

UNITE, LIBERATE AND CREATE:

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A GYPSY, ROMA, TRAVELLER SPACE AT GLASTONBURY FESTIVAL

In the United Kingdom, Gypsy and nomadic cultures have long been perceived to pose a dual threat of trespass. There are two main, parallel accusations made against these cultures. It is not simply that, as Angus Fraser put it in 1953, 'they throw the machinery of administration out of gear' (99). This observation must be understood in the context of a process five hundred years long, and still ongoing, in which the 'Gypsy' is defined by power as an essentially problematic person. To this end, the powers that be have used bizarrely elastic definitions of the word 'Gypsy' through the centuries. When expedient, the term 'Gypsy' has primarily referred to racial minorities such as Romani people or ethnic Celtic Travellers such as Pavee or Nawken people. At other times it has carried a different meaning, of the nomad who is implied to be irredeemably socially backward, and this definition, of course, is able to accommodate racial categories when convenient. What every definition of 'Gypsy' has had in common is that it has been framed as incompatible with notions of 'civilised' modern Britishness; incompatible with participation and integration in the state and the social compact. To be a Gypsy is to be a problem for everyone else who is not a Gypsy.

The perceived threat, and hence the response to it, is layered and cyclical. On the one hand, there is the accusation of physical trespass – 'you should not physically be in this place' – and on the other, of cultural trespass – 'everyone else has moved on from living like that: your culture does not belong in this modern society, it shouldn't be here now'. Both of these stances malign and marginalise the nomad/Traveller/Gypsy and they make use of accusations based on time as well as space: 'your culture is outdated; it does not belong in this time', or 'this land now belongs to someone else, you cannot stop here anymore'. Even if you are a Traveller 'legally' – i.e. get permission to set up a legal site, or otherwise seek to operate within the rules – tensions remain because the perpetuation of aspects of a nomadic culture is seen as a challenge to the status quo. This perception of a dual threat means that being a 'settled Gypsy' does not solve the problem. Because the culture is tied to nomadism – even if for some this is the case mostly ritually, or historically, or wherever their sympathies lie – it is still seen as a threat. It is also possible that the notion of the 'Gypsy' is perceived as more threatening than ever because elsewhere, social orders perceive their own fragility. As people become insecure about whether their own social order works, they become intolerant of other models of living. They lash out.

Likewise, being a nomad who is not an ethnic Gypsy fails to solve the converse problem. The 'new nomad' is simply painted with select negative Gypsy stereotypes because, like the Gypsy, they are now cast in the role of the outdated, conquered, superannuated people who have failed to catch up and integrate into the consensus modern reality. They are presented not as people, who have the temerity to think they can determine their own lives, but as figures in an undesirable social experiment, and hence fit for brutalisation.¹ Thus, it is impossible to fight for 'integrated ethnic Gypsy rights' without also fighting for the rights of those who still travel or are otherwise seen as 'less socially integrated', and it is also impossible to fight for the general public liberty and free movement without fighting for Gypsy rights as emblematic of that struggle.

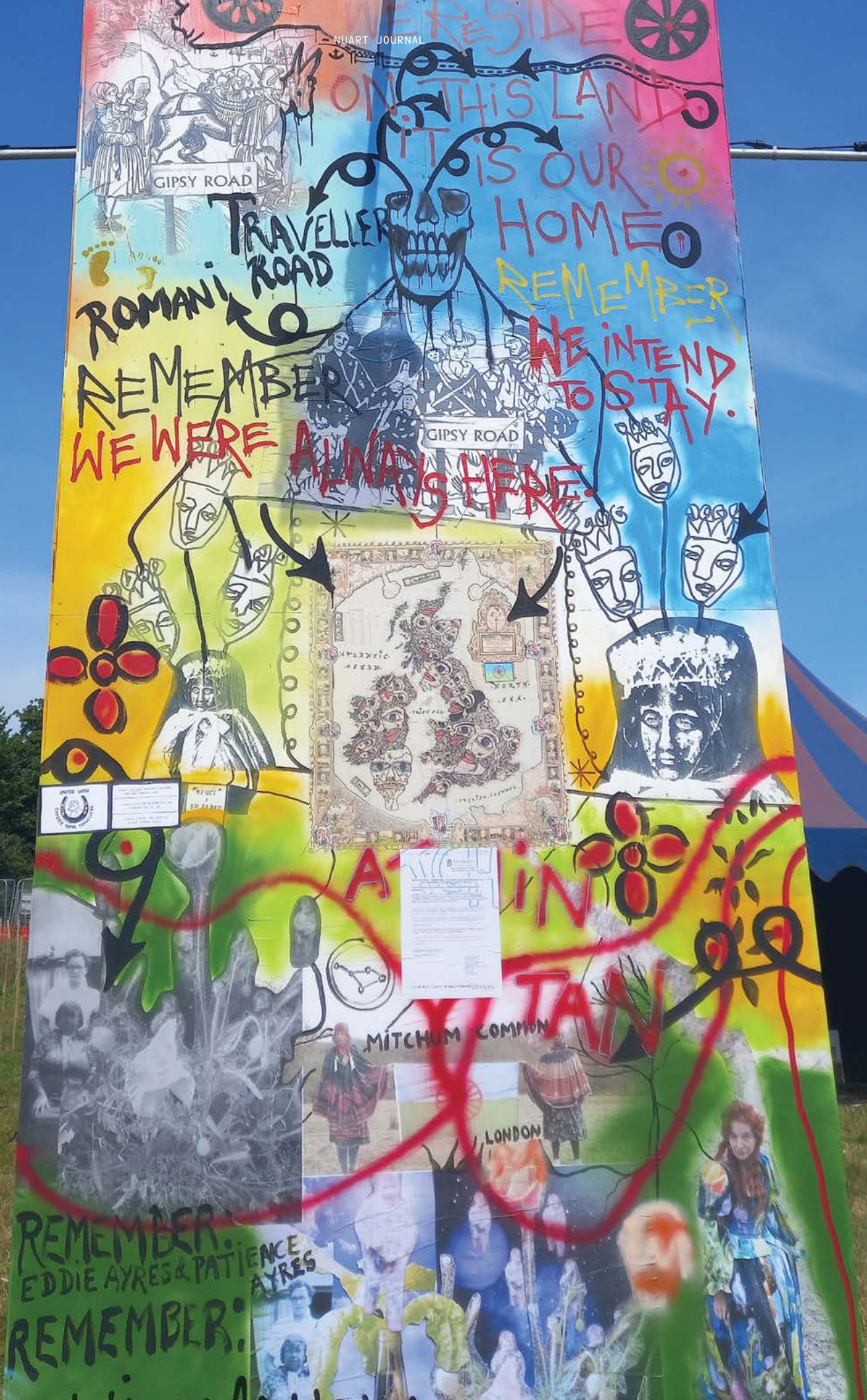
Equally, when someone is denied 'cultural free movement', it also ends up being a denial of their 'physical free movement', and vice versa. There is a cycle at play here, and it is inextricably connected to art and freedom of expression.

Nomadism is often unavoidably artistic. The traditional Gypsy wagon is an obvious symbol of 'the art of life', wherein the accommodation itself – the mobile shelter – is also covered in and ultimately inseparable from, artistry or at least artisanship. Decorative arts make harsh lives more tolerable, and often serve an important second role as a social language and even a disproof of stereotypes of unsophistication or theft: the trailer full of glass says not just 'I appreciate this', but also 'I have paid for it'. The oral tradition represents a survival of the original form of 'literature', and as well as being a means of passing on tradition, also offers a way to pass the time, for instance when work is rained off. As with any act of maligning or eviction, the art of those being maligned or evicted is also being rejected. The need to unite against this insidious 'Catch-22' is clear.

It was in this context that the 'Atchin Tan' (Angloromani language: 'Stopping Place') at the 2022 Glastonbury Festival was conceived. This would be the first time Glastonbury had a dedicated, inclusive meeting space for all Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers and anyone who happened by and wanted to talk and join in. The Atchin Tan sought to provide a creative and open living space for people of all backgrounds – ethnic, social, and perhaps 'ethno-social' or tribal/familial – that are being jointly targeted by Part 4 of the new Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act. The idea and 'avant gardeness' of the space was fundamentally connected to not excluding people based on their spot on the Gypsy/Roma/Traveller/nomad spectrum. This set it apart from much past activism, which has frequently had to declare whether it intends to use ethnic/racial or 'lifestyle' criteria to define its target constituency and its mission. The Atchin Tan, by contrast, invited people to band together because they are seen in the corridors of power as a single problem, and now more than ever this has created a need to find links and common interests whilst acknowledging differences and points of divergence. This speaks of an implicit stance in relation to ideas of cultural appropriation: a riposte to 'divide and rule', perhaps, along the lines of 'unite and liberate and create'. If one upshot of the new legislation is that it has brought some groups of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people together, then that is surely a positive that its concocters did not intend.

It was therefore predictable, and necessary, that the Atchin Tan should be an artistic space in multiple respects: a place that not only made room for artistic performance, but a place that was also literally composed of art, for the duration of its 'encampment'.

Artist Sam Haggarty conceived of placing a bow-top wagon on a large plinth, a gesture which gave a prominent visual embodiment to many of the aforementioned themes, and others. While the wagon is a romanticised object, it is also a genuine living space, an essential shelter. Placing it on a pedestal invites comparison to public sculpture, and questions why this symbol is not 'vaunted'. The plinth has a flat surface which is too small to manoeuvre on: it symbolises the fact that Gypsies, and increasingly everybody, can't go



GIPSY ROAD
 TRAVELLER ROAD
 ROMANI ROAD

RESIDE
 ON THIS LAND
 IT IS OUR HOME
 REMEMBER
 WE INTEND TO STAY.

REMEMBER
 WE WERE ALWAYS HERE.



ATTAINMENT

REMEMBER
 EDDIE AYRES & PATIENCE AYRES
 REMEMBER



anywhere anymore and simply live without being charged, in either or both senses of the word 'charged' – on the one hand, forced to pay rent for dwelling in liminal space, and on the other, charged with what is now the criminal offence of being alive without an authorised place to do so.

Perhaps the small square on which the wagon stands also works as an invitation to consider the fact, often quoted by Gypsy and Traveller campaigners, that a single square mile of land would suffice to provide stopping places for every marginalised caravan-dweller in the United Kingdom: one square mile, when there are over ninety-four thousand in the country. 0.00001% of the UK's land could resolve one of the media's and the government's most trumpeted causes of 'community tension': unauthorised Gypsy and Traveller camps. The required political will, however, is absent. In Britain, where the very phrase 'the square mile' is synonymous with the City of London – a spatial measure, fused with an ancient holy site of capitalism – where there is always room for the banks, but not for the Traveller who, after all, is a citizen of the country.

Rather than being plain and free from 'graffiti', the plinth itself was decorated by the artists Delaine Le Bas and Rohzi, with copious references to the Gypsy and Traveller experience. The dates of pivotal moments in New Traveller history – including the brutal 'Battle of the Beanfield' (1985), when riot police armed with batons and shields attacked unarmed people including pregnant women – sat alongside photographs of prominent Romani people and less well-known family members, such as Le Bas's great-grandmother, accompanied by pledges not to forget them. There was no discernible hierarchy in this information, because it is all equally important. It was jumbled together, but only in the sense of 'jumbled' that is in the nature of fluid, living substances.

Crucial to the meaning of the plinth was the lack of a stable line separating 'fine art' from 'graffiti', or either of these from copies of official and historical documents. One of these is a letter addressed to members of the Royal Society in the English Romani language, handwritten in a copperplate script by the Romani intellectual Westeros 'Dictionary' Boswell in 1874, at a time when Gypsies were thought by many in the academy to be universally illiterate and educationally subnormal.² There is thus an overlapping of meticulous artistic work, hastily spray-painted writing, family mementos, and intimidating letters, all of it swirling in a sea of colours. It works as a wry riposte to the tradition of seeing a Gypsy or Traveller encampment as, in toto, an eyesore, regardless what it is composed of and irrespective of what is being done in it. The skilfully decorated wagon is 'merely' a dwelling sited in the wrong place. Artisanry being done in situ is perceived not as honourable work, but a shirking of the social and locational norms of labour. The colours, again, lack clear boundaries between each and the next, perhaps another nod to the widely spread invitation to take a positive stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion.

There are ghostly horses, mere outlines in misty blue and white. At first glance these animal figures are not obvious, and they seem to rear into view only once the initial explosion of colour, faces, and text has been absorbed and the viewer has settled into the viewing. This achieves two effects. These days many Romani Gypsies and Travellers do not keep horses, in spite of

the fact that their ancestors, in some cases in the very recent past, were deeply dependent on the horse: we might therefore take Rohzi's 'ghost horses' as signalling this, as well as the fact that sometimes you have to really look closely at a culture in order to see what animates it. A photograph of Le Bas's screaming head represents Gypsy Roma and Traveller exasperation with the historical refusal of the powerful to do so. It is their willingness to self-educate which has, in truth, been subnormal.

The wagon on the plinth also had a simple purpose, to be visible from far away and act as a beacon to draw people in. In this respect it worked. Conversations and practical collaborations were begun between groups that have not traditionally collaborated. For instance, historical tensions between Romani Gypsies, Irish Travellers, and New Travellers were addressed but quickly superseded by the need to act in concert, because of a fresh recognition of the matters above, particularly in light of new anti-trespass laws that seek to make nomadic life almost impossible in Britain. Obviously, this is part of a political trend which is generating other resistance, such as a wider social and artistic movement pushing back against ever harsher anti-trespass laws.

By itself, the wagon on its plinth – which, unlike the plain and colourless plinths of so many public sculptures, was made bright and complex with the irreducible kaleidoscope of Gypsy and Traveller history – would have been an artistic statement, but because of what went on around it, it was much more than this. People lived around the plinth: they ate and talked near it, and slept near it in tents, wagons, and camper vans – a selection of accommodations representative of centuries of nomadic history. Around the fire – the ancient centrepiece of the human gathering, whether nomadic or not – there were talks and artistic recitals and performances of music. Children danced under the wagon, their presence underlining the fact that liberty has to be understood generationally as well as personally. This is why the granting of temporary permissions for Gypsy and Traveller sites, or permissions which state that someone who ceases travelling 'permanently', even due to old age or disability, forgoes their status as a 'Gypsy' for the purposes of planning law, are so insidious. They are attempts to prevent intergenerational transmission of liberty. This is forced assimilation, plain and simple.

The wagon and plinth were therefore a centrepiece of a vision of a good nomadic life: a sort of 'Traveller utopia', though unlike other utopias, this one was real for a while. It symbolised an expansive view of what such a life might be like, against a political backdrop of attempts to contract and compress the prospects of the nomad. Even as governmental politics sought to squeeze the Traveller's horizons, Gypsies and Travellers met to broaden them. This was only possible because of a stubborn resistance to attempts to crush hope, honed by centuries of surviving them. As Haggarty put it in conversation with me in February 2023, 'forced assimilation changes the physical setting of where you live, but cannot crush the difference in the mind.'

This is only one type of reaction, though. Another response to anti-Gypsy legislation in Britain has been for communities to view it as 'just another law': our ancestors were subject to similar, often more draconian laws, and yet our culture survived. This stance was discussed at the Atchin Tan, and it is not hard to see

why it might be tempting to have this attitude. Gypsies and Travellers are not seen as an important political constituency, and so have often been deliberately mistreated by politicians who see in such mistreatment the chance to appear tough on the socially problematic. In short, an anti-Traveller stance is perceived as a vote winner. Faced with this situation, Gypsies and Travellers who decide to ignore the flux of politics and simply try and get on with life are, in a sense, making a reasonable choice, and one which might be more likely to preserve their sanity than setting themselves at odds with a political tradition which doesn't care about them. But the recent anti-Gypsy legislation enshrined within the Police, Crime, Sentencing, and Courts Act 2022 (Part 4, ss. 83–85) is not 'just another law'. The outright criminalisation of trespass marks the crossing of a line, a line separating tolerance from intolerance qua illegality. It is an attempt at a final removal of the ability of the nomad to live without instant and serious recrimination; an attempt to delete the possibility of a nomadic life. It was clear to see, in the way the then Home Secretary Priti Patel crowed about the strength of the new laws, that she believed she had 'fixed' the 'problem' of unauthorised Traveller encampments once and for all.

In such times, it is not surprising that alliances once thought impossible are now being forged. These politically dark times for Gypsy and Traveller people may at least provide a new fertile soil for Gypsy and Traveller art. With it might come new forms of self-understanding, and new sources of the strength to push back and find new ways to survive and thrive.

- 1 Artists will be instantly aware of the overlap with how authoritarian politics often maligns artists as feckless, out of touch, and undeserving of a place in 'respectable' society, and this is likewise due to the perceived threat that artistic independence poses to regimes. There is possibly also an overlap in terms of art being seen as a dangerous, atavistic wellspring of human power, to which nomadism could be seen as analogous.
- 2 Even as late as 1954, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in which schoolchildren looked for their facts, stated that 'The mental age of the average adult Gypsy is thought to be about that of a child of ten. Gypsies have never accomplished anything of great significance in writing, painting, musical composition, science or social organisation'.

References

- Fraser, Angus (1953) 'The Gypsy Problem: A Survey of Post-War Developments', *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 3(32): 82-100.
- Author unknown (2020) 'Home Secretary Owes Travellers an Apology', *London Gypsies and Travellers*, September 30, 2020. [Online] Accessed April 28, 2023. londongypsiesandtravellers.org.uk/news/2020/09/30/home-secretary-owes-travellers-an-apology/.

All photographs depict **The Atchin Tan / Stopping Place**, a bow-top wagon that Sam Haggarty put on top of a large plinth, which was decorated by Delaine Le Bas and Rohzi. The artwork served as a meeting place for 'storytellers, organically orchestrated speakers, and fireside music sessions' at the Glastonbury Festival, Glastonbury, UK, 2022. Photographs ©Damian Le Bas & Sam Haggarty.

DAMIAN LE BAS is a writer of Romani Gypsy descent and a native speaker of the Romani language.

SAM HAGGARTY is a hippy and has conformed to the statutory recognition as to be considered of a nomadic culture granted by the GLC (Greater London Council) in 1986.



