

## CHAPTER 9

# TOWARDS A COMMUNITY OF SIGNS



This chapter, as the former, concerns the complexities of the Rastro Gitanos' processes of engaging conceptually and constitutively with meaning, what Csordas (1990, 1997) with Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964) would refer to as people's experiences with the 'existential beginnings'; of perception, objectification and signification. As the previous chapter dealt mostly with processes of *objectification* – that is, the construction of conceptual and material objects – and the reality status of these objects, the present chapter is preoccupied with processes of *signification*. More concretely, I look at the *creyentes*' practice of seeing happenings, situations and phenomena in the world as *signs* of Godly interventions, part of what I have formerly called their 'spiritual gaze'. A central aspect of this view is that the world is intrinsically interconnected and that there is no such thing as 'coincidence' – only hidden meanings to be found and God- given *signs* to be interpreted. To illustrate my own entrance into thinking about the interconnectedness of the world from a Rastro Gitano *creyente* perspective, I will begin by presenting some examples from the early stages of my fieldwork. The examples are, in other words, meant to accentuate meaning attribution and worldly interrelation. Also here, I draw on an auto-ethnographic approach (Ellis 2004; Holman Jones 2005) with a focus on my own epiphanies in the field (Bochner and Ellis 1992; Couser 1997) and an aesthetic analysis and description of these 'epiphanies' (Ellis 2004; Pelias 2000; Moro 2006).

## VAN GOGH'S SHOE

In the first few weeks of my fieldwork, my social life consisted of seeing all the movies of the Spanish film director Pedro Almodovar, partaking in protest marches, walking the streets of el Rastro, sitting in cafés and bars and, from my balcony, watching my 4th floor neighbours live their lives in the building across the street. One day, as I was sitting on my balcony, a man came down Calle Salitre singing the most heartfelt *seguidilla* (a flamenco style of singing). He stopped in front of a door, rang the bell and kept on singing while a female voice answered and the door opened. A little while later, the couple left the street in a shiny convertible. I learned that the couple frequently attended one of the three Gitano Pentecostal churches in el Rastro – she was an esteemed singer in the church choir, and he was a young, up-and-coming flamenco artist. A few years later, it came to my knowledge that they had married and had two children, but as the man's fame grew in '*el mundo de las artistas*' ('the world of the artists'), his engagement with the family had decreased. They had separated, and she, the Pentecostal singer, blamed all the drinking, drugs and partying in '*el mundo de las artistas*' for ruining their marriage.

The *creyentes* would have said that it was no coincidence that I was sitting at my balcony at the exact same time the young man came singing down the street – that it was *la obra de Dios* ('God's work'). He had brought us together, so to speak, for me to reflect on some of the issues and discrepancies felt by some Gitanos of el Rastro between their lives as Pentecostal believers and practitioners, their lives as flamenco artists and their married life – with these three worlds often colliding, collapsing into each other or challenging each other in various ways.

On another day, I spotted a shoe lying at the bottom of the steep Calle Salitre. I noticed the shoe because I had just attended an exhibition called 'Bohemian Lights: Artists, Gypsies and the Definition of the Modern World', which included Vincent van Gogh's famous shoe painting, 'A Pair of Shoes' (1886). In a very convincing way, the exhibition showed how the 'Gypsy', as represented in the paintings of Van Gogh and his contemporaries, was linked to romanticized stereotypes and contrasted to the ideals of progress found in the Modern project. A similar staging of the Gypsy as 'the Other' has also been noted by Smith-Christopher (2020), who describes how Verdi staged 'The Troubadour' (1853) in a Gypsy camp, and how Bizet's 'Carmen' (1875) and Victor Hugo's Esmeralda (in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 1831) became stereotypes of female Gypsies.

Back in Calle Salitre, by the next morning, the abandoned shoe had made it all the way up to the top of the street. I amused myself with this episode. Obviously, someone had carried it up there. But to me, the absurd

films of Almodovar, the singing Flamenco couple and the ‘Bohemian’ shoe bore signs of the interconnectedness of the world – an interconnectedness that the Gitanos of el Rastro, with great humour and passion, occupy themselves with. It is precisely this idea – and practice – that everything is connected and part of a greater whole that is the topic of the present chapter. For this idea to function effectively, however, the meaning and status of signs become central.

In line with the embodied knowledge that I was gradually gaining from *el culto* as fieldwork went along, combined with my increasing familiarity with the *creyente* way of interpreting events as signs of Godly communication, the idea of instances of interconnection began to grow on me. They made me think about how, from my observations in el Rastro, in all spheres of life, the Rastro Gitanos seemed to have a particular knack for finding, interpreting, managing and dealing with signs across a range of contexts, and with a range of consequences. I reflected on the fact that signs are (potentially) free of charge, yet, as discussed in Chapter 8, exchanged by the *comerciantes* of el Rastro for hard currency (i.e. money), and that a central part of their economic model is in fact their engagement with signs – and the existential beginnings of signs. I further asked myself if the circulation of value and signs within and across *el pueblo Gitano* of el Rastro could be characterized as an economy of signs, or whether it would be more (or additionally) correct to depict the Gitano community of el Rastro as a ‘community of signs’. To address these speculations of mine, I first explore the *comerciantes*’ economic practice and its extensive personalized nature, with significant implications for the Rastro Gitanos’ general social organization.

## A PERSONALIZED ECONOMIC PRACTICE

According to Keith Hart (2016), neoliberal economy can be viewed as an experiment in impersonal economy – coined the ‘formal sector’. Accordingly, neoliberal society can be seen as an experiment in impersonal society. Informal economy, on the other hand, is comprised of economic activities that do not adhere to the inner logics and impersonal norms of the formal economy (ibid.) – much as those I observed amongst the Gitanos of el Rastro. Thus, in one sense, the present study can be summarized as an exploration of a personalized economic and social alternative to the impersonalism of neoliberal mainstream Spanish society. With such a frame of interpretation, one could argue that the alternative lifestyle and community-like nature of the Gitanos of el Rastro – all though very much part of this same system – ‘talks’ to the larger, mainstream structure in a multitude of critical ways. Broadly speaking, one could argue that it makes a grand

gesture against the all-embracing, hegemonically structured neoliberal society.

A range of anthropological studies have defined Gypsy/Roma groups according to their alternative economic practices and attitudes towards money and exchange. Such studies have argued that these alternative practices and attitudes give rise to complementary life worlds within neoliberal societies (e.g. Brazzabeni, Cunha and Fotta 2016). Complementing these views, my analyses of the alternative economic practices of the Gitanos of el Rastro (Chapters 3 and 4) have shown that, within this community, the modern divide between economy, sociality and religion falls short. Analytically, and in my study, the market and the activities of the *comerciantes* represent the economic sphere; *el culto* and the ritual practice of the *creyentes* epitomize the religious sphere; and the Rastro Gitanos' group identity is achieved through the active participation of Rastro Gitano individuals in relation to the collective, *el pueblo Gitano*. However, as I have sought to show, for instance, by the concept of 'Mercurial Merchants' (Chapter 4), these arenas – and their practices and logics – merge and intersect in a variety of complex ways. This tells us that an ethnographic comparison between two differing economic practices – for example, those of the majority and those of the minority – needs to include important non-economic aspects of societies as well – religious, ideological, moral, social and so on and so forth.

Before I begin my analysis of the Rastro Gitanos' experiences and creative engagements with the content, form and function of signs within *el pueblo Gitano*, I will first clarify the concept of 'community' in this context, addressing the question: Is *el pueblo Gitano* of el Rastro really a community? And if so of what kind?

### COMMUNITY OR COMMONALITY?

A main theme of exploration all through this book has been how the Gitanos of el Rastro can be viewed as creators of a *society within society*, partly due to their resistance towards assimilation into mainstream Spanish society and partly to their articulation of a common social, economic, religious and political project. A society, yes, but are they a *community*? And if so, what *kind* of community are we talking about? In distinction to 'community', the concept of 'commonality'<sup>1</sup> (Gay y Blasco 1999; Stewart 1997) has been applied as an alternative description of the social cohesion presented by Gitano, Gypsy and Roma groups, allowing for internal division and fragmentation. Ethnographic examples of Gitano communities with fragmented social organization are provided by Kaprow's doctoral



**Figure 9.1.** The Gitano merchants gather for collective decision making in el Rastro. Photo by Marianne Brodersen

thesis, 'Divided we Stand' (1978), her emphasis on the use of anti-organizing as political resistance (1982) and her study of anarchistic tendencies amongst the Gitanos of Zaragoza (1984). Further examples are provided by Silverman's emphasis on social fragmentation as a political strategy performed by many Gypsy and Roma peoples (1988) and her emphasis on impression management as a social strategy (1982). More generally, Berland (Berland and Rao 2004) characterizes the peripatetic Qalandar group using the term 'fission', as opposed to 'fusion'. Finally, Max Weber ([1913] 1978) suggested that the possible conflict and fragmentation among property-less groups could be based on rational motives and political strategy, rather than 'false consciousness' and lack of cohesion – an argument that concurs with the abovementioned ethnographic accounts (Berland and Rao 2004; Gay y Blasco 1999, 2000; Kaprow 1978; San Román 1975; Silverman 1988).

My findings suggest that the Rastro Gitanos' near daily engagement in *el culto*, with its crossing of kinship, age, gender, class and status lines, brings them closer together in every conceivable way: physically, intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, bodily and economically – in the shape of a *communitas* (e.g. Turner 1969, 1974). As argued in Chapters 5–7, through *el culto*, the 'atomized', individualized and urbanized *comerciantes* are on a near daily basis incorporated into the larger Rastro Gitano collective through the ritual practice of *el culto*. Further, with certain Bible passages and the intense inner dynamics of *el culto*, conceptualizations of a shared Gitano biblical past, present and future are established, maintained and put into practice. While politicians and officials I met during fieldwork frequently argued that the Spanish Gitanos' identity as a community stems from their shared origin (India), their common story as persecuted nomads and migrants and some shared cultural traditions such as the *pañuelo* ritual at weddings, *las leyes gitanas* (the Gitanos' laws), flamenco, their patriarchal structure and their Christian belief, I would additionally, and perhaps above all, argue that for the Gitanos of el Rastro it is their present-day cultic practice – combined with their ideologically based economic practices – that first and foremost provide their identity as a *community*. Internally, the members of this community still practise strategies of fission, fragmentation, impression management and anti-organization, producing continuous divides between kinship lineages and families. Simultaneously, however, they – as a community – resist incorporation into the mainstream, and they hold on to an ideology of self-employment and anti-proletarianization. In sum then Gitanos of el Rastro themselves, who are delineated by more or less permeable geographic, economic, religious and social boundaries, identify as *el pueblo Gitano*, bearing close resemblance to what we might call a 'community'.

In the remainder of the chapter, I focus on the importance of signs for *el pueblo Gitano* – as imagined from a Rastro Gitano point of view – and discuss how their internally produced signs; acts of signification and ritually shaped spiritual gaze; cultic habitus and interpretative mode work to create a Rastro Gitano *community*. Again, within the context of an auto-ethnographic approach (Ellis 2004; Holman Jones 2005), I will begin this discussion by describing my personal experience of how I came to see a particular event in the world as *el propósito de Dios* – a sign of God’s will and purpose.

### SONGS OF PRAISE

An ethnographer in the field learns through all five senses, and these bodily and sensory insights contribute greatly to the beauty and depth of anthropological inquiry and knowledge. As indicated in the previous chapters, an anthropologist’s habitus does not remain unmarked during long-term ethnographic fieldwork; mine certainly did not. The music of *el culto* is a medium that can potentially affect all bodily senses. When combined, the music and the rhythmic synchronization and co-motion of bodies are central in the creation of the ‘inner dynamics’ of *el culto* (e.g. Kapferer 2004), the shaping of the *creyentes’* habitus and spiritual gaze, and *communitas* (Turner 1969, 1974) of the Rastro Gitanos. The most vital form of this music is the singing of *las alabanzas* (‘songs of praise’). As I experienced it, young girls practise *las alabanzas* at home, and both women and men sing them whenever and wherever, at the bus stop, at the market, while shopping for groceries and while showering, dressing, swimming, cooking and cleaning.

During *el culto*, the choir forms the ‘backbone’ of *las alabanzas* while a female lead singer brings the song to ‘celestial heights and powers’, as the *creyentes* put it. The rest of the congregation joins in when they want to, but their most important contribution is the rhythmic clapping and emotional avowals. During fieldwork, I took the loudness, intensity and rhythm of the music, singing and clapping home with me each night. As *el culto* is held at night (8–10 PM), I would feel the music in my head – and body – all night long, at times experiencing it as a fever – an uncomfortable, intense bodily, emotional and cognitive presence. Whether this was intended or not, it was certainly an effective way to keep *el culto* going much longer than the actual sermon. I once mentioned all of these sensory experiences of mine to a group of Gitanas in their 20s and 30s, and they confirmed that they too carry with them the bodily feeling of *el culto*, sometimes all through the night until the next day.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, *las alabanzas* felt alien to me. I did not appreciate them in any sense; in fact, they felt intrusive, preachy and invasive. However, my feelings gradually changed. Eventually, even though I still experienced some fear and alienation when listening to them, I came to welcome their aesthetics, started listening to their messages and, ultimately, felt at home with their musical soundtrack. On several occasions, I even surprised myself by humming or singing these songs of praise when cooking or running, having a cup of coffee with my Payo friends or even while rock climbing, which I used as a form of diversion when my fieldwork became too intense. I suspect that my process of internalizing the joy, meaningfulness and intensity of *las alabanzas* was not too far from how some *creyentes* had internalized it upon conversion. Even though I felt quite a degree of resentment towards *las alabanzas* in the beginning, I could not deny their contagious joy, engagement and catchy phrases and rhythms – and as time passed by, they became part of my daily being.

In the following section, I will illustrate the powerful effect these *alabanzas* had on me as a source of pain and pleasure, through a very strange episode. In Chapter 6, I presented a methodological and epistemological outline of how I, as an anthropologist, attempted to enact the *creyentes'* spiritual gaze in order to see the world through a similar – yet of course not identical – lens. The following story shows the logic behind the Rastro Gitanos' culturally informed spiritual gaze and mode of interpretation – as I came to know it via my changing interpretative mode to something more akin to theirs.

I was at home, it was a little before 8pm and I was dreading to attend that evening's *culto*. Every night I had to persuade myself to attend. For a variety of reasons, I found the ritual mentally challenging. In fact, for quite some time I hated going. It was a combined burden; my own scepticism towards missionary Christianity had something to do with it, but the larger issue was the burden of being an outsider. To what degree I constructed it is uncertain, but I felt the *creyentes'* scepticism towards me, a Paya researcher. Although not proud of these feelings – it was me after all who was the (friendly) intruder, and not the other way around – this was nevertheless what I struggled with daily. I was completely outside of my comfort zone. In addition, I found the pressure to convert troubling. Every night, it seemed, I had to answer for my relationship to God.

Had the Rastro Gitanos' religion been more alien to my background, I might have found it easier to partake in the ritual. But because of its Christian essence, I felt that I had to protect myself by, for example, not participating in the clapping, not raising my hands to the ceiling in prayer, not yelling '*Aleluya!*' with the rest of the congregation, and so on and so



forth. Still, this was fieldwork; this was what I had signed up for. So, I normally went. Yet one specific evening, I decided to give myself a break.

I was just about to start watching a movie at my computer, have a glass of beer and relax when the all too familiar sound of *las alabanzas* filled my living room. And these were not just any *alabanzas* but *alabanzas* sung by the women of my regular church! I was surprised and, to be honest, quite scared. How was this possible? By this point, I had already spent enough time in the field among the *creyentes* to have taken on – at least to a certain extent – their manner of interpreting events and dreams in a spiritual, religious and/or magical manner. So, my first (somewhat humoristic) feeling was: ‘this must be a divine intervention because I skipped el culto!’ This half-thought, half-feeling lasted a couple of seconds before I realized that the sound was coming from my computer. But even then, I could not figure out what file or application was producing the sound, and so the *alabanzas*, with their all too familiar voices, continued to sing on, with the same immense volume and intensity as in church. I was alarmed. Finally, after twenty minutes or so, I discovered an internet window with a YouTube clip of the Gitano church choir (filmed and uploaded by some of the *creyentes*) on a ‘hidden desktop’. It was this clip that had suddenly started playing. How, is beyond my technical skills.

A *creyente* interpretation of this event would accept the material-technological explanation and the profane ‘magic’ of technology but would add meaning to the event and claim that the *why* and *when* of the playing was indeed God’s work. God, who is omnipresent and omnipotent, was telling me that my presence in *el culto* was essential. I must admit that this manner of interpreting phenomena in a half-realist, half-magical way grew on me. As with the *creyentes*, I applied it with some humour, but nevertheless, magico-spiritual explanations did come to partly replace my manner of explaining coincidences, in particular. I started to see the world and the events in it as more connected and more loaded with ‘hidden’ meanings and messages than I had ever done before. I was moving, I would say, towards a spiritual gaze.

## THE INTERPRETATION OF SIGNS

In this next section, I expand on the idea that the Rastro Gitano *creyentes* see phenomena – be they visions, prophecies, dreams, thoughts, actions, events or relations – as *signs* of a meaningful *something*; a higher order, emphasizing a larger meaning and a worldly interconnectedness. Through this perspective, they contribute a magico-spiritual *elevation* to the phenomena.

Phenomena are further interpreted as Godly messages or interventions. The *creyentes* assume that there is always something to learn from their visions, prophecies, dreams, thoughts, actions, events and relations – some general insight to gain. The general rule is thus that they believe that God communicates with them through these phenomena, telling them something he wants them to learn, see, feel or do.

### Dreaming

Taking the interpretation of dreams as an example, three years prior to my fieldwork, Bobola's mother passed away. Bobola's father, Tío Carlos, had become immensely depressed. One night, he had a dream, he told me, and that he interpreted it as the sort of dream that many who have lost someone close to them have. The dream went as follows: With her back turned away from him, Tío Carlos' wife was trimming the roses in their garden. Next to her stood a long-haired gentleman in a white robe. His wife and the man in the robe turned around simultaneously and smiled. After that, Bobola later told me, her father knew that his late wife was well on the 'other side' (in heaven with God) and that he could keep on living on Earth with a somewhat lighter heart.

Dreaming – and the interpretation of dreams – is important to the *creyentes'* faith and practice, and it often also connects faith with being Gitano. Paolo, a Gitano *comerciante* in his 40s once told me about a dream he had had before deciding to marry his wife. It contained a vision of a small house and a nice garden with several fruit trees. 'I interpreted my dream as God's way of telling me that I should settle down with my wife. You know, with the dream, I think God tried to show me that he wanted me to live calmly and quietly, like a Gitano.' This theme of calm and quiet living – as God's plan for Gitanos so that they live true to their identity – was often presented to me in the context of economic hardships, which many Gitanas deemed to be *la obra de Dios* ('God's work') to keep their men in a humble, calm and quite situation so that they could reconnect with their original Gitano identity and morality, after having lived pretentiously and extravagantly in *el mundo de los Payos* for some time.

As I came to learn how the *creyentes* interpreted their dreams in connection with their daily lives, I began to look at my own dreams through a stronger interconnective lens, and even wrote down some of the dreams that left a particular impression on me. In the following dream reports (from about 10–11 months in to my fieldwork), it is evident that my fieldwork saturated not only my waking hours but also my sleep and dreams, generating valuable bodily, emotional and intellectual information about the Rastro Gitanos' interpretation of dream content as a sign of Godly communication.

September 25<sup>th</sup>

I woke up at 8[PM] after a dream with wild horses in it; packs of horses in a mountain landscape, precarious scree, heaven and landscape heavy with rain, strong powers, large boulders to be moved.

November 5<sup>th</sup>

Tired! Exhausted. All through the night I dreamed about the traditional Gitano way of making coffee as I had been explained it by my friends in el Rastro. With fat, glistening whole beans, you boil them in water on the stove. When it boils you remove the kettle, turn off the heat, put the heat on again and put the kettle back on. When it boils again it is finished. You pour it into the cup with a strainer to collect the coffee beans and it tastes clean and fantastic. I am told that they used to make it like this on the old stoves, but then with the use of a porcelain kettle.

November 11<sup>th</sup> (two dreams, both about death)

In my first dream there was a large beast of a bull about to be slaughtered. I turn the other way, as I can't bear to watch. The bull transforms into a young, unknown man who, after some time, sits with his pale blue heart in his hands. He shows it to me and wants me to hold his hand. I do so until I get some kind of electric shock, and I feel blood pouring out of my body, the same way as it does him. Scared, I let go of his hand and wake up.

In the second dream there was an old lady. It is hard to communicate with her. The people around her appear to have given her up, but she wants more. She needs something. She is light as a feather and wrinkled, and I carry her in my arms. We are to move somewhere else. I put her neatly wrapped into the trunk of a car. When we get where we are going and I open the trunk again, she is warm and red, still alive, even though she breathes heavily. I place her down on a bed and use a lot of energy to arrange pillows for her to be comfortable. She wants wine and a book that she isn't allowed to read. All the time I don't know if she is dead or alive. When I come back to her with wine and the book, my grandmother's best friend lies underneath the carpet, together with the old lady. They are both naked and wrinkled and my last thought is that I cannot do more for the old lady. I wake up.

During the period I was having these dreams, I was becoming increasingly ill from ME (Myalgic encephalomyelitis), although I did not know it yet. Moreover, the dreams appeared during a time when Bobola's father

was going through several heart operations, and everyone who knew him in *el pueblo Gitano*, including myself, was exerting a lot of effort in praying for him. Additionally, I was about to leave Madrid after having spent almost a year there and was finishing up my fieldwork – it was an intense period with frequent interviews, meetings, *cultos* and market visits. I think my body was in a combined manic and exhausted condition, and this created large movement in my dream life.

The interpretation of dreams always – and necessarily – happens in retrospect. Thus, it presumably never ‘fails’, because the dream, in a sense, carries its own explanation. Dreams can be put to work in a variety of ways, although the content of the dreams sets some limit on their interpretation. Upon sharing my dreams with my closest Gitano friends, they told me that God was preparing me for what was coming (me leaving el Rastro), and that I needed to remember to live *a la manera Gitana* (the coffee making dream). Moreover, I was told that I would be tested heavily in life (the horse dream), that both my fiancé and I should prepare for troublesome times (the dream of the young man and myself) and that I would face death in several ways (the old lady dream); indeed, four women close to my family died of cancer the following year.

What do such interpretations do? First, if seen as God-sent visions or messages, prophetic or visionary dreams might legitimize action through the omnipotent authority which they carry. Second, through their interpretations, the *creyentes* bring meaning, direction, depth and explanation to aspects of their own lives or aspects of the collective life of the *pueblo*. Hence, in addition to the strongly felt divine dimension of their dreaming, both the dreams and the *creyentes*’ interpretations of them carry an important social function.

### Premonitions

I have argued that the *creyentes*’ spiritual gaze, which I have identified as driving the interpretation of dreams (involving a very specific process of meaning making), is part of their ritually produced cultic habitus. This process is repeatedly emphasized in *el culto*, in the domestic space, at the market and, in my experience, in every other social setting in which the Gitanos of el Rastro gather. The *creyentes*’ spiritual gaze saturates every sphere of their life. For instance, Teresa, a young Gitana in the church choir, once told me and some other Gitanas that her mother had died at hospital, where she had bid farewell to friends and family. Teresa explained how she had seen two angels come to take her mother – each holding one arm – and that her mother had waved to her with the broadest smile she had ever seen. In the month after her mother’s death, her aunt passed away. One month

later, her nephew died. Prior to her mother's death, Teresa told us, she had received premonitions of these events that were about to unfold. All her friends agreed that these premonitions were terrifying, and that God was trying to prepare her for what was coming.

Another example of this spiritual gaze and interpretative mode is provided by the story of the death of Gabriela's father, which occurred in a year when many people in her family died. The year before Gabriela's father's death, she had experienced the most extraordinary episodes. She later explained these as premonitions of the deaths that were forthcoming:

It was morning, and in the beginning I don't know if I was awake or asleep. But nevertheless, my body levitated above the bed – while lying there, just a few centimetres up – and now I was definitely awake and really scared, someone appeared in the room. It came through the wall, a person, a spirit. And it was as if something was pulled, no, ripped out of me. And the person stayed there quite a while and then disappeared. I found myself 'normal' again, really scared, and I called my father, who was in the room next door. And the next thing I knew, just a few months later, my father died. And all these other people in my family died. I think it was a premonition. God wanted to prepare me for what was coming. He wanted to make me strong so that I would be prepared for the death of my father.

From a *creyente* spiritual perspective, events such as these are signs of a greater whole. In such an unbroken totality, nothing is coincidental or isolated from other events. Although not supporting a one-sided intellectualist approach to premonition, I see an interesting ethnographic parallel to the Rastro example in Evans-Pritchard's ([1937] 1976) notion of how witchcraft explains unfortunate events. In Zandeland, old granaries collapse from time to time. The Zande know that termites eat the supports and that in due time the structures will collapse. Nevertheless, on hot summer days, the Zande sit under these buildings, in the shade. Consequently, people may be injured if the granary they are sitting beneath collapses. In a rational, cause and effect explanatory model, there would be no relation between the falling granary and the people sitting under it, besides their co-appearance in time and space. Neither would there be any rational explanation for the intersection between the two chains of causation, because there would be no acknowledgement of an interdependence of these phenomena. However, Zande philosophy supplies the missing link: 'Witchcraft explains the coincidence of these two happenings' (Evans-Pritchard [1937] 1976: 70), or, perhaps more precisely, I would argue, it *replaces* the Western idea of coincidence (i.e. the lack of intention and meaning) with witchcraft (i.e. intention and meaning).

Similarly, the *creyentes* believe that although events occur along relatively observable lines of causality, God supplies the *meaning* of why and when,

as well as the particular consequences of these events. Said differently, the *creyentes* view God as an unconditionally loving father and the mover of the semantic foundations of the world, concerning matters of meaning and reference, presupposition and implication. For example, and as mentioned earlier, it was said about a man who had fallen from wealth that ‘God keeps him down to teach him how to be a proper Gitano, to keep him calm and humble’; or ‘He is going through these hard times because God wants him to learn something’. Similarly, when explaining why I, as an anthropologist, had found myself among the Gitano *creyentes*, they would claim: ‘God put you here in el Rastro among us [Gitanos] not for the sake of your study, but for you to open your heart to him, for you to learn to know him.’ Parts of this logic can moreover be attributed to the *creyentes*’ idea about *el propósito de Dios* (‘God’s purpose’) (as discussed earlier) or *la obra de Dios* (God’s work), and the *creyentes*’ cosmological understanding of their loving, purposeful divine father as an almighty omnipotent and omnipresent figure.

As I interpret the *creyentes*’ perspective then, God is the meaning behind the meaning, and, as I will elaborate later in the chapter, the creator of infinite potential for humans to actualize. Moreover, through the actualization of God-given potential, the potential is not only spiritually elevated but also given relevant, contemporary meaning, form and function, in accordance with the situation at hand (e.g. a sales situation, the interpretation of a dream or the continuous (re-)creation of Gitano identity). In the subsequent section, I will thus unfold an argument about the Rastro Gitanos’ process of meaning making as analytically comparable to a continuous conceptual movement between God-given potential, human actualization and theorizations of the cosmological and ontological kind.

## POTENTIAL – ACTUALIZATION – THEORIZING

This section picks up the thread from Chapter 8, in which I discussed the transcendental mode of reality reached in *el culto* as a ‘realm of potentiality’ (e.g. Lorencova, Trnka and Tavel 2018: 202) where borders, categories and concepts are opened up and rearranged within the liminal ritual space through ‘anti-structure’ and spontaneous ‘communitas’ (e.g. Turner 1969, 1974). From an analytical perspective, the *creyentes*’ interpretations of daily events as heavenly signs are interesting in terms of providing important insight into their – and perhaps other Pentecostals’ – processes of sense making, meaning making, classification and construction of objects, signs and symbols. As previous examples have illustrated, the Gitanos of el Rastro are preoccupied with liturgies, scripts, origins, talent, race and background; however, these mainly represent points of departure, with

the potential for numerous meanings and consequences that may be played out in a range of situations. Hence, the *meaning* of conceptual and material objects only becomes fixed at the very moment their potential is actualized, or put differently, when the ‘pre-objective’ becomes objectified (e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1962).

With Peirce (1992, 1998; Hardwick and Cook 1977), we can say that the Gitanos of el Rastro not only engage conceptually in the constitution of signs but they also play with the relation between the sign-object and the interpretant. As I see it, it is the multiplex potentiality of this relation that is their main source of creativity and prosperity. To give an example, due to their way of living and making a living, a successful *comerciante*’s skills and resources include deep knowledge about the social world and human psychology; thus, playing with the relation between the sign-object and the interpretant seems both plausible and necessary. This calls for further explanation.

My argument is thus that in order to interpret an event or phenomenon as a divine sign of something the *creyentes* must ‘stop’ the steady flow of potential events and phenomena in the world and pick out those that are to be given significance. As phrased by Thomas Csordas (1993: 153): ‘The act is not so much an invocation of the sacred as it is an embodied statement, in defiance of the wisdom that one never steps into the same river twice, that one has snatched a definitive outcome from the indeterminate flux of life.’ Only by this ‘somatic mode of attention’ (Csordas 1993) towards the potentiality and indeterminacy of the ‘flux of life’ can the *comerciantes* at the market and the *creyentes* in *el culto* actualize the object of signification. Although the *creyentes* would say that God is the producer of both sign and object – that He alone puts them in the position to see a particular event or phenomenon as a sign of something – it is nevertheless so that the action of ‘stopping’ the steady stream of actions in the world and identifying some of these as significant episodes is an action that simultaneously creates the object and the sign. Hence, my argument is that from *potentiality* (the stream of episodes) the *creyentes* produce *actualization* (the object-sign-interpretant connection), and based on this actualization they *generalize* and draw (cosmological and ontological) theories about the world. An example of this process is provided by their approach to dreams (as well as glosolalia, prophesies and visions). Because the Gitano *creyentes* understand dreams as communications from God, they interpret (i.e. actualize the meaning of) these dreams and embed their interpretations in cosmological and/or ontological generalizations about the existence of God and the interconnectedness of the world.

According to pragmatist philosophy – and especially the work of Peirce (1992, 1998; Hardwick and Cook 1977) – ‘theorization’ implies a movement

back and forth between a set of observations and theoretical generalizations (e.g. Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Applied to the hermeneutics I observed amongst the *creyentes* in el Rastro – that is, to their acts of signification and objectification – I would argue that this interpretative abductive process moves between the world as observed through their ritually shaped gaze and habitus and their often tautologically created cosmological and ontological theories. Theorization in a pragmatist key (e.g. Peirce 1992, 1998; Hardwick and Cook 1977) is considered a continuous movement between potential, actualization and generalization – which I take to represent three distinct modes or levels of conceptual *creation* – and if there is one common thread that ontologically connects the commercial, spiritual and hermeneutical activities of the Gitanos of el Rastro, it is their constant intellectual movement between these three modes.

As previously described (Chapter 3), the Gitanos of el Rastro understand life to undulate between prosperity and humbleness/poverty. Hence, rather than believing in predestination, as Weber's ([1905] 1992) Calvinists, which holds that God has already determined who is saved and who is damned (without jumping too much to conclusions), we might say that the Rastro Gitanos' 'deep psychological need' (to paraphrase Weber [1905] 1992) is to actualize *potential* in people, relations and objects, rather than to search for affirmation for their own salvation. We can thus say that they combine the emic virtue of 'being capable' (*ser capaz*) with *potential* (i.e. talent, origin, immanence, essence) – in themselves and in others, and in objects, situations and relations – as *signs* of salvation, rather than material success in worldly activities. Furthermore, they seek to actualize potential through performative and improvisational actions at the market, in church and other social spheres, which generates 'worldly success' in terms of honour and respect in *el pueblo Gitano*. On this basis, I see the Rastro Gitanos' understanding of potential as somewhat equivalent to the Calvinist theory of predestination, as it constitutes a pre-given 'matrix' created by God. However, I take the *creyentes*' signs of status and salvation as being of a much more agency-oriented kind – managed and maintained by the Rastro Gitanos themselves, fitting for their way of life and position in society – than the Calvinists' material and worldly success, as described by Weber ([1905] 1992).

## TOWARDS A COMMUNITY OF SIGNS

I began this chapter by arguing that the Rastro Gitanos' alternative socio-economic model, which emphasizes the sociality, spirituality and creativity of economic life, is positioned against the hegemonic forces of



non-personal neoliberal economic society. In terms of theirs being a personalized economy, their economic practices carry great significance relating to their self-identification as Gitanos (of el Rastro), meaning that, in their own view (and others') their self-employed trade is part of who they are. If a Gitano or Gitana told me that he or she was a *comerciante en el Rastro* ('a merchant in el Rastro'), he or she did so with pride and confidence. It was a marker of social status, worth, local belonging and class. This economic practice is also personalized because it is family run and carries no particular divide between work and leisure. Hence, family life, social life, personal life, economic life and ritual life merge into one another. Furthermore, and as previously mentioned, the success of the *comerciantes* of el Rastro also depends on their ability to adjust the meaning and signification of physical objects according to the customer and situation at hand. I would argue that it is precisely these socio-psychological and interpretative skills that enable the *comerciantes* to create and maintain their socio-economic niche as middleman traders. Therefore, I do believe that one could see their economic practices as an ethnographic example of a particular kind of 'sign economy' and, by extension, the Gitano community of el Rastro as a certain type of 'community of signs'. In the following, I will further propel the analysis of how this might be the case.

The Gitanos of el Rastro speak of themselves as *el pueblo sin pueblo* ('the people without land'), as depicted in the Bible, as well as *el pueblo de Dios* ('God's people') (for similar findings among other Gypsy/Roma groups, see also Montañés 2016: 4; Williams 1991: 87). As a prolongation, I argued in Chapters 5–7 that their self-conceptualization as God's people implies, among other things, a turn from eyesight to vision – from a profane perspective to a spiritual gaze. This spiritual gaze is an interpretative, inter-connecting and, at times, almost surreal gaze that brings the world into a tautologically enclosed circuit in which everything happens for a reason, and where this reason is determined by God and up to humans to see, interpret and use.

To sum up, the notion of *potential* stands central to the Gitanos of el Rastro in the way they connect this idea to notions of origin, race, roots, talent and blood; in the way sales objects and sales situations hold a range of potential meanings, significations, values, contexts and outcomes; and in the way in which the ritual setting of *el culto* opens up the 'realm of potentiality' (Lorencova Trnka and Tavel 2018: 202), where the lines, boundaries and categories of mundane life can be questioned, transformed and reset – in a *communitas*-like fashion. In a seemingly all-encompassing way, the Rastro Gitanos' activities and perspectives are infused with Godly purpose, taken as a source of potential meaning and signs to draw from. In analytical terms then, and from their own perspective, it is their 'job' to actualize the

potential in each object, person or situation, and it is further up to them to elevate this potential and make it socially relevant. Finally, their constant conceptual movement between potential and actualization leads – with effort – to theories about the world and the beyond. These are theories of an ethical, ideological, cosmological and ontological kind, as ethnographically described and exemplified so far by: an existential entrepreneurial ethos; an ethos of being one's own master; an ideology of self-employment and anti-proletarianization; a combined flexible/rigid cosmology denoting a life that rises and falls like waves on the sea; their ritually produced 'cultic habitus' and 'spiritual gaze'; and their ontological simultaneity involving dualities, contradictions, oxymora and paradoxes that are at times separated, at times united and at times elevated to a third position of simultaneous being.

The actualization of signs might take the shape of performance, and in the following sections I illustrate how the Rastro Gitanos' 'performative deeds' (Rappaport 1999: 121), such as verbally committing 'speech acts', can be seen as community creating – the glue that holds Gitanos together.

### The Performative Aspects of Signs

As already mentioned (Chapter 2), there is a metonymical link between each Gitano and the Gitano collective, a link that is enforced through performative actions. Hence, the Rastro Gitano individual, I argue, serves as a sign of the moral condition and status of the Gitano community of el Rastro as a whole. From a Rastro Gitano perspective, the Gitano person thus becomes the very *sign* of the more general virtues and values of *el pueblo Gitano* – *el pueblo de Dios*. Emically, this metonymic relation is articulated by, among other things, the importance and valuation the Gitanos of el Rastro place on *la palabra* ('the word').

*La palabra* can be seen as representing the long-term relational 'glue' – that is, the socially obliging act – that holds the Gitanos of el Rastro together. In the present day, *la palabra* also refers to the words of the Bible. In short, in the current ethnographic context of el Rastro, we can say that, as a 'speech act' (e.g. Austin 1975; Searle 1969), *la palabra* functions as a central sign of the metonymical relation between each Rastro Gitano and the collective of el Rastro, between each Gitano and God, and between each Gitano's inner moral state and outer performance. As an interesting contrast to the Rastro Gitanos' general flexibility in terms of continuous adjustment and interpretation of worldly events (as argued above), this metonymic relation between individual Gitanos and the Gitano collective – and *la palabra* – exists at a much more profound level and is seemingly thus not to be played with.

## LA PALABRA AS A SOCIAL OBLIGATION

As an emic concept, *la palabra* ('the word') refers to what people say and promise to each other and to themselves – that is, to verbal agreements of for example marriage, business deals or inter-family conflict resolution. In the following, I will address *la palabra* in present day el Rastro and examine how it works as a sign of a socially obliging act in *el pueblo Gitano*.

Theoretically, 'performative deeds' (Rappaport 1999: 121) include actions such as swearing, promising, regretting, evaluating, denying and appraising; they are, in other words, 'speech acts' (Austin 1975; Searle 1969, 1979) containing promises – words that 'make' outer expressions of inner guaranties. As a performative deed, we might thus see *la palabra* as an act of signification indicating a promise of a future action. A story from Bobola about her very tall and handsome uncle, Tío Pepe, serves to illustrate the meaning behind such verbally binding deals. As Bobola told it, it was agreed that Tío Pepe's father would marry Rocita – he shook on it with the girl's father, and the following day the father brought the girl to Tío Pepe. According to Bobola, the girl was '*muy fea, muy fea*' ('very ugly, very ugly'). As she put it:

She was small, fat and her hair reached no longer than her ears! Imagine! And my uncle was so beautiful, and he had to marry that ugly lady. Poor man, such a waste, such a waste of talent. But a word is a word, and a deal is a deal, and you do not break it. That is the way it is for the Gitanos, or at least the way it was back in the day [*antes*]. You never broke a deal or failed to keep your word. The word was something holy [*santo*] back then, but this has changed.

As Bobola's story illustrates, the 'holiness' that previously surrounded the 'word' (in the shape of agreements, deals, promises, engagements and other social commitments) suggests that *la palabra* was once a kind of social institution – a performative sign of great significance, indicating a socially binding contract between two or more people, families or kinship lines. It also highlights that *la palabra* was less flexible in the past than it perhaps is in the present. With this, I do not mean to suggest that *la palabra* as a social institution has disappeared completely, and nor would this be the view of Bobola or any of my Gitano companions; however, in the present day, *la palabra* seems to be challenged from all corners. I will come back to this in just a short while.

The understanding of *la palabra* as presented above – as a binding social commitment – has interesting parallels and divergences to the present-day understanding of *La Palabra* (with a capital L and P) in *el culto*, referring to the Words of God. In my view, this cultic version of *La Palabra* also works as 'glue' for the Rastro Gitanos. In el Rastro, one can hear people say, '*La*

*Palabra dice* ('The Word says') or '*La Palabra no te engaña*' ('The Word does not fool you') or, somewhat differently, '*La Palabra es fuerte, sencillo y verdadero*' ('The Word is strong, straightforward/simple-hearted and true'). As explained in Chapter 5, *fuerte* ('strong') is often used to describe a person of strong character (*con mucho carácter*) who has faced many of life's battles with integrity, never straying from the basic moral values of the community. Gitanos of el Rastro who are *fuerte* are greatly respected for their conduct by the rest of the community. In fact, both *fuerte* and *tener mucho carácter* ('having a strong character') seemed like some of the highest compliments the Rastro Gitanos could pay to other persons of *el pueblo Gitano*. When *La Palabra* carried these qualities, it equally seemed to have strong effect on people.

Additionally, in the religious context, *sencillo* ('straightforward' or 'simple-hearted') is always used in a positive sense. For instance, it may be applied by the pastor to connect the religious with the ethnic or social significance of Gypsiness. '*Solo soy un simple gitano*' ('I am just a simple little Gitano'), he might say, followed by 'and I am straightforward and simple-hearted'. Such phrases would represent the pastor's attempts to underscore that the Word of the Bible must also be preached in a straightforward and simple-hearted manner. 'And so do we', he might say, referring to the congregation, 'we too need to be straightforward and simple-hearted'.

Finally, the *creyente* virtue of *verdadero* is also a feature of *La Palabra*, connoting truth and exactitude, faithfulness, authenticity and genuineness. From their own point of view, the *creyentes*, as incarnations of the Word of God, potentially carry all these fine characteristics, as they are – or strive to be – strong in character, straightforward, simple-hearted, true, faithful and genuine. In this way, the modern (Biblical) understanding of *La Palabra* becomes an outer expression and sign of the *creyentes*' inner moral personal Christian character and standards. Recalling that each Gitano of el Rastro stands in a metonymical relation to the Gitano collective, *La Palabra* may likewise be considered a sign of the moral integrity and state of the Gitano collective. In addition, based on my empirical findings, I would argue that *La Palabra* is one of the central social institutions (e.g. Mauss 2003) that binds the Gitanos of el Rastro together in *el pueblo Gitano* and *el pueblo de Dios*.

As indicated by Bobola in her opening story, in the past, *la palabra* contained a sense of 'holiness' that, in modern times, now seems the exclusive property of *La Palabra de Dios* ('The Word of God'). In the past, the moral standard was that a Gitano never broke a deal, handshake or agreement. One's word was one's word, and if the word was given, the consequences of breaking it were potentially very harmful, as illustrated by the example of 16-year-old Manuel, who broke off his engagement with a Gitana and was banned from *el pueblo Gitano* of el Rastro for six years (see Chapter 4).

A relevant factor in the ‘weakening’ of *la palabra* (of the mundane sort) as a social glue for the Rastro Gitano community is that, in recent years, their lives have become increasingly bureaucratized, and their informal way of engaging with others has become increasingly formalized. The written contract – for example, formal licence, divorce paper, restraining order, to mention a few – represents a very different form of social commitment relative to the older, more personalized oral agreement/handshake, ‘You go live with your father, I go live with my mother’ and community-initiated expulsion from *el pueblo Gitano*. The state social security apparatus in Spain is also playing its part in this, a part previously covered by family and kin. Such social security programmes require its applicants to fill in forms, account for their whereabouts and document health conditions, income, expenditures and so on and so forth, something that increasingly pushes them, in their own words, ‘in the direction of becoming numbers, digits and a governmental statistic’.

Indeed, ‘a word is not a word, anymore’, as the Gitanos of el Rastro put it; it is no longer that ‘simple’. When critiquing the Payo world, the Gitanos tend to accentuate its non-sociality – or even unsociality: ‘The Payo world is all about numbers. We are all made into numbers, but we do not want to become numbers. We are humans.’ I take this statement – and others like it – to suggest that when humans are made into numbers, all trust, morality and integrity is wiped away. No number owes its conscience to another number. Numbers are free of the social burden of morality, norms and ethics. They respond only to themselves, and they serve only as representative digits with a conventional and coincidental link to human host bodies. As such, they are not only *asocial* but also *antisocial*. Thus, the state practice of translating humans into numbers stands in ideological conflict to the Rastro Gitanos’ economic practices, which rely on and merge with their social, spiritual and cultural ethos and practices.

Despite these tendencies, which have somewhat impaired the position of *la palabra* in *el pueblo Gitano* of el Rastro, I would argue that the Gitanos of el Rastro are still very occupied with *la palabra*, albeit with a more forgiving and less violent attitude relative to the past (i.e. in the event that the word is broken). For example, in their day-to-day workings as buyers from Chinese wholesalers and sellers to mostly Payo customers, they rely heavily on verbal agreements based on mutual trust. In their social life, they arrange matrimonies as ‘performative deeds’ (e.g. Rappaport 1999: 121), and as involving more than simply the betrothed couple. Moreover, their business life, ritual life and social life are, in practice, inseparable, meaning that in all their life spheres the same relations are used for a variety of purposes and conflicts are certain to arise. However, to keep conflict low and to ensure that informal deals are upheld, my impression is that *la palabra*

is still highly respected and valued as a binding social act. Hence, I would argue that the Gitanos of el Rastro constantly engage in a process where *la palabra* is *objectified* as a sign of social commitment. Interestingly then, the moral object of *la palabra* stands in opposition to their more flexible manner of dealing with signs and the meaning dimension of the world as God given and as divinely interconnected. The two examples of the Rastro Gitanos' engagement with processes of signification thus not only exemplify two distinct contexts where processes of signification become central to the creation of the Rastro Gitano community but consequently also carry two distinct functions of signification to the community.

To sum up, the 'performative deeds' (e.g. Rappaport 1999: 121) discussed in relation to *la palabra* can thus be viewed as acts of signification, representing actions that signify a combined economic, social and religious commitment between a Gitano person and the collective, and between each Gitano and God. From their own perspective, the Rastro Gitanos' moral obligation is manifold, as it lies with God and the Word of God; with ideologically driven Gitano practices, customs and traditions; with their alternative economic, social and religious practices; with their family and kin; and, finally, with *el pueblo Gitano* (including Gitanos of el Rastro and elsewhere in Spain). I would further argue that their social obligations to one another in fact rest on their ability to perform and produce *signs* that provide outer expressions of inner guaranties. On this basis, their continued existence as a community might be said to rely on their ability to perform, produce, interpret, confirm and trust such signs.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS: MAN MAKING MARKET

Seeing the Rastro Gitano community as a 'community of signs' means seeing it as a community in which the meaning dimension of both religious and economic practices is held high. In this chapter, one of my main arguments has been how the ritually shaped 'cultic habitus' of the *creyentes* – with its associated spiritual gaze that sees all worldly events as signs of some greater Godly meaning – becomes the centripetal power that joins *el pueblo Gitano* of el Rastro together into a community and, moreover, into a community of signs.

I earlier discussed how we can see the Rastro Gitanos' personalized and 'meaning infused' economic practices as driven by an entrepreneurial ethos of an existential kind (e.g. Chapter 4). What does this suggest? First, this personal and meaning-loaded economic practice manifests in their family-run businesses, meaning that family life and business life are two sides of the same coin. Moreover, the *comerciantes* deal face-to-face with both

suppliers and buyers, and the money they earn from the market is converted into socially accessible and accountable values through the value conversion practice of *el culto* (as explored in Chapter 4). Their verbal deals (*la palabra*) are socially obliging acts that are taken as signs of trust, and I would argue that – although challenged by the textualizing and quantifying urges of modern bureaucracies – these acts still comprise the main social glue of their economic practices. Their existential entrepreneurial ethos is embodied and enacted by a ‘cultic habitus’, including also a more general Rastro Gitano sociality, involving systems of signs and symbols, moral standards and ideologies. In short, the personalizing aspects of their economic practices depend on social relations, trust and mistrust, responsibility and irresponsibility and personal risk and gain. In other words, we might sum up their economic model in terms of ‘man making market’, rather than ‘market making man’.

#### NOTE

1. A concept also used by Andrew Douglas in *The Gait of the City* (2014).