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**Mobilising the imperial uncanny: nineteenth-century textual attitudes to travelling Romani people, canal-boat people, showpeople and hop-pickers in Britain**

To the fine global consumers of luxury goods produced by British industry, Dickens's narrator of *Hard Times* tells us, Coketown was not to be mentioned. Thoughts of the dirty means of production and the people engaged in it must be repressed to allow the continuing and smooth function of imperial capitalist enterprise. I suggest an analogous nineteenth-century repression (and Dickens himself was quick to make analogies with Coketown), one hinted at by the presence of Cecilia Jupe and her family in *Hard Times*; the Jupes are travelling showpeople – an “objectionable calling” – who fit not at all into Gradgrind's system of regulation and government but are nevertheless integral to the plot's onward movement (11).

The business of travel so necessary in producing empire (its goods, subjects, and communications) was, like Coketown, almost too threatening for white, pro-empire, nineteenth-century, textual culture to contemplate. Since the 1990s, scholars have scrupulously detailed the discursive tensions under which the project of empire and its resultant out-of-placeness put certainties of identity, knowledge, power, and belief. Paul Smethurst points to the suppression of mobility's destabilising potential, with, for instance, the formal conventions of travel narratives bringing mobility under imperialist order and control. Empire disordered coherent notions of Britishness by globalizing and multiplying its organising “locations of identity” (Baucom, 5). The project risked miscegenation and transgressive desire and troubled conceptions of gender (Young; McClintock). It demanded “shifting

conceptual apparatuses” to make “certain kinds of action seem possible, logical, and even inevitable” (Cooper and Stoler, vii). Empire was dangerous for bodies and minds, to individuals and nations. In short, the movement that drove empire also threatened its ideological basis. It was not to be mentioned or, at least, the permanence and reach of its effects were not. But the repressed always returns. One textual manifestation of this return is, I contend here, the repetitive representation of domestic travellers in Britain, its internal migrants. These included people who travelled for work and/or as a cultural practice, such as Romani people (some of whom travelled because of persecution), canal-boat people, showpeople, and seasonal agricultural workers. These figures represented, simultaneously, escape and privation, freedom and poverty, timelessness and anachronism, colour and danger, dirt and entertainment. Their arrival, stay, and departure were recorded in newspapers, fiction, drawings, engravings, paintings, pamphlets, and on the stage and in song, with a fascinating set of commonalities in representations of these groups across different forms. That they had come from elsewhere in Britain, that they brought alternative behaviours with them, and their need or urge to travel at all, apparently made them worthy of comment in every form and at regular intervals. The texts under analysis here were produced in the metropole: their producers and implied audience were, for the most part, white, male, literate, Christian, house-dwelling beneficiaries of the colonial system. It is *their* imperial (un)consciousness that finds a return, even when ostensible concern for non-white colonised peoples is voiced. This focus is not designed to prioritise the experience of such already-privileged subjects, but to a) draw attention to the wider context that shapes representation of travellers in Britain; and b) contribute to scholarly literature that uses literary theory to suggest the ubiquity of empire’s effects.

As David Mayall has noted, an overwhelmingly negative image of nomadism, travelling, or migrancy in the official and public imagination can be traced from at least the sixteenth century in Europe and is troublingly persistent (267). Adam Hansen points out that “despite their social and spatial marginality, [the] wanderers’ temporary labour located them at the heart of normative urban economic and cultural systems” (82). In that case, why did they seem so “other”, so problematic, in the ways that this essay details? Anti-traveller discourse takes different forms at different historical junctures, as Mayall

and others such as Becky Taylor and Deborah Epstein Nord have explored. I suggest that throughout the long nineteenth century, well-established anti-traveller discourse became an outlet for a kind of empire anxiety, for repressed fears about the destabilising potential of imperial travel. In the body of representations of these particular groups I have analysed, the same tropes appear again and again. The nomads are outside the bounds of civilization, even as they travel on British soil. They are in need of Christian missions. They are framed by extinction discourse and explicitly compared to various “savage” or native peoples. They are marked, repeatedly, as “uncanny.” These tics enable the psychoanalytically-inclined reader to interpret these representations, representations that gain traction thanks to a long history of anti-traveller attitudes at home in Britain, as an outlet for the physical, moral, psychological and ideological danger of imperial travel. “The uncanniness of cultural migration” is mobilised in representations of *domestic* migration as the once familiar practice of travel becomes increasingly strange and unsettling (Johnson, 316). In this period of empire, travelling lives were framed in new ways, representations that refract, but were partly a response to, the omissions and contradictions of imperial discourse.

In 1992, Allan Lloyd Smith suggested that the textual eruption of the uncanny might be produced by “imperialism and the fear of what is brought back from colonial adventures” (285). This, he went on, gives the *reader* a sense of the uncanny. Slightly differently, over twenty years later and from an academic context that has proceeded to return compulsively to Freud’s concept, I suggest that cultural anxiety in the nineteenth century about “what is brought back” produced a sense of the uncanny in those who met and/or represented people who travelled, a sense that the twenty-first-century reader can retrieve by comparing recurring images in what one might term the “travelling archive.” Not only does this allow us to understand attitudes towards domestic migrants as a reverberation of the tension between colonies and metropole that produced empire, it sews the seed for a method that enables an interrogation of constructions of migration in our own equally mobile and intolerant century.

The academic literature on migration and diaspora is broad and well-theorised;<sup>1</sup> varied scholarship on nomadism also exists, and this has previously overlapped with writing about vagrancy.<sup>2</sup>

Hansen suggests, drawing on highly relevant sources, that “discourses on itinerancy, class, criminality, race, and morality interrelated to construct the ‘vagabond savage,’” a disturbingly tenacious stereotype. Here, I consider not permanent migrations from A to B, being a colonial settler, for instance, nor the perpetual movements stereotypically associated with, for instance Romani families—the apparent (but erroneous) “homelessness” that heightens the sense of the uncanny provoked by travellers. Rather, this essay considers familiar practices of cyclical, circuitry travel, noting where the imperial uncanny erupts in textual responses to these practices. It takes in a broad sweep of nineteenth-century representations, calling briefly on canonical, popular, and children’s literature, poetry, autobiography, newspaper articles, pamphlets, and “scientific” works. Amongst the travelling groups under scrutiny, one has been (and continues to be) most culturally visible: narratives of British Romani/Gypsy experience and representation in Britain are most often told in isolation.<sup>3</sup> Here, I demonstrate how common attitudes towards a number of practices of travel around the country were marked in similar ways. The essay considers the four groups in turn, highlighting repeated imagery across them and theorising the motivation for that imagery.

Travelling fairs have a history in Britain dating to at least the Middle Ages, “a blending of religion with commerce.” The arrival in relatively isolated and poorly-supplied towns of people bringing livestock, goods, entertainment, and news, marked an important communal event (Walford, v). By the nineteenth century, fairs brought or attended by showpeople were a tradition and a leisure activity rather than the vital necessity they had once been. *The Era* in 1856 describes what was commonly understood by the term “Showman”:

An individual who exhibits for gain and lucre anything wonderful and extraordinary, from the elephant to the mouse, the giant to the dwarf. In the category of Showmen are proprietors of travelling menageries, equestrian cirques, punch and judys, learned pigs, calculating boys, second-sighted girls, and an interminable list of other *astounding astonishments*.

(“Showmen”; original emphasis)

The article concludes, rather against its own grain, that these were men who paid taxes, “who by energy, talent, unwearied industry, and good conduct, [...] are striving, to earn an honest livelihood.” Their *raison d’être* was to provoke interest and drum up an audience, so it is little wonder that this interest was

reproduced on the pages of nineteenth-century texts. What is less expected is the distaste with which aspects of their lives were met.

Examples from the census can tell us something of individual showpeople in Britain. When the enumerator carried out his duties in Huddersfield, Yorkshire, in 1891, land at the back of the Four Horse Shoes Inn in Milnsbridge revealed several vans with showpeople living in them. They included the Baxter family, with a servant and two sons born in Brighouse, the Vetri family with their boxing booth, the Ackroyds with a coconut shy, and the Marshalls with their “switchback”.<sup>4</sup> In Newcastle, vans parked at Haymarket housed, amongst other showpeople, the Reader family. Their occupations are listed as “Menagerie Proprietress”, “Assistant Foreman”, “Domestic Manageress”, “Groom”, “Serpent Charmer”, and “Drummer”. The children of the family had been born in Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall, suggestive of the distance the family travelled in their trade.<sup>5</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, the showman was, however, thought to be a dying breed. Patrick Brantlinger, in *Dark Vanishings*, identifies extinction discourse as a “specific branch of the dual ideologies of imperialism and racism.” Finding “massive and rarely questioned consensus” and “fusing celebration and mourning,” it frames the inevitable decline and extinction of non-developed, apparently uncivilised peoples as they are overtaken by white European modernity. The self-extinguishing customs of savagery include, alongside cannibalism and human sacrifice, nomadism (Brantlinger, 1–3). The pervasiveness of this discursive formation in the nineteenth century meant that any element of “savage” customs in any context invoked, as synecdoche, imminent extinction.<sup>6</sup> Showpeople, like Romani people and other travelling groups, were marked as dead men walking, inevitably in decline as Britain modernised. In 1890, an article about showmen and women at the World’s Fair in the *Daily News* assumes that the “general impression” is that “our nomads are a dwindling race”; this assumption was disproved by the reported 7,000 members of the Travellers’ National Total Abstiners’ Union formed in 1880, an evangelical “benevolent effort” to promote temperance but also allowing for registration and communication between people without a fixed address. Such an organisation was necessary, it seemed, because these were a people “somewhat outside the pale of our civilization”, despite being “tidy

enough” (“Showmen at Tea”).<sup>7</sup> The fairs made a spectacle of the savage for a paying audience, but the mode by which that spectacle was delivered fell on the wrong side of the civilized/savage dichotomy (Walford, 150). In the 1870s, in his *The Old Showmen, and the Old London Fairs*, Thomas Frost describes “the almost extinct race of the old showmen”. He continues, in a transferral of Brantlinger’s identification, that the “progress of the nation” has removed the fairs’ purpose, having given way to theatres, music halls, zoological gardens, and aquaria. The railway connects centres of population so that residents no longer wait to be brought the season’s entertainment, but go out and find it. Increased short-distance travel by the settled population, it seems, spells an end to the showman’s migration. “Fairs are as dead as the generations which they have delighted,” Frost claims, and in an elegiac comparison that is wearingly familiar to Victorianists, he says, “the last showman will soon be as great a curiosity as the dodo,” the showman himself thus acting as a proxy for the cultural form to which he once contributed (Frost, v; 376–7). Earlier in the century, in her Introduction to David Prince Miller’s *The Life of a Showman* (first edition 1849), Eliza Cook describes how: “the *remains* of a singular nomadic race are still extant in England, who may be found journeying about from town to town during the season of fairs and feasts.” They “throw a violent life into even the most demure little village,” Cook asserts (3–4; emphasis added). Showpeople were apparently dying out throughout the nineteenth century and yet still exist today in the twenty-first, demonstrating the ideological, rather than factual, nature of reports of their greatly exaggerated demise. Miller himself turned the tables on this discourse, however, allied as it is to notions of savagery. It is the villagers *he* met that could be savages, he claims, violent and spiteful as their treatment of him and each other was.

David Prince Miller was born in Scotland and, like many of his contemporaries in the profession, was not born to the fair but made it his life. His autobiography gives the lie to Frost’s 1875 assertion that “no showman has ever written his memoirs, or kept a journal” (Frost, vii), a common justification for exogenous writing about groups such as this. Miller details the trials and tribulations of his trade in his autobiography, including an occasion in Leeds: the giantess, dwarf, and white-haired lady of his company all left when a rival showman offered them higher wages. To fill this gap, Miller blacked up to be

exhibited as a very unconvincing “black giantess” (16). Fairgoers, as sources such as Frost, Walford, and Miller make clear, expected to find racialised savagery on display and seemed quite unbothered about its authenticity: a “wild Indian” in a show, for instance, is actually a “poor black sailor, who had been picked up at Liverpool” (46). The fact that showmen brought fairs, which existed for the purposes of entertainment and accentuated bodily differences (of race, stature, age etc.) as part of the performance is one explanation for the savage otherness the showpeople represented to the sedentary communities they visited.<sup>8</sup> However, nineteenth-century texts seem just as interested in the mundane aspects of their lives, suggesting that the otherness of these travellers exceeds what an audience has paid to see. “That’s a nasty fix to be in a strange town,” a showman quoted in *The Graphic* confirms, “where they look on play-actors as ragamuffins.”

The life of a showman was precarious. The Miller family had sometimes to walk for twenty miles overnight, carrying all their belongings, including their apparatus and instruments, often in bad weather as the fair season continued into November. They were close to starvation, selling their clothes for pitiful amounts in order to rent lodgings, living a hand-to-mouth existence. It was not a salubrious life. Miller’s work is filled with descriptions of heavy drinking, scamming, and Sabbath breaking—conforming, one suspects, to the sensational depictions of his fellow showmen elsewhere. If nothing else, Miller knew how to find an audience.

Miller is keen to draw a distinction between himself and “gipsy showmen.” It is often misunderstood in Britain today that the group who call themselves “Showmen” or showpeople do not, as a rule, identify as Romani or Gypsy people—though there are, of course, Romani people who live the Showman’s life and people who marry into each other’s communities. Most of the nineteenth-century texts examined for this project describe the Gypsy showmen as a sort of sub-group to showpeople more generally. Frost, for instance, describes the refreshments on offer at a fair; the “gipsies booth” would be chosen “for the novelty of being waited upon by dark-eyed and dusky-complexioned Romanies, wearing bright-coloured silk handkerchiefs over their shoulders, and long gold pendants in their ears” (333).

Even if Frost had never seen a Romani, this exotic, racialized image is recognizable from every form of



nineteenth-century culture.<sup>9</sup> Miller describes the Gypsy showmen as “those mysterious wanderers” (81).

On his return to Glasgow, Miller recounts:

I had only some two years before entered the city in circumstances and appearance little better than a sort of gipsy showman and had progressed so far in consequence and respectability that I obtained a license for a theatre in the second city in the empire.

(111)

Miller’s statement of stability in the imperial metropole is, for him, socially as far from the travelling

Gypsy showman as it is possible to get, but he does not recognise the discursive burden he shoulders.

The traveller’s return to a centre of imperial power can be read as an uncomfortable reminder of all the

ways in which the troubles of imperial travel find a way back, one way or another. As Katie Trumpener

points out in her consideration of Glasgow’s role as an early node of imperial trade as represented in

John Galt’s *Bogle Corbet* (1831), the city’s periods of economic boom

were punctuated by recurrent, devastating crashes, often precipitated by events in the colonies. [...] The enormous financial gains of empire were matched not only by enormous financial risks but also by the erosion of social stability and moral values.

(*Bardic Nationalism*, 279)

When Corbet makes a different kind of return to Miller, to the Jamaica of his birth, he has an

“unnerving encounter” with a woman who speaks “Negro Scotch”, the type of hybrid form that so

unsettled British imperialists, indicative of “the rebellious violence beneath the colony’s surface” (280).

As Glasgow businesses circulated people, goods, and capital around the globe, they risked destabilising the economy and society on which it was all based, all the power of empire returned on their own heads.

Literal, figurative, and psychic returns are made heavy with the imbalances of power produced by the

imperial system, an imbalance that threatens to find its restitution. That return is manifested in a

troubled attitude to domestic travel. Miller sees his showman’s return to Glasgow as glorious, but it acts

as an analogue to the showman’s textual function in an economy of the imperial uncanny and presages

ruin. As if to evidence that psychoanalytic suggestion and the fragility of imperial discursive stability,

Miller’s respectability did not last long: he was soon declared bankrupt and the theatre was destroyed by

fire in 1848—a year before his memoirs were published.

To generalise, the dark picture painted of showpeople in periodicals and pamphlets was of an untrustworthy people, quaintly picturesque and anachronistic, dangerous and liable to encourage unruly behaviour in an otherwise civilized populace. Fairs, stated the 1871 Fairs Act, could be “the cause of grievous immorality” and “very injurious to the inhabitants of the towns in which such fairs are held.”<sup>10</sup>

With such legislative language, the essay turns to George Smith of Coalville. Born in Staffordshire in 1831, Smith was forced, like the stereotype of the poor Victorian child, to work long hours in the production of bricks while still young. Apparently through sheer force of will, he obtained an education and devoted his life thereafter to social reform. He successfully campaigned for the inclusion of a clause in the Factory and Workshops Amendment Bill of 1871 forbidding the employment of young children in the making of bricks and tiles, retrospectively saving his younger self, then turned his attention to the children of the canals, to Romani children, and showpeople’s children. In a letter to the editors of the *Leeds Mercury* in 1879 (a letter that would be duplicated many times over in other regional papers), Smith recounted the “cry of children from Gipsy tents and Showmen’s vans.” These children, he insisted, “undergo excruciating practices to please a British public.” He refers to them, as with many contemporaneous descriptions of travellers, as “our roadside Arabs,” a formulation that insinuates responsibility for their welfare but also connects the showpeople to Britain’s interests in the Middle East (“Cry of the Children from Gipsy Tents and Showmen’s Vans”). The formulation is also familiar from, of course, Henry Mayhew’s 1840s observations of London street life, and the word “Arab” was used to describe the British urban poor in this period as often as it was used to refer to inhabitants of foreign climes. The domestication of this term was well and truly established, but it does not lose its foreignness.

Smith’s intention was to ensure that “if these poor children are to be allowed to live in vans and tents,” they should be registered along similar lines as stipulated in the Canal Boats Act of 1877. Smith was instrumental in lobbying for this latter piece of legislation, which demanded the registration of all vessels, along with information about how many people lived on board.<sup>11</sup> It was common (but not universal) practice for the families of bargees transporting goods around Britain’s arterial canal network

to live on the boats in predictably cramped conditions, but with towpaths and areas around the canal basin forming part of the space of their daily lives. Such people formed a community of around 40,000 (Freer, 76). In Smith's lobbying and its endless repetition in print media, one hears echoes of the systematic discipline imposed, not just on British domestic migrants, but by imperial administrators to order and control colonial possessions. Indeed, empire calls from across this very page of the *Mercury*, with mention in another column of "Sir C. Dilke," politician and author of a work that confidently articulated the success (and thus suppressed fears about the dangers) of the British imperial project, *Greater Britain* (1868). The vast majority of nineteenth-century representations of canal-boat people, representations that are not just akin to cries "from Gipsy tents and Showmen's vans" but also, unconsciously, to cries from Dilke's *Greater Britain*, bear the marks of Smith's campaigning; his letters, pamphlets and speeches were widely quoted and even appear verbatim in works of fiction. For instance, Amos Reade's book for young readers, *Life in the Cut* (1888) is dedicated to Smith, "the man who has done most for the Canal people of old England, living amongst us, but still outside the pale of law and civilization."

Reade describes the canal-boat people, especially the children, as "outcasts, miserables, outside the influences of our boasted resources of civilization." "Day by day," he says, they "wore away their God-given lives in a slavery more cruel than that of the Soudanese, as they 'moved on' through, touched skirts with, and added to the wealth of England" (5–6). Once more, Britain's internal travellers (importantly, here, canal-borne ones), economy, and empire are brought together in one image; the issue of slavery was a persistent antagonism for British-Egyptian relations in Sudan, themselves a product of Britain's desire to control the Suez canal and access to India. A description that apparently centres the wasted life of English canal-boat children compulsively reaches for a foreign comparison, demonstrating that Reade's sorrow might bear the marks of the imperialist context in which he wrote; his canals are haunted by that other important British asset in Egypt. It is also impossible to ignore the etymological entanglements of this comparison. Canal-boat people were, occasionally, referred to as "water gypsies" and there are, indeed, similarities in the way, for instance, the interiors of canal boats and Gypsy vardos

or vans were illustrated in the *Illustrated London News* and other illustrated texts.<sup>12</sup> The name “Gypsy” comes from “Egyptian,” which is what the English called Romani people when they were first known in Britain. Houghton-Walker notes that the 1780s repeal of the Egyptians Act, a legislative marker for Romani people being considered English rather than foreign, coincides with linguists locating the source of the Romani diaspora in India. They retain in representations of the Victorian period, however, a sense of the foreign other (albeit an other within), strong enough for it to adhere to images of canal-boat people and to push that image through an Egyptian passage to India. Writers like Reade—and they were many, though not all agreed with him—were appalled at the conditions in which children lived and their parents raised them, in all likelihood exaggerating the number of families who permanently lived on board and certainly painting a one-sided picture of squalor and ill health.<sup>13</sup> This disproportionate horror is, in part, I suggest, a product of concerns about what these other locations do to the English.

Early on in *Life in the Cut*, the reader gains a picture of the way in which canal-boat people were viewed: Mr Deering tells Marcia:

You should not go near such people; it is quite dangerous! They are sure to have some horrid disease. At all events, they are wicked and nasty, and likely to say something it is not fit you should hear. [...] That new canal is a horrid nuisance in the neighbourhood, bringing thieves and rogues, and dirt and drunkenness into our midst. They really are a disgrace to a civilized country. (16-17)

Ten-year-old Ness, who has a “a gipsy face” (41) is described by Marcia as:

dreadful, so dirty, starved and stunted, she scarcely seemed a child, more like a wicked hobgoblin; though she did not look wicked either, only wretched and forlorn, nursing another fearful-looking, more uncanny atom than herself. (16)

Ness and her siblings are children that do not look like children, hobgoblin-esque (suggestive, along with other texts of this period, of an attributed canal-boat person physiognomy), and uncanny. They are strange and, literally, according to the stereotype, without a home: unhomey. Later, the judgemental narrator opines:

The State was out of gear. [...] Dark mysteries existed in the centre of our social system. All-powerful England, so boastful and justly proud of her colossal ‘resources of civilization,’ evaded a grave responsibility.

Those “resources of civilization” produce and are produced by empire. As in this description, any use of the term “civilization” is never far from its other, the savage that must be tamed. The “dark mysteries” in the centre of our social system sound like the secrets withheld by dark territories waiting for colonisation—both land and bodies were described thus.<sup>14</sup> But those “dark mysteries” also bring us back to the “uncanny” and to my proposition that unease about travellers in Britain is a manifestation of anxieties about the destabilising potential of imperial mobility. For Freud, who wrote his essay on the uncanny around thirty years after *Life in the Cut* was published, that which strikes us as uncanny is something already familiar that has *become* mysterious by the process of repression. Travel around Britain was, of course, familiar to nineteenth-century consumers of these various textual forms. Houghton-Walker notes that “fear of the homeless, uprooted wanderer certainly lasts through depictions of gypsies in the long eighteenth century” (20). Why should that fear persist into the nineteenth century, especially when all kinds of travel were increasingly common and well-reported? My point is that it was precisely for that reason that domestic travellers seemed so unsettling: they had become uncanny. The meaning of the travellers’ out-of-place-ness, once so quotidian, shifted to serve as an outlet for unspeakable fears about the out-of-place-ness of empire, and all that that threatened. It has become a postcolonial scholarly commonplace to assert that as empire is made, so is nation. Here, we see notions of travel re-made as part of the metropolitan response to imperial mobility. The “centre” of “powerful England” contains “dark mysteries” indeed.

Seasonal agricultural workers who travelled en masse, more specifically here, hop-pickers, are this essay’s next consideration. This is another well-worn domestic migration, the sight of which should have come as no surprise to nineteenth-century commentators.<sup>15</sup> E. J. T. Collins notes that “seasonal migration was [...] a vital aspect of pre-industrial agriculture,” pointing to records of such as early as the thirteenth century. Land rotation systems only increased the need for labour and, even after the harvesting of many crops was mechanized, hop-picking was undertaken by hand. Industrialization and urbanization (meaning fewer people living in the countryside), and regional specialization (hops being

grown in particular counties) demanded seasonal in-comers (38). The best-known of these annual migrations (that included Romani and Irish people) was from the East-end of London to the hop-fields of Kent, but similar temporary settlements were to be found wherever crops were harvested: Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Hampshire, Surrey and Suffolk. An 1875 article from *The Sporting Gazette* draws attention to the “fearful immorality engendered by the present manner of lodging the itinerant hop-pickers,” i.e. with hundreds of people sleeping in barns together. This time, the comparison is made to Coolie emigrants in “our plantations” (“Agriculture”). Newspaper-readers were used to reading about coolies in the mid-1870s in relation to the barbaric slavery practices of other peoples, suggesting that the hop-pickers life was not one that anyone in their right mind would choose, and one about which action should be taken to improve or outlaw it. The movement of the coolies around the globe is key to this image, suspected as they were of carrying diseases such as dengue fever, and of mutinying: those dangers of imperial travel recurring.

In the second half of the century, many periodicals were fascinated by the hop-pickers lives, and expected readers to be equally compelled and repulsed by the images and descriptions found on their pages for several consecutive weeks. In 1876, an article in *John Bull*, reproduced from the *Maidstone Journal*, bemoaned the fact that any improvement in accommodation would be undermined by “coarse habits and profligate expenditure” on the part of the hoppers. They are, the article says, “a class of people who set at defiance the most ordinary rules of decency.” Many of them, the article asserts (but quoting directly from a pamphlet written by the Rev. J. Y. Stratton), are “scarcely human” (“A Hop-Picker’s Camp Meeting”). Stratton continued to publish on this subject, describing in an 1888 text their “lawless and predatory habits” (Stratton, 51) and that “half-monkey, half-tiger, the typical hopper was often a thief” (54). Stratton’s choice of animalistic comparison tells us that he, too, looks beyond Britain to understand his distaste – monkeys and tigers project the image back to India once more. “So formidable and rampant was the vice commonly practised by the hop-pickers,” Stratton reckoned:

that men who longed to do them a kindness were afraid – the writer for one – to enter their lodgings or go among them. They stood apart, distressed by the language which shocked their ears, appalled at the reckless profligacy which they witnessed and knew not how to grapple with.

As with the canal-boat people, Stratton's fear seems extreme and speaks of more than concern about agricultural workers in England. One "refining influence," the 1876 article assures its readers, on this "mixed vagrant class" drawn from "degraded haunts" is a tent prayer meeting, indicative of the missionary enthusiasm evangelists turned on British subjects. Some ten years later, Plymouth Brethren preacher Samuel Chinn saw in the annual hop harvest an opportunity to bring the "wandering tribes" "within hearing of the story of redeeming love," a phrasing which recalls Biblical wanderings but also the nomadism of uncivilized peoples ripe for conversion in colonized lands. It is the hoppers who are considered the "invaders," however; a "throng" of "half civilized human beings" (Chinn, 18). If we consider the persistent connections these texts make between Britain and its empire, the spectre of throngs of the uncivilized on the march, outnumbering the civilized citizens of Kent and Hampshire, go some way to explain the panic suddenly induced in nineteenth-century writers by a centuries-old spectacle. The women of the throng are described as "weird and uncanny-looking," highlighting once more the potential for post-Freudian readers to consider the nature of that uncanniness. The ostensible and extreme fear, mingled with desire (articulated via the seasonal obsession with the pickers in newspapers and periodicals), for these migrant workers is, in part, a reaction to empire. These seasonal travellers have become uncanny despite the long history of this practice because their arrival signifies something new in the nineteenth century, haunted by their imperial doubles whose uprising is always possible but must be suppressed, literally and psychically, for the imperial project to continue.

In a textual instance of the uncanny so notable it can also be found in Nicholas Royle's study of this "foreign body," *Guy Mannering's* celebrated Scottish Romani, Meg Merrilies, is, more than once, described in this way (Royle, 2; 20). Narratively, Mannering and Brown/Bertram are both recently returned from India as the novel opens, bringing images of colonialism home, a "dislocation of imperialism" (Trumpener, "Time of the Gypsies," 362). As the Gypsies of Ellangowan are dislocated from their former home following their eviction, forced into migrancy, so India comes to Britain; the empire returns. The "Indianness" of Scott's Romanies has been explored in some detail elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> My

interest here is that outlined in the essay's opening: the connection between India as a place of disorder for the non-brown Bertram, and the mistrust displayed towards Ellangowan's forced migrants. For example, Bertram's first sight of Meg brings him to wonder if he has "dreamed of such a figure?" or if "this wild and singular-looking woman [recalls to his] recollection some of the strange figures [he has] seen in an Indian pagoda?" (Scott, 123). Meg seems to be a visitor from a site of colonialism that only appears in the narrative via memory, the source of dreams that confuse the figure of the Gypsy with an Indian scene. In India, and on the imperial traveller's immediate return to Britain, Bertram does not know who he is and neither does anyone else. As Alyson Bardsley notes, "Britain's overseas relations contribute to the instabilities depicted in the novel" (400). The characters' lives do not quite make sense in India: even "dueling, as a practice exclusive to gentlemen and designed to reinforce their code, fails to function properly in the colonial setting" (Bardsley, 401). Like Miller's showman's autobiography, the text puts distance between locations of order, power, and respectability, and the figure of the Gypsy, something noted by Garside: "Meg never enters Edinburgh *in propria persona*" (Garside, "Meg Merrilies and India," 166). The figure who reminds the reader of a far-flung colony is not welcomed into one of the centres of commerce that drives the imperial project, lest she disrupt her eccentric position. Indeed, Trumpener argues that the "novel understands the relationship between national and imperial history in ways its characters do not" (Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, 221). Both Trumpener and Garside point out the similarities between Ellangowan's Gypsy displacement and the implementation by the East India Company of a system of land occupancy in Bengal resulting in the displacement of labourers as villages were parcelled into estates (Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*, 190; Garside, "Picturesque Figure and Landscape," 163–4). Trumpener draws attention to the symmetry of Mannering's domestic tragedy in British India and Bertram's domestic tragedy at Ellangowan twenty years earlier. This symmetry, she asserts, "is reinforced by the novel's persistent metaphoric associations of the Scottish Gypsies with the natives of India, similar in appearance and dress, in language, and in their alternation between submission and rebellion" (*Bardic Nationalism*, 187). Brown, as many of the texts under scrutiny in this essay unconsciously fear, brings features of the disorder of India back to Britain with him by continuing



his entangled relationship with Julia Mannering, begun in that location where identities and motivations are misunderstood. As a stranger he is both unpredictable and the object of suspicion. When he appears, looking “wild and agitated” in front of Julia while she is out walking, she is unable to vouch for him both because their relationship is a secret and because her “terror prevented [her] finding articulate language,” her silence acting as a repression of the Indian connection (Scott, 168). Colonial travel is indissociable from disruption. When the order of home with everything in its rightful place takes over, the unhomely or uncanny Meg is repressed. Again, Freud’s uncanny is the “class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.” The uncanny is also that which “ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Freud, 220–225). Meg, one of nineteenth-century literature’s best-known travellers, appears strange to Bertram, but her strangeness is familiar both because he knew her of old but cannot place her and because it brings to mind the strangeness of India for the young soldier. She is at once not-Indian and Indian, displacing the colonial but simultaneously a harbinger of its encroachment. The frightening power of Meg’s ambivalent position between known and unknown, homely and foreign, cannot be tolerated and so as “home” is defined once and for all (an urgent imperial project as well as a personal one), she must be removed.

Another Scottish writer, one who determined that “race is everything,” had a particularly offensive view of Romani travelling practices. Robert Knox described, in his 1850 *The Races of Men*, a group of Gypsies in Scotland who live in a village during the winter and decamp in the summer “like the Arabs” (once more) but also “like migratory birds or quadrupeds seeking other lands, to return again with the first snows to their winter dormitory.” He goes on, “they neither toil nor think; theirs is the life of the wild animal” (151). An 1845 poem by Caroline Norton, *The Child of the Islands*, includes a note detailing the poet’s recollection of meeting “one of the most celebrated beauties of the gipsy race—a woman of the name of Charlotte Stanley.” It is less bestial than Knox’s description, but nonetheless is framed by nomadic determinism. “She said she could not sleep in a house; that she could not breathe freely; that she should die if she were obliged to give up her wandering life” (201, n. 11). Her need to travel is depicted, as with many, many artistic representations in the nineteenth century and through to

the present day, as being a bodily necessity. Jumping forward a little in time, G. J. Whyte-Melville's 1879 novel *Black But Comely* features the heroine Jane Lee, a young woman who does not know of her Gypsy parentage as she grows up. To Gypsy blood, the reader is told, Jane "owed her health, vitality, grace, beauty, and the wild turbulent instincts that made of all the troubles of her after-life" (vol. 1, 23). No matter what her upbringing, Gypsiness will out. Aged nineteen she confesses that she "should like never to sleep two nights in the same bed"—superficially a reference to the travel that is the preoccupation of this essay, but with clear connotations of sexual promiscuity. Melville's work can stand in for myriad popular and literary sources of the period. His 1875 novel, *Katerfelto*, describes a Gypsy character, Thyra:

From her gipsy ancestors she derived her tameless glances, her nimble strength, her shapely limbs with their delicate extremities, her swarthy savage beauty and light untiring step. From them, too, came the wild blood that boiled under restraint or contradiction, the unbridled passions that knew no curb of custom nor of conscience, the cunning that could conceal them till occasion offered, the recklessness that would then indulge them freely without pity or remorse.

(26–7)

For many nineteenth-century writers, it was these reckless passions that drove the Romani people to travel, never mind the countless other travellers they witnessed who did not share this apparent wanderlust as a birth-right. More romantically and sympathetically, Theodore Watts-Dunton, member of the Gypsy Lore Society, laments in his fin-de-siècle novel, *Aylwin* (1898), that:

Gypsies alone [...] understand nature's supreme charm, and enjoy her largesse as it used to be enjoyed in those remote times [...] before the Children of the Roof invaded the Children of the Open Air, before the earth was parcelled out into domains and ownerships as it now is parcelled out.

(254)

Though critical, this is clear reference to the effects of empire if ever one was heard and drives the image of the Romani traveller back in time and across the sea.

A *Daily Mail* article by G. W. Steevens at the end of the century describing the run up to the Epsom Derby uses language not far from, but more vulgar than, that of Knox—lest we should get carried away with the romanticising element of nineteenth-century literature on this subject. This article, however, confers racialized images on a number of different travellers—and this is the intriguing part of putting representations of various travellers alongside each other, and not just assuming that particular

anti-travel discourse is reserved for Romani people. “The parasites,” as Steevens calls them, including “the swing boat people, the gypsies, and the hawkers” come with their “house-vans.” Steevens is significantly more enamoured of these “ships of the road” than their inhabitants whom, he says, have “arms that hang forward from loose shoulders like an orang-outang’s” (4). The Derby, that stalwart metonymy for English culture, is apparently disturbed by the arrival of the very travellers who make the festival what it is. That Steevens reaches for a figure often comically considered “like” a human but not quite, and with a name whose origin is something like the Malay for “person of the forest” (OED), repeats the animalistic/savage imagery deployed by writers already considered here, but also calls to mind the ambivalence of colonial mimicry critiqued by Homi Bhabha. I suggest that the imperfect double in this instance is not the colonial subject, but that the domestic migrant acts as the displaced ghost of colonial ambivalence itself. In their fear and prurient interest, representations of travellers in Britain mobilise the imperial uncanny.

The authentic Romani is usually characterised in writing by non-Romanies as having a preference for nomadism. In turn, this nomadism is portrayed as romantic, free, and transgressive. Retrospectively, accounts of nomadism, or vagrancy, especially in relation to the perennially exoticised Romani people, are stripped of geographical and historical specificity and consideration of the Romanies’ fellow travellers is missing. Explanations for nomadism have, according to Paula Toninato, been “taken out of context and re-interpreted according to dominant ideologies” (242). The aim of this essay has been to locate ideas about travel very much in the context of their production and, with apologies to Toninato, re-interpret them according to the repressed and manifest cultural anxieties of that time, which is, of course, also to interpret them according to the ideologies of our own time. Nineteenth-century anti-traveller discourse gives itself away, in its attention to civilization and savagery, as a manifestation of empire anxiety. In these images, the dangers of empire appear as Allan Lloyd Smith’s “shadow at the edge of Victorian consciousness” (290), causing nineteenth-century showpeople, canal-boat people, hop-pickers, and Romani people to appear uncanny as the old and familiar practices of travel become newly frightening.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, see Clifford; Bhabha; Brubaker; Fraser; and Fedorowich and Thompson.

<sup>2</sup> Excellent examples can be found in Brantlinger and Ulin; and Langan.

<sup>3</sup> Such experiences are detailed in Epstein Nord; Taylor; Richardson and Richardson; Bancroft; Bardi; and Houghton-Walker. The ‘Travellers’ of such titles do not generally, in this literature, refer to the specific non-Romani travelling groups I discuss here; rather it is a reference to groups considered by the state or public opinion to be similar to Romani people, such as Irish Travellers.

<sup>4</sup> UK census 1891, civil parish of Linthwaite, parliamentary borough of Huddersfield, Administrative county of York. Retrieved from [findmypast.co.uk](http://findmypast.co.uk).

<sup>5</sup> UK census 1891, civil parish of St. Andrews, parliamentary borough of Newcastle, administrative country of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Retrieved from [findmypast.co.uk](http://findmypast.co.uk).

<sup>6</sup> For more on extinction discourse in relation to the representation of Romani people, see my 2013 article in *Immigrants and Minorities*.

<sup>7</sup> In a neat return to Dickens’s interest in this topic, he was founding editor of the publication in which this story appears, *The Daily News*, albeit for just twenty days.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that not all non-white stage performers were displayed as “savages.” A music hall poster for the Argyle Theatre of Varieties in Birkenhead in 1895 details “twelve genuine negro boys from the Bahama Islands” who are there as “spectacle,” but of “marches, drills, and bayonet exercises” under the instruction of a Sergeant Simms. From the Argyle Theatre Collection, National Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield Library. While music hall performers travelled from place to place, they were not regularly framed by the same anti-nomadism as were other showpeople.

<sup>9</sup> See Epstein Nord and Houghton-Walker for examples.

<sup>10</sup> Fairs Act 1871, Retrieved from [http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1871/12/pdfs/ukpga\\_18710012\\_en.pdf](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1871/12/pdfs/ukpga_18710012_en.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> For more detail, see my article in *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*.

<sup>12</sup> See Meade.

<sup>13</sup> For a contrary view, see “Canal Boat Children,” *The Graphic*, 16 May 1874.

<sup>14</sup> See Young.

<sup>15</sup> Market towns where seasonal labour has been required for harvest, such as Boston in Lincolnshire, have, in the twenty-first century, become the focus of anti-migration rhetoric, particularly directed at Eastern European migrants. See “The Town that’s had enough.”

<sup>16</sup> See Garside, “Meg Merrilies and India,” and “Picturesque Figure and Landscape”; and Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism*.

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