antigone's metamorphosis is 'a surrendering of the grounding substance that supports fantasy and a grounding of the world in the act' ( p. 262). Zoli too stakes a claim to contested territory, or territory with a missing logic, as the gadzi image of the Gypsy is a fantasy without substance, and it is this very missing substance that she now becomes: 'I kept expecting troopers to round the corner, or some dead family spirit to lean in from a doorway to see what had happened to me, how I had betrayed all that I had ever known. I had no name for what I had become, it did not exist in either pain or pleasure' (p. 205). No name, no word, no poetry. No repetition of an earlier crime, but the elaboration of a new one, born of gadzi repetitions, stock images of Gypsy ways. Moreover, the novel has a lot to say about the modern world versus the natural world and about the value and meaning of various art forms. The language is sensuous and the characters so fully and completely developed that each voice is unique and distinct. McCann takes on an enormous canvas and manages, like the great artist he is, to make the particulars so emphatic and moving that the whole picture, once opaque, becomes crystalline at the end.

One falsity—the publishing of poems and the damaging misuse of her image by the Gadzos —is met with another, as outcast status goes to work to redeem Mozol's exile. Mozol's defining characteristic is an inability to stop talking, in a careless, harmless way that

[10] Lacan, Jacques. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,1959-1960[1986], trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. New York: W. W.Norton, 1992.

[11] 6. Fonseca, Isabel. Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and their Journey . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.



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is the reverse of the collaborative word-work in which Zoli once engaged. The ashes of Zoli's burned poems become the ashes and dust of her new detour around the missing heart of her identity, gathered from the dump at the edge of town. Zoli does not tell Mozol of her polluted status, but instead performs this creative act that is a kind of traffic in nothingness, a wager with what might be left of her soul. People ought to be allowed the right to go without things that others wish them to have. When Swann meets Zoli, he notes that [a]s a singer she could have lived differently, with no scrubbing, no cooking, no time spent looking after the children, but she didn't isolate herself, she couldn't, she was in love with that bare life, it was what she knew, it fuelled her. She washed clothes in the river, beat the rugs and carpets clean. Afterwards she put playing cards in the spokes of a bicycle wheel and rode around in the mud, calling out to the children . . . [She] was well known among her people, settled and nomadic alike. she touched some old chord of tenderness in them. They would walk twenty kilometres to hear her sing (p. 73). It is in choosing what to do without, as much as what to have, that Zoli's life has meaning before she becomes 'something exotic to fall in love with' (p. 107), and before her world gives way. Zoli is loved by many, but only when her songs and poems are in favor. Her true loves turn out to be a loyal few. The tone of the novel is one of dignified sadness; there is a sense of mourning throughout, not only for the poet but for the fate of the Roma. Beautifully conceived, wonderfully told, the story is proof of an indomitable spirit. The elusive character of Zoli, the brilliant artist, is unforgettable.

McCann's novel, does, shows the singular human being as that for which no place of ultimate belonging in the world could be prepared, and on whom it is thus incumbent to create the possibility of such a belonging. [12]This is what Zoli attempts to do for Mozol, without any thought of her own redemption. And when she later finds the man who assists her across a final border and becomes her husband and father to the daughter to whom she writes, the two exchange an absence of words that is the most meaningful version of nothing they could express. 'I asked Enrico why he had not asked me anything about being a Gypsy'—this being inseparable, for most gadzos , from the intriguing image about which gadzos desire to know, in order to confirm them in their own taken-for-granted invisibility and dissatisfaction—'and he asked me why I had never asked him anything about not being one' (p. 223). Here, the fantasy of Gadzi belonging is suspended before the more important question of what it is possible for Zoli and Enrico to share with each other. And if what they share is a lostness, an exile—for Enrico, an exile from privilege, for Zoli, an exile from her people—symbolised by their house at the edge of a mountain pass, then this sharing may open onto a future together, as it does.

When Zoli is walking the roads for the first term of her exile, she has a word for a place that keeps her moving, a word for the 'non-All'[13] of Santner's poetic remnant that interrupts the accounted-for world. The word is 'Paris. An absurdity. How many borders is that? How many

watchtowers?' Yet, while walking, [s]he clings to its ridiculousness, its simple repetition. She . .. finds that, as she goes along, it is a sound that helps her think of nothing at all, rhythmically bumping against the air, carrying her forward, a sort of contraband, a repetition so formless, so impossible, so bizarre that it matches her footsteps . . . (p. 155).

Not so impossible, though. Zoli and Enrico's daughter, Francesca, goes away to live in Paris, and Zoli visits her, at the end of the novel, to attend the conference Francesca has organised on 'Romani Memory and Imagination.' Zoli declines the opportunity to speak at the conference. But the novel ends as she and Francesca leave the bedroom where Zoli is sleeping

[12] Fanon, F. (1963).Black Skin, White Masks . Harmondsworth : Penguin

[13] Barany, Zoltan, The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.



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for the living room of Francesca's flat, where her boyfriend has brought a group of Scottish musicians from the event. Zoli asks, 'What happened to the music?' and the story ends as the windows and walls of the room seem to open, and as she lifts her head and begins to sing (pp. 274-5).

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