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**Archiving the Outcast: Memory Activism in Mikey Walsh's
*Gypsy Boy***

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Abstract: In traditional societies, identity provides a fundamental sense of continuity and belonging, but this stability is profoundly unsettled when individual experiences of queerness contest prevailing cultural norms. Mikey Walsh's autobiographies, *Gypsy Boy* and *Gypsy Boy on the Run*, document the agonising tension between his emerging queer identity and the rigid, hypermasculine expectations of his Romanichal community. Drawing on Diana Taylor's framework of performance studies and Ann Cvetkovich's queer trauma theory, this article explores the intersection of ethnicity, sexuality and communal exile. Based on Taylor's theory, the paper argues that Romani belonging is enforced not through official written histories, but through a cultural "repertoire", an embodied memory transmitted via live, physical action and a patriarchal "scenario" centred on bare-knuckle boxing. Because Walsh's fragile, queer embodiment fundamentally clashes with this violent norm, it generates an irreconcilable "friction" that leads to his severe social exclusion and erasure from the community's repertoire. To analyse the emotional reality of this exile, the paper incorporates Cvetkovich's concept of "insidious" trauma, which illuminates the chronic, everyday suffering and systemic homophobia Walsh endures. Suffering from a "double marginalisation" ignored by mainstream British society and exiled by his own people, Walsh turns to life writing as a crucial form of memory activism. By documenting his hidden emotional realities, private shame and alternative queer kinship, Walsh consciously constructs a written "archive of feelings". This counter-archive preserves the ephemeral, traumatic experiences of queer Romani life, ultimately subverting the physical repertoire that attempted to silence him. His narrative stands as a powerful testament to the resilience of marginalised individuals who utilise the written archive to reclaim authority over their precarious identities and demand historical visibility.

Keywords: *Archive of Feelings, Repertoire, Insidious Trauma, Scenario, Memory Activism, Double Marginalisation*

Introduction

The construction of history is inherently tied to power, raising critical questions regarding whose narratives are preserved and whose are systematically omitted. Communities safeguard their existence through different methodologies, while some rely on official written records, others sustain their heritage through oral traditions and physical, everyday practices. Historically, dominant Western cultures have privileged documentation, legitimising written history as the primary measure of cultural survival. Consequently, populations that do not conform to these record-keeping practices, relying instead on live, physical and spoken traditions, are frequently treated as outcasts. When these communities do appear in official histories, they are often portrayed through the restricted perspective of outside observers, a process that reinforces existing stigmas against them. This systematic erasure necessitates the documenting of the outcast's lived experience. To defend their authentic realities against distorted official records, marginalised individuals must leverage personal memory as a powerful political tool. By writing their own life stories, they reclaim their narratives, transitioning from passive objects of study to active authors of their own history.

The Romanichal diaspora in the United Kingdom vividly illustrates this broader historical struggle for self- authorship. For centuries, the Romani people have endured severe marginalisation and discrimination from mainstream European society, barred from the official written archives of the dominant culture. Their cultural continuation has depended heavily on internal, physical practices of belonging, where strict adherence to traditional gender roles and family honour is central to social cohesion. Mikey Walsh's autobiographies, *Gypsy Boy* and *Gypsy Boy on the Run*, document the agonising pressure that arises when a community's survival mode becomes a source of trauma for its own youth. Born into a culture where masculinity is defined entirely through physical strength and bare- knuckle boxing, Walsh's fragile, queer personality naturally clashes with these violent cultural expectations. Consequently, Walsh suffers from a profound "double marginalisation". He is ignored by mainstream British society due to his ethnicity and simultaneously banished by his own people due to his queerness.

To understand the mechanics of this exclusion, this paper draws upon performance theorist Diana Taylor, who categorises the live, physical transmission of cultural memory, such as the Romani boxing traditions, as the "repertoire," distinguishing it from the enduring documentary nature of the written "archive". Walsh is rendered a castaway because he physically fails to perform the patriarchal "scenario" required to participate in the Romani repertoire. To analyse the emotional reality of this exile, the article employs Ann Cvetkovich's trauma theory. Walsh's precarious existence exposes him to "insidious trauma," which Cvetkovich defines as the chronic, everyday suffering caused by systemic

oppression and homophobia. Because traditional historical institutions completely ignore the intimate struggles of queer lives, marginalised individuals are forced to forge their own alternative records, constructing what Cvetkovich terms an "archive of feelings".

Mikey Walsh's autobiographies, *Gypsy Boy* and *Gypsy Boy on the Run*, deliver a compelling portrayal of the complex intersection of queer and Romani identities. Identity is constantly considered to be fixed and logical, giving a fundamental sense of belonging and continuity within a community. Raised in a traditional Romanichal setting, Walsh's childhood is shaped by rigid cultural values where family and tradition command one's sense of self, leaving little to no room for individual space. For Romanichal families, manhood is constantly defined through physical strength, rigidity and strict adherence to heteronormative expectations. Any deviation from these established morals is constantly met with harsh rejection or even physical violence.

As the eldest son of a reputed bare-knuckle fighter, Walsh was expected to follow his father's path and embody the hypermasculine ideals valued by his people. However, his natural disposition, marked by a deep sensitivity and an aversion to violence, set him apart from the other boys, making his failure to conform a largely visible sign of difference. Walsh's narrative of this agonising pressure between his arising queer identity and the strict cultural expectations of his people serves as the foundational conflict of his life. To completely understand how this marginalisation operates, it is necessary to examine how Romani identity is physically constructed and transmitted.

To analyse the mechanics of Romani cultural transmission, the performance theorist Diana Taylor's theory is utilised. Marginalised communities, particularly diaspora groups historically excluded from the official written histories of dominant societies, do not primarily depend on the "written archive" to preserve their heritage. Rather, they sustain their traditions through physical, everyday practices. Taylor defines this live transmission of cultural memory as the "repertoire." According to Taylor, the repertoire, on the other hand, enacts embodied memory performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing, in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. Crucially, she notes that the "repertoire requires presence; people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there,' being a part of the transmission" (Taylor 20).

In Walsh's community, to belong is to perform physically. Identity is actively constituted through living bodies rather than recorded in manuals. This broadly gendered repertoire dictates that a "real" Romani man must continuously prove his dominance through physical action. Walsh explicitly documents this crushing physical standard in his memoir:

For years, my father had been calling me gay; it was the worst form of insult there was for a Gypsy man. Every time I lost a fight or ran crying from my father's punches, he would call me a poof and every other derogatory homo put-down he could think of. I learned very young that to be gay was a terrible thing, a shocking thing, and something that could never, ever be true of a red-blooded gypsy man. Gypsy men oozed testosterone and masculinity; they fought, drank, argued over women and produced sons. They were most definitely, irrevocably, not gay. (*Gypsy Boy On the Run*, 18-19)

Oozing testosterone, fighting, and drinking are the true, embodied behaviours required to participate in the Romani repertoire. This hypermasculine expectation is structured through what Taylor identifies as a "scenario". Scenarios are meaning-making paradigms that structure social surroundings, actions, and potential consequences. The scenario is an imitative setup that lays out a range of possibilities, conflict and resolution, demanding that social actors step into predetermined roles. In *Gypsy Boy*, the boxing ring operates as the ultimate patriarchal scenario. The formula dictates that the son must fight, display physical dominance and inherit his father's legacy to maintain the family's honour. Walsh's father relentlessly forces him into this scenario, inflicting brutal physical training upon him to ensure he embodies the solidness demanded to uphold the family name. Nevertheless, Walsh's fragile, queer image inherently clashes with this violent script. His failure to physically execute the scenario causes immense mental torture, as he continuously yearns for the paternal approval he can never achieve. "I worshipped my father and his shame and disappointment in me crushed my heart like a rock. I wanted so badly to please him, to see his face light up as it did when he saw Frankie. She could do no wrong in his eyes." (*Gypsy Boy On the Run*, 16)

This failure to execute the patriarchal scenario exposes a fundamental vulnerability within cultural performance. Because scenarios demand living bodies to execute them, they are innately unstable. Taylor notes that scenarios introduce a generative critical distance between social actors and character. When the predetermined role of the macho fighter clashes with the actual physical reality of the person playing it, an irreconcilable "friction" occurs. In a culture that relies entirely on the physical repertoire to grant belonging, failing to embody the needed gestures results in total erasure. Walsh's incapability to fight does not simply make him a poor boxer; it signifies his incapability to share in the collaborative memory and identity of his people. As his queerness becomes further apparent, his deviation from the expected performance leads to severe social rejection. The tragedy of this exclusion is firmly articulated by Walsh as he realises the permanence of his exile.

By the time I turned thirteen, I was a fearful and lonely boy. My father had grown so ashamed of me he found it difficult to look me in the face. And I couldn't blame him.

Not only was I incapable of fulfilling even one task that he gave me, but my feelings towards men would not go away, and I knew by then that I could do nothing to change them. (*Gypsy Boy On the Run*, 19)

This heartbreaking admission illustrates the devastating consequences of failing the repertoire. Walsh internalises his community's judgment, accepting his own rejection as an unavoidable aftermath of his queer desires. Because his identity renders him incapable of participating in the violent, embodied traditions of his ancestors, he is physically and emotionally banished from the only community he knows. However, the emotional reality of this exile cannot be completely understood simply as a singular event of rejection; it must be analysed as a continuous, chronic state of being. To comprehend the psychological toll of this ongoing marginalisation, it is necessary to turn to queer and feminist theories of trauma, which basically reframe how we understand the day-to-day suffering of exiled individuals.

Traditional clinical definitions of trauma, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), have historically limited the concept to fatal, overwhelmingly immediate events like war, genocide, or severe accidents. However, queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich challenges these conventional paradigms in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Drawing on feminist theory, Cvetkovich argues for a broadened understanding of trauma that recognises the habitual, pervasive effects of systemic oppression. She highlights Laura Brown's crucial formulation of "insidious" trauma to describe the everyday experiences of sexism and discrimination that normalise suffering (Cvetkovich 32). Cvetkovich asserts that the traditional clinical diagnostic condition that trauma must be "an event outside the range of human experience" fundamentally fails to regard the lived reality of marginalised people, whose trauma is frequently tragically persistent and normalised (Cvetkovich 31). By centring on how "catastrophic traumatic histories are embedded within everyday life experience" (Cvetkovich 19), Cvetkovich provides a vital theoretical lens for understanding the quiet, continuous violence imposed upon queer youth in restrictive surroundings.

Walsh's childhood is a visceral testament to this conception of insidious trauma. While his memoir documents explicit moments of physical abuse, the most profound and continuing trauma he endures is the everyday, psychological burden of systemic homophobia within his own home. His suffering is profoundly insidious because it is daily and relentless. It is the constant weight of failing his father's expectations and being subjected to a shower of verbal and emotional degradation. This habitual humiliation constitutes a trauma that digs itself in at the position of the everyday, normalising his pain and alienating him from his own sense of self-worth. The insidious nature of this trauma is perhaps most agonising in its emotional complexity. Walsh's trauma is not simply the result of

despising his abuser; it is intricately bound up with his hopeless, unrequited love for his father and his fundamental desire for familial acceptance. The daily conflict of his reality creates a chronic psychological injury, driven by the impossibility of reconciling his queer identity with his need for paternal approval. He grounds this daily, insidious suffering in a poignant description of his father's constant disappointment, "I worshipped my father, and his shame and disappointment in me crushed my heart like a rock. I wanted so badly to please him, to see his face light up as it did when he saw Frankie. She could do no wrong in his eyes." (Walsh, *Gypsy Boy on the Run* 16)

In this reflection, the crushing weight of insidious trauma becomes palpable. Walsh is not simply narrating a physical beating; he is describing the emotional destruction that occurs when a child's very reality is supposed to be a source of shame by their primary caregiver. Because Romani culture relies entirely on physical performance to grant belonging, Walsh's incompetence to embody the norm results in a total erasure that shatters his mental foundation. He is trapped in a space of "double marginalisation", historically excluded from mainstream British society due to his Gypsy heritage and simultaneously exiled by his own people due to his queerness. This double exclusion leaves him without a recognised space in either the authorised archives of the dominant culture or the physical repertoire of his ancestral community, forcing him to navigate the paralysing, insidious reality of being fundamentally unaccepted on all fronts.

It is precisely within this void of recognition and double marginalisation that the necessity for a new kind of historical documentation emerges. Walsh's narrative suggests that when a marginalised individual is rendered a castaway from both the dominant society and their own ancestral community, their survival depends on forging alternative modes of belonging and record-keeping. To comprehend how Walsh resists his total erasure from the physical Romani repertoire, the paper turns to queer philosopher Ann Cvetkovich and her groundbreaking work, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Cvetkovich argues that traditional historical institutions and official archives totally fail to capture the intimate, lived realities of those existing on the margins. Official archives prioritise monumental, largely visible events and enduring materials, effectively ignoring the habitual, insidious traumas and private emotional lives of marginalised populations. As Cvetkovich notes, "Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it frequently seems to leave behind no records at all" (Cvetkovich 6). Accordingly, "trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation" (Cvetkovich 6), demanding an entirely different approach to how history is preserved and remembered.

For queer individuals whose identities are constantly forged around forms of privacy, secrecy or enforced invisibility, this lack of institutional documentation is a profound danger to cultural continuity. Cvetkovich asserts that queer communities often leave ephemeral and unusual traces, which means their histories must be built and sustained through unorthodox, grassroots efforts. To counteract this systemic historical neglect, Cvetkovich proposes the creation of an "archive of feelings," which she defines as "an exploration of cultural texts as storages of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the textbooks themselves but in the practices that encompass their product and event" (Cvetkovich 7). Rather than storing official state documents, this alternative archive preserves "the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are part of the vibrancy of queer cultures" (Cvetkovich 7). Walsh's life writing functions exactly as this kind of counter-archive. Because he was naturally unfit to participate in the embodied, live repertoire of Romani bare-knuckle boxing, Walsh was denied the traditional system of cementing his heritage within his community. Hence, he turns to the written memoir to permanently document the impermanent, emotional reality of his queer childhood, transforming his private shame and insidious trauma into a tangible factual record.

Within this archive of feelings, one of the most vital acts of resistance is the documentation of alternative queer kinship. Exiled from the patriarchal protection and affection of his biological father, Walsh is forced to seek love and confirmation in the very perimeters of his already marginalised community. The rigid "scenario" of Romani masculinity dictates that any individual who fails to perform physical dominance is considered worthless, effectively separating Walsh from the normative familial bonds that sustain Romani culture. Yet, it is within this space of communal exile that Walsh discovers the profound, life-saving power of queer relation. He finds solace not with the strong, revered men of his family, but with another outcast who exists on the periphery of Romani society. One of the most emotionally resonant relations of Walsh's youth is his quiet, loyal fellowship with Kenny, a "dosser", a term used to describe an unemployed, on-Gypsy labour who works in a subservient job for Romani families. In the traditional Romani hierarchy, both a queer son and a dosser are placed at the absolute bottom, entirely stripped of the power and testosterone-fuelled glory demanded by the cultural repertoire. Walsh eloquently captures the unanticipated sanctuary of this relationship in his memoir. "I was a messed-up boy, and he was a dosser; both of us outcasts. But Kenny treated me like a human being, he cared what I thought and spoke about things other than fighting and money. He made me feel as if, just for a moment, I mattered, and for that, I loved him." (Walsh, *Gypsy Boy* 162)

The documentation of this relationship is an important act of memory activism. By centring on Kenny's story, Walsh deliberately highlights a connection that the mainstream Romani culture would probably consider insignificant or disgraceful. This gentle, supportive bond exists beyond the

aggressive, traditional frame of the boxing arena; it is a form of closeness built not on heritage, physical power or familial pride, but on shared weakness and mutual support. Cvetkovich points out that when there's no official record, or when it opposes official history, memory becomes an important source of historical understanding, and fleeting, personal items, along with official documents, can offer different ways of knowing. By including Kenny's compassion in his memoir, Walsh uses his own memories as a pivotal historical account. He manages to preserve a private, chosen narrative of queer resilience and informal family bonds that the brutal, male-dominated Romani traditions aimed to erase.

Furthermore, making this private, marginalised friendship visible to a broader audience is a critical component of transforming personal grief into a collective political force. Cvetkovich asserts that affect, including the effects associated with trauma, serves as the foundation for the formation of public cultures. When Walsh publishes the deeply private details of his life, his agonising desire for his father's approval, his terror in the boxing ring and his tender appreciation for a fellow outcast like Kenny, he collapses the boundary between private suffering and public discourse. He refuses to let his trauma remain an isolated, unspeakable tragedy hidden behind the closed doors of a secretive community. Instead, he utilises the enduring, transmissible nature of the written text to bypass the physical Romani repertoire entirely. Because the traditional repertoire requires live presence and communal participation to survive, Walsh's physical exclusion from it was intended to be a cultural death sentence. However, by transferring his ephemeral, marginalised experiences into the permanent form of an autobiography, Walsh constructs a public culture for queer Romani youths who might otherwise believe they are entirely alone. His text stands as a testament to the resilience of the outcast, proving that when the physical practices of a community fail its most vulnerable members, the archive of feelings can be mobilised to reclaim their precarious identities and secure their rightful place in history.

The transition from the private sphere of alternative kinship to the public sphere of authorship represents the ultimate political intervention of Mikey Walsh's narrative. Ultimately, his decision to publish his memoirs transcends a simple desire for personal healing or confession; it operates as a profound act of memory activism. In traditional historical frameworks, marginalised individuals are often relegated to the status of passive objects of study, their lives narrated and distorted by dominant outside observers. However, by taking control of his own narrative, Walsh transitions from a passive outcast into an active author. This transition is essential for understanding the political utility of his life writing. As Cvetkovich asserts, affect, including the effects associated with trauma, serves as the foundation for the formation of public cultures. When Walsh documents the deeply private details of his life, his agonising desire for his father's approval, the terror he felt in the boxing ring, and the

tender appreciation he harboured for a fellow outcast, he refuses to let his trauma remain an isolated, unspeakable tragedy hidden behind the closed doors of a secretive community. Instead, he collapses the boundary between private suffering and public discourse, mobilising his personal archive of feelings to demand historical visibility for queer Romani lives.

By permanently recording his experiences in a widely distributed autobiography, Walsh actively subverts the very mechanisms of memory and cultural transmission that originally attempted to erase him. To comprehend the magnitude of this subversion, it is necessary to return to Diana Taylor's distinction between the "archive" and the "repertoire." Romani cultural identity heavily depends on the live, physical enactment of the repertoire, a system of embodied memory that "requires presence" and demands that individuals participate in cultural continuity by physically "being there" (Taylor 20). Because Walsh was constitutionally incapable of performing the violent, hypermasculine scenario of the bare-knuckle boxer, his failure to embody the repertoire meant that he was denied presence within his own community, effectively condemning him to cultural and historical invisibility. The repertoire, for all its vital communal power to protect the Romani diaspora from outside hostility, proved to be an exclusionary mechanism that offered no space for a queer boy. In response to this erasure from the embodied repertoire, Walsh strategically turns to the written archive. Unlike the live performance of the repertoire, archival memory "works across distance, over time and space," safely separating the knowledge from the physical body of the knower (Taylor 19).

This theoretical distinction reveals the true political genius of Walsh's authorship. Because the written archive does not require his physical presence or his ability to throw a punch, it provides a safe, enduring repository for his precarious identity. By transferring his ephemeral, queer experiences into the enduring, transmissible form of a written text, Walsh forcefully takes his marginalised history out of the vulnerable repertoire and secures it within the permanent archive. In doing so, he achieves a profound double resistance. First, he bypasses the internal Romani cultural mechanisms that sought to silence its queer children, ensuring that his life and his hidden emotional realities can never be erased by his community again. Second, he challenges the mainstream public record that has historically ignored both the Romani diaspora and the insidious traumas of queer youth. His memoir stands as a permanent counter-archive, demonstrating that marginalised individuals can weaponise the written word to reclaim authority over their own narratives. In the face of systemic double marginalisation, Walsh's act of memory activism transforms his precarious, hidden existence into an undeniable historical reality.

Mikey Walsh's memoirs, *Gypsy Boy* and *Gypsy Boy on the Run*, offer far more than just a personal recounting of childhood hardship; they constitute a vital theoretical intervention into how marginalised communities negotiate identity, trauma and historical visibility. By reading Walsh's narrative through Diana Taylor's performance studies, it becomes evident that his fragile, queer embodiment created an irreconcilable "friction" with the hypermasculine "scenario" of the boxing ring, ultimately exiling him from the embodied "repertoire" that sustains Romanichal cultural identity. Left to navigate a profound "double marginalisation", alienated from both mainstream British society and his own ancestral community, Walsh was subjected to the chronic, "insidious trauma" that Ann Cvetkovich identifies as the hallmark of queer suffering under systemic oppression. However, rather than remaining a passive victim of this systemic erasure, Walsh engages in a powerful act of memory activism. Drawing on Cvetkovich's framework, his life writing successfully constructs an "archive of feelings," permanently documenting the ephemeral, intimate realities of queer Romani life, private shame, and alternative kinship that the dominant culture sought to destroy. By transferring his precarious existence from the live, exclusionary repertoire into the enduring form of the written archive, Walsh achieves a profound double resistance: he bypasses the physical community traditions that attempted to silence him, while simultaneously demanding historical visibility in a mainstream public record that routinely ignores the traumas of marginalised youth. Ultimately, *Gypsy Boy* stands as a testament to the resilience of the outcast, proving that the written word can be wielded as a potent political tool to subvert cultural erasure, reclaim authority over one's identity, and secure a rightful place in history.

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