



# University of HUDDERSFIELD

## University of Huddersfield Repository

Matthews, Jodie

Gypsies, Roma, and Irish Travellers: Histories, Perceptions, and Representations, A Review. Project Workshop Summary.

### Original Citation

Matthews, Jodie (2012) Gypsies, Roma, and Irish Travellers: Histories, Perceptions, and Representations, A Review. Project Workshop Summary. In: Gypsies, Roma, and Irish Travellers: Histories, Perceptions, and Representations. Workshop, 3 September 2012, University of Huddersfield. (Unpublished)

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/16393/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk](mailto:E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk).

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

# Gypsies, Roma, and Irish Travellers: Histories, Perceptions, and Representations, A Review

---

## **Workshop context & participants**

A workshop was held on 3 September 2012 at the University of Huddersfield to explore some of the issues raised by a review of academic literature on the history and representation of Romanies, Roma and Travellers in Britain. It was convened by Dr. Jodie Matthews (Principal Investigator – PI – of the research review) and attended by two freelance writer/journalists, a Senior Lecturer at the University of Huddersfield, an Education Development Advisor, an artist/photographer who has worked with Romani Gypsy communities, a Gypsy and Traveller Development worker and author, a contributor from Migration Yorkshire, a photographer/film-maker, a participant from a local council Learning Service, and a photographer/journalist. In addition a Romani arts worker joined the discussions via a conference call. Views in this summary are not attributed to individual participants (unless meaning is lost without attribution), partly to protect anonymity because some areas of discussion are contentious, and partly because some ideas were arrived at by consensus. Some participants elaborated on views or corrected particular points via phone conversation or by email after the event. In some instances the self-ascribed ethnicity of the participant is relevant to the point they are making. These are the only cases in which the ethnicity of the speaker is mentioned. Terminology used in this summary (e.g. ‘Romani’ or ‘Gypsy’) reflects what was used by speakers at that point in the discussion.

Amidst the prejudice suffered by the Gypsy, Roma/Romani and Irish Traveller communities today, various organisations have recognised the need to communicate some of the history of these peoples in Britain. Cultural historians and scholars of historical representation, however, recognise that much of what we know in the twenty-first century of these communities in the past is contingent on fragments, the texts that survived in archives. These texts include (but are not limited to) scholarship, official reports, literature, popular fiction, newspaper articles, art, and photography. Much of what remains was written or made by people who were not Gypsies, Roma, or Irish Travellers. As well as uncovering the history of these communities, then, academics study the context in which those texts were written, who wrote them and why. The review of academic work has examined how researchers in the arts and humanities have encountered and articulated questions of the history and representation of these communities.

The agenda for the workshop included: discussions about the general and specific impact of historical prejudice towards and/or romanticisation of these communities (for instance, what does it mean for people of these communities when there is a perception that “real” Gypsies travel in vardos and sit around the campfire, an image inspired by the past); a summary of the sort of research already being undertaken and academic views on history and representation; looking at specific historical representations of Gypsies, Roma/Romani

and Irish Travellers and their effects; exploration of instances of misunderstanding in the media about the history and culture of these groups; and a summary of how academics can better relate their research questions to the concerns of these communities. The aim of the workshop was to relate the research reviewed for this project to contemporary community politics.

As people made their introductions, some chose to describe their ethnicity, including 'Gypsy', 'Roma' and 'gorja'.<sup>1</sup> One person described herself as being 'ethnically a Gypsy but culturally a gorja', reflecting an upbringing amongst non-Gypsy people.

The workshop began with the PI contextualising the discussions in relation to the AHRC-funded project. The PI has been examining academic work undertaken since about 2002 on the history and representation of Romani, Roma, and Traveller people. She noted that academics are very good at talking to and writing for other academics, and that this workshop was one opportunity to explore the issues raised in academic work with people who are engaged in representation themselves (whether written, aural or visual), have worked with the communities in question, have considered these sorts of issues in their professional practice or have personal experience of it. The PI noted that around the turn of the twenty-first century, academics who might be described as mainstream historians, art historians and literary scholars began to turn their sustained attention to the representation of Romanies and Travellers in Britain. This seemed to happen in part because more people were taking notice of an increasingly politically-organised and obviously marginalised minority, and in part because of the effects of postcolonial studies in academic research and writing, which encouraged scholars to examine closely the ways in which different ethnic identities are constructed in cultural discourses. The PI also highlighted that despite this increase in the number of works produced on the subject (outside of the traditional area of 'Romani Studies'), still only a small number are produced by academics who self-identify as Gypsy, Romani, Roma or Traveller.

## Terms

The PI listed some of the terms used to denote ethnic groups and larger groups of people, noting the differences of opinion about their use: Gypsy; Romani; Rrom; Roma; Traveller; Irish Traveller; Scottish Traveller; Gorja.

The consensus among the group was that there is 'nothing wrong with any of these terms as long as they are correctly applied'. It was noted that 'there are also problems with translation': terms that are deeply offensive in mainland Europe are translated as "Gypsy", a commonly-used term and one that many people of Romani ethnicity are happy to use in Britain, when in fact they are racial or ethnic slurs in their original context. There was a strong objection raised to the term 'Traveller', which is so broad and wide-ranging that it cannot possibly accurately describe anyone's ethnicity; it is felt that this term is used lazily when the speaker or writer does not have the will to investigate how individuals or groups

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Gorja', meaning 'non-Gypsy' is variously spelled *gadžo*, *gorgio*, *gadjo* (*gadje* as an adjective). I have used this spelling here because it reflects contemporary British pronunciation.

want to be described and what their culture is. An analogy is the use of the term 'Asian' to refer to people in Britain from or with a heritage from Bangladesh, Pakistan, India and more, who may follow one of many religions or none and speak one or several of a multitude of languages. It has become a euphemism, used frequently by people who have something negative to say about Gypsies/Romanies and Irish or Scottish Travellers. In addition, 'Traveller' perpetuates the myth that one is only of that ethnicity if 'you roll around on four wheels'. The self-ascription to the term 'Traveller' has changed dramatically. After the Battle of the Beanfield and the Criminal Justice Act, the term was thought to mean hippies or New Age Travellers, meaning that some who had formerly used it to describe themselves returned to the use of 'Gypsy'.<sup>2</sup> Now, following various media representations and a broader understanding of definitions enshrined in law, people generally use 'Traveller' to refer to Irish Travellers. Scottish Travellers are often the forgotten group in these discussions.

Gypsies are proud to say that they are 'Gypsy' (and, for some, 'Travellers'). It was noted that people in houses may have a different perspective on appropriate terms than those living in trailers and on sites. Despite nervousness about the census and other ways in which Gypsies and Irish Travellers are marked as that ethnicity (see the next section for further discussion on this), the opinion was voiced that there does need to be some way in which these communities are enumerated in order to be able to challenge the status quo regarding housing, pitches, and rights.

Participants involved in developing teaching tools stressed the need to include a lesson on terms, because so many terms relating to these identities can be acceptable and accurate for some people and offensive for others. For instance, before discussing a prescribed theme on the school curriculum, the Holocaust, work needed to be done with children exploring the terms to be used. This reflects the practice of academics, who will usually include a footnote or an introductory section where terms are discussed.

Terms relating to sexual identity were used as an analogy in order to make the point that 'terminology is important, but it can easily become a blind alley'. 'If you are busy worrying about nomenclature when people down the road are being abused, then your priorities are wrong'. It was felt that 'while it's nice to get terms right, the definition of what is "right" is in flux' and depends on to whom one is speaking, how the term is being used and, perhaps most importantly, intent. A suggested approach to this issue was to contextualise and explain any definitions being used, and to build flexibility into any definition because the use of the term and what it is intended to mean is so important. One participant agreed that this is the case with the term 'pikey'. Someone using the term (which is generally offensive) may not mean any harm, and yet the word 'Gypsy' (which the participant uses to describe herself) can 'become a dirty word in the mouth' of someone who says it with distaste.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Battle of the Beanfield was an incident involving conflict between police and new age travellers at Stonehenge in 1985.

The discussion of terms is closely allied to ideas about 'purity', upbringing and community, because of issues about rights of ascription to various terms. One participant described how some people in the community feel that a person has to be 'pure blooded' to describe themselves as Gypsy, and that there is a need for people to claim the word Gypsy if that is what they think they are today. At the same time, however, there is a problem with the term because its etymology is thought to relate to a mistaken European gorja belief that the source of the Romani diaspora was in Egypt. Some families are uncomfortable claiming the term 'Romani' because for them it represents European Roma, people who are more likely to have dark skin, or particular families in Britain. A participant who is ethnically Gypsy but was brought up as a gorja said that there is no word that adequately describes people in that position (as is the case with people from any ethnicity brought up without a full knowledge of their background). To exclude such individuals from the category or description 'Gypsy' 'denies the richness' and heterogeneity of the culture, but there is also discomfort in claiming an identity that usually implies facing prejudice when you have not lived with those attitudes. A response to this discomfort was that your ethnicity does not depend on 'whether you have faced an eviction or not'. In other words, 'if that is your ethnicity, that is what you are'. Lived experience is not thought to be a defining feature of ethnicity, but the discussion highlighted the ambiguities in this area.

Importantly, 'these things change: they change in the community and they change in wider society'. The use of terms is historically and politically contingent, and it is imperative that academics researching histories and representation are aware of what the terms they use denote outside academia at a particular moment.

The differences between 'gorja', 'Gentile' (as opposed to Jewish) and 'white' were discussed, including the difficulties of using the term 'white' with its historical invisibility as a culturally dominant norm. However, like 'traveller', it fails to describe a culture. The term 'gorja' is not considered a negative term (but, again, context is everything). The general understanding of the etymology is that it means 'civilian'.<sup>3</sup> This led to a brief conversation about the number of military loan words in the Romani language (also called Romanes) and how this relates to the diasporic origin story of the Romani people being an army. Speakers of Romani find that other people assume the words they use to be part of a regional dialect.

It was suggested that using the term 'Romanichals' would be more appropriate (as is more frequently the case in America). 'The Manoush call themselves Manoush, the Kalderash call themselves Kalderash, the Sinti use that word, Lovara call themselves Lovara'. 'Gypsy' is, after all, considered to be an exonym based on a mistake and, like Traveller, becomes almost meaningless if we consider the different cultures, groups, families and individuals it purports to describe when it is used without context. A reservation was proffered that people do not necessarily know who they are beyond the broad terms 'Gypsy' or 'Romani', but it is usually possible to find out. The analogy was drawn with individuals who say that

---

<sup>3</sup> See Ian Hancock, *We are the Romani People* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002).

they are of African descent: slavery has deprived individuals of the knowledge of precisely where and from which country their family originally came, so they use 'African descent' as a shorthand for this. This use is potentially complicated by the tendency (described below) for gorjas to locate Gypsy identity in the past by thinking in terms of 'Gypsy descent' rather than 'contemporary Gypsy identity'. Nonetheless, academic writing usually uses the term 'Gypsy' when talking about the past and 'Gypsy-traveller' or 'Romani' when talking about the present; 'Romanichal' is rarely used by gorja writers writing about Gypsies/Romanies and may help when writing specifically about Britain (for instance when writing about indigenous Gypsies as opposed to Greek or French or other European Gypsies who have migrated to or via Britain).

## Race and ethnicity

The comment was made that 'if you ask any Gypsy person what it is that makes them a Gypsy, they will say "it's in my blood"'. Use of such terminology in a formal setting can make many feel uncomfortable, as the notion of 'Gypsy blood' seems to reinforce what anti-racist education is trying to push against. However, an important point was made by one of the participants that the Gypsy community uses such words to refer specifically to kinship and to practices that one's family and community have followed for generations: this is not a question of using the categories delineated by racial science. Similarly, those concerned with anti-racism are often offended when Gypsy people use the term 'breed', but its use relates to families. This is evident in the importance of family names when discussing identity, who belongs to which group, and culture. While one interpretation of this vocabulary ('blood' and 'breed') may see it as reinforcing ideas about inherited characteristics and bloodlines, at the centre of such conversations is who knows whom, who is married to whom, who understands the culture and who does not. Having noted this, participants who describe themselves as Gypsies said that the Gypsy community needs to confront ideas about racial purity more, because people are very quick to label themselves 'true-blooded', denigrating others they consider to be 'a bunch of half-breeds'. There was a call for political unity in the face of prejudice rather than this sort of internal disagreement amongst communities. When terms like 'Gypsy' are so politically charged and speak of oppression and abuse as much as they do identity and culture, it is little wonder that there is a great deal of anxiety about who can assume the right to speak *as* a member of the community and *for* that community. However, it was felt that Gypsy communities in particular need to discuss these issues more. The problems with claiming Gypsy identity for economic, political or representational gain are discussed further below.

By way of example, one participant had engaged in a large funded project exploring the family histories of Gypsies in the South West, and found many examples of Gypsy families with gorja members. Such family history research is infrequently referred to by academics and is noted as an area of which academic histories could take more notice.

There was a degree of nervousness about the concept of testing for the Romani haplotype, with references to the Leicester British Romany Ancestry project.<sup>4</sup> Participants talked about the cultural impact of people finding out that they did not have the haplotype, and whether there is any value in having a piece of paper that confirms your Romani identity. The daily experience of the inadequacies of immoveable racial or ethnic boundaries is often explored through skin colour and the way people look. Comparisons of skin colour and the comments it engenders were discussed with enthusiasm, demonstrating that the conception that all Roma or Romanichals should look the same is a racist one.

One participant noted that when describing oneself as a 'Gypsy', people fail to hear 'Gypsy', hearing instead 'Gypsy background', as if there cannot possibly be someone in front of them who ascribes to that ethnicity and culture. This coincides with how much writing about Gypsies locates their culture in the past, and indicates an imperative for people writing histories which include Gypsy life in Britain (and specialist histories) to relate that history to the present and contemporary life for people who identify as Gypsies/Romani, Roma, or Irish and Scottish Traveller.

Another workshop participant described the big differences between Roma and gorja cultures existing side by side in parts of Europe, with parents encouraging children to keep with their own. An analogy between the Kurds and Gypsies was drawn, due to the many similarities between the cultures, rituals, lifestyles, and treatment of these groups at the hands of the majority population. This comparison is not a frequently made one, and is an area flagged for further elaboration and research.

## **The Shadow of the Holocaust/Porraimos**

In discussing British Gypsy identity, the shadow of the Nazi extermination of Roma and Sinti in the mid-twentieth century in Europe looms large. For instance, when describing whether someone has the right to call themselves a Gypsy, the comment 'if it was good enough to send you to the gas chambers, then it's good enough to use to describe who you are' was made. This is not seen as an event that happened elsewhere, but something that is ever-present as something that could have happened here. Chapters in British history can be seen as being just as sinister as the Nazi Holocaust, such as the Egyptian Acts of the Early Modern period. These are thought by many to be less accessible than the twentieth-century atrocities, but there are plenty of historical sources detailing them.

Gypsies in Britain relate instances of their ethnicity being recorded (e.g. Christening records being marked with a 'G') to a suspicion that those records will be used for something akin to Hitler's exterminations, and explains wariness about completing census forms. The aversion of some of the older generation of British Gypsies to local authority sites can potentially be attributed to fears about concentration camps in Europe.

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www2.le.ac.uk/projects/impact-of-diasporas/the-romany-in-britain-project>

There was disquiet about the way in which Roma and Sinti murders are excluded from Holocaust memorial in Europe (including Britain) and America. While there are individuals who work to commemorate the Holocaust and are strong supporters of Romani people, the Roma and Sinti experience is routinely ignored and efforts to include their stories are met with indifference and even anger. The term 'porrajmos' (Romani for 'great devouring' and promoted as an alternative to Shoah or Holocaust by Ian Hancock amongst others) was discussed, but the question was asked: 'Why do we have to coin a phrase from our own language to say: "this shouldn't have happened to us?"' The discursive differences in the Nazi treatment of Jews and Gypsies (as well as disabled people, homosexuals, trades unionists and other targets of Nazi extermination policy) was discussed, and there is a danger in reinscribing these ideologies (and the European anti-Gypsy prejudice that preceded and informed them) if the groups affected are categorised along scales of victimhood, viewed as 'criminal elements', and others are forgotten entirely.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, 'when people were sold as slaves, Gypsies were sold too. When people were exported to Australia, Gypsies were sent too. The perception is that 'that didn't happen because we were Gypsies, it happened because they "were all thieves"'. In other words, the targeting of Gypsies as Gypsies is not a narrative that appears in mainstream history enough.

## Histories

Some academic quotations about Romani history were used as the impetus for discussion about the ways in which we talk about Gypsy and Roma history. For instance, Wim Willems' assertion that the 'history of the persecution' of people labelled as Gypsies establishes 'the reality of their existence' (from *In Search of the True Gypsy: From Enlightenment to Final Solution*, 1997) was used to discuss the politics of seeing Gypsy history as one of struggle (and less about celebration). As described above, even within a history of persecution some groups' experience is relegated and others' prioritised. The phrase 'host community', also

---

<sup>5</sup> For work on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust see (amongst others) Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, *Gypsies under the Swastika* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2009); *The National Socialist Genocide of the Sinti and Roma: Catalogue of the Permanent Exhibition in the State Museum of Auschwitz* (Heidelberg: Dokumentations und Kulturzentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma, 2003); Eve Rosenhaft, 'Blacks and Gypsies in Nazi Germany: The Limits of the 'Racial State'', *History Workshop Journal* 72, no. 1 (2011) and 'A Photographer and His "Victims" 1934-1964: Reconstructing a Shared Experience of the Romani Holocaust' in *The Role of the Romanies: Images and Counter-Images of 'Gypsies'/Romanies in European Cultures*, edited by Susan Tebbut and Nicholas Saul, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004); Huub van Baar, 'From "Time-Banditry" to the Challenge of Established Historiographies: Romany Contributions to Old and New Images of the Holocaust' in *Multi-Disciplinary Approaches to Romany Studies*, edited by Michael Stewart and Márton Rövid, 153-71 (Budapest: Central European University 2010). See also the Museum of Resistance and Deportation in Lyon, highlighted by a participant at the workshop. [http://www.chrd.lyon.fr/chrd/sections/fr/pied/english\\_1](http://www.chrd.lyon.fr/chrd/sections/fr/pied/english_1).

used by Willems' translators to describe the gorjas amongst whom Gypsies lived and travelled, was considered to be an unhelpful one because of its suggestion of parasites, an extra, or an other.

Yaron Matras' argument that Romani nationalists explicitly tried to create Romani history to 'give pride to young Roma searching for their identity' (from 'The Role of Language in Mystifying and Demystifying Gypsy Identity' in *The Role of the Romanies*, 2004) was discussed. There are seen to be problems with using Romani diasporic history in the service of Gypsy identity formation. For instance, in the Balkans young Romani women are dressing in saris and translating Sanskrit texts into Romani. Their focus is entirely eastwards, when 'it should also be down at their feet'. This is an understandable response to current conditions, however: 'people look further back and further east because where they are standing feels like foreign land'.

Thomas Acton's view that 'in rewriting their own history, Roma are also giving Europeans back part of *their* story' (from 'Romani Politics, Scholarship, and the Discourse of Nation-Building' in *Gypsies and The Problem of Identities: Contextual, Constructed and Contested*, 2006) was thought to be useful, but can also be seen to exclude the Roma from the category of Europeans. Acton means non-Roma Europeans, but this demonstrates the divisiveness of the language used to write histories, particularly specialist histories of Gypsy and Roma experiences. The suggestion that Roma and Gypsy history is also British and European history was generally agreed.

In her 2002 PhD thesis, *Responses to Gypsies in Britain, 1900-1939*, Helen Carter suggests that the 'occasions when the Gypsies were not perceived to be a problem do not [...] tend to be written about in history'. Workshop participants slightly disagreed with this, suggesting instead that these histories are there, you just need to know where to look. For instance, a participant who had been engaged in archival family history research with Gypsies had found many unnoticed documents relating to their families. While surnames can be important for identification, they can also be used to hide and alternative names or a wife's surname might have been adopted for all sorts of reasons. People may not always have had birth certificates but they were usually christened. An in-depth knowledge of family linkages and the way that relationships between and within families work in Gypsy culture was important for the family history project mentioned. In another project, a 'cultural audit' of a folk museum with a strong focus on domestic interiors enabled Gypsy visitors to illuminate the collection because their family members had made or sold or had specialist knowledge of particular items. Gypsy history in Britain may be complicated to retrieve, but it is not impossible. Source texts are there but not necessarily catalogued in a way that facilitates writing a traditional history. Keywords used for searching digitised collections are often too literal or do not relate closely enough to the experience of Gypsy life in Britain, thus more work with and by Romani/Gypsy people, or people of that heritage, would reveal more appropriate research strategies.

The histories of Gypsies in Britain were generally discussed at the workshop as plural (and separate to those of European Roma and Irish Travellers in Britain), with an acceptance of the existence of competing theories about the source of the Romani diaspora. Many of these theories have been disproved but retain some currency for articulating how histories are fluid, depend on the perspective from and moment in which they are told, and for what purpose they are written or spoken. For instance, a desire persists among some people of Christian faith to find an explanation of who they are in the Bible, meaning that people continue to discuss the origin of the diaspora in relation to Christ's crucifixion, or in relation to Cain and Abel. Academically, there was an acknowledgement that different historical perspectives come from different disciplines, and that all the elements of the British Gypsy story proposed following rigorous research are part of that history: an Indian source, mixing with 'sturdy beggars', links with other people who were part of the English landscape. The other side to a recognition of the plurality of historical narratives is that people rewrite histories to serve contemporary politics. For instance, a Gypsy might say that he or she cannot live in a house and no-one in his/her family has ever lived in a house, when in all likelihood his or her family history involves people living in all sorts of different accommodation at various times of the year. This is not to say that anyone should be forced into culturally inappropriate housing, but that histories are being used emotively and not necessarily accurately to fight for human rights. Histories are also used inappropriately: evictions at Dale Farm were described by some as ethnic cleansing, which most workshop participants thought was problematic for those who had seen Auschwitz or visited the Balkans. Irish Travellers drawing on Romani history is also problematic; this community has its own history of persecution and prejudice in Britain without appropriating the struggles of others. Assuming a Gypsy history when it is not yours to deploy was viewed by some participants as a questionable form of protest.

Crucially, it was noted, 'the lack of Gypsy academics means that we rely on outsiders to tell us who we are, and we have lost our own origins'. Romani/Gypsy people in Britain have become used to other people telling their stories. At its most basic, legislators have written the history of Gypsies in Britain.

In terms of ways forward, participants suggested that more 'hidden histories' should be taught in schools, with a greater emphasis on our Gypsy history present in the landscape and in our literature. A 'cultural infusion' approach can be taken to curriculum planning. Remembering our histories gives us a place in contemporary society. We should not be constantly returning to the perpetrator's view and need to tell the multiple histories of the Irish in Britain, the Irish Travellers, the history of Scottish Travellers, the histories of Roma in Britain and the histories of Gypsies in Britain.

## One voice?

One participant asked about the likelihood of Irish Travellers, Gypsies and Roma working effectively together for political gain and forgetting prejudice towards each other. A participant who had been to Dale Farm had been saddened not to see other Gypsy people there to fight for the cause of the Irish Travellers. Another participant suggested that 'it's not our way; we'd rather move on'. Misrepresentations in the media contribute to the problem, and when Gypsy/Romani people point out that they are not Irish Travellers as a point of fact rather than any form of judgement, they can be labelled snobbish or racist. It was agreed amongst several participants that a popular uprising (like the Bradford 'riots' which made people reassess how they worked with different ethnic minorities in the town) would be greeted with 'what do you expect from a bunch of Gypsies?' Romani/Gypsy people are not offered the opportunity to express themselves in anger, or even to behave badly as individuals, without it being attributed to their being Gypsies. These frustrations are multiplied when the majority population expects Gypsies and Travellers to voice their dissatisfaction through systems that actively discriminate against them.

Romani/Gypsy people, Roma and Irish and Scottish Travellers all face discrimination, persecution and prohibitions on leading the way of life they want to. It was agreed that there is a need to get together and speak with one voice but that this must be done on an honest basis. Individuals from these communities can speak for and with each other as long as it is on the basis of human rights, not exclusively Gypsy rights.

## Representation

As the workshop turned to look at representation, some of the participants discussed examples of their own work in this area. Artur Conka showed his film *Lunik IX-A* about the living conditions for some Roma in Slovakia.<sup>6</sup> Relations in Britain between Roma and indigenous Romani people was another area of discussion following the film. They reveal the concept of a transnational Roma/Romani identity to be something of a myth; while Romani people in Britain may feel sorry for the people in Artur's film, they are unlikely to see them as 'their people'. Those involved with the 'Light and Life' evangelical movement may be more likely to subscribe such transnationalism as would, naturally, political Roma nationalist activists. Roma immigrants to Britain are often in more urgent need of financial support and access to services and while this is not a major point of contention at the moment, it is feared that British Gypsies may start to resent this group. The opinion was offered that in terms of the state, supporting Roma means helping immigrants, which may not always be popular but is fairly uncomplicated in this case. State support for Gypsies means acknowledging centuries of sanctioned oppression and that is too difficult and risky for some. The current agenda is about assimilation rather than recognising the fractures between communities and the historical causes of this.

---

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUFUkVivh\\_M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUFUkVivh_M)

Ciara discussed her photography projects with Roma and British Gypsies. As a photographer and journalist she does not feel comfortable speaking for Gypsies and Travellers, but wants to help people from those communities to tell their stories. One of the methods that she uses is to use photographs she has taken to interview subjects and allow them to talk about what the image means, a significant shift in the representation of Gypsies/Romanies and Roma by gypsy artists and writers. Ciara's text includes some Romani phrases as spoken by her Roma subject. Academics have been known to be negative about representations such as this, maintaining themselves as the guardians of the language's written accuracy and ignoring regional and personal variations.

The representation of Gypsies/Romanies, Roma and Irish Travellers in the media was discussed to some extent (though the main focus of the workshop was not intended to be contemporary media portrayals). The strategy of 'Jewification', where the word 'Gypsy' in newspaper articles is replaced by the word 'Jew', was discussed. While this can be effective in highlighting the racist language used by the British media, it can also be problematic because it is such an emotive method. Racism on the internet, from forum trolls to Twitter and Facebook was briefly discussed but without suggestions for countering it. An additional challenge of digital media is the rapid circulation of images: meanings are changed (sometimes deliberately), images misappropriated, captions lost, and contexts changed.

The group looked at images from fashion shoots and interior design images which romanticise a mythical 'Gypsy' culture. (Some of these were provided by the PI and Nettie Edwards brought along other examples). It was felt that these are often a cultural celebration, but the celebration of a stereotype. Nothing can be done to stop designers appropriating Gypsy culture, but these images were not viewed as particularly dangerous. Gypsy and Roma culture was described as enriching mainstream culture with images of Gypsy culture all around us, but there is work to be done for people to recognise it. There was some distaste at the lack of truthfulness about some of these fashion and mainstream images, particularly when they are used to market autobiographies or other self-representations by Romani people. Some of these exotic images and tales have been used by Gypsies for their own benefit for a long time, such as the air of mystique associated with the practice of dukkerin. Participants also talked about the amount of misinformation that the Gypsy historians and linguists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were fed, which can be seen as Romani people subverting representations made from outside their culture, and also creating myths both for mischief and to take some of the power away from these educated, privileged white men who considered themselves to have all the knowledge.

There are some positive representations coming to the fore. For instance, Philip Pulman's 'Gyptians' from the *His Dark Materials* series are considered to be positive characters. Autobiographies are also seen as an important area of self-representation, but the publishers' keenness for these to fit the genre of misery memoir is problematic. It was suggested that it seems to be presently impossible for Gypsies to be allowed to write

analytical accounts of their own history; they can write personal accounts, but people say they are 'too close' to the subject to write analysis. A response to this would be the move towards personal accounts as part of analytical writing following trends in second-wave feminist writing within academia and, later, postcolonial writing. For mainstream audiences at the moment, it seems that publishers are most interested in announcing that 'the noble savage speaks' rather than allowing for what Ian Hancock has called the 'educated Gypsy'.<sup>7</sup> There was a call amongst participants for more contemporary fiction depicting Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller experience, and more mainstream representation in all genres and forms.

The group considered specific examples of representation from the archive. Having examined Gypsy absences from the archive, the group was able to discuss 'false Gypsy presences' such as the painting of *Salomé* by Henri Regnault (1870). This was described as 'very gypsy' by reviewers, despite featuring neither a Gypsy subject nor model. This was compared to a Kate Moss 'gypsy' photoshoot, and incredulity that this should represent Gypsiness was voiced, particularly concerning the model's near-nakedness (in fact the shoot was taken with New Travellers). The connotations of overt feminine sexuality in both, and murderous passion in *Salomé* were disturbing. The issue of gorja actors playing Gypsy roles was also discussed, with the analogy used of a call amongst disabled activists and actors: 'nothing about us without us'. The painting *Epsom Downs* by Alfred Munnings (1919) was seen as a more positive representation from history because it shows Gypsies not as exotic, not as passive objects of study, but as part of an event and part of the community.

Gypsy people sometimes 'claim' the characters from literature, describing who they think particular characters from particular works (often marginal ones) are based on; literature thus becomes a valuable tool for writing history. People may be wrong about the characters, and there may be much exaggeration, but it demonstrates the relevance of these representations to the community. The stories told in literary and fictional accounts help to make up the history of these communities in Britain.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ian Hancock, *Danger! Educated Gypsy! Selected Essays*, ed by Dileep Karanth (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2010).