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Academic 'truth' and the perpetuation of negative attitudes and intolerance towards Irish Travellers in contemporary Ireland

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In 2014, fifty-one years after the publication of the seminal Report of the Commission on Itinerancy, Irish Travellers remain one the most marginalised groups in Irish society. This is despite the fact that vast resources and energy have been introduced into programmes, campaigns and partnerships aimed at improving relations between Travellers and sedentary society. Whether recognised as an ethnic group, as in Northern Ireland (see Hamilton, Bloomer and Potter, Chapter 4 above), or a listed concern of equality legislation, as in the Republic, Travellers continue to perform very poorly on every indicator used to measure disadvantage including unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, health status and access to decision making and political representation. Nomadism, a core element in Traveller culture, has been severely curtailed as a number of government Acts were ratified in the second half of the twentieth century to regulate Travellers' lives and delimit their spatial mobility with respect to housing, trespass, use of roads, ownership and control of animals, anti-social behaviour and trading.[1] Recent surveys of the general population reveal widely held negative, intolerant and prejudicial attitudes towards Travellers and their lifestyle (see for example, Powell and Geoghegan, 2004; MacGréil, 2011; Tormey and Gleeson, 2012). Indeed as McVeigh (2008: 92) suggests the 'combination of fear and contempt in anti Traveller discourse has changed remarkably little over time'.

This chapter addresses the way in which the issues of tolerance or recognition of a group are preceded by the attributive constitution of that group, focusing on some of the reasons why negative and intolerant attitudes to Travellers prevail amongst sedentary society. In particular, it focuses on tracing out and deconstructing one particular influential element of the complex, amorphous discursive landscape which frames Travellers lives (which includes the views of the state, the media, members

of sedentary society, political and religious elites and so on) – that of academia. Academics have told the story of Irish Travellers many times, from diverse perspectives and with varying intentions. What unites these authors is that they portray the 'truth' of Travellers through the identification of causally connected events or as a result of wider social and cultural transformations – whether it be nation building, modernisation, rural to urban migration, capitalism or globalisation – each of which has a distinct significance and forms part of an overall pattern leading to exclusion, negative stereotyping and intolerance of Traveller lifestyle (MacGreine, 1931; Kearns 1977; Gmelch, 1985; MacLaughlin, 1995; Ní Shúinéar, 1994, 1997, 2002, 2004; McVeigh, 2008). As shown later, within these histories and ethnographies prejudice and intolerance towards Travellers' are described in terms of continuous developments. Events are put into universal explanatory schemes, and in this way given unity. Travellers' position in Irish society is portrayed as *inevitable* given the various evidence or explanation these authors uncover. Theirs is a 'continuist' view of history – one that has involved replacing one narrow construction with another, as long as the substance of the new construction is seen to be better than the old one (Rose, 1996). Moreover, for the most part, these histories are ethnocentric in substance – the view from Irish sedentary society.

This, however, is just one way of tracing out the position of Travellers in society now and in the past. For example, a deterministic approach can be replaced with one that is contingent and relational. Here, Travellers' social position in Irish society is not seen as an inevitable product of unstoppable social forces. Instead, the importance of human actors in constructing and reproducing social processes is recognised. Accordingly, this chapter presents an alternative perspective and investigative method, one that establishes discontinuity. We argue that by viewing archives as 'institutions' in the Foucauldian sense – as opaque, not transparent windows on the past – an anachronistic understanding of Travellers that makes their present position a necessary outcome of a 'continuous past' could be prevented (Dean, 1994). Instead, it should be recognised that Travellers' current situation and the historical processes that have given rise to attitudes of intolerance and prejudice towards Travellers were discontinuous, divergent and contingent, and thus not inevitable. Here, our genealogical approach differs fundamentally from previous studies in that the focus is not on Travellers per se but on how various interlocking and accumulating discourses about Travellers have come to constitute for many in the settled community their perception and experience of Travellers. Essentially the focus of the study is shifted from what the various narratives and discourses concern (Travellers) to

the function that they serve (interests of academics and activists), examining the coloniser rather than the colonised, the culture of power rather than the culture of powerlessness.

The intention is to examine and expose the connection between truth, knowledge and power; the creation and production of the 'Traveller' – the romantic nomad, the primitive, the irredeemably detestable, the corrupt, the victim, the citizen – and the link between discourse and the material lives of Travellers. Drawing from Nochlin and Garb's (1996) *The Jew in the Text*, the analysis here is concerned with exposing how power relations of inequality are created and maintained in subtle, diffuse and paradoxical ways through *academia* – through the construction of particular knowledges. The chapter reveals how many of the discourses and representations of Travellers that have traditionally been the touchstones of sedentary knowledge and truth about Travellers and their relationship with sedentary society are often the most superficial and ill informed.[2] Despite this, academic discourses have contributed to and helped preserve a diffuse and contested, but relatively robust, regime of truth that views Travellers as threatening, lawless, criminal, dependent, victim and so on, and play a significant role in perpetuating negative attitudes and intolerance towards Travellers and their lifestyle.

Understanding the truth of lives and events necessitates a comprehension of how truth has been fashioned and by whom; how statements and discourses become 'the truth' and on what terms. It also entails detailing the effects of truth – how truth produces material effects with respect to attitudes and behaviours. Indeed, the extent to which academic knowledges are or are not 'true' does little to mitigate the force of their collective action. Importantly, we are not suggesting that the regime of truth operating with regard to Travellers in Ireland is wholly unified and totalising. While the stereotypes and 'truths' about Travellers are relatively robust, they are contested and differences occur across individuals and groups. For example, while there is a general consensus amongst sedentary communities that there is a Traveller problem, and that it is Travellers' lifestyle that constitutes this problem, there is variation in how this problem is conceived and in the solutions to it. Indeed, there is a long tradition of liberal Irish attitudes towards Travellers among some sections of society (McVeigh, 2002; Ní Shúinéar, 2002; Lentin and McVeigh, 2002; Fanning, 2012 and this volume). Nor are we suggesting that academia provides the only or main foundation for the 'truth' about Travellers (clearly others exist such as the state, the media, sedentary communities and so on). What we are arguing, however, is that academia provides an important

source of knowledge about Travellers, and a focused analysis of how such knowledge is constructed and put to use is important for thinking through how Travellers are discursively produced through academic endeavour. We are aware that the voice of the Traveller is silent in the critique we forward, but our focus is on deconstructing the discursive construction of Travellers by sedentary society, not the 'truth' of their lives. In other words this is a chapter about academia, not Travellers per se.

To structure the discussion the paper is divided into four sections: late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century British Gypsylorists and Irish literary revivalists; the work of the Irish Folklore Commission (1950s to date); the research of anthropologists and sociologists (1960s to 1980s); and more recent literature on Travellers and racism (1990s to date). These sections are primarily an organisational tool, not exclusive or bounded periods of knowledge production. Indeed, there is considerable overlap between the discourses and stereotypes arising in each. Our analysis is not exhaustive of every academic study of Travellers, but is broadly representative. In the interests of space, our strategy has been to focus on selected cases to illustrate the various ways that Travellers have been academically produced. In the first of these cases, although starting from an idealised picture, and more uniformly in the second and third, Travellers are portrayed in negative and backward terms, immediately giving rise to the implicit question of whether they (or their culture and practices) are to be tolerated – or not (through either exclusion or change). In the final case, the issue is rather whether Travellers should be tolerated and treated without discrimination or receive special recognition as a specific ethnic group.

Gypsylorists

The Gypsy Lore Society (GLS) was for the most part a group best characterised as 'armchair' British anthropologists. The Society consisted of well-educated, cultural intellectuals and professional academics, who between them constructed the first 'legitimate' knowledges of Irish Travellers (this despite the fact that few of them claimed to have actually met Irish Travellers). From the Society's foundation in 1888, their desire was to identify, categorise and preserve the pure Gypsy/Traveller culture before it (like other 'primitive' cultures) inevitably disappeared with modernisation. These Gypsylorists largely drew from earlier romantic images (for example, colourful barrel-top wagons, Carmen-type characters and so on) produced by influential literary writers such as George Borrow (1803–81) and blended it with developing theories of

the time concerning race, blood purity and genetic determinism in order to define the true, 'untainted' Gypsy. Once this category was established, further features were then added regarding the Gypsy's dress, behaviour, attitudes and culture, each contributing to the overall picture of how the pure or true Gypsy should look and behave (Mayall, 1988: 156). Those who did not match up to this idealised, romanticised version of Gypsy were quickly categorised into lesser groupings or castes.

Rooted within these categorisations, Irish Travellers were stereotyped by the GLS and other anthropologists as a lesser 'breed', defined in terms of bodily characteristics as ugly, dirty, defiled, impure, immoral, hyper-sexual, contaminated and sick (Borrow, 1862; Hackett, 1862; Sampson, 1890). Right up to the present day, the establishment of the 'binary opposites' of the 'true' and the 'fraudulent' Gypsy have had profound consequences for Irish and other Travellers.

In Ireland, Anglo-Irish literary revivalists used and manipulated these representations and stereotypes as a challenge to what they saw as the regimented lifestyle of Irish society, preoccupied with material wealth (Gregory, 1903; Synge 1906). Most of their work concerning Travellers was based on romantic and mythical folklore, as detailed by the GLS, and likewise produced without ever having had more personal experience of Travellers than a fleeting glimpse of a few individuals. Travellers were characterised as a uniform social group, and mythological qualities were associated with them, creating powerful fantasy material. Travellers were celebrated for their nomadism, their freedom from wage labour, and their uninhibited sexuality, thus reinforcing the stereotype of the uncivilised, hypersexual, lazy and criminal Traveller, developed in the late nineteenth century by the GLS. Most controversial was the portrayal of the supposed sexual promiscuity, wife swapping, unmarried cohabitation, and attitudes towards priests and religion of Travellers (Botheroyd, 1982: 170–1). These representations were neither arbitrary nor without symbolic power, as Travellers were portrayed as the outsiders against society, the pagan against the church. Through reinforcing each other's message, the plays and writings collectively produced how the consumers of such stories – sedentary society and its institutions – saw Travellers and their world and therefore became real in their effects. They thus contributed to the hostility with which the settled community viewed the Traveller, and the stereotypes associated with these classificatory labels still have a force today. It was a combination of these contingent, relational processes and a lack of any competing theoretical viewpoints that set the broader context within which academics would view and relate to Irish Travellers in the coming decades.

The Irish Folklore Commission (1950s)

Although Irish Travellers attracted little sustained academic interest within Ireland from the foundation of the state in 1922 until the 1960s, there are a few publications dealing exclusively with Irish Travellers by romantic folklorists and academics employed by the Irish Folklore Commission (later the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin). The primary aim of these works was to record Travellers' 'secret language', customs and stories before they eventually vanished. For the most part these studies were cultural, literary and folkloric in nature and, at the time, had few particular political implications. However, a questionnaire issued by the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC) (1952: 152) 'in the hope that a representative documentation on certain aspects of the tinkers' life may be compiled, before it is too late to do so' was to have a profound (if unintended) impact on interpretations of Irish Travellers, particularly relations between Travellers and the settled community, over the coming decades.

This semi-structured questionnaire was sent to more than three hundred retired schoolteachers around the country requesting information on Travellers' physical characteristics, lifestyles, customs, behaviour and superstitions, and has proved a particularly important text over the last five decades. The knowledge contained in the responses to the questionnaire has been used as conclusive evidence of Traveller lifestyle and of relations between settled and Travellers in a succession of scholarly and academic texts, with the survey used as an unquestioned and authoritative reference point for these relations.

The context and the boundaries for the study were set by the Commission, and respondents duly focused on a handful of reductive and seemingly self-evident visual physical characteristics – sexuality, dirt, crime, fighting and so on – that were taken to essentialise the traditional image of the Traveller. This circumscribed representation of difference was compounded by a 'significant silence'. At no point in the returned surveys was one presented with the voice of the Traveller. Indeed, unlike other Folklore Commission questionnaires carried out on the folk traditions of the settled community, fieldwork was not carried out in this instance (even though few respondents claimed first-hand knowledge). Members of sedentary society (and since then academics) spoke for Travellers, about Travellers, naming and placing them, denying them ownership of their own position. In addition, Travellers were denied any opportunity to respond to the pre-empted, ready-made representations of the Commission's respondents. Travellers became idealised and denigrated, made into an object of representation and

investigation. Further, the questions within the survey were informed by previous ill-founded and ill-informed writing and analysis already constructed by the GLS and literary revivalists. Myths and stereotypes had clearly entered into everyday academic and common language as truths, and ascribed to Travellers as real individuals.

This apparently morally neutral pursuit of knowledge concerning the lifestyle and culture of Travellers was obviously deeply inflected with ideological assumptions. The language and questions used to structure the questionnaire betrayed the overriding interest of officials, and, moreover, the language used in the structure of the questionnaire itself directly intervened in people's perceptions and stories of Travellers. It framed the topic and governed the way Travellers could be meaningfully talked and reasoned about. The IFC's report was framed by assumptions grounded in a regime of truth constructed by the GLS and other agencies. It purported to be an objective and authentic stock of knowledge and yet the voice of Travellers themselves was entirely absent. The report and surveys became a standard, authoritative source on Travellers for the next forty years.

The research of anthropologists and sociologists (1960s to 1980s)

Academic anthropologists and sociologists became increasingly interested in Travellers as a result of the IFC's surveys and the government's more active interest in tackling the 'problem of Travellers' (culminating in the Government Report of the Commission on Itinerancy in 1963; see further Fanning, Chapter 12 below). For these academics the IFC report constituted an important set of authentic and basic evidence to draw upon. For example, George and Sharon Gmelch, two of the most influential researchers on the lifestyles and customs of the Travelling community during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, used this source as a basis for much of their research. Their accounts were reconstructions based on a variety of sources, with the IFC singled out for special mention: 'A questionnaire sent in 1950 to more than 300 retired public school teachers by the Irish Folklore Commission was an especially useful source … Most respondents had only a superficial knowledge on Travellers, but some knew them quite well and were able to describe aspects of their culture in detail as far back as the turn of the century' (Gmelch, 1985: 13).

The very stable discourse perpetuated by the IFC – that of primitive, uneconomic, anti-social, irrational behaviour – fitted neatly into the fashionable theories of the time (for example, culture of poverty and modernisation theories) applied to Irish Travellers, and many academics

complemented their theories with 'evidence' from the Folklore question-naire (1952). For example, Gmelch and Gmelch (1976), Kroup (1978) and Botheroyd (1982) all explicitly drew on the questionnaire while others such as O'Toole (1973); Kearns (1977, 1978) and Kent (1980) (who worked as a research assistant for the Gmelchs in the 1970s) helped to reinforce the regime of truth by following in their and each other's footsteps. After giving a brief overview of popular lore with regard to their historical origins, the authors focus on Travellers' personality defects, utilising the concepts of disaffiliation and under-socialisation. Within this 'continuist' framework, Travellers were invariably portrayed as anachronistic throwbacks. For example, McCarthy suggested: 'the folkways of the Travellers had been frozen at some point around the end of the last century' (1972: 13). Gmelch, drawing on anecdotal evidence, stated 'Drinking among Tinkers has greatly increased in the city … Travellers have always been heavy drinkers' (Gmelch, 1985: 101).

In taking the IFC summary at face value these academics failed to take into account the underlying cultural politics of the texts – how they were framed, who contributed, and whose interests they served. Academics analysing this questionnaire have to date paid too much attention to the text's formal operations and far too little to the scope of its authority, and how the text bears upon the lives of subjects in the present – how its 'truth' translates into effects (sedentary attitudes and behaviours, governance and policing, policy and legislation). No (documented) consideration has been given to any of the following: the idea that the questionnaire structured thoughts and responses or the way people act on the basis of that thinking; how the questionnaire disciplined subjects into certain ways of thinking and responding; the fact that the Traveller is contained and represented through a pernicious set of truths that are saturated with power; or the fact that there is a complete absence of the Traveller's voice.

The formalisation of lore within the IFC survey raised 'knowledge' about Travellers to a level of prestige that guaranteed its identification with 'truth'. The belief that this questionnaire corresponded to the real world and portrayed real relations between the settled and Traveller community amounts to what Said calls 'textual attitude': 'A tendency to engage reality within the framework of knowledge gained from previous written texts' (Said, 1978: 67). This text not only created a 'knowledge' of Travellers but also produced the thing it purported to describe. It has been held to signify, to represent truth. As such, the social simplifica-tions found in the questionnaire were like simplified maps. They did not represent the norms, values, lifestyle or customs of Travellers – nor were they intended to: they represented only the part that interested

academics and officials. They were, moreover, not just maps. Rather they were maps that, when connected with the power of political, academic and scholarly texts, would enable much of the Traveller 'reality' they depicted to be remade (Scott, 1998). The text produced its effects of truth because it 'officially' confirmed what many people already thought. 'Common-sense' statements became endowed with authority – they told the 'truth' about Travellers. Traditional lore is now turned into formal knowledge with all its moral judgements and demarcated boundaries.

The tenability of generalisations about the history and expressions of Traveller culture was not seriously tested until the 1990s. Yet, in material terms, the research by anthropologists and sociologists fed into specific policy options in relation to the elimination of poverty amongst Travellers, particularly an emphasis on education and training in order to 'rehabilitate' and aid assimilation. The final solution was, however, always settlement.

Travellers and racism (1990s to present)

It is not, however, simply the academics that portrayed Travellers as fraudulent, or as a subculture of poverty, or as victims of the modernisation process, that have contributed to and perpetuated negative regimes of truth. More liberal academics who have been sympathetic to the plight of Travellers and those who have criticised and contested the portrayal of Travellers and the truth upon which it has rested have also played key roles in configuring the way in which Travellers are viewed and understood by sedentary society.

Influenced by discourses and themes mobilised within European social theory and within the framework of multiculturalism and (anti-)racism studies, much liberal theoretical discussion has been devoted to 'locating' Travellers, finding their 'true' history or putting various arguments forward 'proving' their separate ethnicity and common origin (and thus legitimacy). For many activists the policy implications of ethnic classification are seen as crucial and the identification of Travellers as a distinct group has been a central concern of many Traveller activists, academics and Traveller support organisations like Pavee Point.[3]

A collaborative example of work concerning Traveller ethnicity can be found in *Irish Travellers, Culture and Ethnicity* (McCann et al., 1994). Fascinated by Travellers' origins, academics writing in this collection concentrated primarily on Traveller ethnicity, language and customs. More recent examples are works by Crowley (1999), Ní Shúinéar (1994, 1997, 2004) and McVeigh (2008). The analysis with respect to Traveller ethnicity is itself often highly problematic, not least

because of an almost total absence of grounded historical research and sustained empirical evidence. For example, Ní Shúinéar (1994) identifies a number of criteria for separate ethnicity deriving from a definition by the anthropologist Barth (1970). In her paper 'Irish Travellers, ethnicity and the origins question', she challenges 'conventional wisdom' (that Travellers were originally evicted peasants) by postulating three hypotheses for the origins of Irish Travellers, while at the same time hesitantly and defensively stressing that she is 'not proposing any of these as a new conventional wisdom to replace the old':

1   That they were a pre-Celtic group that might have been nomadic but were relegated to inferior status by Celtic invaders (MacNeill also put forward this hypothesis in 1920).
2   That they were descendants of one of several distinct Celtic groups that invaded Ireland.
3   That they were descendants of indigenous nomadic craftspeople who never became sedentary. (1994: 70–1)

There is no historical foundation for any of these ideas, nor indeed any attempt to provide one. The possibility that, through a process of labelling, Irish Travellers have internalised such bases of ethnicity, or the fact that they may have intermingled with other travelling labourers, does not figure in Ní Shúinéar's hypotheses. Moreover, she disregards the idea that the notion of a 'Traveller Community' may be a recent concept imposed on Travellers by sedentary society's policy makers and some Traveller activists; that repression, stigmatisation and oppressive government policies and programmes may have influenced group formation – in conjunction with ethnic consciousness (Lucassen and Cottar, 1998). Interestingly, in a later work, Ní Shúinéar (2004) points out that there is a dearth of research on the history of Irish Travellers, and that what has been done has been of dubious quality.

Much theoretical and practical work on anti-Traveller racism has come from within Traveller 'resistance' groups (for example, Pavee Point and the Irish Traveller Movement). These groups have influenced policy both at national and European level (Lentin and McVeigh, 2002). For these organisations and writers like Fay (1992), MacLaughlin (1995, 1998), Ní Shúinéar (1997), Whyte (2002), McVeigh (2008) and others, the promotion of a separate ethnic Traveller identity serves a number of purposes. It provides a reaction to the poverty studies of the previous decades, when defining Travellers as an economically deprived group had led to policies of rehabilitation and integration and assimilation with the settled community. Moreover, it provides a vehicle for protest,

as responsibility for discrimination, marginalisation and oppression can be ascribed to the Irish government and its inability or unwillingness to deal with the problem of Traveller racism and to accept Travellers as a separate ethnic group. As Whyte (2002) notes, 'Viewing Travellers as a distinct ethnic group … calls for policies that make special provision for Travellers and that respect their cultural traditions and values, in particular, their nomadic lifestyle'.

The assertion of racial distinctiveness or racial purity can be highly dangerous, drawing negative repercussions. Apart from being almost impossible to prove, the historical claims for pure races have sustained eugenic movements and have been used to justify overt racism in many contexts. Without material evidence, the idea of Travellers being a separate race or ethnic group is a social construction with no biological, scientific or plausible basis (Brah, 1993). Moreover, even if biological or scientific evidence substantiates a claim of race, how people of that race are viewed and treated will be discursively and materially constructed.

Categorising Travellers as an ethnic group, while empowering some (particularly Traveller 'leaders' and Traveller organisations) can have the effect of stigmatising Travellers and further increasing intolerant attitudes towards Travellers in wider society. This is because cultural arguments within academic and policy-making circles are rarely free of political consequences, and in Ireland there have been many instances where journalists have turned the arguments concerning Traveller ethnicity on their head. Academic works, with the intention of validating Travellers as a separate group, have had the unintended consequence of nurturing *cultural racism*. Cultural racism, according to Wren 'is a refined replacement of earlier biological racism. It relies on history rather than biology or religion to explain superiority' (Wren, 2001: 143).

While cultural racism is rooted in long-held social attitudes towards Travellers, the idea of Travellers' separate ethnic identity is used against rather than for Travellers, particularly in times of stress or when Travellers are seen to be involved in anti-social behaviour. Helen Lucy Burke gives an example of such cultural racism in its crudest form in the following quotation:

> I believe that some cultures are more respectable than others. Skip to the ramshackle collections of rusting cars, ramshackle caravans, mangy dogs, snotty-nosed children and women looking twenty years older than their age. This is part of their 'culture' and they hold to it … For years the Travelling People gave us to understand that they are exactly the same as the rest of us, but with caravans. Now some claim that they are a separate race and ethnic group. This is incorrect: their names, race, features are

> Irish. Their language, Shelta, is a form of backslang or Thieves' Cant, done through the medium of Irish. They say little about respecting the culture and sensibilities of their settled neighbours. (Burke, SEE BIB 1995)

Although this article was contested by Traveller activists, academics, liberals and anti-racists, it was soon followed by a 'deluge of anti-Traveller sentiment' in 'all the respectable Irish newspapers' (McVeigh, 1998: 159, 162). It is precisely because activists and academics are unwilling to discriminate between individual Travellers and varieties of practice that members of the settled community end up homogenising Travellers and so damning them all. It is precisely because academics, activists and Traveller organisations are struck silent when faced with the excesses of individual Travellers (for example, issues of feuding, dumping, anti-social behaviour) that questions are being raised primarily by those who may already be intolerant of Travellers and their lifestyle. Quite simply Travellers are not all the same, and nor are members of the settled community. Although the 1989 Incitement to Hatred Act has muted much of the more outrageous comments in the press, a 2013 outburst by a Donegal County Councillor is a reminder of how easily the widespread opprobrium felt by Irish sedentary society towards Travellers can be stimulated by an event. Speaking on a local radio station about a family of Travellers to be housed in Ballyshannon, the Councillor stated: 'You wouldn't want them beside you and I don't want them beside me' (*Thejournal.ie*, 2013). The house intended for the family was later burnt to the ground in an arson attack. The reason for the direction very many academics and activists have taken is understandable, given the history of past treatment of minorities (and particularly Travellers) in this country. It is embarrassing to realise what a significant role 'our' interfering has played, how complicit sedentary society has been in Travellers' continued marginalisation and ill-treatment, poverty and destruction of their way of life.

Works by Helleiner (2000) McVeigh (2008), Bhreatnach (2006, 2007) and Fanning (2012) have attempted to reconstruct the history of Traveller racism and aspects of Travellers' lived experience through archival research. These studies marked an important advance towards a more differentiated and less stereotypical view of Irish Travellers. However, despite this critical turn, the pathological construction of Traveller ethnicity has proved to be persistent and still afflicts many of these recent studies.

For example, by implying that the negative and hostile attitudes towards Travellers are a consequence of their unconventional lifestyle, these academics unintentionally prolong a tradition that positions

Traveller culture as the cause of their own circumstances. Their harassment and abuse is condemnable, but also the understandable result of the 'fundamental incompatibility of nomadic and sedentary lifestyles' (Lucassen and Cottar, 1998: 4). Also these writers (explicitly or implicitly) continue to explain the attitudes and reactions to, and treatment of, Travellers as a consequence of wider social and cultural transformations, as for example sedentarism, modernity, state building, late modernity and so on. They see changes in the ways in which Travellers, the state and the settled community relate and interact as the outcome of fundamental historical events located elsewhere, for example in technological change, alterations in demography, settlement patterns, rural to urban migration, Ireland's entry into the EU, and in difference in culture. The history of Traveller racism becomes a logical flow of causally connected events, each of which had distinct significance and forms part of an overall pattern of meaning (Rose, 1996). These events are then put into a universal explanatory scheme and given a misleading unity. They can be read as attempts to provide a progressive (or regressive) view of the history of Traveller persecution and discrimination.

Conclusion

We have described some of the processes of thought and styles of investigation by which academics and sedentary society have come to 'know' Irish Travellers. Much of this knowledge production has suffered from what Kearney (1988) referred to as 'mindless conformism' – history gone stale. In contrast to these approaches, we have demonstrated how academia has variously *produced* Travellers politically, culturally, ideologically and imaginatively, through a process of classification and exclusion, in terms of illegitimacy and legitimacy. In doing so, we have highlighted how many of the knowledges and 'truths' about Travellers are the result of the contingent emergence of imposed interpretations, creating rather than reflecting history, exposing the false appraisals that 'gave birth to those things that continue to exist' (Foucault, 1979: 146).

As Nochlin and Garb (1996: 8) argue, myths, stereotypes and ill-informed assessments congeal over time to become truths, and form a supply of knowledge that self-perpetuates and self-reinforces. Decades of negative categorisation and representation of Travellers have produced stereotypes and social attitudes that cannot be easily erased; not even in the minds of those who would discredit the intolerant and the racist. These truths have real power, for they 'construct' and dominate Travellers in the process of knowing them. Academic texts not only create a knowledge about Travellers but also in turn produce the very

reality they appeared to describe. As Stuart Hall (1997: 49) states, 'knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of "the truth" but has the power to *make itself* true'.

However, it has not been our intention merely to document the weakness of past scholarship, but we aim rather to stress the need for an alternative form of scholarship. There is a need (as is widely recognised in critical social theory) to be more sensitive 'to what is involved in representation, in studying the Other, in racial thinking, in unthinking and uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas, in the socio-political role of intellectuals, in the great value of sceptical critical consciousness' (Said, 1978: 327). This necessitates employing a nuanced and disruptive reading of archives, which teases apart how knowledge has been produced; which thinks through how such evidence might be alternatively read; which looks for the gaps and silences in the historical record and their significance; which examines the paradoxes created by contradictions across different sources of evidence and how such contradictions were smoothed over or silenced. This needs to be accompanied by a detailed tracing out of the way in which academic 'truths' seeped into discursive and material practices that shaped the social and economic conditions of Travellers, exploring how competing 'truths' and practices played out (though academic, policy and political debates, local and national media, and so on), and gained and lost support; to document the contingency of what was 'discovered' and how that knowledge became accepted and employed. This approach, we believe, makes sense of the role of discourse as a colonising force, and how it establishes relations between different groups of people, how discourses rebuild their targets to produce new actions, habits, gestures, skills, and, in the end, new kinds of people (Rose, 1999).

As for contemporary research on the lives of Travellers, we feel there is the need for two complementary approaches. First, drawing on ideas that have been well articulated with respect to other marginalised groups such as disabled people, there is the need to develop participatory approaches, particularly participatory action projects, that seek to work with Travellers in producing the 'truth' about their lives. Here, Travellers are repositioned as co-researchers within a project taking an active role in setting research questions and answering them. The role of the academic is redefined here as one of facilitator. Such a reconfiguring has two effects. One, Travellers' voices are heard clearly through the research, as they tell their own stories and create their own ethnographies. Two, Travellers become empowered through the research process by gaining some useful tools to fight their oppression.

Second, in order to understand individual and Traveller racism, and

the social and economic position of Travellers in Irish society more fully, there is a need for detailed fieldwork on *sedentary* society's attitudes, behaviours, institutional and legislative practices, political processes and so on. Theoretically, this would consist of documenting the diverse ways in which contemporary 'truths' about Travellers are created and mobilised. In practice, it would consist of interviews with sedentary populations, local and national politicians, policy makers and policy implementers (health, community, police workers), community groups opposed to Traveller settlements and an analysis of documents such as academic accounts, policy statements, newspaper reports and other media coverage, political campaign material and so on. Such evidence should not be analysed with the aim of creating a unified theory that explains sedentary society's views and treatment of Travellers, and thus their inevitable position. Instead, it should be used to reveal the competing ideologies that surround Travellers, the contradictions and paradoxes in knowledges, and the complexities of society and economy. Instead of producing new academic 'truths' that incrementally build on previous studies, and which frame such 'truths' within grand narratives (e.g. modernisation, post-industrialisation, capitalism etc.), the contingent and relational nature of knowledge about Travellers should be laid bare. Only in this way can a 'new politics of truth', the possibility for a new discursive understanding, be opened up for discussion. It is only in this way that we can begin the move forward to genuine attitudinal change, increasing tolerance and true acceptance of diversity.

Notes

1 For example, Roads Act 1993, Section 69; Control of Horses Act 1996, Section 18; Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998, Section 32; Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2002, Section 24.
2 There is a striking similarity with the way the Irish Traveller and the Jew have been discursively constructed in academic texts, as Nochlin and Garb (1996) demonstrate.
3 Pavee Point is a partnership of Irish Travellers and members of the sedentary society working together to improve the lives of Travellers through working towards social justice, unity, social, cultural and economic development and human rights.

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