

Response to: "A Figure by Any Other Name: Exploring Alternatives to Gypsy"

by Dragan Gill

I am both a folk dancer (English, morris, contra) and Romnichal. Romnichal are a sub-group found in the British Isles, US, and Australia. We are, probably, the largest group of Roma in the US. My family, after arriving in the US in 1851, lived a 'traditional' Roma life (nomadic/semi-nomadic with traditional/stereotypical employment) through the generation before mine. My mom's generation was the first to mostly marry "out," meaning they married non-Roma where prior generations only did so occasionally.

"Gypsy" is what I grew up calling myself, interchangeably with Romnichal. I don't hate the word. That said, I in no way can speak for the whole of the Gypsy world. I am well aware of my passing privilege and its twin: erasure.

Here are things I think are worth considering in this conversation after reading the article from Summer.

Who we are

We are an ethnic group, roughly from what is now known as Rajasthan. We were originally nomadic, and some of us still are. There is no clear history that explains why we left the region and traveled more broadly. The most current research into when Roma and predecessors arrived in Europe points to differing dates, but many believe it was in the 11th century. This history was not necessarily part of Gypsy identity for many in Europe and the US, until relatively recently. Once in Europe, groups of Roma began staying in certain regions, giving rise to dialects and cultural differences which gave rise to different sub-groups, such as the Romnichal.

Roma/Romani

The language is a Sanskrit-based language and has changed a lot over time, with many regional dialects. While highly preserved words are similar to Hindi and Urdu, language exchange has led to a lot of adopted words and grammar. For example, my grandparents used Romnes words with English grammar, which is typical of Romnichal. The word "rom" means, as is true in many languages, "man." Among advocates and activists there are further discussions and

disagreements about whether to use the word "Roma" or "Romani" as the general ethnonym.

The word "Gypsy"

The English word "Gypsy" comes from the word "Egyptian." Many European languages use a word derived from "Egyptian." More evident to us might be Gitano (Spanish) and Gitan (French), but across the continent you'll find words starting with Tz, Ts or Cz (like the infrequently used "Tsiganology," study of Gypsies) all derived from "Egyptian." There is no definitive history on how this misnomer began, as Roma are not Egyptian, but it is historically entrenched in many languages starting with the arrival of Gypsies in Europe.

Differing opinions on using the word Gypsy

There are uses I don't like, but it's the intention and use, rather than the word itself that I find problematic. Others have called for use of it to end entirely. As is true for other ethnic groups, preferred language is varied and complicated. For example, Professor Hancock's work is published in *Romani Studies*, a journal published by The Gypsy Lore Society. A newer name for the journal, the historic name for the society.

In the introduction to the book *Insiders, Outsiders and Others: Gypsies and Identity*, the researchers provide background into their use of the word "Gypsies" in their text which resonates strongly with my experiences:

In our work we have chosen to use the term 'Gypsy' primarily because those groups we refer to and spoke to in our research choose to define themselves as such. Many of the people we spoke to did not choose to define themselves as 'Travellers' as, they argued, they no longer travelled. They also suggested they would always be seen as Gypsies by society at large and would always remain Gypsies regardless of their economic circumstances. Despite a recognition of the pejorative associations linked to the use of the term 'Gypsy' by non-Gypsies, the people we spoke to understood the term as having positive associations

with their communities and culture. Our use of this term may be seen as 'giving voice' to and legitimising the viewpoint of those people who informed our research. Here we agree with Okely (1983), who has argued that self-identification is the means by which ethnic identity is achieved and maintained.

My opinion on using the word Gypsy in dance

I am actually, and unsatisfactorily to debaters, ambivalent. As a morris dancer I call, "here!" in response to a "half-gyp", as in a roll-call. My mom got me a "Dance Gypsy" bumper sticker. It's fun to have these inside-jokes with my team and people who know me.

As others have done, I've looked into the history of using the term in dance and found that, like much of the history mentioned above, it's undocumented. There may be no record of why this figure has this name, the intention is missing. Those who argue in favor of continuing to use it frequently point to romantic stereotypes of Gypsies which, while they are intended to be positive, are problematic. They reduce the culture and history of a whole group to fairy tale characters. Those that argue against ignore those of us who self-identify using this term, with the best of intentions of being culturally sensitive.

I understand the impulse to use the safest terms and this is, as Jeff Kaufman pointed out, a figure whose name does not make the movement clear. It is easy to swap it out. However, throughout this process there have been calls on both sides of the debate for a Roma voice and to the extent having mine here provides insight, I am willing to provide it. I have spoken up in Facebook conversations, which interestingly have mostly led to requests to move the conversation to private messages or email, out of the public threads. Even more telling was a request for someone more "in the community" when I recommended Professor Hancock's work as a counter to my own experiences. This person felt fully against using stereotypical language, but was unable to imagine a Gypsy in academia. And this is the crux of the problem: This debate is focusing on a word with more nuanced use than either sides' arguments provide. It is not a simple fix to a simple problem to stop using it. The problem isn't the word, it's a lack of understanding about the people behind the word.

CDSS did not begin this conversation; it's been in callers' blogs and email lists, on Facebook group pages, and forums for a while. But what I hope CDSS can provide is more space for depth—to have better conversations, not just more.



An old family photo—An example of traditional/stereotypical employment. Many of my family members sold horses across New England and the Midwest, with sales stables scattered across the region. This photograph shows: Williams Brother's Horse Market c. 1917, Hartford CT. There was another in East Hartford and one in Holyoke, which is now a furniture store still owned and operated by family, as well as a few others. The stables closed over time as fewer people used work horses in daily life.

Want to read more? Hancock's book *We Are the Romani People* provides further history and background on this subject.