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The Queer Gypsy

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This paper summarises the dissertation submitted in completion of my MA in Gender and Ethnic Studies at the University of Greenwich, London in 2002. The research examined how 'out' Gay Romanies reconcile disparate and/or conflicting identity positions within their familial and cultural milieux. In-depth interview data was analysed in the light of contemporary identity theory in order to uncover narratives that convey what it means for some to be both Gay and Romani.

The scarcity of published material relating to the subject of this research at the time necessitated the gathering of primary data via four sixty-minute interviews during which questions were asked to gain insight into the life trajectory of four Gay Gypsies living in the UK whom I named Alex (22), Ben (29), Chris (30) and Dean (37). These men replied to an advertisement placed by myself in the classified sections of a number of free national Gay publications. The advertisement was worded thus; "Gay Gypsy would like to meet other Gay Gypsies", myself being the singular "Gay Gypsy". During interviews each subject was asked about their early life experience, coming out and its repercussions, recognition of others and their strategies for negotiating their Gypsy and their Gay identities.

Early attempts to publish my findings within the Romani Studies field soon after completion of my MA proved fruitless. Several re-workings at peer review request failed to convince of the relevance of the research despite initial claims of interest in printing the study. I decided not to follow further requests to prove the significance of the paper, instead using my findings as a starting point from which to examine broader questions of Roma visibility within my PhD research into Gypsy aesthetics.

Recent publications on the subject of alternative Roma sexualities such as Vera Kurtić's *Džuvljarke – Roma Lesbian Existance*[1] and *Gypsy Boy*[2] published under the pseudonym Mikey Walsh suggest that the wider bearing of the subject matter of this paper may now be emerging. This desire for discursive expression from the Romani perspective reflects wider moves within Roma discourse toward the dissemination of new knowledge by our own experts and academics rather than of a long-established elite.

The terms Gypsy, Roma and Romani are intended as interchangeable throughout the text.

Identities

The main thrust of modern sociological debate concerning identity has been to challenge earlier essentialist understandings of the concept. These earlier versions assume a unique and fixed core to individual identity, one that is virtually constant throughout life. Contrasting these ideas are the more recent sociological and psychoanalytic theories that explore the concept of identity as constructed.

"Identifications are never fully or finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted, and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshaled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and, on occasion, compelled to give away."[3]

Here Butler suggests that identity is not fixed but fluid, open to continual negotiation and influence – that we locate our sense of self in relation to the circumstances around us. One of the concerns of this paper is how we as individuals develop multiple facets of our identity and how we then combine and manage these elements. Ideas of identity as fluid, changeable and open to influence are explored in the work of Hall[4] and Gilroy[5] and

1 Vera Kurtić, *Džuvljarke – Roma Lesbian Existance* (Niš: Ženski Prostor, 2014).

2 Mikey Walsh, *Gypsy Boy* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2009).

3 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993), 105.

4 Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who needs 'Identity'?", in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Routledge, 1996).

5 Paul Gilroy, "Diaspora and the detours of identity", in *Identity and Difference*, ed. Kathryn Woodward (London: Sage, 1997).

foregrounded by the writings of Michel Foucault,[6] whose emphasis on the multiplicity of identity has become central to many recent accounts of the subject.

Foucault suggests that as individuals we are capable of inhabiting multiple identities, and that as such we may offer divergent and contradictory versions of the self depending on our perceived location within any particular discourse. His work focuses on the development of individuality in all its modern forms within a web of power relations. As well as indicating that as individuals we are addressed by a range of possible versions of ourselves, he suggests that the multiple identities inhabited by us in relation to various social practices are themselves linked to larger structures of identity – structures such as class, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality, all of which continually interact with each other throughout our lives. The contingent nature of identity allows fundamental aspects of identity to be concealed (or revealed) at will. Patterns of concealment (passing) and revelation (coming out) are well practiced amongst the two groups examined in this paper and are examined in more detail below.

The construction of sexual identities and ethnic identities differ in fundamental ways. Sexual identification (sexuality) describes behaviours and their associations with a set of desires, whereas ethnic identity is determined at birth through parentage and location. One is seemingly predetermined and the other 'acquired'. As discussed earlier, all aspects of our identity are open to change and re-invention but certain elements, such as skin colour or birthplace, are fixed. Although the constructions of ethnic and sexual identities differ fundamentally, there remain parallels within the construction of Gay and Gypsy identities. Both are informed by oppressive external definition, and both groups possess a heightened facility to manipulate identity owing to the relative absence of distinguishing physical signifiers.

Passing

The term 'passing' is used in the context of this research to describe the way in which a person may choose to conceal aspects of their identity in order to pass as a member of a group other than their own. "The question of what can and cannot be spoken, what can and cannot be publicly exposed, is raised throughout the text, and it is linked with the larger question of the dangers of public exposure of both colour and desire."

Here Butler[7] describes the 1929 novella *Passing* by the black author Nella Larson in which the author deals with the processes and implications of a black woman passing as white – a mechanism that clearly requires sufficient ambiguity of appearance or behaviour to pass. Ian Hancock writes: "I know of very few Rroma who weren't warned as children to keep their ethnicity to themselves outside of the community".[8] Both Gays and Gypsies have historically been well placed to employ strategic 'passing', with self-protection or ease of passage determining when and where to pass as straight or non-Gypsy. Here ethnicity and sexuality mirror each other within cycles of concealment and revelation. Similar concurrency is explored in relation to the Gay Jewish community in the book *Twice Blessed; on being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish*: "like Jews who assimilate, we learn to 'pass' as heterosexual – dressing the part, omitting a lover's gender from conversation, or refraining from public displays of affection. Passing not only hurts ourselves but also the communities in which we live, which don't reap the benefits of our authentic participation."[9]

Although passing can "hurt" all involved, its instrumentality cannot be underestimated. This is not to suggest that passing is ever an easy option. Just as the process of passing can offer safety from attack, it also carries with it the constant anxiety of 'being seen'.

Diaspora identities

"[Diaspora] introduces the possibility of an historical rift between the location of residence and the location of belonging. Diaspora demands the recognition of inter-culture."[10]

The inter-cultural terms Gypsy and Queer are both used to describe globally linked collectivities of identity rather than

6 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (London: Allen Lane, 1979).

7 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 268.

8 Ian Hancock, "The Struggle for the Control of Identity", *Roma Participation Program Reporter* 1 (1) (1998): 3.

9 Christie Balka and Andy Rose, *Twice Blessed: on being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 4.

10 Paul Gilroy, "Between Camps: Race and Culture in Postmodernity. An Inaugural lecture", *Economy and Society*, Volume 28, Number 2 (1999): 190.

fixed identity positions. This 'un-fixity' relates not only to the range of possibilities within each identity position but also to the persistence of community and cultural values independent of geographical territory. Both are in essence stateless collectives, one established through a 'blood' network, and the other through a network of identification and recognition.

Collective identities are generally created through recognition of commonality – shared origin, common goals or characteristics. Without disregarding the importance of this mirroring process, Stuart Hall stresses the overriding influence of difference in our construction of identity. He suggests that identities are "more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity".[11] In other words commonalities are important – but identities are also defined and constructed through contrast. These ideas are echoed in the work of Paul Gilroy in which he examines the construction of diaspora identities in relation to host societies. He suggests that concepts of collective identity are generally promoted and perceived as natural (or mythic), concealing the fact that they have, at some time, been socially constructed. Gilroy uses the concept of diaspora to examine cross-national workings of identity formation, questioning the relevance of identity as fixed and unchanging. Where diaspora challenges the idea of identity as essential and absolute, it also disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity: "[diaspora] stages the dynamic processes of identity formation in a specific manner, accentuating the power that people enjoy to create themselves and their distinctive cultures where this cannot be openly acknowledged."[12]

Gilroy's work focuses on race and the cultural crossings thereof yet it is clear that the ideas as expressed above have resonance beyond the realm of ethnicity – the workings of cultural identity management in the face of discrimination are pertinent to many groups. In her article *Evaluating 'Diaspora': Beyond Ethnicity*,[13] Anthias challenges the stark absence of gender concerns in discussions of diaspora identities. Equally absent from the debate are issues relating to sexual orientation and the increased possibilities for hybridity that they introduce. Concerns regarding belonging and displacement are not exclusive to racial and ethnic groupings, but are transferable to many collectivities. Sexuality often produces forced migration from family and community. Border crossings and settlements need not be geographic in order to construct a diasporic identity. The traversal of cultural and emotional territory can produce a similar sensibility. This is evident in the experience of Gay Gypsies in their parallel negotiations of sexuality, ethnicity and belonging in the light of multiple prejudices.

Analysis

During the interviews questions were asked in order to gain insight into the accommodations and adaptations that Gay Romanies make *vis-à-vis* their families and community. All those interviewed were 'out' men, it should therefore be made clear that this sample group cannot be wholly indicative of the attitudes and experience of Gay Gypsies in general. The nature of research suggests that those who have experienced difficulty in their lives may be more willing to speak to researchers than those who have not. It is therefore possible that the life experiences of some of those interviewed here may have prompted a greater desire to tell their story. This, however, does not make any testimony more or less valid than another.

Detachment

The interview data showed that all four men have experienced both emotional and physical detachment from their families and communities. This detachment seems to have increased after coming out, suggesting a general unwillingness to remain attached to a community that is unwilling to fully embrace them. Even though all seem essentially proud of their Gypsy roots, all make it clear that their detachment occurred mainly through a difficulty in combining Gayness and Gypsiness. This suggests that in order to live as openly Gay these men compromised their Gypsy identity along with integration within the Gypsy community; a sacrifice that has repercussions both for the individual as well as the families and communities involved. An alternative to this would be to 'pass' as non-Gay in the Gypsy community, a device which is much more common than being 'out' according to the interview data – but this solution is no less problematic

11 Hall, "Introduction: Who needs 'Identity'?", 4.

12 Gilroy, "Diaspora and the detours of identity", 341.

13 Floya Anthias, "Evaluating 'Diaspora': Beyond Ethnicity", *Sociology*, Volume 32, Number 3.

as Balka and Rose suggest; "Passing not only hurts ourselves but also the communities in which we live, which don't reap the benefits of our authentic participation".[14] The interview data suggests that *not* passing also deprives all parties from "*authentic participation*". If being 'out' and being 'closeted' both result in dislocation within the Gypsy community, it is clear that any attempts to integrate Gay and Gypsy aspects of identity will be problematic until core attitudes towards Gayness within the Gypsy communities change.

Invisibility

All four men reported very little contact with other Gay Gypsies. It seems that they have become conditioned by the absence of models of diverse sexuality within their communities – not expecting to see, and so not seeing others like themselves. This suggests that the reported lack of mirroring throughout life has lead to a fragmented sense of self – a lack of internal vocabulary with which to construct an inclusive self that enables one to see oneself reflected in others. A similar fragmentation is apparent in the way that Gypsies are portrayed and perceived by wider society. Van de Port writes of the role of the Gypsy in the popular Serbian imagination: "the figure of the Gypsy functioned as a repository for all kinds of other shapes and guises".[15] As well as referring to the Gypsy's historic associations with camouflage and identity manipulation Van de Port's words highlight the ambiguity and confusion in the way that Gypsies are seen. I suggest that Gypsy communities have internalised this uncertainty over time, making for a marked dislocation between identity and self-perception – a position that has made it difficult for Gypsies to fully see themselves in the world and therefore claim their space in it. This dislocation informs the Gay Gypsy's inability to see themselves clearly – both as Gypsies in the non-Gypsy world and as Gays in the Gypsy world – an identity doubly obscured, invisible all round. Each of us inhabits multiple identities and uses external reference points to compare, contrast and reflect particular aspects of ourselves. The invisibility of Gypsies within society along with the invisibility of Gays in the Gypsy world means that key reference points are missing for Gay Gypsies; an absence that promotes the invisibility of Gay Gypsies to themselves and to others.

Stigma

My data suggests that those interviewed see non-Gypsy perceptions of Gypsies as similar to Gypsies' perceptions of Gays, that is, unclean, problematic, threatening and unwelcome. These parallel views have historical resonance in patterns of discrimination experienced by the homosexual and the Gypsy, beginning with shared associations with sorcery in the Middle Ages through to legislation from the 16th century onwards. Perceptions changed to some degree in the 19th century with the growth in attempts at understanding and categorising these two groups from a more scientific point of view resulting in the medicalisation and classification of sexual deviance by Havelock Ellis and the growth of anthropological explorations of Gypsies with the introduction of Gypsylorism. The exoticisation of Gays and Gypsies has endured, continuing to associate both the imagined sodomite and the imagined Gypsy with primitive aspects of the human psyche.

The attitudes above suggest that Gay Gypsies experience a similar range of prejudice in whichever environment they might find themselves – unwelcome in either milieu. This doubling of historic negative perceptions inevitably compounds the Gay Gypsy's outsider sensibility. It also illustrates the performative function of naming, or classification, by deeming those not belonging to the outsider group (Gay and/or Gypsy in this case) as non-deviant and clean.[16] Gay Gypsies face prejudice on both fronts for different aspects of their identity – a scissor hold of intolerance which negates visibility.

Passing

Visibility can also be a matter of choice – environment and circumstance determine when and where respondents reveal their ethnicity, indicating a well-practiced facility for ambiguity. This facility has been drawn upon throughout Romani history and is well documented in literature on Romani identity.[17] The same facility appears to be

14 Balka and Rose, *Twice Blessed: on being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish,* 4.

15 Mattijs van de Port, *Gypsies, Wars & Other Instances of the Wild* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998), 205.

16 Butler, *Bodies that Matter.* Mary McIntosh, "The homosexual role", *Social Problems* Volume 16 (1968).

17 Angus Fraser, *The Gypsies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

employed in relation to the sexual identities of the interviewees, suggesting that the experience of managing their Gypsy identity in early life has informed the eventual management of their Gay identity. Each reported that they usually kept their ethnicity to themselves in order to avoid being pigeonholed and/or having to educate others, but also for self protection. The latter echoes Hancock's recollection of warnings to Roma children to keep their ethnicity hidden and Balka and Rose's reports of Gay Jews passing as heterosexual – of passing as a member of a privileged group in order to avoid being perceived as inferior.[18]

The ambiguity involved in ethnic passing is mirrored in that of sexuality. The patterns of management employed for sexual and ethnic representation combine to facilitate the Gay Gypsy's ability to remain invisible in multiple sites. These mechanisms make for a free-floating approach to identity – a facility that allows adaptation at will, but at the cost of constructive community building within this doubly alienated group.

Conclusions

Lack of visibility has been a key issue throughout my analysis. A double invisibility exists for the subjects of this research – invisibility of the Gypsy in society, and the invisibility of Gays in the Gypsy world. The management of Gypsiness in the light of prejudice and misunderstanding afforded by wider society seems to inform the management of Gayness within Gypsy communities. It seems that the way in which one experiences one's Gypsy identity in relation to non-Gypsy society from an early age gives models of process and adaptation that are directly transferable to the management of one's Gay identity in non-Gay environments, suggesting a direct relationship between how Gays position themselves within Romani communities, and how the Romani community positions itself in relation to other groups in society i.e. not truly seen but signified by an array of archetypes that serve to obscure authentic representation and connection. It appears that this learnt behaviour (of 'not being seen') has become difficult for the Gay Gypsy to avoid – a phenomenon reflected in their inability to recognise each other. As the data suggests, seeing Gypsiness in the Gay space is as alien to our interviewees as seeing Gayness in the Gypsy space – the former negating constructive connection and community building between Gay Gypsies and the latter leading to detachment from family and community, in effect dismantling community.

All those interviewed experienced physical and emotional detachment from their Gypsy communities. These migrations of body and mind have both personal and community resonance for those involved. The term diaspora suggests identification within a "relational network, characteristically produced by forced movement through dispersal and reluctant scattering"[19] and so it seems that 'out' Gay Gypsies are compelled to compound the diaspora narrative by continuing to cross geographic, cultural and behavioural boundaries in their pursuit of acceptance.

All four men reported isolation from other Gays. Meeting another Gay Gypsy (in the interviewer) seems to have presented a rare but welcome opportunity to spend time with someone that they could identify with, or as importantly, identify with them. This suggests an appetite for networks of affiliation and recognition that at present seem absent from Gay Gypsy life – the development of which is dependent upon how openly sexuality is expressed. Several of the respondents to my advertisement were not willing to be interviewed as they were not out to their families and communities but were willing to talk briefly over the telephone about their involvement with other Gay Gypsies. They spoke of networks of Gay Gypsy friends whose sexual identity is kept hidden. The callers revealed an alternative to the detachment experienced by the four recorded interviewees, albeit at the price of open exchange. Their reports along with those of the four men interviewed suggest that in order to maintain full integration into Gypsy communities one has to sacrifice the open expression of sexual identity, and conversely that in order to explore an openly Gay identity one's integration within the Gypsy community is compromised to a significant degree.

The situation outlined above has no winners. More understanding and acceptance of alternative sexualities within Gyspy communities could benefit all. The migration of Gay people from their home environment is not unique

18 Sara Ahmed, "'She'll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She's Turned into a Nigger': Passing Through Hybridity", in *Performativity and Belonging*, ed. Vicky Bell (London: Sage Publication, 1999).

19 Gilroy, "Diaspora and the detours of identity", 318.

to Gypsy communities. Gays and Lesbians of any ethnicity, if faced with hostility in their own community will inevitably seek a place of acceptance and understanding in which to conduct their lives. The impact of migrations of Gays and Lesbians from Gypsy groups is perhaps more significant than for other minority groups because of their relatively small populations and their more extreme marginalisation. Greater understanding and acceptance of Gay Gypsies by their own Gypsy communities can only benefit all, both personally and politically. Although the gulf between Gayness and Gypsiness is yet to be bridged by affirmational visible models, I am optimistic that this situation can change: As Gilroy suggests, in reference to trans-cultural patterns of hybridity in diaspora communities; "inter-mixture is something more than the loss and betrayal that we were always told it must be".[20] Although focusing on the ethno-geographic, these words have resonance for "inter-mixture" between sexuality and ethnicity. The "loss and betrayal" that Gilroy refers to is echoed in the words of those interviewed during my research – but the *"something more"* is yet to be reified. Given time and space an emergence is likely - after all, communities formed by other Gay ethnic minorities flourish, so why not Gay Gypsies. Increased visibility can only create greater confidence and community cohesion amongst Gay Gypsies – a situation that will benefit all.

20 Gilroy, "Between Camps: Race and Culture in Postmodernity", 195.