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Scottish Gypsy Travellers

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Abstract

Although a population recognised externally for their itinerancy, the mobility of Gypsy Travellers in Scotland has been fundamentally misunderstood. Endowed with creative power, mobility exists for Gypsy Travellers not only in times of transit, but continuously through an imagined connection to the spirit of travel. The dominant settled population’s understanding of movement, which has informed past policy-making, has overlooked the significance of mobility in making meaning, resulting in a system in which the travel of Gypsy Travellers has been effectively illegitimated, and their community further marginalised. By challenging notions of place as fixed by necessity, we can see that ‘place’ can be created through movement, which occurs physically as well as through imagination and anticipation.

Keywords: Gypsy Travellers, mobility, place, Scotland

Introduction

‘While you’re shifting, you see places and things most people don’t see, because it’s a limited view you have, being just in one place. Even though I’ve been here for years I’m always thinking: I could move somewhere new. I’m not tied here. Travelling’s in my blood.’

(interview with an informant on site).

‘Is black coffee alright?’ Brenda asks.

I am sitting inside the trailer where she lives alone, situated on a council-run Gypsy Traveller site a short bus ride outside the city centre. Ten minutes ago, I arrived at Kirkleith for the first time and was met by Brenda, a friendly woman in her sixties, at the gate of her pitch, where she welcomed me into her trailer. Immaculately kept, the trailer could be mistaken for a show-

model; countertops sparkle, the sofa is covered in a protective plastic layer, and an array of family photographs are pinned by the door.

‘Twenty years I’ve been here, on this site. I’ve moved around in that time, mind, but I first came to Kirkleith twenty years ago’.

‘Where are you originally from?’ I ask.

‘My mother’s from Glasgow, father’s from Edinburgh, but we travelled so much when I was young’. Brenda’s dog Scruffy, a terrier-cross (although crossed with what, she is not sure), lies beside me.

‘I’ve been all over Britain, but I’m Scottish,’ Brenda says. ‘I’ve been here for a while but that’s not to say I won’t move again’.

Those who had worked with Gypsy Travellers before warned me to watch out for being given a chipped mug: ‘it’s a test’, they told me, ‘to see if you will mention it or not. That’s taboo, for Travellers, to drink out a chipped mug. So, they’ll have a wee laugh at you if you do’¹. Brenda brings over my coffee, sitting down across from me. ‘Gypsy Travellers, we’re so misunderstood. So that’s why I thought I should talk to you, so you can get an idea of our ways and how we live, why we travel’. Smiling, she hands me my coffee. In a perfectly intact mug.

My research plan was initially born out of an interest in how Gypsy Traveller identity was negotiated when travelling stopped. Kirkleith’s council-run Gypsy Traveller site appeared to me as an intriguing location: somewhere at the intersection of the Gypsy Traveller movement and state bureaucracy, two phenomena which throughout history have been presented as incompatible (Shubin, 2011a: 502). Located in central Scotland, Kirkleith consists of twenty pitches, all of which were occupied during my fieldwork period. The provision of council-run Gypsy Traveller sites began in the 1960s (Hawes and Perez, 1996: 24) and while demand for places is high, it is, contentiously, not compulsory for councils to provide a Gypsy Traveller site.

It did not take long, however, for me to realise that my prior assumption of the Gypsy Traveller movement was flawed. Within my first few interviews I discovered that mobility was intrinsic

¹ Gypsy Traveller codes of purity and pollution are based on an inside/outside dichotomy, wherein the ‘internal’ and ‘external body’ must be kept separate. Drinking from chipped or cracked crockery is deemed *mochadi* (ritually unclean) and is seen to contaminate the internal body (Okely, 1983: 80-81).

to the lives of my informants in ways that I, as a settled person, had not fully grasped: travel was not simply a cultural practice, but a way of living – indeed, a way of being. The centrality of movement was made apparent not just through direct questions on travelling, but from the presence of travel in conversations about seemingly unrelated topics. My informants spoke of mobility as something at the core of who they were: present in the mind, even when the body seemed settled, was the memory of past travel and the anticipation of future travel. The choice to live on the site was not a rejection of movement, rather one way to live a mobile life within a socio-political climate where movement is heavily regulated. Despite being recognised by the government as a community holding a marginalised position within Scotland (EHRC, 2018), the traditional itinerancy of Gypsy Travellers has been challenged by a series of harsh laws and penalties throughout Scottish History (Clark and Greenfields, 2006: 133-134).

I argue that past government efforts to regulate Gypsy Traveller movement have failed because of their grounding in sedentarist ideology – policies have been wrongly designed to accommodate the type of movement practiced by settled people, not the type of movement practiced by Gypsy Travellers. Attempts to regulate movement within a sedentary framework aspire more to assimilate than accommodate. By imposing essentialist understandings of movement and place upon Gypsy Travellers, we fail to understand the complex ways in which mobility comes to shape their mode of engagement with the world (Shubin, 2011b: 1938). Gypsy Traveller mobility exists on a continuum, which encompasses physical and non-physical movement. Shubin writes that ‘movement as existence in passage generates spaces of rupture, animates cultural fields...and continuously reenergises mobile lives’ (2011b: 1943) – the spirit of *shifting* (a Gypsy Traveller word for ‘travelling’), which was central to the lives of Gypsy Travellers I met, emerges not from points of departure or destination, but from movement itself.

Methodology

My findings have emerged from my own observations, as well as semi-formal interviews and informal conversations. Interviews took place inside the trailers (caravans) of my informants, which I was kindly invited into. I did not take notes during interviews as some of my informants had informed me they were not literate. Although this meant I was unable to document conversations in real-time, I felt that note-taking or audio-recording would detract from the fluidity of conversation and, more pressingly, emphasise an imbalance in the ‘familiar asymmetrical relationship’ of the interviewer and the interviewee (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002: 3; Riley et al, 2003). Fieldnotes were instead written immediately after interviews, where

I would document conversations in as much detail as possible, also recording particularly memorable quotes.

In an attempt to minimise the aforementioned power disparity, I explained to my informants that they were free to redact statements which they were not happy with, to not answer questions and to end the interview at any time. My informants, of course, held the power to do these things regardless of my 'permission', yet I hope that my explicit expression reflected to them my acknowledgement of the history of misrepresentation Gypsy Travellers have faced (Clark and Greenfields, 2006: 237) and my gratitude that, in spite of this, they were willing to give up their time to speak to me.

I cannot claim to speak on the experience of all Scottish Gypsy Travellers as my findings emerge from localised research undertaken in a limited time-span, and of course there is no singular 'Gypsy Traveller experience'. Instead, I present the experiences of my informants as they were told to me and lived out in front of me and invite further analytical inquiry into the field. I believe the nature of ethnographic fieldwork places anthropologists in a uniquely privileged position from which to research the mobility of Gypsy Travellers, which should be understood for its heterogeneity, rather than through external attempts to discern pattern.

Background

Despite the recognition of Gypsy Travellers as itinerant people, the mobility which they practice is grossly misrepresented and misunderstood in popular imagination. The romanticised idea of the wandering nomad (Okely, 1983: 30) mistakenly views Gypsy Travellers as a socially and culturally isolated group, and throughout their history in Scotland negative stereotypes have presented the movement of Gypsy Travellers as threatening to the settled population (Cresswell, 2006: 25). Modern-day discrimination against Gypsy Travellers has been spurred on, in part, through dog-whistle politics, where 'Gypsy Travellers' are codified as a 'problem' to be solved (Clark and Greenfields, 2006: 1-2).

An increasing number of Gypsy Travellers within the UK are moving into bricks and mortar accommodation, a pattern in part caused by institutional and social constraints (Shubin, 2011b: 1931) which vilify movement as deviation. Yet, it should also be noted that many Gypsy Travellers live happily within bricks and mortar houses, retaining an emotional connection to mobility. Itinerancy does not have to be constant to be central to the lives of Gypsy Travellers: the imagined potential of travel also serves as an important mode of engagement with the world.

Drawing upon the work of Shubin, who has carried out extensive fieldwork with Gypsy Travellers in Scotland, I shall here adopt the notion of ‘travelling as a way of being’ (2011b: 1942) to consider how mobility is lived by Gypsy Travellers. Through exploring the ways in which practices of actual and imagined mobility were important to my informants, I shall argue that shifting is the primary mode through which they engaged with the world. I shall also explain how Gypsy Traveller mobility has been misunderstood due to the settled population’s preoccupation with bounded definitions of ‘punctual’ movement. The success of policies to improve outcomes for Gypsy Travellers within Scotland is dependent upon engagement with mobility. A misunderstanding of mobility, namely that mobility only concerns actual movement, has been at the core of much anti-Gypsy sentiment (Hawes and Perez, 1996: 151-152).

Mobilities and Accommodation

Fixity is established, as in ‘sedentarist’ thinking, as the logical and moral alternative to mobility (Cresswell, 2006), informing the idea that housing is a viable solution for Gypsy Traveller issues. Mobility in ‘the West’ is coded as a threat within a system of ‘sedentarist metaphysics’; ‘a disorder in the system, a thing to control’ (Cresswell, 2006: 25-26). Such ideas have led to state-regulation of mobility and nomadism, with government attempts to assimilate Gypsy Travellers into a ‘settled’ way of life (Hawes and Perez, 1996: 171-172). Historical government preference of bricks and mortar assimilation over accommodating mobility has resulted in a chronic shortage of council-run sites across Scotland, with many existing sites too small to meet local demand (Clark and Greenfields, 2006: 112-113). While these sites urgently need attention, Hilary Third, secretariat to the Scottish Government’s Ministerial Working Group on Gypsy/Travellers, expressed to me the additional importance of a focus on accommodation provisions for those who are actively shifting, as, in her words, ‘it is their cultural right to do so’.

While the fluidity which characterises Gypsy Traveller movement may seem incompatible with processes of bureaucratic policy making, the Scottish Government plans to re-open traditional Gypsy Traveller stopping places which will provide facilities for those in transit, although only accommodating a controlled mobility. A parliamentary motion for the re-opening of stopping places was passed in June 2018. Due to the oral nature of Gypsy Traveller society (Reith, 2008: 77) many stopping places are not officially documented. Government efforts to re-open

stopping places, therefore, will be undertaken collaboratively, with guidance sought from Gypsy Travellers.

Governing Mobility

Here I shall also draw upon Malkki's perspective on 'sedentarism': the dominant settled population's system of thought which prioritises territorial connection to the land and views mobility as a menace. Movement becomes a digression from the settled notion of a 'home' or 'place' which is controlled and controllable. Sedentarist ideas become codified as natural due to their inclusion in 'ordinary language, in nationalist discourses, and in scholarly studies of nations, nationalism, and refugees' (Malkki 1992: 25; Cresswell, 2006: 32). Dominant sedentary ideas have been 'adopted by every non-nomadic community' (Clark and Greenfields, 2006: 134) and the use of such discourse to inform law-making can be highly damaging for Gypsy Travellers and other nomadic groups as the moral preference for fixity (Malkki, 1992: 30) redefines mobility as atypical. These ideas serve as a means for the justification of discrimination against itinerant communities. Sedentarist notions of mobility are insufficient for understanding Gypsy Traveller mobility, which does not necessarily involve actual movement.

A Mobile Temporality

Considered within a sedentarist ideology, travel is measured between clear points of departure and arrival from an equilibrium: leaving one's settled state and returning to one's settled state. This was not the case for my informants, who did not consider travelling in these terms of linear progression: the shift between periods of stillness and periods of movement can be planned, unplanned and interrupted, shaped by material and emotional circumstance (Shubin and Swanson, 2010: 923). When the start and finish points of travel are afforded prioritisation, the process of mobility itself is neglected and 'movement is entirely subordinated to the positions it connects' (Massumi, 2002: 3). Such 'punctual' definitions of movement do not allow for adequate understanding of what happens during periods of mobility (Massumi, 2002: 3-4). Shifting, for my informants, was not a means to an end, rather a specific mode of engaging with the world; meaning did not emerge from the start or end point of the journey, if indeed such movement can be considered to have a start or end point, rather emerging through the process of travelling itself. As one informant explained: 'You would leave in the morning and you didn't always know where you'd end up...every day a different view out the window, it's all about that freedom'. Sedentarist efforts to 'ground' movement with a 'bounded and fixed

framework' neglect the meaning which is made within 'performative practices of mobility' (Shubin, 2011a: 512), and therefore cannot fully understand the creative power of movement.

The anticipation of mobility informs behaviour and preferences, with many Gypsy Travellers who live in bricks and mortar housing also owning a caravan to retain a pragmatic connection to the potential to travel (Kenrick and Clark, 1999: 29). Mobility serves as a means through which Gypsy Travellers can connect to their heritage, or as my informants often put it: 'the Traveller way'. By challenging dominant sedentary understandings, we can see movement is not just a physical act, but a way of living. At the crux of government failure to accommodate Gypsy Travellers is a misunderstanding of mobility. The imposition of a punctual understanding of mobility upon Gypsy Traveller movement is problematic as Gypsy Travellers I met did not practice mobility in punctual terms.

'Travelling...well, we call it *shifting*'

Historically, the nomadism of Gypsy Travellers was facilitated by the mobile nature of the tents, trailers and wagons which they chose to live in, allowing for flexible travel (Okely, 1983: 53). My informants spoke of shifting as their 'history' and 'the Traveller way'. Shifting was a way to engage with family and friends, a point of departure from which they understood their identity and 'place' within the world. Gypsy Traveller identity was not lost during stationary periods as mobility could still be practiced emotionally and imaginatively. Through living in trailers my informants kept the potential to travel open.

Upon attending the Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month concert in Edinburgh this summer, I enjoyed a performance by Scottish Traveller Jess Smith, who sang a number of traditional Gypsy Traveller songs, including an acapella rendition of the well-known Yellow on the Broom; a song which expresses the treasured relationship Gypsy Travellers have traditionally had with the natural environment:

*Oh, the scaldies call us tinker dirt and they sconce our bairns in school,
But who cares what a scaldy says, for scaldy's but a fool.
They never hear the yorlin's song, nor see the flax in bloom,
For they're aye cooped up in houses when the yellow's on the broom.*

[Scaldy = settled person.]

The audience, made up largely of Gypsy Travellers, were visibly moved by the lyrical sentiment: taking to their feet they swayed together, gently singing along. By the time the song reached its final verse, the performance resembled more of a chorus, followed by rapturous applause.

Mobility exists in the lives of Gypsy Travellers, though, through more than the physical act of travelling: engagement with mobility can occur in an emotional sense. Travelling can be understood as a ‘state of mind’ which occurs symbolically and through imagination. Even for those who could be considered to have ‘settled’, the possibility to reconnect with travel remains important (Shubin, 2011b: 1931-1932). Connection to mobility crystallises Gypsy Traveller identity and allows for adaptability and freedom (Hawes and Perez, 1996: 8). Mobility can occur within the mind, or through conversations with family and friends; Claire smiled as she told me of the frequent phone-calls she had with family currently shifting, during which they would update her on their whereabouts; ‘they’re moving all over the place...when I phoned they said to me “we’re in London” and when I phoned again, maybe one or two days later, they said “we’re in Wales now, we’re at the coast!”’. Although Claire did not move her trailer off Kirkleith this summer, she felt connected to mobility through the stories of her family, enjoying hearing that they had stopped at places she remembered from her childhood travels. While not physically moving with her family, the emotional potency of their telephone updates led her on her own imagined journey, reminding her of her shifting past and hinting at future travel.

Mobility as Place-making

Relph writes that it is essential to the human experience to form links with significant places. Without these links he sees the only future for humans as one where ‘placelessness’ takes over and places do not matter (1976: 147); ‘to be human is to have and to know your place’. Place becomes an ontological starting point, an orientation from which one looks out on the world (1976: 38). Essentialist ideas construct a notion of place in opposition with mobility and see it as necessary for one’s understanding of oneself and one’s society that one has a situated and stationary perspective: worldly knowledge becomes validated by this fixed position (Ong 1969). The prioritisation of fixity and ‘stationariness’ (Rapport and Dawson, 1998: 21) is a problematic starting point for considering the ontology of itinerant groups. By awarding fixity moral primacy, the movement of nomads is seen as chaotic: they are assumed to be people who do not hold regional loyalties and therefore do not ‘know their place socially or geographically’ (Cresswell, 2006: 32).

Relph's argument neglects the experiences of nomadic communities. The misconception of Gypsy Travellers as disconnected from place emerges from the alignment of mobility with space, placing it in binary opposition with place (Kabachnik, 2012: 215). Moving away from such essentialist understandings of place is vital for understanding Gypsy Traveller itinerancy. Place should be conceptualised not as static and bounded, but rather as holding the capacity for fluidity and movement (Kabachnik, 2012: 213-214). The Gypsy Travellers I met were not placeless, instead place was conceptualised by them in relation to mobility. My informants were connected to Kirkleith, which can be essentially conceptualised as a bounded place, in that they lived on it, yet this connection can be better understood in relation to mobility. Living on the site allowed for the potential of movement but meant residents could avoid the constant evictions which occur during 'life on-the-road' due to strict anti-nomad policies (Clark and Greenfield, 2006: 71). In this way, the site facilitated movement: 'moorings enable movement' (Urry, 2003: 126), thus the potential for engagement with mobility exists even in presumably 'fixed' places.

Shifting in Action

Upon one of my visits to the site I was surprised to find it so empty. Brenda told me that many had left for the weekend, shifting together to attend a 'Church of Light and Life' event in the Scottish Borders. This Gypsy-led Evangelical Christian movement draws large numbers to its events, known to be highly social occasions. Brenda was not a member of the Church but told me she had previously travelled to their events to socialise. During another visit, a pitch near the back of the site was a hive of activity; cars and an extra trailer had appeared, children ran around, soaking wet after playing with a broken hose in the site playpark to cool off in the heatwave. 'Don't you know there's a hose-pipe ban?' their grandad joked, before catching sight of his wife taking a plastic-wrapped fascinator out of her handbag - 'that's surely no another hat!'. 'We're in the middle of wedding-planning frenzy' he said, somewhat exasperated. Additional family members had arrived to help with preparations, and he told me they would soon be shifting down to the Borders for the wedding of his son to a Traveller girl - it was to be a big occasion. While group travel is often undertaken in celebration, large gatherings of Gypsy Travellers are frequently painted as menacing and subjected to threat of police eviction at the request of local residents (Clark and Greenfields, 2006: 66-67).

While travel is perceived within the sedentary population as a disruption to settled life, for my informants the nomadic way of life, as a lived practice or an aspiration, remained culturally

valuable (Shubin and Swanson, 2010: 921). Travel was not a disruption to their lives, rather they lived in such a way that travel was facilitated. I observed one conversation between three middle-aged female friends (all Kirkleith tenants) which occurred at a charity-event close to the site. Two of the women were pleasantly surprised to see the third attend, and began to discuss her travelling;

Brenda - *'Pat! How are you? Are you back for long?'*

Pat - *'I'm in Ayrshire just now with family, seeing the wee ones is nice. I'm singing tomorrow at the [Church of Light and Life] event in the Borders then back to Ayrshire then onto somewhere else.'*

Susan - *'Lovely, is that Kate's kids? We're going to the [Church event] as well and might start shifting from there.'*

This conversation illustrated some of the ways in which these women practiced shifting, whether planned or unplanned. Considered oppositional to being 'at home' (Dovey, 1985: 42) travel is planned by the settled population as an interruption to normal order. Yet the travel plans of these three women were not steadfast: in this case there were certain points of the journey which were mapped, seeing family and attending a religious event, yet movement was not discussed in terms of arrival and return, rather occurring on a continuum which was subject to temporal influence.

All of these women were currently engaged with mobility in different ways: Pat was absent from the site for the duration of my fieldwork, although she kept her pitch. Graham, the site manager, showed me the tenancy agreement, which emphasised that tenants were only permitted to spend up to 12 weeks off the site in any 12-month period to retain their pitch, yet explained that he did not enforce this rule stringently as he did not want to unnecessarily split families up or disrupt the site dynamic. He described Kirkleith as 'fairly settled', owing to the fact most tenants were related, thus even those who were very mobile would return for extended periods. Susan had two trailers on her pitch, one stayed for the summer and the other was used for shifting. Her family returned to the site at some points throughout June and July. Brenda was on the site for the majority of my fieldwork period, though she did travel by car to visit family often, leaving her trailer behind. Speaking about the future, Brenda did not express to me any concrete travel plans but said it was 'likely' she would move again.

When considering the salience of emotional and imagined connections to mobility, one can see that living on a site is not opposite to travelling. One can live on a site long-term yet still retain a strong connection to mobility. Choosing to live on the site, or in housing, does not mark the ‘end’ of travelling, nor the ‘end’ of being a Gypsy Traveller, and instead is part of a continuum of mobility which may lead to further travel, or may not.

Stationary Mobility

The connection to Gypsy Traveller identity is not lost if movement stops; an imagined and emotional connection to movement can be maintained even during relatively ‘settled’ periods, and mobility can be understood as ‘a state of mind rather than a state of action’ (Kenrick and Clark, 1999: 29). The connection to mobility is not dependent upon continuous movement, remaining steadfast in imagined and emotional ways. When I asked my informants if they saw themselves staying at Kirkleith long-term, none agreed with total certainty. Even those who had lived there for over ten years, whom one might expect to have an established connection, replied with the suggestion that they anticipated further travel, often adding that their mobility was linked to the mobilities of their family. Their answers indicated that a connection to travelling was more important than a connection to the site:

John - *‘I do like [Kirkleith], it’s not like some other sites because the location’s good, so I could stay, or I could leave tomorrow.’*

Maureen - *‘Well, you know I have family who are shifting, so I could go along with them for a bit...but my daughter has the bairn [child] so it also depends where she’s going.’*

Kim, an older lady who had lived on the site for over twenty years, shifting during this time, explained that she found a great degree of ‘freedom’ in the knowledge that she could still remember how to ‘tow’, despite not having moved her trailer for a few years: ‘I haven’t done it for a while but I still know how to tow a trailer, so that’s my freedom there, really...because I can tow, so then I can move’. Although Kim could be seen to be somewhat ‘settled’ at Kirkleith, her connection to mobility was evident. As Shubin explains: ‘mobility covers an emotional as well as physical landscape for Scottish Gypsy Travellers’ (2011b: 1935). Mobility exists to Gypsy Travellers as more than the act of movement itself, but as an emotional connection to the ‘spirit’ of travel - a connection which was at the core of my informants’ identity.

Conclusion

Essentially misunderstood within sedentary discourse, mobility was central to the lives of my informants: occurring physically and through imagination. Shifting was spoken of in reference to their past, through personal histories of travel; their present, through their lived practice; and their future, through anticipation of movement. More than a cultural practice, shifting was their way of inhabiting the world: the foundational aspect of their identity.

A project initially intended to explore what happens when Gypsy Travellers stop travelling, I soon realised that any ‘paradox’ I expected was emergent from my own absorption in the dominant sedentary discourse on movement. When we recognise the existence of mobilities which are not ‘punctual’ (Massumi, 2002), we can see that Gypsy Traveller shifting is not an exclusively spatial phenomenon. First of all, my informants’ physical mobility did not take a ‘punctual’ form – it was not circumscribed by travelling from one fixed place to another. Furthermore, mobility exists not only during times of physical movement, it is also present in the imagination during ‘settled’ periods as an aspiration (Shubin, 2011a: 498). This emotional connection is significant, valid whether physical movement materialises or not. When travelling is considered as a continuum, encompassing stationary and mobile periods, we can see that there is nothing contradictory about a ‘settled’ Gypsy Traveller. Experienced also through the imagination, travel is fundamentally misunderstood when it is restricted within sedentary definitions which subordinate the meaning-making which occurs along the way.

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