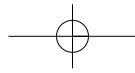


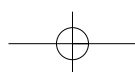
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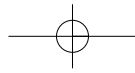
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## 1. Gypsies and their identities

This is a book about Gypsies in the United Kingdom and in particular it is a book that provides an account of the formation of Gypsy identity/identities. Whilst it would be palpably untrue to suggest that providing such an account of any other group or community is a simple or straightforward business, there is still a clear sense of greater complexity and wider scope for misunderstanding when considering Gypsy culture. This should not be surprising; although Gypsies are recognisable figures within rural and urban landscapes, the representations that are made of them tend to reflect an imaginary sense of the Gypsy which is configured, in general, from a non-Gypsy perspective. In many ways this is a hugely confused perspective. Within the wider population there appears to be little knowledge or interest in the history and culture of Gypsy communities (little is known, for example, of the likely links between Gypsies and India); there is apprehension and distrust of many cultural aspects associated with Gypsy lifestyles and there is a historic feeling of dividedness, of an uncrossable borderline between Gypsy culture and non-Gypsy culture. What is more, the miscomprehension by the wider population, of Gypsies within the UK, reflects prevalent attitudes across Europe and further afield. It is within this context that Gypsy culture has shaped itself and continues to shape itself. The recent and historic tendencies to either misrepresent or misrecognise Gypsy culture provide the background against which this account of Gypsy identity is situated. Often such



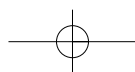


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misrepresentation or misrecognition comes from anticipated sources: the sloganeering of tabloid headlines, for example. Sometimes, however, it appears more unexpectedly, in the voices of the Academy or in thoughtful and supportive articles in liberal broadsheets. In these cases such misrepresentation might take an altogether different tone, countering the tabloid tales of dirt and idleness with a romanticised version of hardworking and long-suffering families. In these more liberal accounts is the tendency to reinvent, in contemporary terms, historic dualisms in which Gypsies are portrayed in a positive and a negative fashion at the same time. It is perhaps ironic that liberal and illiberal accounts often seem to be as inaccurate as each other.

Such accounts, both liberal and intolerant, say much about the wider community and its need to place Gypsies in relation to itself. One strand of the thinking behind this book is intended to unravel that placement by society and the understanding of Gypsies that follows in its wake. Georg Simmel (1950; 1971) and, more recently, Zygmunt Bauman (1991) have raised many interesting questions about the role of the '*stranger*' in society, identifying in particular immigrant groups who come to a society from elsewhere, or, as Simmel famously put it, 'the man who comes today and stays tomorrow' (Simmel 1971, 49).

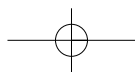
The power of the *stranger* is his ability to disrupt the ordinariness of everyday life. He is unsettling because he is not understood and yet he remains: the *stranger* is not an exotic visitor passing briefly, who strays from the tourist map and brings a little colour into our lives; but, rather, an exotic visitor who moves into the house next door, walks our street, plies his trade and lives within a distinct and different cultural milieu. This *stranger* and the baggage that he brings with him becomes a source of anxiety for wider society. In the UK today we see many clear signs of the functioning of multiculturalism and if we look closely we may also be aware of its various failings. In many respects one result of multiculturalism, in either its difference-





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blind or difference-celebratory manifestations, should be an overcoming of issues around the stranger; we either become blind to difference or learn to understand it. The strangeness should dissipate, the anxiety be relieved and *Daily Mail* readers should sleep a little more easily in their beds. This does not appear to happen in real life, however, and the figure of the Gypsy remains a significantly unsettling figure within contemporary accounts. This book will examine whether there is a sense of the ‘*stranger*’ within the positioning of Gypsies in society. Related to this, and particularly to ideas of how ‘otherness’ is created, is an examination of the ways in which ‘white’ culture differentiates itself and the extent to which understandings of Gypsy identity fall within and outside notions of ‘whiteness’. We might expect on the basis of well-established racism towards immigrant communities in the UK that skin colour is a dependent characteristic for such racism. It might be anticipated that the element of public opinion swayed by sloganeering demanding to ‘keep Britain white’ would materialise in a groundswell of right-wing thinking that is largely sympathetic towards Gypsy culture in the UK because of their long-established presence and skin colour. Within less extreme political agendas – the ascendancy of free-market thinking in the governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major, for example, or more recently Tony Blair’s slightly more fuzzy promotion of individual choice and its associated responsibilities – we might also anticipate a more affirmative embracing of Gypsy culture. With its emphasis on self-employment and family and community bonds, Gypsy culture surely has the potential to be seen as a positive model for society. None of these interpretations have materialised within wider society and there are probably very few amongst us who are in any way surprised by this. There is a general and unwritten understanding of the role played by Gypsies within society that anticipates negative accounts of their lives. Even within liberal agendas and multicultural institutions there is a clear sense that the understandings being constructed have



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deep roots within such negative accounts. By examining the production of representations of Gypsies and their culture it is possible to understand something of how multicultural society reproduces many of the same aspects of misrecognition and misrepresentation of Gypsy culture that might be more generally equated with less liberal regimes.

