

England or Uruguay? The persistence of place and the myth of the placeless Gypsy

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The Roma are often depicted as not only not having a place, but not caring about place. I refer to this common association as the 'myth of the placeless Gypsy'. There is a need to challenge the myth of the placeless Gypsy as these types of representations further stigmatise the Roma community. To accomplish this I examine the geographies underpinning the Romani Studies discourse in order to see how the Roma's relationship to place is constructed. In this article, I examine four ethnographies about the Roma to highlight how academic representations help to further reinforce the idea that Roma are placeless. I find that even in in-depth studies, authors simultaneously reproduce and deny the myth of the placeless Gypsy. Despite explicit pronouncements that Roma are placeless, these authors in their detailed discussions of Roma practices actually emphasise the importance of place. In order to account for this incongruity, it is crucial to understand how place is being conceptualised, as limited, essentialist definitions of place typically make it easier to render Roma placeless.

Key words: Roma, Gypsies and Travellers, place, placelessness, Europe, nomadism

Introduction

In this article we will encounter an extraordinary figure, that of the 'placeless Gypsy'. In popular and academic writing we repeatedly see that Roma¹ (Gypsies) are naturally nomadic and do not live in a fixed location, have no ties to territory for their identity, no imagined homeland from which they are coming, nor a promised land to which to go. Thus, it is obvious that they do not care about place.

Geographer David Sibley surmises that a specific group of nomadic Roma at the beginning of the twentieth century have 'an indifference to place' (2003, 219). Could it be the case that a geographer, who has done a significant amount of research about Roma, is suggesting that this particular group of Roma is 'indifferent to place'? '[B]ut, at the same time,' Sibley continues, they have 'a sensitivity to locale' (2003, 219). Here we find a distinction being made between place and locale, but at least Sibley seems to be calling attention to the Roma's interest in

locale (he could mean place to be simply location and locale to be a component of the definition of place [see Agnew 1987]). He goes on to state that 'they were evidently indifferent, however, to rural or urban stopping places, fields, yards, or houses, England or Uruguay' (2003, 219). This list seems to be a catalogue of various types of places. So we can now see that for Sibley locale has something to do with social relations, and nothing at all to do with place. And if we are still unclear as to whether Sibley actually believes that there are Roma who are uninterested in place, in a footnote he remarks that 'indifference to place is not . . . universal' for Roma (2003, 230), and so in the process demonstrates that there are indeed some groups of Roma that are indifferent to place. To them, presumably, it would make no difference if they were in England or Uruguay. Another geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, agrees, stating that 'gypsies [sic] . . . are placeless in both senses of the word [in the geographic and sociological senses] and they do not much care' (1974, 241).²

Can there be a group of people for whom place is not important? Is there, or has there been, a group of people to whom it would not matter whether they found themselves in England or Uruguay? If we are to believe statements like the ones above, then the answer would be yes. However, I would suggest that before accepting this conclusion we engage in a more cautious analysis.

Long-term ethnographic fieldwork on Roma has been relatively rare (Okely 1983), with the first research being conducted well after the Second World War (Willems 1997). I will limit my analysis to four (book-length) ethnographies on European Roma written in the past 25 years that are in English (or have been translated): Judith Okely's *The Traveller-Gypsies* (1983), Michael Stewart's *Time of the Gypsies* (1997), Paloma Gay y Blasco's *Gypsies in Madrid* (1999) and Patrick Williams' *Gypsy World* (2003). While selecting four texts is by no means exhaustive, these are influential in Romani Studies, are oft-cited works, and are among the few major long-term ethnographies available. In this article I will examine these four authors and explore how they deal with the relationship Roma have with place.³ All four authors look at different Roma groups, each in a different country: Stewart looks at Hungary, Okely at the United Kingdom, Williams at France and Gay y Blasco at Spain. My intention is not to be overly critical of these studies. On the contrary, these works are particularly sensitive (and rare) understandings of Roma ways of life and critical contributions to Romani Studies. However, what I am concerned with is how the relationship that Roma have with place, or lack thereof, is described, both explicitly and implicitly.

This article explores discourses about place and what particular conceptualisations of place are utilised in academic writing about Roma. My conceptualisation of place draws off of anti-essentialist and progressive understandings of place (Curry 1999; Cresswell 2004; Massey 1993; Thrift 1999). Here places are relational, produced and reproduced through human practices, whereby places enable action and themselves are constructed by those very same practices. Places are inhabited, rather than seen as containers or settings for action (Thrift 1999). They are interconnected to other places, are integral centres of meaning, emotion and memory, and are critical to identity formation (Agnew 1987; Tuan 1974; Entrikin 1991 1997; Cresswell 2004; McDowell 1997; Sack 1993 1997).

Geographers have recently explored a variety of topics related to Roma, focusing mainly on the US (e.g.

Nemeth 1991 2002) and the UK (e.g. Halfacree 1996; Holloway 2003; Kabachnik 2007 2009; Sibley 1988 1990 1992 1994; Vanderbeck 2005). The geographic literature highlights the importance of analysing discourses about place. Much of the work done by geographers examines how Roma are othered and marginalised, by analysing racialisation (Holloway 2003 2004 2005 2007; Vanderbeck 2003) and how they are made to be seen as 'out-of-place' (Sibley 1981 1995; Kabachnik 2007). However, this focus on being out-of-place may inadvertently reinforce the myth of the placeless Gypsy, when not countered with a discussion of the importance of place for Roma.

There has been research conducted that examines Roma and space (Sibley 1981; Kendall 1997). And many studies have examined the role of territoriality⁴ in the monopolisation by Roma of certain economic activities and niche markets, both in Europe (Piasere 1992; Mirga 1992) and in the US (where the emphasis is particularly on fortune telling [Sway 1988]). Though not employing place within an analytical framework, these studies, and others (Greenfields and Home 2007), plainly show how central place is for certain groups of Roma. Similarly, others (Lemon 2000; Bancroft 2005) clearly emphasise place as a crucial line of inquiry to better understand the way of life of Roma and the circumstances they endure.

How then do we account for this mismatch? Why are Roma more often than not represented as placeless, when scholars repeatedly note their connections to place? We must consider how place is conceptualised and examine whether a space-place binary is being relied upon. What needs to be examined is how place is defined, as that conceptualisation will influence whether Roma are seen as placeless or not. In many essentialist definitions of place, where place is seen as bounded, having an essence and static, it is easier to understand how Roma are seen as excluded from, and uninterested in, places. Here, the definition of place is spatialised, that is, place is defined as being an element of space. The consequence of this being that place gets subsumed under that concept of space and is seen as a mere fixed location, thus denying place to those who are not sedentary (Kabachnik 2007). In recent approaches to place (Massey 1993; Sack 1997; Cresswell 2004), we see more nuanced theorisations, yet the reliance on a spatialised definition remains. It is this definition, I argue, that encourages the space-place binary that facilitates the movement-settled binary, which in turn, proves so damaging to the ways Roma are represented and treated.

Analysing ethnographers

Although place has been reformulated to better encompass how places function in our lives and are constructed, many researchers still ignore place, or reduce it to a bounded and fixed portion of space, used for exclusionary purposes. This latter narrow conceptualisation is commonly invoked today by many people, as evidenced by its use in various exclusionary movements (e.g. nationalist, racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.), and is rightfully criticised. However, several of the authors that I have examined, while criticising that particular view of place, also, paradoxically, tend to equate place solely with that same conceptualisation. By doing so, it then follows logically, for them, that Roma have no relationship to place. I contend that they are essentially saying that (some) Roma do not embrace that particular connection to place; this is very different from the claim that they are uninterested in place. In fact, in other parts of their research these scholars show the importance of place for Roma, although that aspect remains implicit. I contend that if these authors utilised a broader or clearer definition of place, they could not only maintain their criticism of traditional ideas of place, but also analyse the types of places that Roma construct and inhabit. This would not only offer empirical research about different conceptualisations of place, but would also enable Roma not to be rendered placeless, and thereby othered.

Why has place been overlooked in Romani Studies? There are two basic answers to this query. The first suggests the more general problem of place as an undertheorised concept within academia. Second, disciplinary boundaries, even with the recent 'postmodern turn' and focus on interdisciplinarity in the social sciences, still have quite an influence on the ways in which research is carried out and on what is studied. Most of the studies done about Roma are undertaken by anthropologists. While I by no means want to suggest that geographers should only study place and anthropologists should only study culture or people (as if that was even possible), I suggest that this is how researchers themselves, in those respected fields, have tended to frame their academic practices.

Still, it has been remarked that if place has not been used much in anthropology (Richardson 1989; Rodman 1992; Geertz 1996), matters have changed considerably since the late 1980s (Appadurai 1988; Feld and Basso 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Conversely, although there has been a cultural geography subdiscipline since the early twentieth century, the object of research tended to be the material landscape,

rather than people, until humanistic geographers brought about a change in the research agenda in the 1970s, followed by the 'new' cultural geographers in the 1980s. To this day, ethnographic fieldwork is a somewhat marginal qualitative method in geography, though calls have been made for much more of this type of methodological inquiry to be done (Herbert 2000; Crang 2002), and its use has noticeably increased recently.

As all of the authors that I will examine, Gay y Blasco (1999), Okely (1983), Stewart (1997) and Williams (2003), are trained anthropologists, one should perhaps not be surprised that certain concepts, such as place, have been overlooked, as a matter of disciplinary territorialisation.⁵ However, while this plays a part, there are more substantive reasons for the absence of place, and these will be discussed at the end of this article. But before I continue, let me offer a quick example by examining an article by a geographer to see how place is utilised and whether geographers are immune to displacing place.

Geography, Gypsies and place

In her article 'Sites of resistance: places on the margin – the Traveller "homeplace"', Sally Kendall (1997) criticises the use of bounded and static notions of place that are used to exclude Gypsies and Travellers in England. She says that there is

a need to reconceptualize the notion of place in order to break down this rigidity and prevent concepts of place being utilized by the dominant group to exclude marginal groups. (1997, 74)

However, she still tends to conflate space and place. The title of her article mentions place twice, yet much of her article discusses 'homespace' and marginal spaces, as well as place, with little attempt to distinguish space from place. For her, marginal spaces are 'not necessarily fixed in a particular location . . . likely to shift temporally and spatially' (Kendall 1997, 70). This can easily fit as a definition for (an anti-essentialist conception of) place, not space.

Although unclear on what space is, she does define place, drawing off a definition offered by geographer Doreen Massey. The exclusion of Gypsies is based on a static notion of place that is equated with a fixed home, and tied to an identity that defines who belongs and who does not. She advocates the idea of a 'homeplace' on the margin as a site of resistance. This claim is not what I am challenging, but instead her use of 'homeplace'. She goes on to say that:

The term 'homeplace' rather than 'homespace' is used in order to signify the home's position within a particular location. (This emphasis is particularly important for Travellers when the location of the home may be moving regularly). (Kendall 1997, 77)

Now she is explicitly demarcating place as tied to a particular, fixed location and differentiating it from space, which is about movement. If this is the case, Gypsies do not have places when they are moving, and this lack of connection to place is precisely what those who exclude Gypsies are saying, and what Kendall is in other parts of her paper criticising.⁶

Therefore, there really is no reconceptualisation of place in her article. Instead we find a critique of the traditional conception of place and then the utilisation of space to make up for the errors of this particular version of place. Place is still conflated with fixed locations and movement is deemed incompatible with place.

Anthropological accounts of Roma and place in Europe

In this section I will examine how scholars who have conducted long-term ethnographies of Roma, in various places, deal with place and the Roma's relationship to it. In some of these accounts the complexity of the term place is effaced, while in others place is discussed implicitly, and still in others place is stated to be quite integral. What accounts for these discrepancies? Is it simply a matter of different groups in different places espousing different cultural values and practices, as most certainly could be the case, since the Roma are not a homogeneous, monolithic group? Or could it be the discursive displacement of the term place, at once ignored, undertheorised, taken for granted and simplified? Let me provide some specifics from their own studies to help answer these questions.

If we listen to scholars like Bancroft (2005) and Lemon (2000), place is a key concern that should be studied. Lemon notes:

Roma nevertheless are and speak of themselves as connected to local places and pasts. This may be a banal point, but it is one lost in nearly every novel and newspaper article about Gypsies, even in many scholarly monographs. (Lemon 2000, 3)

Indeed, following Lemon, despite some explicit claims to the contrary, all the material I am examining clearly shows the importance of place in the lives of the Roma they studied.

Both Gay y Blasco (1999) and Stewart (1997) insist that the Roma they studied did not care where they lived. Gay y Blasco informs us that Spanish Roma (Gitanos) 'show little interest in establishing practical or symbolic holds over the places they are made to live' (1999, 16). This is because the government resettles the Roma often, causing them to fail to create attachments to their homes. The reason given to Gay y Blasco was that since they have been moved before, they felt powerless in such events. Stewart also remarks that 'no particular emphasis was put by the Rom on the bare fact of where they lived' (1997, 72). The response of the Roma he researched when it was suggested that their community might be cleared for a factory was fairly relaxed, and they stated they were not going to complain.

This runs in stark contrast to nomadic Gypsies in England, who have recently been in several well-publicised stand-offs with police, eviction officers and irate non-Roma townspeople. In these examples, Gypsies have staunchly defended their places, whether those places consisted of land that they owned or merely of places where they had decided to camp. Gypsies clearly can invoke essentialist conceptions of place as well. Furthermore, as Sibley (1981) and Okely (1983) note, the design of the caravan site is extremely important for Gypsies. So does this then prove that there are some Roma for whom place is valued (certain British Gypsies) and some for whom it is not (Gay y Blasco's Gitanos and Stewart's Hungarian Rom), echoing Sibley's earlier remark?

Again the answer depends on what definition of place one uses. If place means a site, a particular location in space, then perhaps, as Gay y Blasco and Stewart suggest, these Roma are not so interested in place. However, if we accept the newer relational definition of place, we see that it is precisely because the Roma do not care about a fixed location that they are indeed revealing a strong connection to place.

Stewart discusses this incident in a chapter entitled 'A place of their own', but at the end of the chapter he concludes that 'a "place of their own" was not in the end a place at all' but an 'intangible quality of life together' (1997, 72). But how can one realise the value of this 'intangible quality of life together' without it being somewhere, someplace? Here place becomes an irrelevant, inert backdrop. Earlier, Stewart suggests that 'they created a place of their own in which they could feel at home, a social space composed according to their own ethic of relatedness' (1997, 28). This 'social space' is eerily similar to a description of place-making.

The Roma Stewart talks to may in fact not want to fight the requirement that they move, but this does not mean that they have abandoned the need for places in general, as they most certainly would want to live in a place together, and as free from outsider interference as possible (which illustrates an awareness of how the geographic and the social are intertwined, what some refer to as spatiality, and others the placial aspect). The Roma settlement, referred to as the Third Class,⁷ is described by Stewart as lacking the most basic services, it has unpaved streets, and is located on the periphery of the town. From the Roma perspective, being forced to relocate might be seen as not really losing that much, given the conditions⁸ of their neglected settlement.

Similarly, the Gitanos in Madrid do not seem to mind where they are settled, because they are acutely aware that they are being given substandard living conditions, prescribed by the Spanish government and labelled 'Colony for Marginal Population (Colonia Para Población Marginal)' (Gay y Blasco 1999, 7). Their neighbourhood, Jarana, was located peripherally to Madrid and was not connected to standard public services that other non-Roma communities would expect unconditionally, such as public telephones and bus services.⁹ Stewart describes the community of the Third Class in a similar fashion, where the roads in the Roma part of town are unpaved:

If someone is ill here, the ambulance will come only as far as the tracks when there is a lot of mud. It won't come in for the *Cigány*.¹⁰ (1997, 84)

The Gitanos realise that Jarana is not a place they have chosen, nor are the circumstances under which they find themselves moving there ideal. Hence, it is not a place they wanted, which is quite different from saying they are not interested in place generally. This is still true even if the Gitanos themselves express that links to place are '*Payo*¹¹ things' (Gay y Blasco 1999, 40).

Stewart's example shows that when faced with an administrative decision that they be relocated, this group of Hungarian Roma is not going to fight what they see as a losing battle. They know all too well that places are constructs, and they will just have to build another safe place for themselves, just as the Third Class is their own right now. Stewart would agree with Sibley (2003) who, when discussing the Roma, also feels that if a group adopts mobility as its strategy rather than a futile defence of place, place ceases to be significant. This is an explicit recapitulation of the spa-

tialised definition of place. If a group decides to conduct their place-making practices in a variety of particular locations, then the conclusion that is drawn is that they must not care about place, since place is conflated with being tied to a specific location in space. Furthermore, while the Roma may have told Stewart that the Third Class was not worth fighting for, at other times their actions belie this sentiment.

In other sections of his study Stewart clearly demonstrates the connection of the Roma of Harangos to place, and the important role place plays in their lives. The world outside of their settlement is seen as a dangerous place and filled with *gadje*.¹² It is threatening for single male Roma to venture out alone, and thus they travel in groups to look after each other (Stewart 1997, 41). The Third Class is seen as safe in contrast to the dangerous outside world (Stewart 1997, 43).

We can see this in another instance, where a Roma family that moved into 'regular' housing, among ethnic Hungarians, is discussed. They felt out-of-place and were avoided, as no one would enter their homes, they had few interactions, their new neighbours were very suspicious and their children had no one to play with. They felt so unwelcome that they eventually moved back into the Roma settlement in the Third Class (Stewart 1997, 135). Stewart provides other examples of Roma who move back to the Roma settlement, and concludes that 'the deeper reason lay in their inability to find a "place of their own" among the gazos' (1997, 78). Place and racism play a key role in the family's decision to move back to the Third Class.

While stating that place is unimportant for Roma identity and that not having an attachment to place is part of the Roma ethic (1997, 237), Stewart's ethnography provides several rich examples of the vital implications of place and identity for Roma. One Roma couple, Čoro and Luludji, sought to elevate their status in Hungary's social hierarchy by assimilating. To do this they needed to leave the Third Class and move into a council housing estate in the centre of Harangos, among ethnic Hungarians.

Place was a major factor in their inability to assimilate, since the Third Class was so explicitly marked as 'Gypsy' that they felt looked down upon simply by being there. Yet, after three years of trying to adapt, they returned to the Third Class, unable to overcome their loneliness, exclusion and isolation. Even if it was not their ideal, the Third Class was a place where they could fit in and feel accepted.

Similarly, the failure to achieve status recognition led Čaja and Šošoj to return to the Third Class. Though

the places they lived among non-Roma proved profitable, they were 'unable to convert their wealth into an equivalent social standing' (Stewart 1997, 78). Also, they could not find non-Roma husbands for their daughters. They moved back to avoid the humiliation that went along with being Roma in Hungarian circles. Šošoj, among Roma, was respected and had great authority, yet outside of Roma places this higher status was nullified. Stewart talks about the limited contexts where Šošoj can enjoy his prestige, and this is clearly an example of recognising the important role of place, for the Third Class settlement is one of those places, the context where his status is acknowledged and matters a great deal.

Furthermore, as Michael Curry argues, the sheer fact of location is often inessential to place (1999, 99). Therefore, attachment to place can be tied to an exact location, e.g. a specific address, but it does not necessarily have to be. Home is often described as the quintessential place. But home is frequently felt more keenly wherever one's family is, not just tied to a particular building. And various nomadic groups show us quite clearly how homes can be mobile without being any less home-like.

Judith Okely (1983), in *The Traveller-Gypsies*, provides an ethnography of Gypsies who live in caravans/trailers and mobile homes. Part of her discussion focuses on one of the most popular themes regarding Roma culture, namely pollution taboos, referred to as *marime* or *mochadi* (Acton et al. 1997). In the case of American Roma, there is an upper/lower body distinction (Sutherland 1975; Sway 1988), whereas Okely focuses on that of inner/outer body symbolism. These pollution taboos of the body are also reflected in their place-making practices. Domestic places are constructed specifically in ways that reflect these beliefs. In order not to pollute ones' home, many bathrooms inside the trailers are used only as storage closets. Garbage cans are also kept outside. Using bathrooms and keeping garbage inside the home is seen as proof of the *gorgios*¹³ dirty habits and, in contradistinction to the usual stereotypes, evidence of the cleanliness of Gypsies. These various cultural permutations exemplify the notion that cleanliness and dirt are social constructions (Douglas 1970).

Another important element of Roma sensitivity to place is the layout of caravan sites. Government-built and designed council caravan sites follow a specific design that esteems order and the grid. Using 'Cartesian geometry in environmental designs for peripheral or non-conforming groups' is common (Sibley 1981, 31). Council sites emphasise neat lines of caravans,

maximising privacy and the appearance of order. The design is a strategy for correcting the perceived deviance. This contradicts the Gypsies own preference for the organisation of caravan sites (Sibley 1981; Okely 1983). Furthermore, the Gypsies own place-making strategies reflect little need for this type of architectural privacy, as groups travel as extended family units and place caravans in a circular pattern with a common public area in the middle.¹⁴ Council sites, apart from being seen as stepping stones to assimilation, are often in isolated, inconvenient and marginal areas, such as industrial zones or near garbage dumps, and away from traditional stopping places. The sites also allow for closer monitoring, harassing and eviction of Gypsies by government officials.

The separation of industrial and residential uses of place also poses problems for Gypsies (Sibley 1981). English planning law exhibits this through single-use zoning, where certain practices are prohibited in certain places. Some occupations, such as scrap breaking, which Gypsies pursue at home, are banned on council sites, thereby making it more difficult to earn a living.

Places of the dead

Williams' *Gypsy World* (2003) is an ethnography of the Manus¹⁵ of France and their relationship to their dead. Place is shown to be an integral part of their lives, shown in his discussion of *mulengre placi*, or 'places of the dead'. In these places the dead's objects will be kept, in order to observe their custom of respecting the dead. Though these places can still be entered, they are generally avoided. The *mulengre placi* are taken out of everyday use out of respect for the deceased. Due to their strong emphasis on respecting the dead, cemeteries are also places which structure their lives, but unlike *mulengre placi*, not by avoidance but by visiting the graves often and living nearby.

Gay y Blasco (1999) makes a similar point. Place is shown to be important to the Gitanos by their avoidance of places that belonged to and remind them of relatives that have passed on. Here she notes that 'Gitanos reject the Payo model of identity where place and sense of self are intertwined' (1999, 47); yet having said that place is an unimportant feature of their lives, she then suggests that the Gitanos territorialise. By all accounts, the definition of territorialisation is about a specific type of place-making (see Sack 1986).

She describes their living arrangements in Jarana as a kinship-based form of segregation. In order to avoid places of non-kin, individuals will avoid walking down certain streets or past unknown houses, even if to do so

means going out of their way. Williams discusses a similar phenomenon, based on the comparable idea of needing to maintain strong family ties. The Manus must visit any family members if they are passing by the area where they live. What sometimes happens is that a place will be completely avoided, even if it means going on a longer route, so that one will not be breaking the convention to stop and visit family.

Okely's (1983) account of British Gypsies resonates with the examples just mentioned. Sometimes a trailer will be burnt following the death of an individual. The trailer is thus not seen as just a vehicle or an object, but a place that is intimately associated with the memory of the deceased. This place, the trailer, is so strongly connected with the person that it will be a constant reminder of their loss and suffering. This emotive aspect of place results in the decision to burn the trailer, despite financial loss.¹⁶ This feeling also works in reverse, as mourners often keep the trailers for months, unable to let go of these powerful reminders of their loved ones, to the displeasure of the community since it is seen as polluting.

Similar to practices of moving away from markers of the dead, conflagration fulfils a corollary function to get rid of the place that reminds them of death. To live in the deceased's trailer would be breaking pollution taboos. However, Gypsies may also avoid the area where the death occurred in addition to the destruction of the property for periods of up to one year (Okely 1983, 142). Since death is so polluting, it is more common today for Gypsies, ideally, to prefer it to occur in a liminal place, such as the outskirts of a camp or a *gorgio* hospital (Okely 1983, 217).

Rootedness or sense of place?

Yi-Fu Tuan (1980), in 'Rootedness Versus Sense of Place', has made an important distinction in the ways that people can relate to places. Tuan identifies two distinct relationships people can have with places. The first, rootedness, is 'being at home in an unself-conscious way' (Tuan 1980, 4). The other, sense of place, implies a 'certain distance between self and place that allows the self to appreciate a place' (Tuan 1980, 4). We can highlight the distinction further by noting that the former is about knowing a place through familiar routines and habitual practices, while the latter is knowing about a place, where a conscious effort is made to be reflective about what the place is.

Several of the accounts of Roma that I discuss actually describe them as an extremely, if not quintessen-

tially, rooted people. This stands in stark contrast to their explicit commentary about how the Roma espouse an apparent lack of interest and connection to places. Both Stewart and Gay y Blasco emphasise the Roma way of life as hinging on the present, rather than on the past, the future or an imagined place.¹⁷ 'For the Gypsies, the past was truly another country', and Stewart purports that it was a place they did not visit (1997, 60). They focused on current relationships instead of the past. In contrast to the claims of the standard model, according to Stewart, Roma identity is constructed in the present, not inherited from the past. In the end, this group of Hungarian Roma identity and cohesion lay not 'in a dream of a future reunion of their people nor in a mythology of shared ancestry', but in the places they construct and inhabit, although Stewart does not use the term 'place' (Stewart 1997, 28).

In Gay y Blasco's account we find very similar conclusions. In her analysis, the Gitanos are not interested in the past and don't use history or myth to differentiate themselves from *Payos* or to explain their way of life. Once again, the present is highlighted as the source of shared identity.

Memory, links to place, accumulation of material culture and even ties between non-kin are all downplayed: they are said to be 'Payo things' (*cosas Payas*), which do not contribute to the Gypsiness (*gitaneidad, lo Gitano*) of the Gitanos. (Gay y Blasco 1999, 40)

Okely, on the other hand, suggests that Gypsies have a highly developed sense of memory, particularly for routes and places (1983, 60). Before the rampant criminalisation of the nomadic way of life and increased development of land in the UK, Gypsy travels followed traditional patterns. These habitual routes were embarked upon based on knowing people, family and access to employment. Gypsies would stop where they knew they could find water, jobs and hospitality, and where they could socialise.

Gay y Blasco spends a lot of time writing about the way in which the Gitanos downplay genealogy. They have a lack of concern with the past, often being able to name relatives and kinship relations only a few (three or four) generations back. To Gay y Blasco, this translates to enacting Roma practices in the present (see also Sibley 2003). But where are practices done, if not in places?

Fred Myers, though discussing the Pintupi, a group of Australian Aborigines, identifies a form of social organisation similar to the one that Gay y Blasco describes. His conclusion is quite different though:

their kinship is derived less by blood or genealogy 'than by the places they share, i.e. the camps they keep together' (Myers, cited in Casey 1993, 393). Gay y Blasco herself supports this claim when she states that many people thought to be related probably were not, but were treated as such due to their proximity and daily interactions, i.e. in places. It is the everyday practices of Gypsiness that are performed in shared places that enable the Gitano identity that Gay y Blasco analyses. One of the most salient features uniting all the accounts is that 'place matters to most Roma a great deal, especially a place near kin' (Lemon 2000, 227). While Lemon is referring to Russian Roma, the works of Okely, Stewart, Gay y Blasco, and Williams each support this claim.

Implications of the myth of the placeless Gypsy

There is a need to deconstruct the myth of the placeless Gypsy, since this myth has definite consequences for the daily lives and experiences of Roma. These representations are not divorced from materiality and the world of practice, but instead help to inform people's attitudes, actions and policy decisions that continue to affect and discriminate against Roma. The myth of the placeless Gypsy manifests itself quite explicitly in English planning cases. For instance, Bancroft (2000) discusses how Roma are deemed to have 'no interest in the land' and thus can be denied the right to stay on their caravan sites.

Following my analysis of the conceptualisation of place by scholars writing about Roma, a question still remains. Why do some authors believe that Roma have a relationship to place so different from that of other people? Perhaps it is simply because the Roma are nomadic, and those who lead a nomadic way of life will relate to place very differently from the sedentary population. And if the writers were only using the traditional bounded definition of place, as they most certainly were, then nomadic Roma would not have had similar interactions with those types of places as sedentary people would. However, two out of four of the groups discussed are sedentary Roma. Now why would a non-nomadic group not care about place? Or more specifically, why would the authors describe their research subjects as having such a peculiar lack of connection to place?

I think that there are three reasons for this belief. First, the Roma, as a stateless minority, are perennial victims of the 'territorial trap' (see Agnew 1998). Amid the hegemonic order of the logic of the nation state,

the Roma are visibly without a legitimate homeland, and are therefore inherently out-of-place. Second, drawing from the first point, the territorial trap is a symptom of a more general process of conflating people and place. This has been termed a sedentarist metaphysics (Malkki 1997) and there have been repeated critiques and calls for its deconstruction. Nomads are the other of the sedentarist system, and their mobility will be perennially suspect as long as essentialist geographic conceptions are relied upon. Lastly, the taint of nomadism (Kabachnik 2009) plays the most pivotal role in the continuing construction of Roma as a placeless people. Roma, both sedentary and nomadic, are stigmatised by the stereotypes and placelessness commonly associated with nomadism. This reveals the power of representation to impact our understanding of Roma. Thus, even sedentary Roma will be associated with placelessness, reproducing the space/place binary which makes place and mobility mutually exclusive categories.

All the authors that I discuss above show, to different degrees, not the curious placelessness of Roma but precisely the opposite. All the various manifestations of culture, memory, place-making practices, tradition, language, social organisation, attitudes and survival strategies in Roma groups ultimately reveal the power of place.

This exploration and reconceptualisation of the use of 'place' in Romani Studies is not just an idle semantic exercise. For the clarification of the lives of Roma points to a more nuanced idea of place, one that extends the understanding of place that one typically finds in the geographic literature. By failing to take place seriously, or by only using a very location-bound and traditional view of place, many writers reproduce centuries-old stereotypes about Roma and nomads being placeless wanderers and thus vastly different and inferior. In fact, finding oneself in England or Uruguay would matter a great deal. Places are important, for all people, though in a variety of different ways. Places are, in turn, just as important for Roma, nomadic or sedentary, as they are for everyone else.

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Notes

- 1 I will use the term Roma when speaking in general about Roma groups. When speaking about specific groups, I will use the terms they self-identify with, such as Gitano in Spain or Manus in France. While Gypsy is considered pejorative by many Roma communities, in England Gypsy is the preferred term.
- 2 Though later Tuan (1976) acknowledges the powerful feelings nomads can develop, and have developed, toward place.
- 3 Ethnographic work by 'outsiders' will construct a very different understanding of who the Roma are when compared with Roma self-representation, of which there is a noticeable shortfall.
- 4 Territoriality is a common type of place-making strategy (see Sack 1986).
- 5 This is not inevitable, as Lemon (2000) is an anthropologist and does attend to place.
- 6 Massey also implies that home is fixed when she states that Roma have a different idea of place, one that is 'not so intimately related . . . to home' (1995, 51).
- 7 This is a Roma neighbourhood in the town of Harangos, Hungary. The name is actually not disparaging, but refers to the way in which the land is classified.
- 8 These conditions of course are caused by the lack of funding given to this part of the town, since Roma inhabit it. Legally, all of these services should be provided by the state or local governments to every one of its constituents, regardless of their ethnic identity.
- 9 It took over three years for the Third Class to get these services.
- 10 The Hungarian term for Roma.
- 11 The Spanish term for non-Roma.
- 12 Romanes for non-Roma.
- 13 British Romanes term for non-Roma.
- 14 Today there are many private sites that resemble the layout of typical suburban towns, with linear streets.
- 15 This term is often used to describe French Roma.
- 16 Extremely valuable trailers are rarely burnt. Instead they are sold to *gorgio* dealers (Okely 1983, 224).
- 17 But see Stewart (2004) for a counter to the idea that Roma 'forget' their past.

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