Delaine Le Bas: Stranger in Silver Walking on Air

Communities

Roma and Traveller communities have been part of Europe for centuries, yet their histories are often disregarded and forgotten by broader British populations and their identities misunderstood. In the UK, the term 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT)' is widely used as an umbrella term in government policy, an acronym that groups together distinct ethnic groups – each with their own languages, traditions, and experiences.

The G Word

'English Gypsies' (or Romani) are descendants of people that came from India and settled across England and Scotland as early as the fifteenth century. In Scotland, there are Scottish Lowland Gypsies, who have their own histories and traditions, and Border Gypsies who share many cultural links to Romani communities in northern England. Welsh Gypsies, also known as the Kale, are predominantly based in the North East. Genetic studies and oral history traditions place their historic lineage in northern India.

The term 'Gypsy' is a historic abbreviation from the sixteenth-century word 'Gypcian'. This was short for 'Egyptian'. It stems from the early mistaken belief that Romani migrated from Egypt in North Africa. In 1971, the first World Congress of the international civil rights movement of the Roma in London voted to replace the word 'gypsy' with 'Roma' as the broad term for members of the minority. Today, many consider 'gypsy' a racist slur that erases Romani culture and heritage. Many others have 'reclaimed' the term and associate with it proudly – for some with a sense of *'I can call myself this but you can't'*.

Roma

While the word 'Roma' can be used as an umbrella term for multiple communities, it is also used specifically for recent migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, who also have Romani heritage. There have been waves of migration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but this rapidly increased after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Many have arrived (and continue to) in the UK as economic migrants with minimal resources, while some come as refugees. Within their home countries, many Roma have been subject to forced labour, had their children taken away by the state and been victims of state-sanctioned violence – sometimes extending to genocide and ethnic cleansing. Often, they continue to suffer the impact of the Holocaust, where up to 500,000 Roma people are estimated to have been killed – up to 50% of the 1 million population of Roma in Europe at that time.

Travellers

Also under the 'GRT' umbrella are a variety of Traveller communities. These are historically distinct from Romani and Roma; Irish Travellers (also known as Pavees or Mincéirs) and Scottish Travellers (Ceàrdannan, Gaelic for 'Craftsmen') are indigenous to their regions, without a genetic relationship to Romani or Roma - although they do occasionally intermarry and some families thus hold combined lineage.

In Scotland, Travellers are further recognised as distinct communities in Scottish Highland Travellers and Scottish Lowland Travellers; not to be confused with Scottish Lowland Gypsies, who do have Romani heritage.

Other groups

Beyond these distinct communities, many other people are sometimes included under the term 'GRT'. These include occupational travellers who travel for work, such as show people, bargees and lifestyle travellers, often called 'New Age travellers'. While some crossover occurs with the communities detailed above, these groups do not intrinsically hold a shared genetic heritage and do not hold legal protection as ethnic minorities. However, non-ethnic travellers are also often subject to disenfranchisement due to their ways of living. Some community groups signal extended support to these communities with use of the term 'GRTSB' ('Gypsies, Roma, Travellers, Show People and Bargee').

Nomadism

Why then, despite their complex historical lineages, are all of these distinct communities grouped together? The principal link between them is a relationship to nomadism – a way of life in which families or communities regularly travel from place to place, often seasonally, rather than staying permanently in the one domestic site. However, they will often return to the same locations again and again, which complicates a simple understanding of the notion of 'home'.

For Romani and Traveller communities, many have recent practices of nomadism, sometimes travelling in wagons (as alluded to in the 16-spoked wheel on the Romani flag). Nomadic life has a complex relationship with broader social practices and this disconnection has led to societal suspicion and state discrimination. By contrast, while Roma communities' ancestors have often been nomadic, in twenty-first-century UK they generally are not; where their direct relations still in Europe sometimes do engage in nomadic practice, this is often to flee violence and persecution rather than as a cultural practice.

This is one four essays produced alongside the exhibition.

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