Authors:

Hazel Marsh (corresponding author)

Professor of Cultural Politics

University of East Anglia

Norwich Research Park

Norwich

NR4 7TJ

hazel.marsh@uea.ac.uk https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1633-6484

Julia Morgan

Associate Professor Public Health and Wellbeing

University of Greenwich

Old Royal Naval College

Park Row

Greenwich

SE10 9LS

j.e.morgan@gre.ac.uk https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1098-9671

Decolonising the University Curriculum: an Investigation into Current Practice Regarding Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Communities

Abstract

This article explores how Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are positioned in relation to current decolonising work in higher education. Drawing on interviews with fifteen equality, diversity and inclusion staff at twelve universities in Britain, we examine the extent to which the decolonising agenda tackles anti-Gypsyism. We find that, despite recognition of the importance of including Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in decolonising initiatives, they are overlooked and omitted from institutional discourses and strategies. We identify and discuss the main barriers to the inclusion of these groups in university decolonising work, conceptualising these within a thematic framework of factors relating to *invisibility*, *ignorance*, and *unease*. Arguing that anti-Gypsyism is a core component of both coloniality and established, institutionalised whiteness, we advocate for an extension of Critical Race Theory and the development of a RomaniTravellerCrit to expose and address the impacts of anti-Gypsy and anti-Roma racism and discrimination in higher education.

Keywords

Gypsy, Roma, Traveller; higher education; decolonisation; Critical Race Theory; anti-Gypsyism

Introduction

Over the last decade, student-led campaigns in the United Kingdom (UK) such as 'Why is My Curriculum White?' and '#LiberateMyDegree' have challenged Eurocentrism and lack of diversity in traditional university curricula, and demanded change (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu 2018). The decolonisation agenda has subsequently become 'high currency' across disciplines (Charles 2019, 1), and is now widely promoted in institutional discourses (Doharty, Madriaga, and Joseph-Salisbury 2021, 233).

Although there is no universally accepted definition of 'decolonising the curriculum', nor how this can be achieved in practice (Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2022), recent student- and activist-led campaigns aim to challenge the legacy of colonialism by interrogating what knowledge is produced, legitimated and taught in universities, how it is taught, and by whom (Zembylas 2023).

Coloniality, a term coined by Quijano (2000), refers to the enduring influence of patterns of power and representation established via colonial practices. The Global North granted itself the 'epistemic privilege' of inventing classifications of knowledge, positioned as universal, which are rooted in colonial assumptions about the inferiority of non-Western ways of experiencing and knowing the world (Mignolo 2011). In its current iteration in UK academia, student- and activist-led decolonising campaigns demand the dismantling of such 'intellectual legacies of empire' and disruption of 'the hierarchies and exclusions embedded in Eurocentric forms of knowledge' (Zembylas 2023, 303).

European modernity has been constructed on self-conceptions of superiority in relation to colonised peoples elsewhere (Dussel 1993). But it has also been built on the dehumanisation of Roma, Gypsies and Travellers within Europe including anti-Roma and anti-Gypsy racism (Fejzula 2023, 446). Racialisation is not a 'one-size-fits-all concept', and 'race' is 'never only a matter of skin colour' (Garner 2019, 513-4). Being non-Roma, or 'gadjo-ness', is a specific form of European whiteness which is privileged and institutionalised, and constructed in opposition to Roma (Matache et al 2020; Matache 2016). Racism and discrimination against Gypsies, Roma and Travellers is 'a core component of established and institutionalised whiteness', normalising and perpetuating:

> …racialised and stigmatising group stereotypes of alterity including controlling images

of innate and immutable inferiority, 'cultural backwardness', and criminality which mark them [Gypsies, Roma and Travellers] out as 'outsiders' to the white gadjo majority (Morgan and Stubbs 2024, 73-4).

A theorisation of these processes, we argue, can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the ways in which white supremacy functions to exclude non-Black racialised others from white privilege. Anti-Gypsyism is '… a historically constructed, persistent complex of customary racism against social groups identified under the stigma "gypsy" or other related terms' and includes:

- a homogenizing and essentialising perception and description of these groups;
- the attribution of specific characteristics to them;
- discriminating social structures and violent practices that emerge against that background, which have a degrading and ostracizing effect, and which reproduce structural disadvantages (Alliance against Antigypsyism 2017).

These practices produce and re-produce 'racist systems of inequality, domination, and oppression which can constrain opportunities and lead to "civilising projects" which aim to control, assimilate, acculturate and/or segregate' (Morgan and Stubbs 2024, 74). In this article, we investigate the extent to which the current decolonising agenda tackles anti-Gypsyism in higher education in the UK. In practice, as Shain et al (2021) have shown, decolonising work in universities remains a highly contested terrain fraught with conflicting interests. Activist staff and students engaged in decolonising work have frequently encountered institutional rejection and resistance. At the same time, university management teams seeking to boost student recruitment and retention have increasingly co-opted decolonising discourses for their own ends. Such top-down efforts to strategically advance decolonising practices risk 'tokenism, superficiality, and a ramping up of the exploitation of Women of Colour' while doing nothing to change the structures and processes that perpetuate coloniality (Shain et al 2021, 934). Drawing on interviews with fifteen equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) staff at twelve universities in Scotland, Wales and England, we examine what decolonising work means in practice for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups in higher education.

In the UK, only 6.3% of Gypsy/Roma and 3.8% of Irish Travellers access higher education by the age of 19, compared to around 40% of all young people (Brassington 2022). The systemic

inequalities that produce such disparities are the result of enduring colonial and racist structures that privilege whiteness, while normalising and justifying low Gypsy, Roma and Traveller access as the 'natural result' of their own culture. But since Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are generally racialised as white, the hostility and antipathy felt by other white people towards them is not recognised as racism (Garner 2019, 511). And when racism is invisible, an anti-racist repertoire is rendered unavailable (Araújo 2016).

To date, there has been very little use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado and Stefancic 2001) to analyse how normalised but invisible forms of racism, which are socially constructed and based on white supremacy, disadvantage Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people in educational settings. Originating in the USA in the 1970s-1980s in the field of law (Bell 1995), CRT is an intersectional form of analysis that approaches racism and discrimination not just as individual acts, but predominantly as embedded social structures that reproduce injustice (West et al 1995). CRT was later adapted to education, with Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) applying its tenets to argue that class and gender differences alone do not account for differences in the educational experiences and performance of Black students in the USA. In education, CRT seeks to centre the voices, experiential knowledge and lived experiences of racialised people, not merely to describe but to make visible and eradicate institutionalised structures that privilege whiteness through the use of counter-narratives (Busey et al 2023, 439). Moreover, in education, CRT aims to elucidate how so called 'neutral' educational policies and practices uphold racial inequalities and maintain hegemonic whiteness.

More recently, scholars have drawn on CRT to analyse how white supremacy impacts and shapes the lived experiences of other, non-Black racialised groups. Taking racism to be endemic in society and so engrained in education as to be invisible (Brayboy 2005, 428), Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), Asian Critical Race Theory (AsianCrit), and Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit) examine how racialisation essentialises and influences the lives of Latinx (Chávez-Moreno 2023), Asian American (Iftikar and Museus 2018) and Indigenous (Brayboy 2005) peoples. Like other non-Black racialised groups, Gypsies, Roma and Travellers have historically been represented through homogenising discourses that construct them as a 'community of difference' placed 'distinctly apart from the rest of [mainstream white] society'(James 2021, 144). We would argue for the development of a RomaniTravellerCrit that shifts the focus away from 'stock stories' of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller deficit (D'Arcy 2017) and instead analyses how white supremacy racialises these groups and produces and re-produces such stories.

In education discourses in Britain today, Gypsy and Traveller groups are often racialised through government planning policy and the construction of a sedentary/non-sedentary binary which positions them as deficient and deviant (Garner 2019). This 'sedentarist binary' logic criminalises the movement of Gypsy and Traveller groups and aims to assimilate them by reducing the provision of culturally appropriate and adequate accommodation (James and Southern 2019). Whilst local authorities are required to meet the accommodation needs of all people in their area, they are often unwilling to build sufficient sites nor allow permission for Gypsies and Travellers to build their own (Garner 2019, 517). With increasing property prices, particularly in southeast England, land for building has become much more valuable and fought over. Contemporary racialisations of Gypsies and Travellers, therefore, could be seen as part of a wider struggle between 'the landless and the land-owning' (Garner 2019, 525). Moreover, CRT with its emphasis on 'whiteness as property' (Harris, 1993) clarifies how groups such as Gypsies and Travellers can be racialised as 'not white enough' (Bhopal, 2018), 'culturally and socially' problematic, and a 'threat' to hegemonic whiteness and social order. Whiteness is equated with sedentary lifestyles, which convey both property and land rights.

Tackling such racialising discourses, and eliminating anti-Gypsyism, requires a 'decolonised knowledge base that extends … into all places of higher education' (Brooks, Clark and Rostas 2022, 69). Do contemporary higher education decolonising debates contribute to achieving such a knowledge base? This question lies at the core of our enquiry. The article is divided into four sections. First, after briefly discussing terminology in the UK context, we outline the predominant cultural imaginaries that shape 'knowledge' about Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in the UK. We argue that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are predominantly represented in policy and media discourses through a colonial lens that racialises these populations as 'white others' (Bhopal 2018; Webb 2019). Second, we outline our methodology and analytical tools. Third, we discuss the themes that emerged during interviews with decolonising and EDI staff in higher education, and what these reveal about the institutional positioning of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers vis-à-vis the decolonisation agenda. We conclude by calling for a move away from a 'deficit' model that positions Gypsy, Romani and Traveller people as the problem. We build on and extend calls for the development of a 'RomaniCrit' (Dragos 2022; Matache and Oehlke. 2017), advocating for what we call RomaniTravellerCrit - to be inclusive of non-Romani groups in the UK - to expose and address all forms of anti-Gypsyism in higher education.

Terminology in the UK context

In the UK, the official term 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller' (GRT) is used to refer to a range of ethnicities grouped together in policy discourses because they are seen to face 'similar challenges', which the government attributes to 'nomadic ways of life' (GOV.UK)[1]. However, the term and acronym are contested, since they homogenise and essentialise highly diverse groups of people and, like the disputed 'BAME' (Black and Minority Ethnic) acronym, prioritise 'analytical convenience over nuanced representation' (Danvers and Hinton-Smith 2022, 2). In this article, we do not use the 'GRT' acronym unless quoting interviewees, and prefer to write in full 'Gypsy', 'Roma' and 'Traveller' in varying order to avoid essentialism (Grillo 1995).

Outside the UK, the term 'Gypsy' is a contentious one, widely seen in Europe and the Americas as pejorative since it is not self-ascribed, but ascribed and based on misconceptions about the supposed Egyptian origins of diverse post-diasporic groupings (Trumpener 1992, 847). However, some – particularly English and Welsh Romanies - have reclaimed the term and now use it, with a capital 'G', as a marker of identity (Matthews 2021, 60). In the UK today, 'Roma'[2] often refers to diverse Romani groups who have immigrated in recent decades from Central and Eastern Europe, after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the accession of new European Union member states in 2004 (Patel et al. 2023). 'Romanies', or 'Romani Gypsies', are terms used for the descendants of Romani peoples believed to have originally migrated from north-west India into Europe in the Middle Ages, first recorded in England in 1514 (Matthews 2021, 60). The term 'Travellers' is usually used for Scottish and Irish groups with Indigenous heritage 'tied to experiences of dispossession because of English colonial practices' (Taylor and Hinks 2021, 3). Roma, Irish (Pavee) and Scottish Travellers (Nawken), and Romani Gypsies including Welsh Kalé and English Romanichal are recognised as ethnic minority groups under the Equality Act (2010) in England, Wales, and Scotland. As such they

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[1] https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/summaries/gypsy-roma-irish-traveller#:~:text=Gypsy%2C%20Roma%20and%20Traveller%20(GRT,but%20are%20often%20reported%20together. (Last accessed 12 April 2024).

[2] 'Roma' is an umbrella term, and includes different groups of Romani origin with diverse and heterogenous cultures, languages, lifestyles, and heritages such as 'Roma, Sinti, Kalé, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations' (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti)" (European Commission, n.d).

are protected groups under the Race Relations Act (1976) (amended 2000) and Equality Act (2010) in relation to racism, hate crimes, and discrimination. Showmen, Bargee Travellers, and New Travellers, included in the GTRSB[3] acronym, are not protected ethnic categories under the Equality Act (2010) but often face prejudice, discrimination, and other intersectional inequalities. We include this information to highlight the diversity of identifications obscured by the homogenising 'GRT' acronym. Rather than advocate for the use of any particular nomenclature, we would call for respect for people's own self-identifications within these communities.

Gypsies, Roma, Travellers: the Global South within the Global North

Roma, Gypsies and Travellers remain largely absent from narratives of 'Britishness' (Mathews 2015, 81). Excluded from mainstream histories, Roma, Gypsies and Travellers are usually written about or represented by authors and authorities who are 'external or hostile to their experience' (Cressy 2016, 47). In popular culture, political rhetoric and populist media discourses, Britain's Gypsy, Roma and Traveller populations are predominantly portrayed as either 'romantic outsiders', or as 'out of control, uncivilised, amoral and above all in need of control and containment' (Holdsworth 2020, 126). These stereotypical representations have a long history in Britain. In the 19th century, as the country underwent rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, English poets such as Matthew Arnold and William Wordsworth used the figure of the 'Gypsy' as a 'an alter ego free from the shackles of the daily grind and from the modern world of getting, spending, working, and obeying the law' (Nord 2006, 13). Like the colonised subject, the 'Gypsy' was racialised and associated with 'a rhetoric of primitive desires, lawlessness, mystery, cunning, sexual excess, godlessness, and savagery', but also with 'freedom from the repressions' of Western civilisation (ibid. 3). In 19th century literature and poetry, the imagined 'Gypsy', representing a figure to be both feared and desired, both a threat to civilisation and freedom from social norms, became conflated with living Romani and Traveller peoples (Trumpener 1992, 849).

The effect of these cultural imaginaries is damaging; they obliterate outsiders' ability to recognise Gypsy, Roma and Traveller histories, and their contemporary struggles for human rights (Sonneman 2004, 132). Today, Roma, Gypsies and Travellers continue to be racialised and perceived through the prism of such romantic and disparaging stereotypes, and to experience high levels of misrecognition and discrimination (Okely 2014; Tremlett 2014;

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[3] Gypsies, Travellers, Roma, Showmen, Boaters

Chovanec 2021). As Rowe and Goodman (2014) show in their discourse analysis conducted on online discussion forums, comments about Gypsies, Roma and Travellers and how they should be treated use certain discursive strategies to present racist patterns of thought as non-racist, non-discriminatory, and rational descriptions and observations. These include characterising all Gypsies as criminals and abnormal 'others' who demand special treatment and legal favouritism, and suggesting that some Gypsies are 'bogus' and then using this claim to argue against all Gypsies. People posting such comments may profess respect, tolerance and even admiration for imagined 'authentic Gypsies' elsewhere, while also claiming that those they condemn and disparage are not 'real' ethnic Gypsies at all, and therefore their comments cannot be racist (Rowe and Goodman 2014).

Despite Gypsies, Roma and Travellers being subject to 'the last acceptable form of racism' (The Traveller Movement 2017), anti-Gypsyism remains largely unacknowledged in debates about racial and ethnic discrimination, with media and policy discourses predominantly framing them as white 'others' whose own traditions and culture generate their exclusion (Brooks, Clark and Rostas 2022, 73). Education is widely considered to be one of the focal points for improving life outcomes for all racialsied, minoritised and marginalised groups, but the underlying complexities of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller communities' apparent disengagement from mainstream education are under-researched and little understood (McDonagh and Fonseca 2022). Despite the high levels of persecution and discrimination Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities face, it is often argued that their low educational achievements are the direct result of their own cultures (Brüggemann 2014). Even in schools where 'good practice' is implemented, this may not challenge stereotypical attitudes towards Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, but instead contribute to the 'othering' of such communties by reinforcing their status as 'outsiders' (Bhopal 2011). Furthermore, 'low teacher expectations continue to construct Gypsy and Traveller groups and their cultures as disruptive and abnormal' (Bhopal 2011, 481).

Bonilla-Medina and Finardi (2022, 828) argue that the Global North/Global South divide is 'relational and geopolitical rather than geographical'. We would argue that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups share a history of subjugation and oppression with marginalised, racialised and excluded populations of the Global South, regardless of their geographical location. The first groups of Roma arrived in Europe at a time of colonial expansion. They were, writes Kapralski (2021, 59) 'targeted by the disciplinary practices of the modern state' and 'perceived as "internal savages", treated like people subjected to colonial domination'. They became:

… victims of the new philosophy of the state, which focused on the control and unification of populations, employing racism more and more intensively to construct external boundaries and internal bonds (Kapralski 2021, 59).

Like colonial subjects, Roma, Gypsies and Travellers are rarely granted the opportunity to control the framework of their representation (Silverman 2007). Knowledge about Gypsies, Roma and Travellers has traditionally been generated and legitimated by people from outside these communities (Mayall 2004), leading non-Roma and non-Travellers to believe they can recognise 'authenticity' and distinguish between 'real Gypsies' and 'hangers on' (Holloway 2005; Toyn and Schofield 2022). Prejudice, discrimination and hatred towards Roma, Gypsies and Travellers are openly and freely expressed, and even justified, because the production of knowledge about these populations remains rooted in representations of 'authenticity' legitimated by Victorian Gypsylorism (Selling 2018). As Professor Thomas Acton put it in an inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Greenwich in 1998:

… whereas most racism consists of complaining that people resemble too much various ethnic stereotypes, when it comes to Gypsies, the most common racist complaint is that they do not resemble the historic stereotype of 'the true Gypsy'.

Non-Roma and non-Travellers believe they know what a 'true Gypsy' is, but this knowledge is predominantly based on racialised stereotypes and cultural imaginaries that are circulated and re-circulated in media, education and policy discourses (Richardson and O'Neill 2012). Like the colonised subject, Roma, Gypsies and Travellers continue to be disparaged, devalued and disadvantaged by racialised structures which privilege whiteness, including being gadjo. This perpetuates and reinforces hierarchical ideas of ethnic and social worth which stigmatise Gypsies, Roma and Travellers as 'white others' existing at the margins of society (Webb 2019, 1). In our interviews with EDI staff at UK universities, we sought to explore whether traditional knowledge production about these populations, and the ways in which they are racialised, are being questioned, challenged and disrupted in current institutional decolonial initiatives.

Methodology

To understand the extent to which Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are included in present-day decolonising work, we sought to elicit the perspectives of HE Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

(EDI) staff. We employed qualitative interviews to facilitate in-depth understanding of relevant experiences and approaches.

Participants

The second author sent emails from her university email to EDI email addresses at 120 higher education institutions across the UK, inviting EDI staff to participate in an interview on institutional decolonisation and EDI initiatives regarding Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students. In some instances, EDI managers were interviewed directly, and in other cases the email was re-redirected to a staff member with a professed interest in decolonising the curriculum or in Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers. Fifteen participants from twelve universities agreed to participate in interviews, including: seven post-1992 universities; one Plate Glass university; one Red Brick university, and; three Russell Group universities. Nine of the fifteen participants had leadership responsibility for EDI across their university. The interviews took place in 2023, between May and October. One university was in Scotland, one in Wales, and the remainder in England. The participants' job roles included: academics and non-academics, three of whom were from Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller backgrounds; subject librarians; Deans of Equality; Widening Participation Managers; Inclusion and Equality Advisors and Managers; Curriculum Developers; Researchers and Leads on Race Equality Charter, and; Researchers and Leads on Decolonising the Curriculum. One limitation of our study is that the focus was only on the views of university staff. Further insights from students from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities would be useful for future research.

Data Collection

Online qualitative interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and recorded with participants' consent. Dialogic interviews were chosen to enhance reflection, for both the interviewee and the interviewer, around the topic under consideration (Denzin 2001; Tanggaard 2009), and to support critical exploration. The dialogic interviews were loosely structured, with the initial question 'please tell me about decolonising the curriculum and EDI initiatives in your university' or 'please tell me about your role in your university' being asked at the beginning of the interview to set the scene. After this, the interviewer followed the narratives of the participants using probes such as 'why is that?' or 'what are your reflections/thoughts on this?' or 'why do you think that is the case?', and 'how does this relate to…?' to support reflection and reflexivity. The interview then continued with a specific focus on Gypsies, Roma, and Travellers and their positioning in EDI and decolonising the curriculum

initiatives. Again, probing was employed, as well as 'mirroring' (Way et al. 2015) whereby the interviewer repeats what the interviewee has said to aid reflection on taken-for-granted assumptions (including assumptions from both the interviewer and interviewee as well as general taken for granted doxa across the HE academy). The participants also asked questions and used probes to facilitate a two-way dialogue. All interviews were carried out by the second author, a white female researcher who is currently EDI Lead. The first author is an interdisciplinary researcher and Chair of a Decolonising Working Group and Director of EDI within her School. Both authors have extensive experience of impact and engagement, and collaborative, participatory research, with diverse Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded using the transcription facility in Microsoft Teams. The recordings were listened to several times by the interviewer, and the transcription edited to ensure it reflected the discussions. Reflexive thematic analysis of the transcribed texts was undertaken, by both researchers, to identify patterns across the data as outlined by Braun and Clarke's (2022) six phase model of thematic analysis with initial codes generated, the development of themes, and review, modification and reflection upon themes to ensure analytical sense.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from the second author's university (UREB/ 23.1.6.i.h). Ethical concerns were mainly focused on anonymity and respondents were assured that no identifying data would be used in the final paper. All recordings were deleted after transcription as per the ethical terms of the research.

Results

Minor changes have been made to quotes and job titles, where necessary, to protect anonymity. In the quotes below, the following abbreviations are used: WPM (Widening Participation Manager), EA (Equality Adviser), EM (Equality Manager), (ACM) Academic Community Member, DL (Decolonising Lead), RECL (Race Equality Charter Lead), IA (Inclusion Advisor), ANCM (Academic Non-Community Member), EDID (EDI Dean), and RIL (Race Inequality Lead).

Decolonising the Higher Education Curriculum: what about Gypsies, Roma and Travellers?

The interviews began with the initial question 'please tell me about decolonising the curriculum and EDI initiatives in your university' or 'please tell me about your role in your university'. All responses to the opening question, as would be expected from people in this professional capacity, indicated high levels of engagement with the topic and that, as one interviewee (IA) put it, 'a huge amount of work' is being done with regard to decolonising curricula and reading lists. Interviewees discussed university strategies and action plans aimed at 'designing an anti-racist curriculum ... [that] … moves away from the colonial lens' (IA). The importance of this was clearly recognised and articulated, with one respondent (IA) describing the curriculum as:

> … a vehicle that imparts knowledge to the students … That is the thinking that they will use in the outside world and it very much informs what they do, how they think, their actions … when they go into the workplace, into society and into their homes. We need to talk about these subjects. Yes, they're controversial. Yes, they're very uncomfortable, but if we don't talk about them, nothing changes. It may still not change, but the fact is, having those conversations makes people go away and start looking at their own behaviours, at the systems that may encourage some behaviours and which silence others.

Decolonising the curriculum, as another interviewee (DL) put it:

> … addresses knowledge frameworks, so epistemologies and the violence of epistemologies. We are explicitly looking at knowledge sets. What qualifies? What gets authorised as knowledges? Are we only teaching dead white men? What don't we teach and why? Sources of knowledge from the Far East, from Africa ... What about oral knowledges? You know publications in English – why? It is about the 500 years of colonisation and it is about the power structure we inherited and then authorises what's knowledge. What gets taught? What doesn't? … So it's about a system change. But that's just, you know, one of the many things - even assessment methods, how to include people who express their knowledges very, very differently.

When the focus was shifted to Gypsies, Roma and Travellers and their positioning in decolonising initiatives, it became clear that these groups are not included in the strategies being implemented in interviewees' universities. While many interviewees acknowledged that they had simply not thought of including Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in decolonising

discourses and action plans, their responses indicated that they did nevertheless recognise the importance of doing so since, as one respondent (ACM) put it, decolonisation 'is also about recognising people from those communities that have not been seen. It's sharing those stories that have not been heard before'. Using probes to encourage reflection, interviewees clearly articulated reasons why, in their view, Roma, Gypsies and Travellers should be included in decolonisation initiatives.

The importance of including Roma, Gypsies and Travellers in decolonising initiatives

Respondents acknowledged, as one interviewee (DL) put it, that is it necessary to ask '[w]hat are the values that are inscribed and reproduced … within the curriculum as a whole? How are you bringing those lived experiences in?'. With regard to Travellers, Roma and Gypsies, interviewees stressed the importance of their inclusion in the decolonising agenda both in terms of equity and social justice, and the imperative to challenge stereotypes and include positive representation.

Equity and social justice

Interviewees recognised, as one respondent (RECL) stated, that the curriculum 'should be decolonised for everybody … all voices should be heard'. With reference to Roma, Gypsies and Travellers, an interviewee (RECL) highlighted how the curriculum could equip students to better recognise and draw attention to the prejudice and injustice affecting these populations, thereby contributing toward greater equity and social justice:

> [the curriculum could foster] more acceptance and also probably promote allyship, I suppose to educate one person … they would carry on, they could educate their friends, their family and so on. When they see people being mistreated … from GRT communit[ies] or someone's making a joke, they are not an active bystander, and say 'that is offensive, that's racist'.

A further respondent (WPM) argued that the inclusion of Roma, Travellers and Gypsies in efforts to decolonise the curriculum would benefit students from all backgrounds by raising awareness of the lived experiences of minoritised, 'othered' and marginalised groups:

> … you're not just doing it for those Gypsy, Roma, Traveller students, you are doing it for all students, because part of it is about raising awareness of what it's like for those who are GRT. It is important that students are aware of other people's

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cultures and what it is like for them.

Roma, Gypsies and Travellers should be included in decolonisation agendas, one interviewee (IA) noted, not just 'because they are an ethnic minority' but because equity and social justice matter for everyone in higher education, regardless of background:

> Treat them [Roma, Gypsies and Travellers] with the same dignity and respect that you treat any other student or any other colleague. Don't use that difference in their culture or their name or their skin colour to create an added layer to treat them differently. That's on you, that's not on that person.

Challenging stereotypes and including positive representation

Interviewees highlighted the importance of using the curriculum to unpick stereotypes and bias, and of including positive representations of Roma, Gypsies and Travellers. One respondent (RECL) argued that dominant media representations of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers could be challenged in higher education curricula, and misconceptions addressed:

> I think we … need to break the stereotypes – they need to be challenged as these stereotypes are historical and happening today. You can see it in the media and on TV, GRT communities portrayed in a certain way ... breaking down the stereotypes would help correct misconceptions that there are no successful GRT people … there are some successful GRT but … we just need to raise their visibility and hopefully …they could act as role models … including them will hopefully break the cycle of stereotype and misconceptions.

A further interviewee (ANCM) argued that the curriculum can exclude students who do not see themselves reflected in it, stating '… if you've designed a particular curriculum, you're going to get a particular set of students coming to join that vision … It's going to reinforce their vision as well. You're not going to open it up to anything new'. Another (WPM) noted that it should not be left to individuals to 'come up and put their hands up' to call for inclusion of the diversity of Roma, Gypsy and Traveller groups in higher education curricula. Instead, these groups should be included in university decolonising strategy:

> … as a distinct group in their own right, and examples of … writers, film makers and other positives … [it is] … [a]bout trying to celebrate their communities … there is a

lack of knowledge about GRT communities. So [we] … need to raise awareness at the strategic level in universities. Also in society generally we need more stuff out in the media, but positive, so [we] need positive role models in society to say that they are GRT.

A further interviewee (RECL) argued that, without inclusion of positive representations of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in higher education, 'it gets instilled' in these groups that university 'is not for' them, and that they do not 'belong' in such spaces. However, interviewees were not aware of any institutional strategies aimed at including Roma, Gypsies and Travellers in decolonising initiatives. As one interviewee (DL) stated:

I can't think of any examples where there has been anything to do with GRT communities … [it's] … left to the individual to sort of voice their marginalisation or the hostility of the environment, or the toxic event that's impacted them …There is nothing for GRT

Barriers to inclusion of Roma, Gypsies and Travellers in decolonising discourses

Using probes to encourage reflection on the reasons why Roma, Gypsies and Travellers are not included in decolonising initiatives, several topics emerged during the interviews. These topics can be grouped into three closely related themes: invisibility, ignorance, and unease. After briefly outlining these themes, in the next section we discuss the issues they raise around perceptions of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in relation to decolonising discourses.

Invisibility

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, according to one interviewee (EA), are 'just invisible' in university settings. It does not occur to decolonising leads to include them in university strategy, as another interviewee (RECL) put it, because of a widespread 'lack of visibility' of these groups. A further respondent (EA) noted 'I don't know if they're on anybody's radar … I don't know where they would live, or any stats'. Similarly, another interviewee (ANCM) noted 'it wouldn't even occur … [to most academics] … that those students [GRT] and their heritage might be part of … their classroom'. One interviewee (EA) attributed this perceived invisibility to an assumption that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers simply would not be in education, explaining that these groups are not thought of with regard to the curriculum because '… there's a literacy issue. I think that historically they have never been in school'. A further

reason for the perceived invisibility of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers appeared to relate to their 'whiteness': 'I would say that they're [GRT] not as prominent … just because the focus is more on the visibly racially minoritised communities' (RECL).

Ignorance

Interviewees noted that at their universities there was, as one respondent (IA) put it, 'patchy knowledge of GRT'. One interviewee (EA) stated the belief that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are 'by nature a community which is separate … There is literally a lack of any written material, lack of any understanding of the culture'. A further interviewee (IA) pointed out that most 'knowledge' about Gypsies, Roma and Travellers was gleaned from television programmes: 'You know people don't know who Gypsies and Roma are, if you say Gypsy to a student, they probably think Peaky Blinders or something on the TV – Big Fat Gypsy Wedding'. One respondent (EA) was concerned to highlight that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are not included in the curriculum because 'people know nothing about them. Who are they? … It's not racism … but it's just a complete lack of information'. Similarly, further interviewees explained '…sourcing materials to use would be a struggle' (EA) and 'in terms of anything … to do with GRT, I wouldn't necessarily know where to start' (ANCM). Another respondent (ANCM) commented 'I think primarily my feeling is that people have, you know, I include myself in this, have an ignorance around the experience of these communities, and I think that probably cannot be overestimated'.

Unease

Interviewees noted, as one respondent put it, that the lack of inclusion of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in decolonising discourses is 'more nervousness than unwillingness, worry about saying the wrong thing' (EDID). The same interviewee observed '… in terms of race and ethnicity broadly, people feel uncomfortable … I think people really struggle with discomfort and you see this where some people find conversations difficult, so they're trying to shut it down and move on'. Respondents appeared to worry about trespassing into areas they knew nothing about, with one interviewee (ANCM) arguing 'a lot of white colleagues are scared of saying anything about ethnicity in case they get it wrong', and a further respondent stating 'the community [GRT] would have to be OK with us giving away their secrets' (EA). Interviewees also expressed concerns about the reactions of senior management, for whom Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are, as one respondent put it, 'not relevant' (EDID). A further interviewee (RECL) wondered about how to articulate to university senior managers the 'added value' of

including Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in the decolonising agenda, while another respondent (DL) felt that university management would view any money invested in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students or issues as a 'waste' that would not bring any 'kudos'.

Discussion

The university EDI staff interviewed for this project all stated that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are not currently included in their universities' decolonising strategies. Further probing revealed that participants attributed this lack of inclusion to the perceived invisibility of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers, and to the ignorance and unease of university staff around the needs and capacities of these groups. Here, we discuss each of these areas, their relation to decolonisation and CRT discourses, and what they reveal about the ways in which Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are racialised.

Tackling Invisibility

The perceived invisibility of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in higher education must be understood within the context of racism, hegemonic whiteness, anti-Gypsyism, and discrimination in wider society which are, in turn, endemic within the Higher Education Academy (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Gillborn 2005). Staff and students from these backgrounds may naturally be reluctant to disclose their ethnicity in educational settings due to lived experience, or fear of, discrimination, bullying, and other negative repercussions (Brassington 2022). Roma, Travellers and Gypsies are aware of the 'stigma of trouble' that is arbitrarily attached to their ethnicity on the basis of outsiders' assumptions and expectations (Joyce 2013), and may therefore be hypervigilant about sharing their ethnic identity (Morgan, McDonagh and Acton 2023). Often appearing as 'white' to observers (D'Arcy 2017, 640), it is no surprise that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers may adopt 'passing' strategies to present themselves as indistinguishable from the majority population. In settings where they may encounter entrenched anti-Gypsyism, 'passing' can be a necessary survival strategy for Roma, Travellers and Gypsies (Derrington 2007; Pantea 2014), but is not without consequences in relation to wellbeing. Moreover, a lack of interest convergence (Bell 1980) renders Travellers, Roma and Gypsies as having 'little value' in relation to institutional strategic goals, supporting their marginalistion and invisibility within institutional practices and social justice initiatives.

Instead of viewing Gypsies, Roma and Travellers as 'hard to reach', a label that positions them as 'unwilling to cooperate' with institutions (Webb 2019, 9), universities might better reflect on their own assumptions about their staff and student bodies and the presumed absence of

Travellers, Gypsies and Roma. This should include reflection upon how university institutional white habitus and discursive structures themselves lead to the invisibilisation of these communities within higher education decolonial and anti-racist discourses (Morgan, Marsh and Clark, 2024; Morgan, McDonagh and Acton, 2023). In our interviews, one respondent (IA) noted that in their university, issues around Roma, Travellers and Gypsies and their support needs would only be raised in a 'reactive' way if a concern arose. Decolonisation and CRT require university strategy to shift to a more proactive model that tackles all forms of coloniality, racism and oppression including anti-Gypsyism. Whether or not there are staff and students who openly identity as Gypsy, Traveller or Roma, decolonising discourses should be made inclusive of these groups. It should simply never be assumed that a university has no Roma, Traveller or Gypsy staff or students based on perceived invisibility.

Tackling Ignorance

Decolonising and CRT discourses recognise that universities are not neutral generators of objective knowledge (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu 2018). But while the production of knowledge about the world is being questioned, and Eurocentrism including white supremacy challenged, a perceived lack of 'information' about Travellers, Roma and Gypsies, according to EDI staff interviewed, presents a barrier to their inclusion in decolonising initiatives. Our interviews revealed that any attempts to highlight Roma, Gypsies and Travellers in decolonising initiatives were, as one respondent (IA) put it, 'pushed forward' by individuals from those communities. Thus, staff and students who disclose their ethnicity may find that they are expected to carry out the emotional labour of addressing the ignorance of others, a form of 'epistemic exploitation' which occurs when marginalised people are compelled to educate others 'about the nature of their oppression' (Berenstain 2016, 569).

Proclaimed ignorance about Gypsies, Roma and Travellers is, we would argue, a consequence of coloniality and anti-Gypsysim, not the result of an absence of knowledge (Araújo and Maeso 2021, 189). In the past, colonial power structures gave rise to social discriminations, categorised as 'racial' or 'ethnic', that systematically repressed 'beliefs, ideas, images, symbols or knowledge that were not useful to global colonial domination' (Quijano 2007, 169). The legacy of such colonial power structures today produces what Mills (2007) calls 'white ignorance', which is neither accidental nor the result of limited time and resources. Such ignorance is 'white' in the sense that it reproduces Eurocentric gadjo knowledge, while

obscuring or erasing other ways of knowing the world. Whether 'consciously produced' or 'unconsciously generated and supported', 'unknowledges' enable and facilitate the reproduction of white privilege (Sullivan and Tuana 2007, 1-2). These processes function to 'defend and maintain certain power relations' that disadvantage those racialised as non-white or 'other' (Lootens and Funez-Flores 2024, 1), thus reinforcing anti-Gypsyism.

From a CRT lens, it is important to avoid teaching that homogenises 'GRT' and constructs them as 'others', one community of difference, 'deficit', or as 'victims', leading to stereotyping and essentialism (Kalsås and Helakorpi 2020). Instead, it is necessary to challenge deficit models, which reinforce anti-Gypsyism in education, using counter narratives that recognise the cultural capital and cultural wealth of Travellers, Roma and Gypsies (Yosso 2005). As one interviewee (ACM) noted, it is easy to use Google to search for relevant local organisations and charities that could be contacted for sources of reliable information about Roma, Gypsies and Travellers and their needs and experiences in higher education. As Millner (2021, 820) argues, decolonising initiatives can be strengthened by 'involving actors outside the academy in and beyond the classroom to unsettle hierarchies of expertise'. Decolonising leads, we argue, should be proactive in seeking out guest speakers and academics from Roma, Traveller and Gypsy backgrounds. Such invited speakers could encourage academic staff and students to question the production of knowledge about Roma, Gypsies and Travellers, as they would regarding any other minoritised or marginalised group.

Tackling Unease

One interviewee (IA) commented that staff and students at their university became defensive when conversations around antiracism started, and felt offended by suggestions that there was racism on campus. Decolonising leads recognise such resistance and work hard to overcome it by highlighting how, as one respondent (IA) explained, '… racism happens in society. We're part of that society, so … [racism is] … about even if you don't think it, let's start looking at what we can be doing better'.

Indeed, academic staff can find it difficult to talk about racism, whiteness and coloniality in higher education (Lootens and Funez-Flores 2024). Research indicates that being confronted with whiteness as unearned 'supremacy and privilege' (Zembylas 2018, 86) can cause staff and students to experience discomfort as they are faced with the struggles of others (Millner 2023). It is acknowledged that decolonising processes generate discomfort because habitual patterns

of thought are unsettled, but also that the 'labour of explaining racism and challenging whiteness' needs to be shifted 'from students of colour to white facilitators and students' (Stewart and Gagacho 2022, 19). Universities therefore need to create safe spaces to support staff and students to embrace discomfort pedagogically (Millner 2023). However, our interviews indicate that, in the respondents' universities, there are no coherent and sustainable institutional commitments aimed at the creation of such safe spaces that would support staff and students in interrogating how knowledge about Gypsies, Roma and Travellers is produced and how oppression is maintained. A global and diverse world includes Roma, Gypsies and Travellers, and decolonising initiatives including those that focus on anti-racism could help non-Gypsy, Roma and Traveller staff and students to better understand how and why colonial processes and white supremacy racialised these communities and rendered them internal 'others'.

Conclusion: addressing anti-Gypsyism in higher education

The decolonising agenda, in higher education contexts, calls on us to contemplate how colonialism formed, and coloniality continues to influence, the ways in which knowledge is produced and disseminated in academia. In this article, drawing on interviews with fifteen staff members with an interest in EDI and decolonisation across twelve universities in the UK, we have explored how Gypsies, Roma and Travellers are positioned in relation to contemporary decolonising discourses in respondents' universities. Interviewees recognised that including Roma, Gypsies and Travellers in decolonising initiatives is important for reasons of equity and social justice, and to challenge bias and stereotypes including anti- Gypsyism. However, the perceived 'invisibility' of these populations, combined with proclaimed 'ignorance' and associated 'unease', are viewed by university staff as obstacles to their inclusion in universities' decolonising strategies.

Critical Race Theory seeks to centre marginalised voices that usually 'remain on the periphery' (Arday, Belluigi and Thomas 2021, 304), and thereby challenge the 'race-neutral thinking that often obscures structural racism' and normalises hegemonic whiteness in higher education institutions (Lin 2023, 1085). However, Critical Race Theorists have not really engaged with the racialisation of ostensibly white groups such as Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. We thus advocate for an extension of Critical Race Theory, and call for the development of a RomaniTravellerCrit, inclusive of non-Romani groups in the UK, to expose and address all forms of anti-Gypsyism in higher education.

The tools offered by CRT can be used to tackle the perceived obstacles preventing inclusion of Roma, Gypsies and Travellers in higher education decolonising initiatives as well as other EDI initiatives. Highlighting social justice and the centrality of experiential knowledge, CRT methods draw on the lived experiences of minoritised and marginalised people, including counter-stories, biographies and family histories (Delgado, 1989; Doharty et al. 2021, 235), to counter dominant 'deficit' and essentialising notions about minoritised people that may be disseminated 'under the guise of "objective" research' (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 23). University staff can create spaces for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller authors and scholars in their curricula to centre their experiences, knowledge and histories (Marsh, Hulmes and Peacock 2024, 55) and challenge anti-Gypsysim. As D'Arcy (2017, 644) argues, Roma, Traveller and Gypsy cultures are 'rarely shared or celebrated in educational materials', and this silence contributes to wider society having 'a very limited amount of information to inform their attitudes' towards these communities. Calling for counter-stories that 'expose injustice' and 'purposefully seek to assert [Gypsy, Roma and Traveller] experiential knowledge', D'Arcy (2017, 639) highlights the importance of challenging the 'stock story' and stories of deficit (Morgan, McDonagh and Acton 2023). Higher education institutions, by including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups in their decolonising strategies, are well-placed to create spaces for the production and dissemination of counter-stories that can tackle anti-Gypsyism and contribute to greater social justice.

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