

Book reviews

Irish Travellers: Racism and the politics of culture. *Jane Helleiner*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000. 274 pp. (hbk.)

Reviewed by Alaina Lemon

Jane Helleiner conducted nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in a Traveller camp in Ireland in 1986–87. Joining a growing number of anthropologists who combine historical and ethnographic methods, she weds her field material to archival and other sources to render an account that transcends the field site, connecting that site to broader forces and events. The book itself divides conceptually into two parts: the first part analyzes romanticizing and denigrating depictions of Travellers, tracing them through debates around settlement policies and integration. The second part traces the resonance of these depictions and policies in Traveller identity and social life.

The first chapter, 'Origins, histories, and anti-Traveller racism', is of special interest to scholars in Romani studies because it points out early intersections between scholarship and literature on Travellers and 'tinkers' and that of Gypsiologists, such as John Sampson. As Helleiner outlines, Traveller studies were not only overshadowed by other Gypsy studies, but were subsumed under fascination about timing the arrival of 'real' Gypsies from India. Here Helleiner does not cite work on Romani, but instead cites Okely (1983) as demonstrating the 'fallacy of the linguistic basis' of origin (p. 38). Okely argued that Romani is not Indic, but a Silk Road lingua franca, and thus that traveling groups singled out as 'foreign' were actually indigenous. However, while many Romani-speakers may indeed not be of Indic descent, Romani is Indo-Aryan, and it is hardly fantastic to posit that *some* speakers of Prakrits left India. At any rate, the real problem with discourses about Gypsy 'origins' is not the claim that Romani is Indo-Aryan, but rather the ways Gypsiologists and others have deployed such claims—for instance, as Helleiner points out, to slot 'tinkers' in a racial hierarchy below so-called 'true-blood' Gypsies.

Alaina Lemon is an assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan (Ann Arbor). 500 South State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1382, USA. Email: amlemon@umich.edu.

Romani Studies 5, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2002), 149–153. ISSN 1528-0478

Another late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tendency in representing Travellers seems more lastingly to have influenced policy into the twentieth century. Helleiner grounds depictions of Travellers (in scholarship, journalism, and policy publications and debates) to Irish nation building and capitalist development. Like other 'Gypsies', Irish 'tinkers' stood for a romantic, pre-Industrial nostalgia. A key difference, especially in the works of the Celtic revivalists, was that the 'tinkers' stood also for a pure, Irish, pre-colonial past, for a national and racial 'self.' Depictions of Travellers as archaic forms of Irish self, or degenerations of that self seems to have informed most assimilationist policy.

To understand how such modes of racializing Travellers affected policy and discrimination practices, it would have been extremely helpful if Helleiner had briefly discussed the ways other, differently racialized minorities in Ireland are treated or depicted—not just other Gypsies or Roma, but immigrants from Africa or India, for instance. Without this contrast, it is too easy to take at face value the claim of the activist-scholars that discrimination against Travellers is 'racism without race' (p. 8). For some aspects of their treatment depend precisely on racializing them as *white*, or as Celts. This is not an absence of race; Traveller 'whiteness' is part of the perceived 'problem.' On the other hand, elsewhere in the book, acts and statements that Helleiner calls 'racist' seem not to depend upon racial (or essentialist) logic. While, at the level of activism, it is certainly politically effective to label discriminatory acts 'racist' in order to index their intensity and severity, at the level of analysis such conflation only works sometimes. Helleiner (p. 8) follows scholars who reject distinctions between ideologies based on biology and ideologies based on culture *when the latter are essentialist*. The trouble is that many of the book's textual and ethnographic examples of discrimination do not rest on essentialism, but draw also on assumptions that Travellers *would* change in half a generation, if only placed in suitable environments. That is, racial logic ('they are us') motivates certain (perhaps initial?) moves towards assimilation—but different logics may drive other moments of policy making, or of a range of everyday discriminatory acts. For instance, one Traveller boy was told by a shopkeeper that he 'couldn't come back *until* he had cleaner clothes and didn't smell' [*italics added*]—the shopkeeper constructed difference as habitual, or perhaps learned, but neither as genetically nor culturally essential. On the other hand, Helleiner tells of Travellers recounting cases when non-Travellers 'called off' engagements when they discovered that their fiancé, though settled, 'really' was a Travel-

ler—here, signs of kinship and genealogy may indeed slip towards racialism. To flesh out *how* people use racial categories along with others to reproduce social realities and relations, it would be fascinating if Helleiner elsewhere would discuss and contrast the signs by which people in various situations distinguish Travellers (or by which they ‘pass’ as non-Travellers)—how do they decide they ‘know one’? By clothing? By mailing address? By activity? By kin? Any of these criteria, or similar ones, such as aspect, can be used to signify race—but more discussion of how they are put to use would help us understand just how. Such a discussion could engage the rich scholarship on race and space (mainly in diaspora and black Atlantic studies) published over the last fifteen years.

Especially valuable in the author’s discussion of racism and anti-Travellerism is that she resists the tendency (one that she points out in other works) to treat Irish discrimination against Travellers (or Jews) as examples of ‘organic racism’ (p. 7). Instead, throughout the book she tracks the ways social differences are produced in relation to broader dynamics: industrialization; post-colonial, bourgeois nation-building; post-war globalization via the Marshall plan and more recent forms of American investment. Helleiner tracks discourses about Travellers and settlement policy as effects of ways various classes in Ireland have differently related to and been affected by these forces. In doing so, she reinforces valuable insights, noting for instance that while certain kinds of mobility (tourism, investment flows) were valued, those associated with Irish Travellers came to be branded anti-modern or unsafe.

Moving in the other direction, Helleiner effectively shows how anti-Travellerism complexly resonated in Traveller identity and social life in the 1980s: in some cases Travellers colluded with dominant stereotypes for practical reasons, aligning self-depictions with majority ones. For instance, agreeing that Traveller men ‘don’t work’ or ‘fail to provide’, knowing that to point out the ways they did work (or that women worked) would jeopardize access to services. In other cases, Travellers echoed dominant ideologies, telling tales of cleverness and ingenuity in the market, and thereby voicing a capitalist ideal of individual initiative. They did so, however, in ways that countered dominant imagery characterizing Travellers as stupid or unskilled. At the same time, such counter-discourses could rationalize inequalities and distinctions among Travellers—this one, for instance, masked collective labor and ignored unpaid female and child labor (and thus paralleled dominant descriptions that did likewise).

These latter social distinctions weave throughout the book: Helleiner structures the chapters through a trinity of class, gender, and generation. She treats this trinity as categories that a nation-building, increasingly capitalist Irish state produced alongside and through representations of Travellers—but she also treats them as real categories of Traveller practice that have been neglected or misrepresented. This latter strategy is Helleiner's answer to what she sees as the Gmelches' only partly successful use of the same categories to reject 'culture of poverty' arguments dominating policy when they did fieldwork. Helleiner argues that they emphasized tensions of class, gender, and generation among Travellers as signs of cultural breakdown—she thus revisits them, aiming instead to sketch a more complicated picture of agency and resilience.

This works fairly well, especially in the chapters on gender and youth. The significance of class, both among and between Travellers and non-Travellers, however, seemed least concretely worked out at the ethnographic level, especially given the detail devoted to class at the level of national policy discourse: we learn that working-class tenants protested Travellers in their developments—but what was at stake in their interactions with Travellers or with the state? We learn how some Travellers accumulated wealth or became poorer (in part through better or worse access to transport and unpaid kin labor)—but what did it mean, in interaction and in the imagination, to be a more or less wealthy Traveller? The book importantly rejects 'travelling' as core to Traveller identity (Helleiner astutely points out that camping does not indicate mobility, and that living in houses need not correlate with being permanently settled). Yet the ways (a majority of) Travellers actually live in houses, the ways they talk about Traveller identity from that position are left somewhat mysterious. Would more discussion of such practices and accounts illuminate understanding of Traveller 'class'? The brief mention of the Travellers living in a house who warned Helleiner off from the camping sort, calling them 'dirty', implies that it might.

In all, this book is admirable for the way it moves among and makes connections between past and present accounts, and between levels of political discourse and ethnographic observation. It is clearly written, and would work well in a number of college courses.

References

- Gmelch, George. 1977. *The Irish tinkers: The urbanization of an itinerant People*. Menlo Park, Calif.: Cummings.

Gmelch, Sharon, and George Gmelch. 1976. The emergence of an ethnic group: The Irish tinkers. *Anthropological Quarterly* 49: 225–38.
 Okely, Judith. 1983. *The Traveller Gypsies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

1

The Gypsy-American: An ethnogeographic study. *David J. Nemeth*. 2002. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press. 271 pp. ISBN 0-7734-7217-7

Reviewed by Anne Hartley Sutherland

David Nemeth has spent the better part of his professional life studying American Roma. This book is a compilation of his life work on the Roma, divided into three parts. The first part is a brief history of Roma and other Gypsies, including their migrations and movements from AD 1000 to 1400. The second and largest section, Part Two, is a collection of articles and pieces based largely on the life of one particular Rom, Tom Nicholas, and his family, a family that Nemeth has befriended over a long period of time. Finally, Part Three is an essay comparing Irving Brown to George Borrow and a review of two recent published bibliographies of material on the Roma.

Part One, the history of the Roma, is only a partial history and an inconclusive one at that. New scholarship on Roma history has opened many questions on origins, migration patterns and language. Much of this new scholarship is missing in this book, in particular, the theories of Ian Hancock on the Kshatriya (warrior caste in India) connection. The reader looking for information on origins and history would be advised to consult other works.

Part Two, a study of the adaptive strategies of the Nicholas family, is the richest part of the book and well worth reading. For the scholar of the Roma, this section contains a useful case study of many aspects of the life of an American Rom. For example, Tom Nicholas, like all American Roma, has many names. His Gypsy name is Toma; his 'American' names include Tom Nicholas, Nick Thomas, Victor Thomas, and Victor Curtis (the Victor

Anne Hartley Sutherland is Professor of Anthropology at the Department of Anthropology and Geography, Georgia State University, 33 Gilmer Street, Room 335, Sparks Hall, Atlanta, GA 30303-3083, USA. Email: asutherland@gsu.edu

Romani Studies 5, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2002), 153–154. ISSN 1528-0478

designation stemming from his uncanny resemblance to the actor Victor Mature). His nickname is Samson (after Victor Mature's most famous role). The ethnographic descriptions and discussion of Tom Nicholas' work as a wipe-tinner (a metal working trade of coating an iron object with tin), his survival strategies (secrecy, mobility, etc.), and a fascinating description of a *kris* are all wonderful ethnographic material. This is not to say that Mr Nicholas's life is necessarily typical, but Nemeth's descriptions add a valuable case study to the literature. In particular, Chapter 9, 'Field notes from 1970: A *kris* in river city' is a first hand telling of a Roma *kris* (a trial held by the elders of the Roma community on issues such as marriage payments). It is very difficult for a non-Gypsy to attend a *kris* and Nemeth's account is a worthy contribution to the record. While this section may not constitute what anthropologists call 'thick description', it is fascinating reading.