

PLACE INVADERS: CONSTRUCTING THE NOMADIC THREAT IN ENGLAND*

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ABSTRACT. Over the centuries, the image of nomads threatening sedentary ways of life has been a common pejorative representation. In order to understand what geographies underpin narratives about nomads, I examine how social theory and media representations invoke the image of nomads. Both media and academic representations are buttressed by limited understandings of place and space, framing nomads as the quintessential “place invaders.” Focusing on nomadic Gypsies and Travelers in England provides a contemporary example of this process. British media representations construct nomadic Gypsies and Travelers in England as out-of-place and threatening. Deconstructing essentialist geographical conceptions allows us to avoid reproducing the common image of placeless nomads, reveals how people utilize place to render others inferior, and highlights the fact that conflicts between nomadic and sedentary ways of life are not intractable and natural. Adopting a more nuanced understanding of place can challenge the dominant trope of nomads as place invaders.
Keywords: England, Gypsies and Travelers, media representations, nomads, place.

Many commentators celebrate the claim that we live in an era epitomized by mobility, yet certain mobile people still elicit negative reactions, including exclusion, stigmatization, and violence. Despite calls of the increasing irrelevance of state borders, awareness and defense of boundaries (at various scales) have in many ways been heightened. This is evident in the building of fences along the U.S.-Mexico border, the fear of terrorists and corresponding color-coded alerts, moral panics over the homeless, and anti-immigration rhetoric, to name but a few examples from the United States. What do disparate groups such as nomads, refugees, the homeless, internally displaced persons, and economic migrants have in common? For the purposes of this article, I highlight the fact that negative patterns of speech, pernicious stereotypical representations, and threatening images portray these groups as “place invaders.” Thus politicians, journalists, and others who feel threatened decontextualize the practices of all these groups and individuals, abstracting their various forms of mobility and constructing it as threatening.

I use the phrase “place invader” to describe representations of individuals or groups whom people see as inherently threatening and anxiety arousing, precisely because they enter the “wrong” place. Those who wish to exclude others invoke certain conceptions of place in a manner that facilitates the discourse of invasion. These geographical conceptions rely on essentialist conceptions that represent places

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