

Connected Communities

Romanies/Gypsies, Roma & Irish and Scottish Travellers

Histories, Perceptions and Representations

Jodie Matthews



Background

Executive Summary

Why should we study the histories and representations of Romanies/Gypsies, Roma, and Irish and Scottish Travellers today?

1. There exists in contemporary British culture a lack of understanding about the diverse histories of these groups.
2. The concept of an 'authentic Gypsy' of the past persists, meaning that experiences failing to match this visible stereotype are neglected.
3. These groups are usually considered in collective isolation rather than as part of mainstream British history.
4. The definition of terms like 'Gypsy' is an on-going process and scholarship contributes to both the undermining and reinscription of the stereotypes they connote.
5. Romani and Roma history in Europe amounts to more than victimhood and there is still considerable work to do to retrieve it.
6. Nevertheless, the history of persecution of these groups informs contemporary identities; these persecutions have not yet been fully recognised as part of broader histories
7. Written and oral histories and autobiographies are co-opted into narratives about nation, modernity and ethnicity, and are used to perpetuate exoticism and prejudice.
8. Policy and legislation are based on knowledge about these groups that is open to critique and question.

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Key words

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Research review

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Approaching the field

This paper draws on a survey of academic work in the arts and humanities since 2002 on the history and representation of Romanies/Gypsies, Roma, and Irish and Scottish Travellers in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The most common approach in such work is to discuss otherness, rather than emphasising similarity and interaction. Reflecting another imbalance in scholarly interest, most of the works relate to Romanies/Gypsies; the attention paid to Irish Travellers outside Ireland has been very small in comparison (see Hayes, 2006; Bhreatnach, 2006), with even less focus on Scottish Travellers (see Braid, 2002; Burke 2004). There is a significant volume of work on Roma in Europe, but very little in the humanities relating to the representation of their recent migrations to Britain.

A workshop attended by writers and journalists, lecturers, education specialists, artists and photographers, and people working for advocacy organisations, about half of whom described themselves as Gypsy, Romani or Roma, related the research reviewed to contemporary community politics.

Institutionalised Romani/Gypsy Studies, often located in the Social Sciences, is seen as having been inaugurated with Heinrich Grellman's late-eighteenth-century Dissertation (see Willems, 1997; Mayall, 2004; and Lee, 2004 for Grellman's plagiarism). Mayall (amongst others) has charted the development of this specialist field. Mainstream historical and literary studies since the turn of the new century have taken an increasing interest in textual and archival representations of Romanies/Gypsies and, to a lesser extent, Roma and Irish Travellers (for instance,

Matthews, 2010). This can be attributed, in part, to the influence of postcolonial studies; the knowledge collected under the heading of 'Romani/Gypsy Studies' has been opened to a similar critique, deconstructing power relations and examining the discourses that inform knowledge and images of 'the Gypsy', both in academia and mainstream culture. Just as examinations of Orientalism (after Edward Said's landmark text) ask different questions than does scholarship undertaken as part of Oriental Studies, so a portion of recent publications on this subject interrogate the ways in which scholarship has constructed, distributed and recycled knowledge about these groups; they stand outside traditional Romani/Gypsy Studies looking in, a supplementary field.

David Mayall (whose 2004 work provides necessary historical context to the study of representation) surveyed the field as it stood in 1998, seeing the increasing disciplinary diversity of Gypsy Studies as preparing it to 'confront issues of historical and contemporary relevance' (Mayall, 1998). Few studies, however, have followed Becky Taylor's 2008 lead to understand the experiences of Gypsies/Romanies and Irish and Scottish Travellers in the context of mainstream society.

Definitions

Nomenclature is tied to: the politics of representation; the centrality of origin narratives to diasporic identities; the relationship between 'experts' and the objects of their study; and the rights and prejudices attached to particular labels. Debates about terminology take place in the shadow of two European genocides against the Romani people; these terms have been used to mark

individuals for murder and persecution. They continue to be variously used as racial or ethnic slurs, reasons to deny people jobs and homes, a banner for political unity, and an identity through which one might claim rights and services. Perhaps most importantly, they are also, to some individuals, just 'who they are'. Choosing to articulate any definition as a completed action rather than as continually in process, particularly from outside a community, risks reinscribing essentialism (see Mayall and Nord's work for the implications of definitions).

While it does not please everyone, the reappropriation of the term 'Gypsy' in Britain by the community carries with it a specifically British history which some are keen to claim in contradistinction to histories of Roma in Europe. Here I refer to Romanies/Gypsies (unless directly quoting from a source using a different practice); do not mark 'gypsies' as fictional in comparison to an authentic Romani within or beyond the text; and refer to 'non-Gypsies' and 'non-Irish/Scottish Travellers' rather than *gorjas/gadže* (variously spelled).

The commonly-used term, 'traveller' (to mean Romanies/Gypsies, Irish and Scottish Travellers, Roma *and* new travellers) has been described as a euphemism, absolving the speaker/writer of ascertaining details about any particular culture. There are some reasons for using it: historical evidence is rarely clear on who was, ethnically speaking, a Romani/Gypsy or any other kind of traveller. 'Gypsy' is also used pejoratively (Taylor, 2008). However, there is a great deal of misunderstanding in popular contemporary representations about the differences (or even that there is a difference) between these groups. Multiple historical narratives have yet to reach a wide audience, and using as broad a term as 'traveller' does not improve this situation.

Having said this, 'Romani/Gypsy' can be as problematic a term as 'traveller', as it acts as shorthand for a number of diverse groups (e.g. Romanichals, Kale, Roma). An analogy is 'an attempt to define contemporary Britishness or Irishness' (Belton, 2005, 10), and source texts similarly 'address a fictional unified population' (Sonneman 1999; 121).

Re-evaluations

Literacy/orality A clutch of stereotypes can be organised under this heading, relating to archival absences, historylessness, and uncertain origins. Many works include a description of the Romanies'/Gypsies' oral culture, leaving few archival traces behind other than those written about rather than by them (for assertions about orality see Carter, 2002; Grobbel, 2003). Intentionally or otherwise, repeating the notion of a *completely* oral culture implies savagery when romantic imagery of the Gypsy is already caught in the discourse of the noble savage (see Ong, 1982). It also lends credibility to expectations of low academic achievement and closes down the space for analytical, insider perspectives on history and representation.

Even if 'writing was traditionally only employed by a small [Roma] elite in interactions with non-Roma', the histories of many other communities were also written by a literate minority (Toninato 2006, 235). New methods of interpreting 'other' experiences – those of the working class, of women, of children – are continually researched in various areas of historical study and could be applied here. Some of our earliest documentary evidence of Romanies/Gypsies in Europe are letters guaranteeing safe conduct; their holders understood them

and were able to reproduce them or recognise a decent copy (see Fraser, 2003). While self-produced representations are hard to find, such details as these mark aspects of the written within the myth of absolute illiteracy.

This myth means that researchers stop looking for new sources. The countless transactions (financial, legal, and social) between and within communities left traces that are yet to be interpreted as part of Romani/Gypsy, Roma and Scottish and Irish Traveller histories. Those histories amount to more than victimhood and there is considerable work to do to retrieve it (see Carter, 2002, 13). The focus need not necessarily be on finding the 'truth' about ethnic origins, nor on co-opting histories into reinvented national(ist) narratives (Hayes, 2006).

Constructivist controversy Since the 1980s, various non-Romani/Gypsy scholars have produced work which, in the course of its conclusions, questions some of the orthodoxies of Romani/Gypsy diasporic origins and continuities (see Willems and Okely). Suggestions are made about the constructed and hybrid nature of 'Gypsy' identity. Those suggestions have not been universally welcomed. There are analogous debates (though usually less emotive) about the origins of Irish Travellers, part of a dialogue about Ireland's pre-colonial past.

The perceived problem with some of these theories has been that, while they note the value of self-ascription and the inalienable right to practice a group culture, they potentially undermine narratives about a recognisable and shared past for peoples still negotiating fundamental human rights in Europe. To suggest that those who subscribe to an Indian diasporic connection necessarily understand all Romani/Gypsy people as having the same

origin is too simplistic, but so is the view that the constructivists see all Romanies/Gypsies as descended from a dispossessed peasantry. It is easy to misrepresent all perspectives in this debate when summarising, for the temptation is to describe the most polarised of positions. My purpose here is to point to the fact that some scholars in the humanities writing in this field seem unaware of these debates, which tend to take place on the pages of journals and books published under the headings of Sociology or Anthropology, yet they have a bearing on the way we read archival and artistic sources.

Privileged Archives The people who wrote and made the documents and artefacts catalogued in archives were in a position to study Romanies/Gypsies and Irish Travellers, to support each other's work, to publish it and to make provisions for the survival of that work. Though not all the writers who fall under this heading were members, for shorthand I refer to the Gypsy Lore Society (founded 1888). Its members did not take representational privilege for granted: they fought to be taken seriously and to find a place within academia. However, the fact that their work was professionally published means that the scholar in this field often turns to it first, and their links with universities means that we know where to find it. Mayall has noted that the thoroughness of their research discourages scholars from conducting their own searches for new material (2004, 41). Attitudes towards the work of the Gypsy Lore Society vary, from appreciation through grudging respect to charges of racism, orientalism and exoticism (variously Savage, 2002, 383; Burke, 2004a; Nord, 127, Hancock, 2006, Matthews, forthcoming).

There is a body of scholarly work focusing on the society, its activities and the records

they left, eliding almost entirely the lives of the Romanies/Gypsies they studied and the effects of their writing (see, for instance, Yates and Roud, 2006). Ken Lee makes a gesture towards overturning the hegemony of certain Gypsy Lore schools of thought in Romani/Gypsy Studies by proposing a history of scholarly repression; he suggests that when the Lorists' theories became conventional wisdom 'epistemic violence' occurred (2004, 36).

Authenticity The 'romance' of Romani/Gypsy identities is sometimes connected by writers to an 'authenticity of being', dissociated from the inauthenticity of modern existence (Nord, 2006, 71). Politically, the 'authentic' voice of the community is perceived as inauthentic the moment it is heard outside (Acton, 2004, 99). Historically, the 'authentic' Romani/Gypsy was presumed to belong to a specific racial category. As 'race' gave way to 'ethnicity' as a way of figuring a group or individual's heritage, authenticity remained part of that figuration. Notions of 'passing' or assimilating complicate the concept of authenticity in ways that merit further investigation (Voskuil, 2004, 10).

The authenticity of Romanies/Gypsies has preoccupied legislators since their arrival in Britain, has interested scholars since the inception of Romani Studies, is frequently discussed within Romani/Gypsy and Irish and Scottish communities, and continues to trouble commentators today. One hears reference to 'the real Gypsies', the image of which resides firmly in the past (Burke, 2004, 23). Contemporary popular sources do not articulate the significant cultural differences between groups, thus non-Romanies/Gypsies or people following modes of life that have traditionally been less visible are figured as troublesome counterfeits. People were and are asked to prove themselves 'genuine' Gypsies to receive dispensation from eviction or

harassment, despite this label also being the cause (see Taylor, 2008).

Discoveries of invented traditions and the undermining of notions of cultural authenticity have led scholars to question their own 'cultures of enquiry' (Bendix, 1997, 4). 'Authenticity', then, is at the heart of this field's reassessments of culture, knowledge and identity. In spite of this, studies of Romani/Gypsy culture seem susceptible to reinscribing the myth of the authentic. An example is the use of 'Romani' to refer to an authentic historical reality, and 'gypsy' to refer to an inauthentic fictional counterpart. The implicit suggestion that the two figures are so easily distinguished fails to do justice to the discursive similarities between the fictionally- and supposedly factually-represented Romani/Gypsy.

Nomadism The authentic Romani/Gypsy is characterised as having a preference for nomadism. Nomadism is portrayed as romantic, free, purposeless, and transgressive (see Toninato, 2006; Kabachnik, 2010) and informs the discourses of law- and policy-making bodies (Simhandl, 2006). The complexity of the conditions of nomadism is rarely explored, particularly as it represents a seductive metaphor for concepts of hybrid identity, transnationalism and movement (Savage, 2002, 384; Malvinni, 2004). Such accounts must be historicised: few Romanies/Gypsies were constantly nomadic, and not all travelling groups were Romanies/Gypsies. Some groups were forcibly moved and/or resettled through enslavement, persecution and discriminatory legislation. Others engaged in commercial nomadism. This is not to say that fears about nomadism were unimportant

in European attitudes towards the Romanies/Gypsies but to deploy an unhistoricised metaphor is to flatten out those differences and allows stereotypes to stand.

Recommendations

Potential areas for further research in the humanities are:

- Analysis of terms used in Britain for and by the different groups making up these communities;
- Comparative work on formation of stereotypes in Britain, Europe and America.
- Cracking the monolith of the image of the 'Gypsy' by examining similarities and differences in the ways that groups were figured. For example:
 - » the Irish and Irish Travellers;
 - » European 'Gypsies' coming to Britain and British Romanies/Gypsies;
 - » Scottish Travellers and Romanies/Gypsies;
 - » Welsh Kale and English Romanichals;
 - » Romanies/Gypsies and others engaged in the same trades;
 - » 'Strangers' and regular visitors;
 - » Jews and Romanies/Gypsies.
- Assimilations and displacements.
- Migrations to America and forced migrations to slave and penal colonies.
- The inclusion of these groups in mainstream histories (such as medical or military).
- The role of these communities in the history of British religion.
- Analyses of oral histories and autobiography.

This work should:

- Be aware of debates in the Social Sciences to understand the discursive frames in which its secondary material is caught.
- Be of the highest scholarly standards to do justice to the people whose histories and representations are studied.
- Move beyond looking at the ways in which the figure of the Romani/Gypsy has been used to play out non-Romani /Gypsy fantasies and anxieties.

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A fuller report of this research review, a list of works consulted, a workshop summary, and a podcast describing the relevance of this research can be found at:

www.hud.ac.uk/abis/projects/gypsies-roma-irish-travellers/



www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk