WHO ARE THE IRISH TRAVELLERS?: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATIONS

A Thesis

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By

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore the various complexities involved in the definition and representation of Irish Travellers, who are considered to be an ethnic minority native to Ireland. Based on personal experience in the United States and the Republic of Ireland, academic texts, Traveller activist literature, films, and media portrayals, I attempt to understand some of the common themes that circulate around the communities and individuals considered Irish Travellers. I am not interested in finding one particular all-encompassing truth as to what it means to be an Irish Traveller, nor am I seeking to create a 'better' representation. Instead, I am interested in digging beneath the surface of these various representations in order to better understand the social, historical, and political underpinnings that motivate the circulation of certain themes and motifs.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my mother and father for allowing me the opportunities to follow my dreams and for offering their unwavering support in my academic and personal adventures.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my inspiring teacher and advisor, Professor Amy Shuman, for her constant encouragement, support, willingness to open her heart and home to those in need, the ability to make people feel as if everyone has something special to contribute to the world, and to help them find the right register in which to say it. I would also like to thank Professor Maurice Stevens for being one of the best educators in matters of diversity, critical awareness, and unpacking terms and behaviors that are too often taken for granted—and for offering support and encouragement as he challenged me to dig deeper. And lastly, but not least, I would like to thank Marge Lynd for her clear insight and talents that are too many to list here. Thank you for your support and direction these past years.

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I would also like to thank Martin Ward, Owen Ward, and the Ward family for helping me find my way around Tuam and for giving me the time and support to learn more about their perspectives on being Travellers. Without their assistance, I would have missed out on one of the best days of my life.
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CHAPTER 1

PREFACE

As I scurry around in a hopeless attempt to accomplish everything on my lists, I find the majority of time is spent in my head, moving between Irish Travellers, my thesis topic, and my impending journey to Newfoundland, where I am likely to spend the next few years. I admittedly know much less about Newfoundland than I do Irish Travellers, and yet I find myself at ‘computer-chair-length’s’ away from any insider knowledge. I am left to rely on brief conversations, articles, media, and the Internet.

Remembering some of the students who attended National University of Ireland, Galway, for the Irish Studies Summer Programme (2004), I recall a classmate and neighbour from Ottawa, Canada. We talk about our home towns and areas of interest and I mention Memorial University’s Folklore Program in St. John’s, Canada.

“Oh, you’re going to go live with the Newfies?” she asks incredulously.

“Umm, I guess. I didn’t know that’s what Newfoundlanders were called. What do you mean?” I ask her.
“Well, they’re special,” she emphasizes with arched eyebrows, “but the great thing is they don’t seem to care. For example, they built this huge library complete with a wall made entirely of glass. But they built it facing the wrong direction. So when the snow came and went and the sun baked the books already drenched from the humidity, all of the books started to mildew and rot! But they didn’t care…they’re Newfies.”

“Hmh,” I chew my lips, not knowing what to say.

Back to my current historical moment, I am searching through journal articles with the keywords: ethnic identity, and find an engaging article concerning an ideological dispute over an ethnic label...a historical tracing of the term...and then an examination of the “present-day attitudes as expressed in (provincial and national) media discourse and in self-report data” (King and Clarke, 537). The ethnic term in debate? The contested meaning of Newfie (537).

For the purpose of this thesis, I will not follow in-depth the details of the aforementioned article, but I will highlight some of the similarities and differences between this debate and my research surrounding the discourses over identity and representation regarding the Irish Travellers. I argue that underlying both of these areas is the difficulty of defining ethnic identity and the power struggles concerning the representations by non-members of the community being defined, who is doing the defining, and how the inherent complexities can make certain groups in/visible, hyper/mis/under-represented. I do not claim to offer any Truth to answer my ultimate question: What does it mean to be a Traveller in the Ireland of today? I, too, am creating
my own representation, composed of selected bits and pieces of information, scraps
written on post-it notes, “candid” and “not-so-candid” interviews on tapes, feature films,
and anything I have been able to find in book or online form.

In order to supplement what little contact I had with Irish Travellers, I attempt to
recreate historical moments that have similar themes. By piling together key phrases and
“identifying” symbols in a heap of paper scraps and margin notes, and increasing a
collection of signs and sayings relating to identifying Travellers, I have amassed a
collection of stories that does not offer me a position to speak in a univocal, Traveller-
supported, position. But I do recognize that I play a role as an inquiring outsider,
American, academic-oriented, woman (a Goffmanesque analysis of how each encounter
was performed could be useful and provide more insight into the interactions between the
“cultural brokers” and myself)\(^1\). In order to expand my knowledge of the discourses
circulating in these arenas, I explore representations of Irish Travellers as seen in
Traveller activist films, interviews with anonymous acquaintances met in Ireland and in
America, interactive web encyclopaedic categorizations and subsequent discussion posts,
and academic and activist literature. Rather than asking whether one representation is
correct or not\(^2\), I want to explore the responses that are created from various exposures to
media, gossip, interaction, etc., and try to understand if: a) a responsible work, as defined
by Minh-Ha, is indeed possible, one that is “on the one hand, a political commitment and
an ideological lucidity, and is, on the other hand interrogative by nature, instead of being
merely prescriptive” (Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 149); b) if such a work would still, by nature,
limit the complex identities of a group; or c) if an outsider is even necessary or

\(^1\)Amy Shuman, personal communication, 2004–2005.
appropriate for attempting to create this hypothetical work. The answers might begin
with who is in power of the creation and its final formulation (as seen in a film) and also
to whom it reaches, namely, the audience.

The assumption that the audience already exists, that it is a given, and that the
filmmaker merely has to gear her making towards the so-called needs of this
audience, is an assumption that seems to ignore how needs are made and
audiences are built. What is ideological is often confused with what is natural—or
biological, as is often implied in women’s context. The media system as it
exists may not be most efficient for reaching the audience desired, but it allows
little direct input from the audience into the creative process (critics and citizen
groups are not defined as part of the audience for example).³

³ While Minh-ha alludes to the complication of knowing one’s audience, I am confused as to what
eliminates critics and citizen groups as part of the audience.
CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION TO IRISH TRAVELLERS

Travellers have been in the news again recently, this time generating a considerable amount of publicity over the behaviour of a group from Rathkeal who moved into Wexford and, by all accounts, virtually held the town to ransom. When a town is held virtually under siege, when residents are terrorised and when businesses have to close down because of the presence of a particular group, then it's time to speak out. Fear of being politically incorrect should not become a reason for remaining silent in the face of the most extreme provocation.—The Sligo Champion (30th June, 2004)

...It is a life worse than the life of beasts, for beasts at least are guided by wholesome instinct. Traveller life is without the ennobling intellect of man or the steadying instinct of animals. The Tinker ‘culture’ is without achievement, discipline, reason or intellectual ambition. It is a morass.—The Sunday Independent (28th January, 1996)

Why would the Gypsies want to go to the trouble of explaining why a man died on their campsite, when they could bury the pair of them and just move camp? It's not like they got Social Security numbers, is it?—narrator (Snatch, directed by Guy Ritchie, 2000)

We come to know ourselves and to be known by others through the images and stories of popular culture. There is nothing worse than to live in a society in which the traces of your own existence have been erased or squeezed into a narrow and humiliating set of stereotypes. The power of cultural visibility and memory is potent, and the absence of that public face can crush even the hardiest of souls—Suzanna Danuta Walters (2001, 13)
As Walters notes in her book *All the Rage* (2001), the power of cultural visibility and its ability to shape others’ perceptions about people who do not fit into mainstream, middle-class norms, has serious implications for the socially stigmatized. Judging from the conversations and some of the clips taken from Irish newspapers, it appears that Irish Travellers are perceived as stigmatised. Combining Walters’ conception of visibility politics with Goffman’s definition of stigma as something that marks or externally signifies the moral nature of an individual (1963: 5), I would like to explore how Travellers are identified and often limited by mainstream popular culture and the complexities involved in individual and group identification as Travellers. By recalling my fieldwork experiences in Ireland with both non-Travellers and Travellers and supplementing my encounters with research gathered from anthropological, sociological, and activist scholarship on Travellers, I hope to gain a clearer understanding of what issues underlie the multiple forms of Traveller identity. With no intention of privileging one group over another, or claiming one as more authentic, I would like to examine some of the many voices in order to better comprehend how the tendency to strive for a homogenous group identity can have social and political implications for those who do not clearly “fit” into neat categories. This not-fitting highlights the extent to which identities and representing identities are sites of contestation and how this relates to Irish Travellers.
CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Debates surrounding the origins of the Irish Travellers abound. First, it is important to consider who is telling the history and in what socioeconomic, historical, and national moment this telling occurs. What advantages are gained by particular definitions and written histories? Where do oral histories gain recognition? Accounts of ethnically Irish nomads who peddled wares across the countryside and worked with tin have been cited since the 1500s (Helleiner 2000). At the turn of the 1800s, Travellers were labelled as a population to be dreaded because they represented the antithesis to the sedentary norm of Irish society (Helleiner 2000). Much of the debate trying to place the origins of the Travellers has been advanced by non- Travellers, but it is interesting to note the heritage of Travelling offered by Nan Joyce, Traveller activist and author, who states the following:

Some of my ancestors went on the road in the Famine but more of them have been travelling for hundreds of years – we’re not dropouts like some people think. The Travellers have been in Ireland since St. Patrick’s time, there’s a lot of history behind them though there’s not much written down – it’s what you get from your grandfather and what he got from his grandfather. (Helleiner 2000: 29)

This statement coincides with other attributions of origin that emphasize, according to Canadian anthropologist Jane Helleiner, “the essential ‘Irishness’ of Travellers and, in
contrast to colonized indigenous populations elsewhere, Travellers have not been constructed as racially ‘Other.’ While the imputed origins of Travellers are largely free of a discourse of ‘race,’ attributed origins have none the less often been deeply stigmatizing and have been used to legitimate anti-Traveller action” (Helleiner 2000: 29–30).

Race is a social construction that has multiple manifestations. Sometimes it is apparent through the language of colour, or the imagining of colour, with White being the culmination of “civilization.” In other cases, where our language seems to be lacking, moral value and personal identity are evaluated through other markers, ranging between the subjective categories of tangible and intangible, sometimes evidenced by accent, behavioural practices, kinship ties, etc. Where do our categories and measuring sticks situating people according to race, ethnicity, class, gender, ability, the list goes on, fall short? What is useful and what is limiting when it comes to situations such as these, and how can the models of race and ethnicity that are employed in the United States be altered or altogether discarded when it appears a new language is needed? Is race really what is at stake, or is it being a member of a stigmatized social group? Perhaps some Travellers and Traveller activist groups use the discourse of race when seeking recognition and human rights because anti-racism can be linked to the powerful Civil Rights movement in the United States.

Tangled in these definitions of identity are also the concepts of ethnicity and the nation-state. For a more complete summary of the growth in the definition and application of the terms race and ethnicity and their political valence, Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue the following:
Theoretically, the ethnicity paradigm has passed through three major stages: a pre-1930s stage in which the ethnic group view was an insurgent approach, challenging the biologic (and at least implicitly racist) view of race which was dominant at that time; a 1930s to 1965 stage during which the paradigm operated as the progressive/liberal 'common sense' approach to race, and during which two recurrent themes—assimilationism and cultural pluralism—were defined; and a post-1965 phase, in which the paradigm has taken on the defense of conservative (or 'neoconservative') egalitarianism against what is perceived as the radical assault of 'group rights.'

The ethnicity-based paradigm arose in the 1920s and 1930s as an explicit challenge to the prevailing racial views of the period. The pre-existing biologic paradigm had evolved since the downfall of racial slavery to explain racial inferiority as part of a natural order of humankind. Whites were considered the superior race; white skin was the norm while other skins were exotic mutations which had to be explained. Race was equated with distinct hereditary characteristics. Differences in intelligence, temperament, and sexuality (among other traits) were deemed to be racial in character. Racial intermixture was seen as a sin against nature which would lead to the creation of 'biological throwbacks.' These were some of the assumptions in social Darwinist, Spencerist, and eugenist thinking about race and race relations.

But by the early decades of the 20th century biologist was losing coherence. It had come under attack by adherents of Progressivism, and had also been called into question by adherents of Progressivism, and had also been called into question by the work of the ‘Chicago school’ of sociology. The Progressive attack was led by Horace Kallen, who also introduced the concept of cultural pluralism, which was to become a key current of ethnicity theory. The Chicago sociologists were led by Robert E. Park, who had been secretary to Booker T. Washington, and whose approach embodied the other major current of the ethnicity paradigm, assimilationism.

In contrast to biologically oriented approaches, the ethnicity-based paradigm was an insurgent theory which suggested that race was a social category. Race was but one of a number of determinants of ethnic group identity or ethnicity. Ethnicity itself was understood as the result of a group formation process based on culture and descent. ‘Culture’ in this formulation included such diverse factors as religion, language, ‘customs,’ nationality, and political identification. ‘Descent’ involved heredity and a sense of group origins, thus suggesting that ethnicity was socially ‘primordial,’ if not biologically given, in character. While earlier theorists did indeed assume this, later ethnicity theory came to question the validity of any primordial sense of identity or attachment, arguing instead that these concepts too were socially constructed.

Early ethnicity-based theory, considered in the U.S. context, concentrated on problems of migration and ‘culture contact’ (to use Park’s phrase). The problem and foci generated by this approach have continued to preoccupy the school: incorporation and separation of ‘ethnic minorities,’ the nature of ethnic identity, and the impact of ethnicity on politics.” (14–15)

How does this correlate to the socio-historical trajectory of the Irish Travellers?

Following the work of Helleiner and Okely, I begin with pre-conquest Ireland, when
Ireland was based on a pastoral mode of subsistence and Irish society was considered to be one based on mobility (Helleiner 2000: 31). The mobility of Gaelic society was looked down upon by the English and noted as evidence of "barbarism" and the suppression of this mobility was often equated with 'civilizing' the Irish from the 1500s on (Helleiner 2000: 31).

In response to anti-Traveller discourse, some Travellers have employed a form of heritagization that seems to linger between ethnicity and nationality and can be seen in the materials distributed by Pavee Point.\(^4\) The front of the information packet features a weathered and soiled man's hand clutching a copper (?) drum or barrel and the group's insignia is a road framed within a border that resembles the decorations one might find on a barrel-topped wagon more than twenty years ago. This type of representation might fall under the category of what Amy Shuman calls "strategic romanticism," when a group promotes a particular emblem that signifies a nostalgic sense of culture in order to gain political and social gains (personal communication). Moving to even more politically powerful emblems that contest the homogeneity and solidarity of the nation-state, one Pavee Point activist is urging for a separate and distinct Traveller national anthem and flag, a movement that links romanticism with nationalism.

From Pavee News—"Update on Traveller Flag and Traveller Forum"

"On 28\(^{th}\) of January, Travellers gathered for an inaugural meeting to discuss a proposal that Travellers would have their own flag. Over 100 people attended and the group represented Travellers of different ages, both men and women and Travellers from different parts of the country.

\(^4\) Pavee Point is a "partnership of Irish Travellers and settled people working together to improve the lives of Irish Travellers through working towards social justice, solidarity, socio-economic development and human rights" see the following website: [http://www.paveepoint.ie/pav_about_a.html](http://www.paveepoint.ie/pav_about_a.html). Pavee Point distributes newsletters and information booklets at their main headquarters in Dublin, but these materials can also be accessed only.
An interesting and lively debate took place on the pros and cons of Travellers having their own flag. Michael McDonagh made an argument against a flag and Martin Collins made an argument for a flag. Thomas McCann gave an alternate view. The discussion was co-chaired by Davy Joyce and Bernadette Comiskey.

As the issue of a Traveller flag is a sensitive and complicated issue and not one to be decided without proper consideration it was agreed that people would initiate discussion on this subject in their own areas and broaden out the debate. It was agreed, that after further debate, a date would be set to make a decision.

This meeting, being a Traveller only meeting, gave rise to the idea that it is useful to have a Traveller only space and it was agreed to set up a Traveller Forum where ideas and strategies could be discussed in future (8).

When I mentioned this to two Travellers from Tuam, Martin and Owen Ward, Owen became indignant. He argued that this was just another move to get more EU money and to further separate Travellers from their Irish nationality. After all, he asked, “Are we not all Irish? I am just as much Irish as I am a Traveller” (underlying this statement is an assumption that there is a dominant notion of what it means to be ethnically Irish and will be further explored later).

This intra-group tension might also be attributed to differing realities of social tolerance and funding philosophies and capabilities. Whereas Pavee Point and the Galway Traveller Support Centre often act as liaisons to help Travellers benefit from social welfare programs (including ‘the dole’), Martin and Owen Ward of TTEAD believe that this support only creates dependence and that the ‘true’ way to help Travellers is to provide them with educational opportunities.
CHAPTER 3

PRELIMINARY ETHNOGRAPHY

In an attempt to learn more about the Travellers, I had two options: the top-down approach, where I would work with an agency or group dedicated to promoting cultural awareness; or the bottom-up approach, in which I would try to meet people on the street or through random encounters. I chose the top-down approach by contacting various Traveller activist groups in Dublin, Galway, and Tuam. This seemed the most practical at the time because as an obvious foreigner, I would need the assistance of a ‘cultural broker’ of sorts. Also, attempting to gain access to a distinctively separate and closed society is extremely difficult and often fraught with complications and I did not want to risk my safety or the safety of my informants by asking inappropriate questions or talking to the wrong people.

Trying to schedule meetings with individuals from both Pavee Point (formerly the Dublin Traveller Education and Development Group) and the Galway Traveller Support Centre was nearly impossible. Before travelling to Ireland, I tried to contact Pavee Point several times via email, but only once did I receive a response, which merely referred me to the Galway Centre. While in Galway, I made numerous attempts to contact someone
from the Galway Centre, but was told that the person that I needed to talk to was on holiday. After calling again when this person was supposed to be back, I was referred to her assistant who said that they would bring up my interests at their weekly meeting the next time they convened. Without receiving any reply as to the outcome of the group’s decision, I called again and was told that I needed to submit a paper outlining my background, research interests, methodology, and future interests. After submitting this information and calling to see if it was acceptable, I was told it had not gotten to the right person and I would have to wait until the director had a chance to read my proposal. Two weeks before I was scheduled to leave for America, I received a call from the director who left a message giving me her mobile phone number, which I repeatedly called but never was able to reach her.

Somewhat discouraged, I went to Dublin to meet with the people from Pavee Point and was met with mixed reactions. The office assistant was friendly and willing to direct me to Pavee Point resources and after hearing my interests, introduced me to the director of cultural affairs. The director appeared irritated at the unexpected interruption and when I told him that one of the areas I was interested in was how Travellers feel about film representations and would ideally like to have a screening session, he agreed that it was a valid concern but that it was too short of notice and that I should have contacted him sooner (I felt uncomfortable responding that I had made multiple attempts to speak with someone from the group, so I apologized and left). With my spirits greatly diminished, I was distraught that my research was hopeless. However, I was fortunate to meet an asylum-seeker from Ghana who owned his own Internet café and after hearing of my difficulties, gave me the office number of Martin Ward, the former mayor of Tuam.
and current City Councillor. Martin agreed to be interviewed on camera and to show me around the museum housed upstairs in the TTEAD facility, and I was finally able to meet with him on the day before I had to return to the United States. Once there, Martin articulated countless answers to many of my questions, providing information on Traveller culture and related issues for nearly two hours.

Tuam (see also section on popular culture for another reference to Tuam), a town twenty kilometers north of the city of Galway, has a population varying between 800–1000 Travellers (with about 500 registered voters), and thus has a reputation of being predominantly a town of Travellers (as I quickly learned when I told the maintenance man at my apartment that I was going to Tuam and he said, “Now, why would you want to go there? It’s Tinker Town.”). The TTEAD Centre is one of four Travelling training centres in Co. Galway, and one of thirty-four Travelling training centres in the Republic of Ireland. TTEAD focuses predominantly on health issues, housing and halting sites, and culturally appropriate education. Issues that Ward predicts will come to the forefront include the impact of drugs on Travelling communities, involvement with the European Union, and the pressures and complications faced by cultural changes. When asked what he believes will help ensure that Traveller culture survives, Martin Ward named the following factors: 1) early marriage; 2) strict moral values; and 3) the importance of remaining connected to the extended family.

When Martin had to attend to other matters, he asked three Traveller women (Bridie, Winnie, and Mary) from the Centre to come in and sit for an interview. Bridie agreed to be on camera, but Winnie and Mary wanted only their voices recorded. This second interview progressed less smoothly than the one with Martin, owing in large part
to their discomfort and unfamiliarity with being on film and generational and gendered differences. Martin is the head of the Centre and the women might have guarded their words for fear of compromising a sense of solidarity. For example, whereas Martin argued that early marriage was one aspect that strengthened Traveller culture, the women claimed that one of the signs of social improvement for Travellers was that people were getting married later than before. There was also an almost tangible layer of tension between Bridie and the two older women (Mary and Winnie) to my side. Granted, these women neither knew me nor were prepared to be interviewed; therefore, the awkwardness and tension surrounding the situation, coupled with ethnographic mistakes I made, were understandable. However, once the interview had officially ended and the video camera had been packed away, they began to ask me questions about my marital status and previous relationships and conversations flowed with greater ease than before. This portion of my ethnographic encounter could be framed as a moment of discovery of what Noyes calls “the complex network of contacts and influences feeding into and emerging from an apparently bounded community” (1995:449).

When the interviews were completed, I was directed to the museum section of the facility where I was allowed to explore and take pictures. Owen Ward, a member of the Centre, offered to guide me through the museum at my own pace, and answered questions as they arose. Owen had lived in Tuam all of his life and had known Martin Ward since they were young. From what I can recall, both of their families had travelled until Owen and Martin reached adolescence, but now both men and their families live in houses.
Although it might seem off-track, it is important for me to include a rather embarrassing side story to my visit to Tuam. I had spent the prior night in a hostel in Galway since there were not any hostels in Tuam, storing my luggage in the hostel for the day to be retrieved that afternoon before I had to catch a bus from Galway to Dublin in order to catch my early morning flight to America the next day. As I had gotten off the bus to walk to the Traveller Centre in Tuam, I realized that my wallet must have fallen out of my raincoat and I was without any money or my return bus ticket to Galway. Mortified, I went to the TTEAD Centre and when told that Martín had not yet arrived, I confessed the predicament I was in and the people at the Centre let me use their phone to call the bus station. After numerous phone calls back and forth, the bus station lieutenant tracked down my bus driver who found my wallet on the seat and would hand it to another bus driver heading back south who was due to pass through Tuam in a couple of hours. When the time came for the scheduled rendezvous, the bus never arrived. It turned out that the buses were almost three hours behind due to the heavy traffic caused by the Galway Races and the bus station could not predict when my wallet would be returned. Trying to put these thoughts out of my mind, I continued with my work and hoped that the bus would come before it was too late for me to catch the last bus from Galway to Dublin. After I had finished taking pictures of the museum, Martin, Owen, Owen’s son, Connor, and I went to a local restaurant for lunch. When lunch was finished, Martin and Connor returned to the TTEAD Centre and Owen offered to drive me around the town and countryside so I could see the multiple housing accommodations occupied by Travellers. Owen first drove me to the country lane where his childhood home had been and then to the fields where hemlock grew in the wild. The Travellers
often had problems with rats but could not afford rat poison, so to combat the growing populations they would harvest hemlock, boil water and plants to a concentrated mixture, strain the plants, stew rotten meat in the concentrated hemlock water, and then place the poison-soaked meat near the campsites for the rats to consume. The next day they would gather the rat carcasses in bags and burn the bodies to avoid contaminating the environment and their water source. Although Owen can now afford to purchase ready-made rat poison, he still prides himself on his knowledge of herbs and their properties and has taught his knowledge to his oldest son, who is also an herbalist.

Meandering along the country lanes, Owen decided to show me the different forms of Traveller accommodation in Tuam. Proceeding in an almost hierarchical fashion, we went from the least to most settled Traveller lodgings. The first place we visited was a roadside camping site where two caravans were parked. As we approached the site, Owen ordered me to get my camera ready, that it was time for a “drive-by shooting” (his actual terms) because they would more than likely not want their picture taken. This encampment had no access to sanitary facilities and the nearest cold water well was over a mile away. Owen remarked that these Travellers had been offered a place in an ‘established’ halting site (also referred to as a hardstand) where they would have had access to better facilities, but that they had chosen to stay on the roadside and retain their nomadic lifestyle. The second site we visited was a hardstand where at least five or six families were staying. Each caravan was parked on a concrete lot and the families were expected to share the facilities housed in a small concrete building where a laundry machine, bathroom, and electric outlets were located. The third and final site
was Owen’s own home, a two-story house on a road filled with similar houses owned by other settled Travellers.

Once inside, we were greeted by Owen’s teenage daughter, Theresa, who brewed a pot of tea and sat down with us in the living room. Owen Jr. was also at home and came downstairs to talk and answer some of my questions. When I asked them about relations between Travellers and non- Travellers, both Owen Jr. and Theresa claimed that overt discrimination was not as prevalent, but tension between the two communities persisted and discrimination was still occurring in two particular areas: the educational system and pubs. Owen Jr. told me that he had one teacher in primary school who would never give him any grade above a failing grade, even when he was scoring above average in his standardized tests. He said he thought it was because she never expected him to pass since he was a Traveller, but now that he was in a military school, he was getting straight A’s and was wondering if she was still treating other Travellers the same. Avoidance of alcohol was another topic of importance for the Wards. Owen Jr. stated he had never touched a drop of alcohol but when it was time for his most recent birthday celebration, his friends took him to a local pub where he was not allowed to enter because, according to the bouncer, he was too drunk. Owen Jr. argued that he had not had anything to drink on that night nor any other night of his life, but the guard continued to insist that he was too drunk. When I asked how this was possible, he replied that it was because he was a Traveller and that his last name is Ward, a common Traveller surname, so the bouncer expected him to fit the stereotype of a drunken, rabble-rousing Traveller man and barred him from the establishment.
This encouraged me to ask more questions about how one identifies a Traveller. As I was asking, “What does it mean to be a Traveller?” Owen’s two other sons and their friends ran into the living room. Owen asked them what it meant to be a Traveller and no one had a particularly direct answer. One boy responded, “I don’t know, it’s just what you are,” and another stated, “It’s where you come from.” When I asked if this meant that they travelled, they replied no, but their families had a long time ago so they were still considered Travellers. I then asked how someone can tell who is and is not a Traveller: is it through their language, dress, hair, or something else? Owen said one identifying factor could be language, if you could hear two people speaking to each other in Cant (also known as Shelta or Gammon, depending on where one is from originally) then you would know that they are Travellers, but “not many Travellers know how to speak Cant anymore.” Theresa said she doubted it was through dress since most people shopped at the same stores and much of a person’s style could be attributed to individual tastes. I had heard from three non- Travellers that Traveller women could be recognised by their “big hair and big bangle-y earrings,” but Theresa’s hair was styled in a common up-do and although she did have hoop earrings, so did I. Theresa replied that, again, it was a matter of individual style and that one could not identify someone as a Traveller based solely on style. However, she did say that Travellers can identify other Travellers without the assistance of any external signs. Theresa hypothesized the following, “You could put me in a room full of strangers, in another part of the country, and I could tell you who was a Traveller...you just know.”

These questions concerning Traveller identity appeared to be fascinating to both me and the Ward family. Owen suggested that we should collectively create a
questionnaire to give to the Travellers of Tuam and ask them to define what it means to be a Traveller at this particular moment. We exchanged email and regular addresses and Owen gave me his telephone number along with his wife’s cellular phone number in case I had any more questions. For my plane trip home, Owen handed me a copy of “Getting Married,” a short story he had written about a twelve-year-old boy who acts as the mediator between a young woman unable to express her love for an illiterate young man in their town. Owen then drove me back into town to find Connor waiting at the Centre with the good news that the bus station had called and my wallet (with bus ticket inside) was waiting to be picked up at the local Laundromat. Had it not been for the combined kindness, generosity, and cooperation of the Travellers from TTEAD and the bus system, I could have been stranded in a serious situation.

Before beginning my analysis of the events that took place in Tuam, I would first like to explore some of the complexities involved in applying performance theory to this situation. Performance, like folklore, can signify different things to people depending on their background and familiarity with the multiple interpretations and uses of the term. While I, as a student of a class specifically focused on the ethnography of performance, might feel comfortable using the term folklore to frame the interactions that took place between myself and the Travellers from Tuam, were I to label their actions and words as performances, I might risk offending their notions of authenticity, honesty, and identity. On the one hand, people perform their identities in strategic ways to allow other people to identify them. This is apparent in the activist literature and films endorsed by Pavee Point because to be proud of being a Traveller demonstrates a willingness to be part of a traditionally disempowered group, thereby garnering power through group solidarity. On
the other hand, it is also a manner through which one can control one’s image against what is considered stereotypical. For example, mentioning that he has never touched alcohol was one way for Owen Jr. to ‘perform’ respectability and thereby distance himself from the stereotype of the alcoholic Traveller man. The problem with approaching Travellers as people who perform their identities in strategic ways is that it implies that identity is only performed. Perhaps this is problematic precisely because it does contain a certain amount of truthfulness and has serious implications for political and social concerns. In “Pavee Culture: Our Voices, Our Ways,” Gearóid Ó Riain of Pavee Point states:

Who are the Travellers is at the core of all policy issues. And, therefore, we see it as very important that due recognition is given to their cultural identity. And Travellers do constitute an ethnic group because you can’t decide to become a Traveller. You’re born into the community. You see yourself and you’re seen by others as different on account of your culture and on account of shared history, and a sense of belonging, of peoplehood, distinct language, distinct traditions, distinct customs, norms…

However, as members of the Ward family indicated, it is often difficult to identify Travellers based on dress, language, choice of housing, or occupation, since many Travellers dress the same as non-Travellers, speak English, live in permanent housing establishments, and work outside of what were historically deemed ‘Traveller’ occupations (i.e. tin-smithing, horse peddling, door-to-door sales, etc.). Is it appropriate at this moment for academics to deconstruct their performance and thus undo the threads of solidarity that are promoting cultural awareness and unification? On the other hand, if we do not label our social interactions as having some element of performance, are we not risking placing an essentialist framework upon Travellers, which could then be used against them?
Another question to consider is the following: if Travellers are continuing to experience instances of individual and institutional discrimination while they are not wearing the visible markers that historically signified their status as Travellers, what are the distinguishing factors that separate them from non-Travellers? In an interview with Scottish Traveller Betty Townsley, Donald Braid recalled her saying she could recognize other Travellers in a crowd no matter how well disguised, as if “worldview managed to somehow be visible in subtle ways that non-Travellers would miss” (personal communication: November 16, 2004). Braid remarked that this was always offered in contrast to the belief that non-Travellers could not tell the difference, but he also wondered if “it is more that settled folk are looking for signs that reflect a romanticized view of Traveller identity” (Braid, 2004). This ambiguity or intangibility of evidence is alluded to in the following remarks from Martin Collins of Pavee Point:

I think the big mistake that has been made is that people have a tendency to focus on the tangible aspects of culture, whether that be language, whether it be nomadism, whether it be diet, dress, music, storytelling, folklore. And while all of these are very important aspects of people’s culture, for me what’s equally important is the so-called intangible aspects of people’s culture, almost indefinable in many ways, and that is about shared understandings, shared perceptions, how people relate to themselves, how to relate to their immediate community, and more importantly how they might relate and perceive people outside of their community (“Pavee Culture: Our Voices, Our Ways”).

While Collins argues that attention needs to be paid to intangible aspects of people’s culture, Pavee Point also pushes for a movement towards solidarity between the Irish Travellers and the Roma, arguing that the anti-trespassing laws are specifically targeting these nomadic cultures. Martin Ward of TTEAD, however, is concerned that this course of action will alienate those Travellers who no longer pursue nomadic lifestyles and that the underlying issues actually have to do with receiving recognition, protection, and
monetary benefits from the European Union, rather than celebrating the diversity of Traveller experiences. Braid also refers to the strategic choices of identity where, citing the work of Thomas Acton, “defining identity based on mobility has significant consequences regarding inclusion of settled Travellers or of New Age Travellers” (Braid 2004).

For the concerns of this paper, I will not try to determine what an accurate or authentic representation or performance of Traveller identity looks like (or to what extent that would even be possible) because I am not sure to what extent what I experienced was typical. Instead, I will consider my interaction with the Travellers from Tuam as a series of moments where insiders portrayed themselves to an outsider. In order to understand these moments within the larger context of an event, I will categorize the experiences in terms of genres.

In “Genre, Intertextuality, and Social Power,” Briggs and Bauman support a new approach to the study of genres by investigating generic intertextuality that can “illuminate questions of ideology, political economy, and power” (1992: 131). Applying this concept of generic intertextuality to my experience in Tuam, I can begin to frame the events, conversations, and effects that were caused by the interaction of an outsider student seeking information about Travellers from several community members in one particular location. What I have learned is that there were multiple genres embedded in each other: some were highlighted through movement through the landscape and my physical surroundings, some were rooted in oral and written texts, and others were deep-seated in intertextual subtleties that I am only beginning to uncover.
Upon reviewing the series of events, I found there was a level of consistency among the issues that arose. One of the broadest genres was the performance of expertise. I believe I valued the performances of expertise by each individual who spoke with me because they were associated with the Tuam Traveller headquarters and had political and social clout, evidenced by Martin’s former and current political position and prior experience as a Traveller spokesperson in an interview for NPR. Therefore, I did not feel it was unusual or unsafe for me to be a passenger in a personalized guided tour of the countryside to view three different Traveller housing accommodations. As I had mentioned before, the first site was of the caravans parked on the side of the road where Owen used the emic category of the drive-by shooting to signal a somewhat inappropriate opportunity for me to take a picture of the conditions. Was it appropriate for me to take a picture of someone’s private home if they are in public space? This becomes increasingly complicated, particularly by the nature of constructing Travellers as inhabiting both “public” and “private” space. What made it suitable for me to take a picture at that site but not at the second location, the hardstand where Owen visibly acknowledged the presence of the Travellers moving about outside and was, in turn, likewise acknowledged? At the third location, Owen’s home, I was allowed to take pictures but found myself only comfortable with taking pictures of the backyard view and the chickens. Interestingly, this last part also might fall under the genre of self-identification and refusal of stereotype that appeared in Owen Jr.’s statement concerning abstaining from alcohol; in this instance, Owen Sr. pointed to the cock’s trimmed spurs and stated that although Jack’s breed is meant for cock-fighting, they would never engage in illegal sporting activities, and that Jack and Lizzy were simply family pets.
The other main category of genre that warrants further attention is that of individual and group recognition. In both my research and Braid’s ethnographic work, narratives of being able to identify group members based on subtle and intangible factors appear. As a community based on descent, Travellers have rules maintaining the boundaries between Travellers and non- Travellers. However, these rules must be explored further in order for there to be greater understanding as to how these boundaries are established, based on what criteria, who is authorized to police them, and the political, social, and material repercussions for blurred boundaries.

As Theresa Ward and Betty Townsley indicated, Travellers have an intuitive (or socially-constructed?) ability to recognize other Travellers, no matter how well disguised. Can we apply the term *shibboleth* to this marker that distinguishes someone as a Traveller? According to Jennifer Michael, “shibboleths depend on the assumption that certain behaviour, verbal or otherwise, is characteristic of and specific to a given group: all group members know and can perform this behaviour” (1998:149). If these identifying factors are neither physical nor verbal, and if Traveller culture is constantly changing, are the shibboleths changing as well?
CHAPTER 4

REMINISCING

Finding the right thing to say can be of little use unless one can find the right register in which to say it.

--Michael Warner (1999), The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life

It has been said that folklore as a discipline or methodology can precede and complement social sciences, such as anthropology and sociology, and that there is an inherent value in listening to the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others (personal communications with Dorothy Noyes and Amy Shuman). What is also valuable is looking beyond these stories and situating them in their particular socio-historic-political moment. Who is doing the talking or providing representations and what is the best form of presenting this information without privileging one homogenous view over another? While in Ireland, I was confronted with multiple stories and
stereotypes of Travellers by non-Travelers, but relatively little interaction with Travellers; thus, my sample study is limited and I have been left with evidence garnered from random encounters, hearsay, and anecdotal reminiscences. Finding a way to decipher the meanings of words, images, and their messages can be further complicated when travelling through memory-filters and time. In an attempt to understand these stories within a larger context, I am not looking for an inherent truth value, but rather as moments where native Irish people act as insiders of the ‘Irish’ culture while remaining outsiders to Traveller culture. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks supported by Joan W. Scott and Kamala Viswesweran, I attempt to provide a preliminary feminist ethnography that looks at the similarities and differences in the experiences that occurred in various contexts. I will also overlay these encounters with definitions provided by Travellers and non-Travelers on different websites. In this thesis, I will include multiple voices, some in accordance with each other, others contesting circulating representations, in an attempt to show the interruptions, disjunctures, and multivocalities that provide commentary to each other without the need for my own overarching meta-commentary that provides a cohesive whole. I have decided to present my voice only as an observer, whereas typically in an ethnographic work the scholar usually has two voices: one as an observer and the other as a critic/theorist, because I am not in a position to either speak for the Travellers or to understand the complicated circumstances and ideologies that have created and continue to create a proliferation of pro-Traveler and anti-Traveler discourses.

Because Travellers have been traditionally disempowered in Ireland, their history has either been ignored or written by outsiders in positions of power. In her article
“Experience” (1992), Joan W. Scott challenges this power that has been given to histories and “hegemonic constructions of social worlds” (24). Scott seeks not just to make visible the experience of different groups, but to contemplate how subjects are constructed through experience, how knowledge is produced, and how a critical perspective might be utilized to reconsider how the explanatory categories are classified in the first place (26). She acknowledges the multiple possibilities of experience and the need for a historical reading “…to open new possibilities for analyzing discursive productions of social and political reality as complex, contradictory processes” (34). This is where the role of the feminist ethnographer, according to Viswesweran, is important because a feminist ethnography can consider “how identities are multiple, contradictory, partial, and strategic. The underlying assumption is, of course, that the subject herself represents a constellation of conflicting social, linguistic, and political forces” (1994: 50).

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May 1997, Galway, Ireland

It must be nearing noon and my friend and I are starving as we walk around looking at the town’s whitewashed buildings with brightly painted doors and trim. Shopkeepers with smiling faces greet us and invite us in to view their expensive Aran sweaters, Connemara marble, Wedgewood crystal, and various Irish knickknacks. Because it is May, flowers spill over the edges of window boxes and freesia and roses clamber to reach the sunlight. Behind the avowedly picturesque street sites, I can see lush green hillscapes dotted with the legendary Connemara ponies. I feel embarrassed as I fight the wells of tears that threaten to escape behind my eyes, but I cannot help it—this is the Ireland I have imagined and dreamt of seeing since I was a child. We spot a pub
across the street advertising ham and cheese sandwiches and head in its direction. As we are walking down the street, I notice a small old man to my right sitting between two large wolf-like dogs. We smile at each other and I comment on how beautiful his dogs are. I ask him if they are wolves and he answers that they are a mix of a wolf, shepherd, and wolfhound. He tells me they are friendly and I can pet them if I would like. Just as I reach out to let the dog nearest to me sniff my hand, a fierce grip grabs my elbow and a tall man’s body pushes me down the street.

“What the %&&* do you think you’re doing?” he asks disapprovingly.

“Excuse me, let go!” I tell him as I twist my arm out of his grasp. “What is your problem?”

“You shouldn’t talk to him—he’s a Tinker!”

“What is a ‘Tinker’ and why should I not talk to him?” I ask.

“He’s a Tinker, a Knacker, a Gypsy, you know, scum o’ the earth! You, especially being a lady, shouldn’t be talking to a Tinker,” the lanky red-head sputters (I learn later that he is a rugby player who has had more than a few pints by the time of our encounter).

“I still don’t get it,” I say, “and what’s this scum o’ the earth thing?”

“They’re the scum of the earth, the lowest of the low, you know, like the Blacks in America, you don’t talk to them,” he explains.

”’Like the Blacks in America’?” I question. “Have you ever been to America?”

“Well, no,” he admits.

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29
Irish Travellers are a nomadic or itinerant people of Irish origin living in Ireland, Great Britain and the United States. They are also often referred to as 'gypsies' or 'tinkers' but these names are now considered to be offensive, and in the case of the gypsy are technically incorrect, as that word more specifically refers to another travelling community who originated in India. Irish Travellers are distinguished from the settled communities of the countries in which they live by their own language and customs. Shelta is the traditional language of Travellers but they also speak English with a distinct accent and mannerisms...The Traveller lifestyle often produces friction with settled communities, especially in urban areas. Travellers are accused of leaving behind large amounts of litter in temporary halting sites, or are stereotyped as dishonest or criminal. Travellers are known to settled people by a number of names generally considered pejorative, such as gypsy, tinker and knacker (in Ireland), and pikey (in Great Britain)...Tinker and knacker are based on the historical occupations of some Travellers, whereas pikey is a generic term used for all travellers, regardless of origin.

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Wikipedia, unlike encyclopaedias written, bound, and stored on reference shelves, is an online encyclopaedia that allows visitors to post their comments in a discussion section relating to the terms. Regarding Irish Travellers, several visitors posted comments and questions that offer insight into some questions and misunderstandings between Travellers and non- Travellers.

(from Talk: Irish Traveller at Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

The article originally spoke of a "nomadic people", but I think that's misleading. Also, the article seems to be mostly a summary of the advocacy website. It needs a bit of balance. Also, the claim that Travellers are "distinct" needs some more explanation. How are they different from other Irish, aside from their desire to move about rather than remain settled--Ed Poor

They are distinct in look (a product of dietary limitations and its impact on body shape, skin quality, overall health, etc), in social characteristics (large families, high rate of inter-marriage and early death), in speech mannerisms (whereas most people in Ireland have a dialect based on physical location, their community has a set of speech mannerisms unique to it, with its own language and indeed distinctive usage of English), in educational experience (because of the constant degree of travel, traveller children spent less time in one set school and so generally have a lower rate of educational attainment, often missing much of the school year as they travel around the country. Most Traveller children leave school between 12 and 15 years of age). FearÉIREANN

The name "Irish Traveller" is well-established for these people. They are not a movement -- they are a people, with a clearly defined culture. The Irish Travellers' Movement, on the other hand is a political pressure group that tries to push for recognition of the rights of the Irish Travellers. Please provide evidence for the distinctness of this "people". I am adding sources for some of the claims you have made.
Also, I will try to reduce the redundancy between the traveller and traveller movement articles.
--Ed Poor

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May 2004, Manchester, Tennessee

Camping next to my friends and I are two young men from Dublin, Ireland, who have come to the music festival to see a friend’s band. As we each begin our morning camp routines of brewing a pot of coffee and hanging out clothes and blankets to dry, we start chatting and inquiring about each other’s lives. I ask them about Ireland and tell them I am heading to Galway for school in the summer to learn more about Ireland’s history, cultures, and Travellers.

“Tourists, you mean?” one asks.


“What do you want to know about them for?” asks Gavin, the short, scrawny, long-haired young man who has no qualms about walking around nude in the morning before his pre-breakfast wash. After warning me that I had better be careful because the women are tough and like to pick fights, Gavin gives me the following “tips” on how to recognize a Traveller by looks: the women are easier to identify, they usually have red bushy hair and are smothered in freckles.

“But don’t you have red hair and freckles?” I ask one.
“Yeah, but more than me. And they’re darker from being in the sun more,” he adds.

They continue to chime in with each other on the various physical attributes of Traveller women. According to Colin, the tall, balding, blond man slathering sunscreen over his exposed surfaces, Traveller women wear their hair pulled up in big “poufs” on top of their head, wear big, “bangle-y” earrings, look a lot older than they are, and talk in a “husky” voice. As for Traveller men, the Dublin men tell me, they are sometimes harder to pick out, but they’re often darker in complexion than the ‘average Irishman’ and wear a lot of gold jewellery.

When I ask them if they know any Travellers on an individual level, both young men admit that they went to school with some Travellers in their early years but do not know any at present.

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(from an “Interview with Catherine Joyce,” at http://www.itmtrav.com/Catherine’s%20interview.html)

In terms of the issues around race and discrimination, the way I see it, we are only now coming to a situation in Ireland where racism has actually been put on the table and is being seen as an issue to be debated and looked at. There was a lot of denial in this country in terms of whether Travellers were at the receiving end of racism and discrimination. I think now it is becoming more obvious and more prevalent that that is an issue that affects Travellers. In terms of discrimination, you suffer discrimination from a very early age if you are a Traveller, and it happens at a number of levels, on an individual level and an institutional level. I have a daughter who’s 11 years of age now, and she came home from school one night and said there was somebody in the school yard who called her a ‘knacker.’ And I am sure that it has happened to other Travellers who are quite younger than that. You go down to the shop and people follow you around because you’re a Traveller. People refuse us services in a pub. You can’t get a hotel for a Traveller wedding or a christening. People don’t want Travellers in their town, camped in their area. People don’t want Travellers going to school with their kids... You have state agencies that refuse either to provide accommodation for Travellers or are allowed not to provide accommodation for Travellers. You have the department of education that allows discrimination at our schools that refuse service to Travellers. You have insurance companies that are allowed to either charge an excess what they’re charging settled people or else refuse Travellers cover for their car.

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32
June 24, 2004, Dublin, Ireland

I arrive at the Dublin airport and take the last bus into town, hoping that the hostel is not too far away and the city centre is not too wild this late at night. Winding my way from the bus station to a local hostel looks much easier on my map than it does on the darkened streets. Two young women dressed in black Metallica goth-gear, smoking cigarettes on another hostel’s steps ask me if I need help. I thank them and tell them where I’m trying to go and they offer to walk with me until I find my hostel because, according to them, this part of Dublin is no place for a young girl to be walking around by herself. When I ask them what brings them to Dublin, both of them scream in unison: “Metallica!” When they, in turn, ask me what brings me to Ireland and I reply, “I want to learn more about Irish Travellers,” I get hit with my first round of 2004 Irish non- Traveller opinions on Irish Travellers, while in Ireland.

“Well, you didn’t have to come all the way here to learn any of that!” laughs one girl, “Just watch ‘Snatch’ a couple more times because Brad Pitt was the perfect Traveller.”

“Yeah, he should’ve gotten an Oscar for that one!” adds the other.

I ask them what makes his performance authentic and they both agree that everything about the movie’s portrayal is accurate, although the clincher is his accent.

The taller girl with brightly dyed pink-red hair tells me that she knows that the majority of Travellers cannot be trusted—if you give them an inch, they will take a yard.
June 24, 2004, Dublin, Ireland

I find the hostel and want more than anything to drop my luggage some place safe and take a hot shower. The entrance personnel are two dark-haired men possibly in their thirties who ask me a series of questions: Where are you from? Where’s your picture? Can we have your picture? Are you from California? Are you married? etc.

I fire back: Ohio. Here. No. No. No, but I have a boyfriend (standard line I give when dealing with the opposite sex in certain arenas).

“What language is that?” I ask, pointing to the script on the pages of a book one of the men is reading.

“Romanian,” he answers.

And then I ask the wrong question, but with a hopeful and naïve smile, “Are you Roma?”, or so it seems by their identical reactions of horror, defensiveness, and disgust.

“No! We are not Roma” they both assure me.

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Later in the month, I pick up the May 2004 issue of the Pavee Point newsletter when I’m dropping off my proposal letter at the Galway Traveller Support Centre. The cover features a little dark-haired, dark-eyed grinning young girl, across whose face scream the words: “Mayday! Mayday! Racism Against Roma in the EU!” In the section “Racism Against Roma,” a brief sketch of Roma history in Europe is given, along with the implications for countries who wish to join the EU, but face criticism for their human rights violations (particularly when it comes to Roma) (2004: 5). “In Ireland, 52
Romanians were recently deported—45 of which were Roma,” the article states and then follows with the comment that a judicial review in the High Court is underway (2004: 5).

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**Back in Dublin, June 24, 2004**

I leave the men at the desk and head for my room, hoping my roommates are not irritated by my late arrival. After showering and fumbling around in the darkened room, I quietly climb into my bed and am relieved to hear the girl below me soundly snoring.

The next morning I wake to find my roommates are three girls from Cork who have travelled to see Metallica. The oldest girl, Moira, is twenty-one and is chaperoning her sixteen-year-old sister and her friend. I ask them if they are familiar with any Travellers and they react with a mixture of rolling eyes and snickering laughter. “Oh yeah, we have a bunch of them in Cork,” answers Moira. “Our parents own a restaurant and we used to let the little ones [Traveller children] come in and we’d give them some leftovers, but then it got so the place was crawling with them and our silverware went missing. It was too bad for the ‘good’ Travellers, but we had to make it a rule that no Travellers could come in because of what the others had done. We couldn’t afford to keep replacing the stolen items.”

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**July 17, 2004, Galway, Ireland**

The security night-watchman likes to linger around the apartment I share with five young American girls. He has taken a liking to my dark-haired roommate, Katie, who is too polite to dismiss his advances or tell him she cannot spend her evenings talking to him in the shadows of our doorway. He is at least thirty years her senior and she claims
she is in no way interested in him, but does not mind talking to him—or rather listening to him talk at her, since she is often interrupted and chided for how naïve she is as a young American girl.

One night I accompany her outside to drink some tea and watch the moonrise. Along comes Paul, who then asks me what I’m studying, and is horrified that I want to talk to Travellers.

He says, “They’re all up to no good. They steal, can’t hold a job, and are good for nothing. You’d best stay away from them.”

“They can’t all be bad,” I argue. “Just because you might have had some negative experiences doesn’t mean you can speak for all of them.”

“Do you know of any itinerants who have a legitimate job?” he asks, with an arched eyebrow and a knowing smirk.

* * *

His question reflects the perception that Travellers are either unemployed or have illegitimate jobs and do not abide by society’s rules. According to the 2002 Census, “73% of Traveller men are unemployed in comparison to a national average of 9%; while 62% of Traveller women are unemployed in comparison to a national average of 8%” (Pavee Point Newsletter, May 2004). Several factors could contribute to these statistics: a high rate of illiteracy, the decline of the Travellers’ position as peddlers of wares and horses to rural households, the difficulty of scrap collecting in more settled housing sites, and anti-Traveller discrimination from those in a position of power, namely, employers. According to the Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community in 1995, discrimination against Travellers has not diminished at the “individual or interpersonal
level and at the institutional level” and these forces can be seen to affect Travellers’ abilities to gain access to employment (O’Connell 2002, 51). Warranting further exploration is, first, how these statistics are gathered and how “Travellers” are defined (by themselves and by those performing the surveys) and, second, the very definition of what it means to be employed. Making money in an informal economic sector might not be reported for fear of being linked to illegal activities or becoming ineligible to receive outside social support (possibly through public assistance). Also to be considered is the issue of literacy and how this relates to employment. Since Travellers have traditionally been mobile, some have had negative experiences with the educational institutions and difficulties keeping their children enrolled in various schools. This also can affect a child’s self-esteem when the curriculum is not culturally-specific, leaving many Traveller children with a sense of isolation and frustration (interview with Martin Ward).

I have an ongoing conversation (subject more often than not: Travellers) with the maintenance men at my apartment complex, so I have acquired the nickname of Tinker Girl. Frank, a forty-something married father of two, and Mickey, an eighteen-year-old aspiring professional wrestler, act as ‘cultural brokers’ and share with me whenever they have a chance their knowledge of Travellers. Although Frank often refers to Travellers pejoratively as Tinkers or Knackers, he admits that not all of them are bad, that he does see some good ones when he referees the local youth league’s football games. Mickey tells me he might be able to introduce me to some, but my best chance is to go to the Galway Races and roam around outside of the races, where there will be gambling and hawking and plenty of Travellers from all over the country. Later in the week, I find an extra copy of the local newspaper on my doorstep (courtesy of Mickey) with an article on
“Scrap Lads,” the new documentary featuring local Galway Traveller teenage boys who collect scrap metal for profit.

I tell Frank I’m heading to Tuam to meet Martin Ward, the former mayor of Tuam who received national attention for being a Traveller. Frank asks, “You mean Tinker Town?” I later learn that Tuam does have a large Traveller population and wonder if this nickname is widespread, and for how long Tuam has been associated with Travellers. And then I look back through my collections of “traditional Irish music” and find some interesting discontinuities and motifs.

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The Chieftains are renowned worldwide for their musical expertise and ability to dazzle audiences the world over with their traditional renditions of Irish music and collaborative efforts with musicians from such genres as rock and roll (i.e. Rolling Stones, Sting, Elvis Costello, etc.), country, classical, and world music. One of my favourite songs is their rendition of “The Rocky Road to Dublin,” and although I am aware that artists alter lyrics and melodies at their will, I am interested in the root of a discrepancy between the traditional lyrics and the Chieftains’ version. Following are the lyrics that can be located on multiple traditional music websites, this particular version is from [http://www.showbizireland.com/news/january02/24-chieftains01.shtml](http://www.showbizireland.com/news/january02/24-chieftains01.shtml)

**The Rocky Road to Dublin**

In the merry month of May from me home I started
Left the girls of Tuam sad and broken hearted
Saluted father dear, then kissed me darlin’ mother
Then drank a pint of beer me tears and grief to smother
Off to reap the corn, leave where I was born,
I cut a stout blackthorn to banish ghost and goblin
A brand new pair of brogues, rattlin’ o’er the bogs
And frightnin’ all the dogs on the rock road to Dublin.
Chorus:
One, two, three, four, five
Hunt the hare and turn her
Down the rocky road, another way to Dublin
Whack fol-laddie-rol!
In Mullingar that night I rested limbs so weary
Started by daylight next mornin’ light and early
Took a drop of the pure to keep me heart from sinkin’
That’s an Irishman’s cure whener’ he’s on for drinkin’
To see the lassies smile, laughin’ all the while,
At me daring style, would set your heart a bubblin’
Asked if was I hired, the wages I required,
Till I was almost tired on the rocky road to Dublin.
(Chorus)

In Dublin next arrived, I thought it such a pity
To be so soon deprived of a view of that fine city
When I took a stroll all among the quality
My bundle it was stole from that neat locality
Something crossed me mind, when I looked behind
No bundle could I find upon me stick a-wobblin’
Enquirein’ for the rogue, they said me Connacht brogue
Wasn’t much in vogue on the rock road to Dublin.
(Chorus)
The boys of Liverpool, when we safely landed,
Called meself a fool, I could no longer stand it,
Me blood began to boil, for all I was a losin’,
Poor old Erin’s Isle they began abusin’
"Hurrah, me Soul!" says I, shillelagh I let fly
Some Galway boys came by and saw I was a hobblin’
With a loud "Hurray" they joined in the affair
And quickly cleared the way for the rocky road to Dublin!
(Chorus)

In the Chieftains’ version, Kevin Conneff makes two significantly (?) different alterations. In the first two lines, where the lyrics say “In the merry month of May from me home I started/Left the girls of Tuam sad and broken-hearted,” Conneff alters the second line to either Sleath or Sligo, I am not sure, but he definitely does not mention Tuam. Is this arbitrary, or is there some connection he wishes to avoid with Tuam? Is he leaving Tuam as a Traveller? The second alteration occurs in the second to last line of the third full stanza, where the original singer inquires about his missing pack and he is told that his Connacht (the western province of Ireland, often viewed as the most wild and rural, often pejoratively referred to as backwards) brogue is not in vogue in Dublin;
however, Kevin Conneff sings that it is his “funny” brogue that is not in vogue. These two instances may be insignificant, but what if they are not? What if the Chieftains do not want to associate themselves with Travellers, even though Travellers have often made their livelihoods as traditional musicians and storytellers? Perhaps this is another case of rendering the Travellers invisible as well as their contributions to Irish traditional music.

From Kevin Conneff to Christy Moore to the current popular rock band, The Prodigals, the traditional song “The Dark-Eyed Gypsies” has been a favourite to record in their individual styles. I have included the liner notes from Conneff’s recording in order to highlight the last line that states, “its story of the highborn lady who abandons home and husband for a life on the road has made it understandably popular among the travelling people.” How do we know it is popular among the Travellers for this reason? Or is this more of a reflection of the settled population’s particularly patriarchal anxieties and assumptions?

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Kevin Conneff, The Week before Easter
© 1988 Claddagh Records Limited

The Dark-Eyed Gypsies (liner notes)
“Known throughout Ireland, this ballad is called by various titles such as The Seven Yellow Gypsies, The Raggle Taggle Gypsies and Gypsy David. The title used by Francis Child is The Gypsy Laddie (Child 200). Child’s system of numbering, which at first may appear pedantic, is actually a very useful tool for tracing and cataloguing the various forms in which analogous versions of the older ballads may appear. This one has been sung throughout Ireland, and its story of the highborn lady who abandons home and husband for a life on the road has made it understandably popular among the traveling people.”

Lyrics (my transcription)

They came three gypsies to the east
They sang so sweet and bonny-o
They sang so sweet, so very, very sweet
They charmed the heart of the lady-o

Late that night the lord came home
Inquiring for his lady-o
“She’s gone, she’s gone,” said their own servant man
“She’s a-following the dark-eyed gypsies-o”

Saddle for me the milk-white steed
The gray is ne’er so speedy-o
And I will ride for the length of the night
A-following the dark-eyed gypsies-o

He rode east and he rode west
And he rode north and southwards-o
And then he spied his fair lady
A-following the dark-eyed gypsies-o

Have you forsaken your houses and lands?
And have you forsaken your three perty babes?
And have you forsaken your own wedded lord
For to follow these dark-eyed gypsies-o?

What do I care for me houses and lands?
And what do I care for me three perty babes?
And what do I care for me own wedded lord
Now I’m following the dark-eyed gypsies-o

Only last night I’d a fine feather bed
With white sheets all so comely-o
But tonight I will lie on the cold mossy ground
With me dark-eyed gypsies around me-o

Tonight I will lie on the cold mossy ground
With me dark-eyed gypsies around me-o

While the lyrics and tempos of this song vary slightly in the versions performed by Kevin Conneff, Christy Moore, and the Prodigals, the core theme remains the same: a highborn woman leaves her husband, children, and upscale household, for a life on the road (highlighted by the change of sleeping in a fine feather bed with her husband to the cold mossy ground, surrounded by “gypsies”). While it is unclear to what extent this song reflects the current historical and social circumstances of today, it would be interesting to collect more of these songs and also songs by Travellers to analyse some of the predominant themes. More information is readily available through the medium of
film and although I do not yet have the tools to provide an in-depth psychoanalytical or
film studies theoretical framework, I do believe certain markers emerge as reflections of
identity, by both Travellers and non-Travelers.
CHAPTER 5

TRAVELLERS IN FILM
During the summer of 2004, I had the opportunity to meet Joe Comerford, director of Traveller (1981), at the Galway Film Fleadh. Hoping to ask him about his experiences and reflections on the film, the changes that have occurred since it was made, and how Travellers are portrayed in the media, I approached him and told him of my interests. He recommended I read the latest edition of “Film Ireland” (July/August 2004) because it features an entire article, written by Mark Venner, about images of Travellers in cinema. The article explores the (mis)representations of Romanies and Travellers from the late nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century, and how and why certain images are constructed. Venner argues, “almost all of the popular knowledge about these peoples comes not from social interaction or direct contact, but from the way they have been depicted in stories and song, and more recently film and media” (Venner 2004: 40). While earlier films often reiterate typical narratives of the ‘Gypsy’ as the exotic Other, later films have offer more of a critical lens through which society’s underbelly and social issues are exposed. Focusing first on the commonalities between Travellers and Romanies, Venner links the two groups by their tendency to experience exclusion and discrimination, pressures to assimilate rather than maintain their ethnic identity, and they
are both portrayed in film and television as stereotypical figures (i.e. con artists, loveable rogue, etc.) (Venner 2004:42).

Venner argues, “There are only a handful of films that make any attempt to shatter these stereotypes,” but I am left wondering, do any succeed through the eyes of Travellers themselves? About Comerford’s *Traveller* (1981), Venner says the following:

> It is hard to explain why one of Ireland’s most gifted filmmakers is also one of the most overlooked and underrated. Joe Comerford’s *Traveller* (1981) is not only the finest film to be made about Irish Travellers, it is also one of the best films ever made in this country. A dark picture of rural poverty set on the desolate borderlands between Leitrim and Fermanagh, Comerford wasn’t interested in getting actors who looked like Travellers; instead, after extensive research with members of the Travelling community, he found the form of the story in the subject matter and drew it out in the film. Abandoning the written script, he went to the west of Ireland and started from scratch: ‘I looked for sources that would treat the film as a journey. I said to the Travellers: I’m making this film, this is roughly the story, but I’m telling you I don’t know where this is going to end up – don’t say I didn’t tell you!’ Although very much of its time, and somewhat marred by Alan Devlin’s mannered acting which jars against the understated, naturalistic performances of the rest of the cast, *Traveller* is a major Irish film that sits alongside Bob Quinn’s *Poitín* (1978) and Neil Jordan’s *Angel* (1982) as perhaps the finest films to have come out of Ireland.

My curiosity piqued, I found the film in the media library of NUI, viewed it, and was left with more questions than answers, but no conclusion as to whether or not the film is successful at shattering Traveller stereotypes, or if that was its intention at all. It features actual Travellers as actors, which leads me to think that they were supportive of the content and framework, but what have been the repercussions of the film? These are not answers that can be easily measured or statistically analyzed, but it would be fascinating to do follow-up interviews with the Travellers in the film in addition to a current screening for Travellers and a discussion session concerning their views.

Exploring Traveller representations in the films *The Field* (1991), *Into the West* (1993), *Snatch* (2000), and *Traveller* (1981), I hope to understand some of the commonalities and differences in their portrayals of Travellers. Although these films
have a unique storyline and agenda, each film relies, to some extent, on the socio-cultural anxieties of sedentary people in order to create a dramatic effect. My question (which shall remain unanswered until I am able to ask Travellers about their views) is: what work do these representations do? Goffman's analysis of the effects of representation is best stated by the following:

Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him.

For those present, many sources of information become accessible and many carriers (or 'sign-vehicles') become available for conveying this information. If unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him. They can also assume from past experience that only individuals of a particular kind are likely to be found in a given social setting. They can rely on what the individual says about himself or on documentary evidence he provides as to who and what he is. If they know, or know of, the individual by virtue of experience prior to the interaction, they can rely on assumptions as to the persistence and generality of psychological traits as a means of predicting his present and future behavior.

However, during the period in which the individual is in the immediate presence of the others, few events may occur which directly provide the others with the conclusive information they will need if they are to direct wisely their own activity.5

This information, depending on its form, context, as well as numerous conditions defining the moment, can hinder or expand different community member’s opinions and reactions to each other. My question lies not necessarily in the accuracy of a representation, but more in the artistic integrity that fuels the project and its message. Some representations in film and the media portray Travellers as mystical, nostalgic, remnants of a past that no longer fits within today’s social framework (as defined by

5 Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1–2).
those in power, more often than not non-Travelers), other representations employ stereotypical tropes (such as the dangerous, thieving, conniving, and ultimately able to escape the gaze of society’s radar, or the hardened, promiscuous, prematurely sexual ‘gypsy harlot’) for dramatic effect. What happens when these portrayals offer visibility, but one that reinforces mainstream society’s fears and prejudices and works to support discriminatory practices?

As it has been stated before (see Catherine Joyce’s interview), Travelers experience racism and discrimination on both individual and institutional levels. On an individual level, Travelers have experienced racism and discrimination when settled people have marched and attacked Traveller halting sites, housing establishments, and Travelers are denied access or service at popular establishments. At an institutional level, Travelers face discrimination in the educational system, health services, and through legal systems that discourage nomadism. Underlying these practices are public sentiments that are continually fed by (mis)representations of Travelers in film and in the media. It seems Travelers occupy a liminal space of an exotic (?) Other and represent a perceived threat to the order and stability heralded by the dominant ideology, which emphasizes the importance of possession accumulation and immobility.

Feature films is one genre where representations of Travelers signify multiple meanings, subsequently projected by the screenwriter, director, and producer. Beginning with feature films made by non-Travelers and featuring Traveller-type characters, I will explore some of the similar characteristics or signs that mark individuals as Travellers. Whether these are accurate depictions or not is not the question; what is noteworthy is

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what these signs signify to the majority of the population, as evident in films circulating in popular culture.

**The Field (1991)**

Nowhere is the connection between an individual’s status and the land more apparent than in Jim Sheridan’s film “The Field.” Filmed in Connemarra, the rough and rugged landscape in the west of Ireland, the movie follows the trials faced by an aging farmer, Bull McCabe (played by Richard Harris), and his overwhelming desire for a plot of land that is coveted by an American businessman planning to pave it with cement. Issues of “us vs. them” serve to consolidate the townsfolk under the leadership of Bull, until his passion consumes him in a fit of rage and he kills the American. He wins the field, but his stability unravels when his son admits that he has no desire to farm the land and falls in love with a Traveller woman (portrayed as a free-spirited sexual redhead who has “a strong back”). Bull drives his sheep and cattle to their deaths over the cliffs, accidentally catching up his son in the stampede, and it is then that Bull finally loses what was left of his sanity.

This film offered some interesting insights into the perceived dynamics among local small town people, American outsiders, and the Travelling outsiders/insiders. The Travellers were depicted wearing tattered clothes and flocking in the town’s square begging for money. The Traveller woman’s father was a one-dimensional drunken man who beat his daughter. While physical (and sexual) abuse likely occurs behind closed doors in all societies, the hypersexuality of the Traveller daughter was problematic because it played to the Gypsy temptress stereotype, without taking into consideration the
strict codes of sexuality and modesty that are associated with women in Traveller culture. Helleiner mentions throughout her book that the women were self-conscious about their reputations and although the men might have gone into town and taken a settled woman to a dance, Traveller women were not allowed the same freedom.

Sexually promiscuous, prone to alcoholic abuse, physical abuse, and forced to earn money through begging, the depictions of the Travellers did nothing to challenge the negative stereotypes of Travellers in Ireland. Elements of truth in these depictions could be applied in many different cultures and societies, but what work is being done by creating one-dimensional stock characters embodying these aspects? The Travellers served the director’s purpose as the clownish folk who endangered the livelihood of hard-working stable farmers in rural Ireland.

_Into the West (1993)_

Mike Newell’s _Into the West_ (1992) is a tired slice of Celtic whimsy written by Jim Sheridan, with Gabriel Byrne hamming it up as Traveller king Papa Riley (which is perhaps less risible than Brad Pitt’s turn as an Irish Traveller in _Snatch_ or Johnny Depp’s in _Chocolat!).

—Mark Venner (_FilmIreland_, 2004)

This children’s film (also directed by Jim Sheridan) tells the story of an alcoholic father and his two young sons. Before his wife died in childbirth, due to being refused treatment by the medical facilities because of her Traveller identity, Papa was known as the Traveller king and lived a nomadic life with his family. Papa then settled in a depressing Dublin tenement project in order to give his children a more “stable” life. Rather than finding stability, their lives are filled with hunger and despair and it is not until their grandfather, a traditional Traveller who rejects the settled life, appears with a
magical horse from the sea that their lives change for the better. A corrupt policeman illegally sells the horse to a big businessman and the film follows the boys’ journey as they rescue their horse and run from the law. Papa calls upon the tracking capabilities of his estranged Travelling kin and together they find the boys along the coast in the west of Ireland.

While the film portrays the discriminatory practices faced by many Travellers, it does little more than reinforce a mythical stereotype of Travellers as mystical renegades, somewhat akin to cowboys of the old Wild West. This is problematic because it presents two extremes of Traveller life: one of alcoholism, illiteracy, and welfare-dependency, if Travellers choose to settle; while the other is characterized by a renegade lawlessness, magic and superstition, and nomadism. What is omitted in this characterization? How does this frame the perceived options available for Travellers? It offers a dismal picture of Traveller life (‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t) because if Travellers settle in the city, they will fall into despair and despondency, but if they stay on the roads, they remain outlaws of sorts, always subject to the whims and resentment of those in power, the sedentary population.

This portrayal seems to echo the sentiments of the essentialist perspective that ‘nomadism is in your blood’—a claim made by some Travellers who argue that assimilation processes that revolve around ‘settling’ Travellers negatively affects their psyche and wellbeing. Government-sponsored assimilation programs began in 1963, when the Irish Government Commission on Itinerancy developed in response to the Traveller situation. The Traveller Support Movement, founded by non- Travellers, developed as “an expressly assimilationist movement through itinerant settlement
committees – the ‘final solution’ to the Traveller problem would be assimilation into the sedentary community” (Commission on Itinerancy 1963, cited in McVeigh 2002, 214). Based upon the notion that Irish Travellers had been forced into nomadism through British domination and economic misfortune, the Commission portrayed settlement as “crucial to the economic, social, and moral development of the nation” (Helleiner 2000, 77). The problem inherent in this style of approach is that it is not culturally respectful of nomadism as a central element to Traveller identity. Crafts and trades, associated with a Traveller nomadic existence, such as horse dealing, seasonal labor, copper or tin work, and chimney sweeping became more difficult to practice as “tractors replaced horses; plastic replaced tinware; central heating replaced chimneys” (Fay 1992, 34). These sources of income were not as accessible as Travellers were pressured to settle in housing developments. The developments themselves were also often less than ideal, located in industrial areas or areas occupied the poorer members of society, and many Travellers found the travel restrictions, widespread discrimination, and unfamiliar ways of life to be difficult to bear. Marginalization and dependency on social welfare for financial support created added stresses that were reflected in increasing levels of delinquency and alcohol abuse (Fay 1992, 35). Additionally, class-based divisions between the settled non-Travellers and Travellers seemed to reaffirm Travellers’ inability to be rapidly ‘absorbed’ into the settled communities, thus reifying a failure on the part of the Travellers to conform to society’s rules (Helleiner 2000, 100).

*Snatch (2000)*

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Offering yet another stereotypical portrayal of an Irish Traveller is Guy Ritchie’s film, “Snatch.” The convoluted storyline follows a stolen diamond and illegal prizefighting, but my interest lies in the characterization of the Travellers, derogatorily referred to as “Pikeys.” In a behind-the-scenes section of an extra DVD, we learn the basis for Pitt’s character and subsequent storyline—as director Ritchie admits that he got the idea for the campsite scam scene from “a true story I’ve heard from a bunch of people.” Authenticity can be called into question again, but for what purpose? Did Ritchie really hear this story from a bunch of people, and how do we know if it is true? Does any of this matter since, after all, it is just a feature film?

We are first introduced to the Travellers when two men, Gorgeous and Turkish, head to a campsite to purchase a caravan from Mickey O’Neill, played by Brad Pitt. As they approach the campsite, Gorgeous expresses his dismay about heading into a business venture with Travellers because it “will get messy” and tells Turkish, “Oh, you bastard, I fuckin’ hate Pikeys.” While the two men look for Mickey, the audience catches its first glance of Mickey—as he stands up from squatting behind a truck and pulls up his pants. This seems to hint at the lack of plumbing facilities at the campsite, thus signifying a certain Otherness of the Traveller lifestyle, something for the settled population to find repugnant and mark as a distinguishing factor between Us and Them. Ritchie and Pitt admit in the commentary that this was one of the funniest but most subtle parts, and Ritchie was afraid people would not notice that he was “taking a crap.”

Pitt’s character embodies two other common stereotypical views of Travellers, namely as a con artist and a tough fighter. He sells a caravan and a dog to the two men and as soon as the men drive away, the wheels of the caravan fall off and the dog runs
back to the campsite. Not only were the goods sold faulty but also everything was a trap, and this implies that all Travellers are bad businesspeople that will do anything to make a “quick bob” at everyone else’s expense. In order to settle the affair, he agrees to fight Gorgeous for the money. Taking several hard blows in stride, he takes off his shirt and knocks Gorgeous out with one right hook. The narrator informs us that “the sweet-talking, tattoo-sporting Pikey” is a bare-knuckle gypsy boxing champ, “which makes him harder than a coffin nail.” As Gorgeous lies unconscious on the ground, Turkish stands and cries as the Travellers argue over what to do with them if Gorgeous dies. The narrator explains his fears by asking “why would the Gypsies want to go to the trouble of explaining why a man died on their campsite, when they could bury the pair of them and just move camp? It’s not like they got Social Security numbers, is it?” This offers a clear view of the position held by Travellers for the film’s intended audience. The actions of the fictional (yet based on “true stories” according to Ritchie) signify Travellers as sketchy businesspeople who will not hesitate to fight for what they want, have no qualms about killing and burying people, and are nearly impossible to locate if they do not want to be found. This freedom of movement and ability to disappear seems to trigger intense anxieties in the settled population and, I imagine, is reflected in discriminatory practices that either seek to expel or assimilate nonconforming Travellers.

And yet, as there is a certain amount of anxiety surrounding Travellers’ abilities to move and not be found when they do not want to, there is also a sense of admiration and sexual appeal. After all, it is no accident that Brad Pitt stars as the bare-knuckle boxer, complete with rippling muscles, lightning quick moves, and a fierce determination and a glimmer in his eyes that mask his ultimate plans for revenge and escape.
**Traveller (1981)**

Unlike in the other films, one of the main characters in *Traveller* is a Traveller woman, played by Judy Donovan. This film follows a newly-wed couple, Angela (Judy Donovan) and Michael (Davy Spillane), from the Republic up to Northern Ireland where they are sent to pick up smuggled or stolen goods in order to bring them back and sell them in the South. *Traveller* features “authentic” Travellers (see exploration of issues of authenticity and tradition in other chapter) rather than actors, but I have not yet been able to learn more about their feelings on the plot and final cut of the film. On one hand, it seems as if the film is trying to uncover the hardships that are faced by some Travellers and offer a liberating tale of a woman who overcomes a series of trials to flee her father, her husband, Ireland, and presumably, the Traveller way of life. On the other hand, it could also be seen as a harsh microscope that focuses only on worst-case scenarios and shows little that is positive or hopeful for Travellers. Although the political troubles in Northern Ireland provide a non-Traveler subtext worthy of attention, illegitimate profiteering and gender relations are the areas where Traveller identity is stereotyped and reified.

Although Michael is obviously a talented musician, his prospects for employment are not defined because Angela’s father sends them to the North to retrieve stolen goods to sell. There is little affection or conversation between the couple. Clicky, a Traveller they pick up along the way, notices this and makes comments about their lack of
affection, but Angela does not address this directly. As they are returning home, Angela begins to sing loudly (reminiscent of her performance on stage and the first time she is seen acting confidently), Michael yells at Angela to shut up and stop singing, a fight ensues, and their van crashes. While going for help (leaving Angela by herself on the side of the road), Michael robs an elderly woman in a post office. The woman eyed him suspiciously from the moment he entered and she saw his bleeding face, so the audience might be partially sympathetic to his plight. However, taking money from an elderly woman is not the most admirable act and the viewer's opinion of Michael takes a turn for the worse. Therefore, the character of Michael is portrayed as someone who has a temper, little respect or concern for his new wife, and will rob the elderly. Since his father-in-law is the one who sent him on the trip for the illegal goods and no men are seen in jobs unrelated to illegal activity, a portrait is created casting Travellers as criminals and thieves.

Gender issues are also troublesome in this film. The first scene shows Angela brushing her hair while her dad looks at her with a leering gaze. A flash of eye contact between the two hints at a troubled past, but it is unclear what is the cause for the tension. Another hint cluing the viewer into the father’s character is his fondness for stabbing a knife through the wires of the birdcage while trying to impale the bird. Luckily, he misses, but the symbolism of the caged bird is carried throughout the film and signifies the burdens of Angela’s life, Traveller culture, religion, and political turmoil.

The audience soon learns more about the causes of Angela’s troubles. Her father tried to molest her and she hit him with a bottle, her mother taught her that all men beat women and you should bite the cloth so the neighbours cannot hear, and it appears
Michael has little concern or respect for her either. He does not like her singing, scoffs at her attempts to clam independence and a life outside of Traveller norms, tells her she annoys him, and that he had no choice in marrying her either. He also admits that he does not want to fight, but that fighting is part of being married. However cruel and heartless he seems throughout the movie, his character is not all that it seems and this is most apparent when he secretly heads back to Angela’s father’s caravan, shoots him in the stomach, props him up in a chair to die, and then leaves Angela’s dowry money. He does not tell Clicky of his actions, but it is possible that Clicky knows and silently approves since Clicky had previously indirectly accused the father of molesting his daughter when he said, “Is she your daughter or your girlfriend?” In the end, the three leave on a boat for England, Mickey heads to Australia and Angela goes to California.

Whether dealing with notions of sexuality, crime, abuse, alcoholism, or freedom, these films vary in subject matter and style but have one key element in common: they construct identities of Travellers with ambiguous intentions and lingering repercussions. While one might argue that they are permitted to do so within the freedom of artistic license, I would argue that this rationale could also perpetuate the misconceptions and discriminatory practices levelled at the Travellers. According to one source, Travellers “fare poorly on every indicator used to measure disadvantage: unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, health status, infant mortality, life expectancy, illiteracy, education and training levels, access to decision making and political representation, gender equality, access to credit, accommodation, and living conditions.” These factors call attention to the need for a greater awareness and sense of responsibility on the parts of artists who
perpetuate certain stereotypes through their works. What causes artists to utilize Travellers to portray a certain message or evoke a certain sentiment? More work needs to be done here in order to unpack what Travellers represent and how these meanings change and grow increasingly more complex over time. Perhaps another alternative is to facilitate and encourage Travellers to do their own writing, acting, and directing in order for their own voices to be heard. According to Nuala Broderick of the Galway Film Centre, this has been developing recently and some Travellers have already made two short films. Perhaps only through films made by and/or with Travellers can positive representations begin to offer counterarguments against misrepresentations and characters based on conjecture. However, this does not eliminate the problem that Travellers are still taken to represent marginal characters who live outside of society’s rules and norms and cannot be smoothly integrated into “Irish” society without losing their identity.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

"What does it mean to be a Traveller?"

While this question has yet to be asked on a widely distributed questionnaire or on a census survey, I would like to see more personal accounts from Travellers addressing this question. In the meantime, in an attempt to avoid offering yet another misrepresentation, I have attempted to highlight some of the complex identities, representations, constructions, conceptions, practices, and institutions that have offered their own answers to this question. I have looked at different genres, institutional practices and arenas, and the machinery of representation employed by various individuals and groups. My thesis is neither unified by materials, nor is it framed by one predominant viewpoint. Instead, I try to look at the available languages of representation (scholarly texts, activist discourse, films, and individual encounters with non-Travelers and Travellers) in order to gain a better understanding of the complexity of identity when it comes to Irish Travellers.
I believe that Nira Yuval-Davis’s notion of ‘transversal politics’ might be the theoretical tool best suited to framing these complexities. In her article “Ethnicity, Gender Relations and Multiculturalism,” Yuval-Davis problematizes identity politics because they “tend not only to homogenize and naturalize social categories and groupings, but also to deny shifting boundaries of identities and internal power differences and conflicts of interest” (120). Rather than assuming that there is one true Traveller identity, we can use the idea of transversal politics because they are “based on dialogue that takes into account the different positionings of women, or people in general, but does not grant any of them a priori privileged access to the ‘truth.’ In ‘transversal politics,’” she continues, “perceived unity and homogeneity are replaced by dialogues that give recognition to the specific positionings of those who participate in them, as well as to the ‘unfinished knowledge’ (to use Patricia Hill Collins’ term [1990]) that each situated positioning can offer” (121).

Is this type of multivocality possible when much of what we learn about Travellers is through the media and census reports, like the one given by the Central Statistic Office in 2002, which ask: Are you a member of the Travelling community? I will include the results to demonstrate that there is evidence that Travellers fare poorly in terms of health and education, but little is revealed about the complexity of what it means to be a Traveller, particularly when many have become urban and relatively immobile, and this is where folklore and ethnography can add more depth to these issues.

(from Pavee Point Newsletter, May 2004)
“In January the Central Statistic Office published the results of Census 2002 in terms of Travellers. The following new statistics are based on the number of people who responded positively to the question: Are you a member of the Travelling community?
• 24,000 Travellers nationally representing 0.6% of the population
• 3.3% of Travellers over 65 years compared to 11.1% of general population
• 63% of Travellers under 25 years compared with 37% of general population
• 42% of Travellers under 15 years compared with 21% of general population
• 73% of Traveller men are unemployed compared to 9.4% of the general population

The population figures reveal that the Traveller community has a profile akin to populations in developing countries. This is in stark contrast to the profile of the population in general. These figures highlight the exclusion and marginalisation that Travellers continue to experience.

Other figures include:

• 26.6% of Traveller men employed compared to 90% of general population of men
• 37.5% of Traveller women employed compared to 82% of general population [of] women
• Among children whose age was known, 63.3% of Traveller children dropped out of full time education before they were 15 years. This compares to a national drop out rate of 15.4%
• Completion of lower secondary education is 1.5 times higher among general population compared to Travellers
• Completion of upper secondary is 8 times higher among general population compared to Travellers
• Completion of non-degree is 11 times higher among general population
• Completion of degree is 13 times higher among general population (14)

Perhaps what is also needed is a more thorough understanding of how Travellers would like to be identified, apart from numbers and statistical figures. If to be a Traveller does not necessarily entail a nomadic lifestyle, but one defined by heritage or tradition, it would be interesting to pursue further research to see if Travellers would agree or disagree with Handler and Linnekin’s argument that “we must understand tradition as a symbolic process that both presupposes past symbolisms and creatively reinterprets them. In other words, tradition is not a bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts, but a process of interpretation, attributing meaning in the present though making
reference to the past” (287). Also, more exploration and analysis needs to be pursued in order to better understand how and when Travellers became stigmatized. From my research, it was clear that itinerancy had negative connotations for the governing (settled) populace, but since much of Traveller history has been passed orally, there is a lack in corroborating or disputing evidence.
LIST OF REFERENCES


http://www.paveepoint.ie/pav_faq_a.html


