

The Change and Continuities of British New Travellers

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Abstract

During Thatcher's Britain (1979-1990), the inner-city squatting movement and the hippy convoy movements of the 1970s formed a new lifestyle culture, termed 'New Age Travellers' by the contemporary media. It was a reaction to the injustices of early neoliberalism and a romantic desire to salvage what was left of the natural world before every facet of life became 'up for sale'. Over three decades since the birth of this movement, I explore the life-worlds of those who remain on the road today and those who retreated into more conventional forms of living. The piece asks what sustains a 'creationist culture' such as this, in contrast to other travelling cultures who are sustained through family heritage and tradition. I address some of the familiar misconceptions and stereotypes of a culture which has all too often been spoken for, concluding that the lifestyle is sustained by a commitment to craftsmanship and an integral appreciation (and tolerance) for nature.

Keywords: 'New Age Travellers', Wales, Nomadic life, Techne, Ethnographic research

It had been six days since the whole thing started; music was blaring out of the numerous sound systems. The park-up of trucks, buses, caravans and cars created a makeshift village separated by a maze of passageways. The old and the young alike, people from all walks of life, could be seen dancing next to the speakers or 'lunching out' in other people's buses. It was 1992. It was Castlemorton Common Free Festival. A mass congregation of Travellers and sound systems attracting an estimated 20,000 – 40,000 people from across the UK for a week-long party. Sophisticatedly orchestrated before the use of mobile phones or the internet, Castlemorton relied solely on word of mouth. News helicopters could be seen circling the site. In amongst the ravers, Travellers, students and locals, news reporters could be seen roaming the crowds to document this never-seen-before event. The whole nation was watching. There was a sense that something had begun. For some, their lives would never be the same again.

It was a cloudy December morning. An old postal truck, a renovated horse box and a caravan sat in a muddy field with a backdrop of giant solar panels and wind turbines against the serene countryside. A trail of pallets led from the corner of the field to the door of the horse box. It was 2017. I was at a semi-sustainable farm in Mid-Wales. Power came from the panels and the turbines and drinking water was sourced directly from filtered rainfall. The air was still and blissfully quiet; a far cry from the propagated image of a noisy, disruptive free party terrorising the British countryside or the unwelcome 'intruders' living with the impending threat of eviction. These Travellers had a good relationship with the farmer and like many others today, choose to live where

the seasonal work is found - orchards and farms rather than the suburban Traveller site. For these Travellers, the stereotype propagated by the media is far from their reality.

This paper explores the diverse experiences of British New Travellers, sometimes referred to as 'New Age' Travellers. It draws on my time spent conducting ethnographic research at two field sites in Mid-Wales. First Amy¹, an ex-Traveller, discusses how her experiences at Castlemorton (as described above) drew her into the Travelling Scene in the 1990s. Amy's story is contrasted with Rosie and Eric, whose family have been on the road since the 1980s and are active Travellers to this day (also described above). I will use the knowledge learnt from these two field sites to contrast and compare, ultimately asking why some stay on the road and why some retreat into conventional forms of living. While this paper draws primarily on my experiences in the field, I justify my research methodology and line of questioning through epistemological theories, the available anthropological literature on 'New Age' travellers (of which there is little), and Traveller's own autobiographical/ auto-ethnographic texts such as *A Time to Travel?* (1994) and *Travellers: Voices of the New Age Nomads* (1993). Throughout, I will juxtapose my field research primarily with Greg Martin's postulations in *New Age Travellers: Uproarious or Uprooted?*.

A Brief History

The comprehensive history of New Travellers is both fascinating and long. Therefore, a very brief history of the group and some basic terminology is as follows. For the purpose of this paper, I refer to this group as 'Travellers', though they are known most widely as 'New Age Travellers'. While some Travellers and ex-Travellers identify with this term, many reject it on the basis that they are not aligned with 'New Age' spiritual philosophy, a characteristic ascribed to them by the media. Some prefer New Travellers, Newer Travellers, Contemporary Travellers, among others. All these terms refer to a collective which can be defined as a British nomadic subculture. They are distinct from traditional Roma Gypsy² and Irish or Scottish travellers³ in that they do not come from a travelling heritage but have either actively rejected the culture in which they were raised and took it upon themselves to live nomadically or entered the culture out of the force of marginalisation and homelessness caused by the rising house prices of the 1980s. In this way, the origins of the culture can be traced to a convergence in the 1970s of both the inner-city squatting movement and the free festival movement (Earl *et al.* 1994).

Quintessential to Travellers are their creative methods of living. Travellers are known to occupy renovated vehicles such as horse trucks, postal trucks, trailers, old busses equipped with wood burners and gas stoves. Others occupy tents such as benders, tepees, tarps, yurts and some use traditional horse-drawn wagons. Once the Traveller 'culture' formed, its population gradually inflated. The free parties and festivals gained attention from national newspapers which conceptualised the Travellers in the minds of the wider population. It's difficult to know the population of Travellers throughout this brief history; as many lived off the grid, any official assumptions tend to underestimate their numbers. However, the population is known to have peaked in the early 1990s, marking what is known to many as the beginning of the end. The

¹ All names are pseudonyms

² Stewart, M. (2013). 'Roma and Gypsy "Ethnicity" as a Subject of Anthropological Inquiry'. *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 42: 415- 432.

³ Acton, T. & Mundy, G. (1999). *Romani Culture and Gypsy Identity*. Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press.

perceived demise of the New Traveller culture is often credited to the draconian eviction laws echoed from the reign of Margaret Thatcher, namely the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. Some, however, have found ways to remain ‘on the road’.

Off the Road

For my initial research I came to a historic market town in Mid-Wales⁴ to meet Amy, an ex-Traveller who now permanently lives here. I wanted to find out about her years as a Traveller in the 1990s; why she chose to take to the road and why she decided to retreat back to a house some years later. I was lucky to have known Amy prior to research and she was happy to help with the project, access was therefore straight forward. Amy now owns a shop in the town’s market hall, so we decided to meet here. For this field site, I decided to use a semi-structured interview formula as I had specific points I wanted to address but also wanted to encourage Amy to take the conversation in any direction she saw fit. I hypothesised this would award a more emic, sensitive kind of data. I likened this technique to that of Sherry Ortner’s style in *Ethnography among the Newark* (1993). Ortner delineates in this piece how she will research among a segment of American culture; namely her fellow high school students (class of 58’), while addressing and responding to the stylistic and theoretical problems associated with the crisis of representation in ethnographic work. In this study of social class she adopts an approach which she terms ‘documentary ethnography’. This form is characterised by entering relatively small life-worlds and examining the way in which large social forces work themselves out in everyday life.

Amy was first introduced to the Traveller Scene when she started going to festivals such as Glastonbury as a teenager. However, the “defining moment”, as she describes it, was Castlemorton. “That’s where it all changed for me. Castlemorton was the moment,” she explains. Amy describes her experience at the illegal free festival as a kind of enlightenment. “There was just such a strong sense of community. The sense of freedom was very exciting. “We were one big family”. What was meant to be a two-day party lead to a week-long gathering. She was even interviewed by one of the many news reporters on the site and made it into the newspaper. When she went back to work in Bristol the following week her boss had seen her picture in the paper and thought she’d never come back. “I didn’t feel like I was the same person when I came back,” she recalls. “Going back to living in a house, it just felt different”. She cites many elements that attracted her to the scene, “The party scene was so strong. The whole thing: the partying, the drugs, the people, the way of life, it was definitely a strong part of it”.

A couple of years after the iconic Castlemorton Festival, Amy was on the road. I wanted to find out what made her decide to be a Traveller. She acknowledged that she didn’t make the decision to be a Traveller but was led to the scene by a series of events. “I was already going to festivals and things like that and had already taken a year out travelling abroad. But then my personal life took a bit of a turn. Getting into the Traveller Scene was born out of a violent relationship. My daughter’s father was really violent. I went through the courts, but nothing worked so I packed my bags one day, left everything behind. Left my home behind. And just got in the car. I had some friends in Tepee Valley and I just packed as much as I could for me and my baby and went to the Valley and set up a kind of refuge.” From there she was able to find Brechfa, a Traveller site nearby and met her partner, Jay, to whom she later married on the site in a Pagan wedding ceremony. Jay

⁴ Exact locations will remain anonymous to protect my interlocutor’s privacy

was a horse-drawn Traveller and already owned a horse and cart, for their wedding present they were given an old wagon and continued to travel by horse throughout Wales and South West England.

Amy and her family would utilise road protest camps that were prevalent at the time as a place to park up and meet like-minded people. These camps were part of an altruistic movement in Britain which reacted to Margaret Thatcher's 'Roads for Prosperity' white paper detailing plans for the largest road building programme for the UK since the Romans (Sadler 2006). These protests involved activists camping out in forests and building treehouses in places where development plans were being outlined. Amy recalls, "At the time it was quite a big thing, the road protests. The camps became quite big, people were setting up almost permanent homes. That's where my son was born, on a road protest camp. Proper Traveller styley, in a bender with no gas n' air or anything like that". This demonstrates the 'back-to-nature' aspect of being a Traveller which all of my interlocutors discussed in the interviews. Amy discussed the attraction of living a simple life, "appreciating simple things like warmth and sunlight. Trying to find grazing, finding wood and water. You have to kind of rely on the universe to give you what you need when you need it. It's very grounding and quite spiritual, especially with a horse and cart you're very much out there. You spend most of your time outside, outdoors in the elements and you're very in tune with the horse." Amy's fondest memory of being a Traveller was the connection she shared with their horse, Willow. "It's amazing how in tune you can get with a horse when you're with them all the time. It's almost like they can read your mind. I went through my whole pregnancy with Willow. I rode him every day until I gave birth. Towards the end of my labour I went in to a kind of twilight zone where I was oblivious to everyone else around me right before I gave birth, right at that point. And I kind of wailed out and I heard willow neigh back at me. I'll never forget that. The next morning, I took my new-born baby to willow and willow was sniffing him, and he just knew. It was magical." This details a Rousseauian conception of nature, a reclaiming of the connection to the land which many Travellers value.

However, while Amy detailed the remarkable connection she felt towards the horse, especially during her second pregnancy, it was their connection towards nature that ultimately brought their travelling days to an end. Amy expressed that it was a hard and sad decision to make, but it became apparent that they could no longer live with the elements while caring for two children. It's difficult to say whether the path that lead Amy to the Traveller Scene is a common one, but it does challenge the public perceptions of Travellers as 'sponges' and 'scroungers' that were common at the time (Lowe & Shaw 1993: xi). In *New Age Travellers: Uproarious or Uprooted?* Greg Martin (2002) discusses the different ways in which people come to be Travellers. He takes a sympathetic approach to how many turn to the Traveller Scene out of force rather than choice, for instance, due to homelessness or domestic violence. However, it might be argued that Martin's tone is somewhat patronising. In a reaction to Hetherington (2000), Martin argues that his representation of Travellers favours the view that they live on the road by choice, implying that they aren't true nomads who live on the road by force but rather middle class drop-outs who are too lazy to 'get a real job'. I agree here with Martin's concern that this idea can lead to the 'official' line taken by the media that Travellers are middle class dropouts. However, in taking this position Martin also affirms a hierarchical dichotomy of force over choice. He claims that overestimating the level of choice Travellers have, risks "contrasting their lifestyle to that of true nomads who are on the road 'for legitimate reasons and not out of choice'" (Martin 2002: 724).

Ultimately, Martin's claim is flawed because it fails to acknowledge that choice is an ambiguous concept rather than something that can be measured. In the case of Amy, she was drawn to the Traveller scene because she had to flee an abusive relationship in the city. However, there are many places she could have gone, a legitimate women's refuge for instance, but instead she chose to seek protection from the Travellers. Arguably, joining the Traveller scene was both an act of free will and coercion, and evaluating whether this is a culture born out of choice or force is arbitrary. Furthermore, Martin's hierarchy of force over choice is imagined. He argues choice is not a legitimate reason to be a Traveller. I would dispute this assumption. The concept of choice in our society is surely what determines the intrinsic value we assign to personal sovereignty. To dismiss choice in the way Martin does is unfounded and lacks the accreditation individuals deserve for the agency of crafting their own culture.

On the Road

The crux of my ethnographic methodology is participant observation, or as Peter Wogan describes it, "deep hanging out" (2004: 129). In my primary field site where the Traveller's 'park-up' on the farm, I grappled with some of the epistemological issues of participant observation. The practice has, in recent years, been unpacked for its philosophical shortcomings in the wake of postmodernist scrutiny (Swartz & Jacobs 1979; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Taussig 1987; Duranti & Goodwin 1992). A valid critique of the practice is that one cannot both participate and observe simultaneously, rendering the term 'participant observation' a debilitating oxymoron. Schwartz & Jacobs argue involvement and detachment cannot be achieved because they are "competitive in principle" (1979: 49). Duranti also maintains that the more the ethnographer "acquires a way of behaving and interpreting reality similar to those of the subjects he is studying, the more their behaviour and relative vision of the world seems natural to him and therefore difficult for him to grasp" (1992: 20).

With this in mind I was able to separate the involvement and detachment with the Travellers in two separate visits. The first was in the summer of 2016 at a cherry orchard in Kent where I first gained access to the group. Working here for just over a month during the cherry-picking season, I learned about the culture through lived experience; the daily beat of waking up with the sun, working in the trees until 5pm, eating dinner together, playing endless games of hide and seek with Batstar (their youngest daughter), collecting wood and talking around the fire in the evening. In this visit I learned through participation or involvement. I used this experience to gain what Geertz (1977) describes as "thick description". In contrast, during our second meeting (under research circumstances) at my primary field site in the winter of 2017, I took an observational or detached perspective when conducting interviews and gathering qualitative data. In this way, I feel I overcame the dilemma of the participant-observation paradox by applying both an involved and detached approach to my fieldwork. This dual approach allowed me to see the contrast of living seasonally and how winter affects a nomadic lifestyle in comparison to summer.

In a conversation we once had around the fire at the cherry orchard, I initiated a discussion on what it would be like to be 'studied' by an anthropologist, to which they jokingly responded that it would feel quite weird. I must admit that I agreed with them. While access was easy because of my positionality, fluctuating between the role of friend and researcher came with its own 'weirdness'. To break the ice, I used the ethical guidelines of fieldwork as a fun activity by having everyone pick their own pseudonym. Rosie's 5-year-old daughter took this activity very seriously and spent a long five minutes pondering in silence before finally declaring her name was to be

'Batstar'. To give a brief outline of the family: Rosie took to the road when she was 19 years old in 1990 and met her ex-partner with whom she had two children, Polly and Rainbow. After parting ways, Rosie met Eric, who lived in a bender at the time, and they began travelling together. They later had two further children, Bran and Batstar. Polly and Rainbow have both moved away from home and are no longer travelling, leaving Rosie, Eric, Bran and Batstar as the remaining contemporary Travellers in the family.

Throughout the interviews conducted with Rosie and Eric's family they provided me with a comprehensive history, a wealth of anecdotes, and endless stories of being a Traveller. They detailed the various subcultures which existed within the community; groups such as the "Crusties" known for their rude attitude, dirty clothes, and habitual Special Brew consumption (a strong, cheap brand of beer). And of course, their own motto: "in crust we trust". The stories of eviction, changes in legislation, and the dynamic between traditional Gypsies and New Travellers were fascinating. Initially I was curious about whether, although those labelled as Travellers often have vastly different attitudes and motivations, they feel as though they're still part of a homogenous culture; alluding to whether Victor Turner's concept of 'Communitas' (1969: 132) plays a role in sustaining the lifestyle. Eric answered, "No". He maintained that "as far as I'm concerned we're a family, we're all one. And the fact that I'm in a vehicle is neither here nor there, because there's people like me in houses, there's people like me on the street, there's people in tents. I don't distinguish between who's part of my family or who's not". I understood what he meant, as Martin argued: "By treating Travellers as Other, or as blank figures (...) one perpetuates their popular image as strangers and all of the negative connotations that go along with this" (2002: 730).

Rosie, on the other hand, argued that all Travellers do share fundamental commonalities: being connected by fire (all Travellers need to make fire), a need to collect wood and water, and lifestyles and livelihoods dictated by the seasons. "All these things bring us closer to nature and the elements, that's what we all share," said Rosie. She also cited the ritualistic use of cannabis which is common among all Travellers. "In the late 80s and 90s you used to just step in a vehicle and everyone would be smoking dope. It was part of the ritual. It's still the same now but it's changed slightly due to the introduction of the stronger skunk varieties. Back then it wasn't as strong, and everyone was smoking spliffs or pipes. That was seen as a massive part of this culture, and having dreadlocks alongside it was also very symbolic."

According to Rosie, however, other forms of drug use lead some to 'pack up' and move in to houses, abandoning the Traveller scene altogether. "Of course, some people get lost and lose the lifestyle completely, and end up in a council house because they've done too many drugs or whatever. Most people do [travelling] for five years, get burnt out, then decide they want their kids to go to school or whatever. Some people keep going, but it's very rare to find people that have been doing it for 30 years." I asked Rosie what has made her such a successful Traveller had kept her on the road for so long. "From my perspective I've made it all this time by avoiding taking all the drugs and not becoming obsessed with partying and burning the candle at both ends. And by finding a way of surviving, a practical way of living that will sustain the lifestyle. You need to be really organised." Rosie's daughter Rainbow agreed, "You have to maintain all the vehicles, you need to know how to be a mechanic. You need to be able to work with wood. You need to have practical skills". She claimed that these practical skills are the reason they are so successful at remaining on the road. Rosie and Rainbow's comments suggest that Travellers may be considered a creationist culture -crafting their culture out of the ashes of post-Thatcher Britain (in contrast to

those who inherited a travelling culture) while maintaining the physical craftsmanship the lifestyle demands.

However, for those ex-Travellers such as Rosie's ex-partner (Rainbow and Polly's dad) who are no longer on the road, much of the community atmosphere of the 80s and 90s is alive and kicking on the internet. Through online forums and Facebook groups such as the 'Crusty Traveller' group, 'Site Life'⁵, and squatters Facebook groups, many Travellers and ex-Travellers alike stay in touch, share information about technology and reminisce about old times. For those who are no longer on the road it allows them to remain part of the community, and for those remaining Travellers such as Rosie and Eric it allows them to feel the community that was once present on the Traveller sites they frequented. "Of course, now it's different again because of the technology. When Polly and Rainbow were growing up all we had was candles, we were lucky if we got a radio signal. Now we have LED lights, phones, laptops. There's a bit of a cyber element to the culture now," Rosie observed. If I could add a commonality among Travellers to Rosie's list (above) I would add *techne* – the gift of creation and craftsmanship. It is a culture created (rather than inherited), maintained by craftsmanship, and remembered on the internet through technology. Travellers share a culture of *techne*.

Overall, much of the conversations I had with Rosie and Eric echoed the question I had grappled with in regard to Martin's earlier essay: whether people take up travelling through choice or force and how that affects their success of staying on the road. Martin argues, "While I do not dispute that some have quite deliberately chosen to move onto the road, a vast proportion of them have, in fact, been forced to do so" (2002: 733). The concept of choice is again ambiguous here. As Eric said, he was presented with a society in which he was expected to be something he didn't want to be. "Everything just seemed wrong. The education system seemed wrong, what they wanted us to be seemed wrong. It just all seemed wrong. So, it's like, I just want to find what's right for myself. And that's what people did, for myself it was my own personal dream". From this perspective the concept of choice becomes arbitrary. For Eric, looking for an alternative is just something that needed to happen. By rejecting the conditions imposed upon them by the state, Rosie and Eric and others like them created their own culture and continue to live on their own terms. This demonstrates the agency involved in becoming a Traveller, an agency which Martin (2002) doesn't accredit in his paper.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed fieldwork among two parties: Travellers and ex-Travellers. I conducted interviews to gain insight into why some people stay 'on the road' and why some return to mainstream society. With reference to my findings, it appears a desire to stay on the road is related to a passion (and also a tolerance) for nature. The knowledge required to adapt to a nomadic life is very much real and learned only from raw experience which makes Traveller culture particularly hard to maintain. It became clear from the offset that an entire volume could be written on this amazingly unique way of life; at once a display of the most fundamental of our rights – to opt out of convention and stay true to the natural environment, and yet perhaps the most misunderstood, misrepresented, and precarious of lifestyles in Britain today. As my research has only scratched

⁵ These have not been referenced to protect the right of anonymity.

the surface of this lifestyle, given the opportunity to revisit New Travellers the study would benefit from a deeper exploration of the culture of techne. It seems that this is a creationist culture. Born out of craftsmanship, maintained by craftsmanship, and even remembered through craftsmanship in the cyber world. An exploration of the culture of techne as Tom Boellstorff conceptualises in *Coming of Age in Second Life* would award a rich and interesting take on the New Traveller scene. To reflect on the completion of my first ethnographic research project, the element which proved to be the most challenging was converting my raw data into readable material. That being said, I hope my research made for an interesting read and a balanced window into the New Travellers' world, if only a drop in the ocean of the possibilities of research of this kind.

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