

‘THERE WILL ALWAYS BE TRAVELLERS’: CERTAINTY AS SURVIVANCE IN A NEW ALTERNATIVE WORLD?

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Gypsies, Roma, Travellers and other marginalised groups are often constructed as being present oriented. However, anthropologists working with such groups (Fotta 2019; Howarth 2019) have recently begun to demonstrate ways they do in fact orient themselves towards the future in the face of uncertainty. I will extend this work by examining how New Travellers, who only formed as a mobile group in the UK from the 1970s onwards and have suffered from state violence and high morbidity and mortality rates, attempt to ensure their endurance. Despite their short history and experiences of marginalisation, rather than defining their experience as uncertainty, I argue that New Travellers appear to successfully produce a sense of certainty regarding their shared future. This was captured by one interlocutor asserting that ‘There will always be Travellers’, despite the newest in a string of legislation criminalising their lifestyle being rolled out at the time. I thus ask whether and how Gerald Vizenor’s (2009) concept of survivance may aid an understanding of this community’s future-making activities, such as their modes of child socialisation, the telling of stories and their collective mediation of death. While the notion of survivance is in many ways pertinent, due to its embeddedness in Native American studies I conclude that it may not be wholly appropriate to apply it to the New Traveller context. Instead, extending work on human possibilities (Graeber 2007), I build on Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2011) notion of new alternative worlds, proposing that the term ‘alternative worldmaking’ may better capture the norms, values and practices through which new groups both produce and preserve their communities.

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Introduction

The sky had clouded over grey, the light evening chill a relief at the end of this late summer day. The sun had still been strong enough to burn my skin as I'd sat exposed to it on the dry, yellow grass of the festival, socialising, minding people's children and taking photographs for an exhibition I was working on. I had just taken his picture, and now me and Dan², he still in his cowboy hat and shades despite the dwindling light, stood looking out across the field of vans, tents, caravans and disparate larger living vehicles. Bow-top horse-drawn living waggons sporadically lined the hedge behind and ahead of us to the right where Lucy, one of their residents, was opening the gate to let a car into the festival. A few of her friends and family members sat nearby, waiting for the kettle on a small fire to boil for tea and watching for any trouble. We surveyed the scene in momentary silence. Then, spurred on by the sense that my fieldwork, like the summer evening, was coming to an end, I asked him: 'So, what do you think about these new laws then, this Policing Bill?' 'Well, that's not going to stop us', he said confidently, 'there's always *been* Travellers³ in Britain and there will always *be* Travellers here.'

It was not the first time I had heard this kind of answer about (the then) British Home Secretary Priti Patel's 'Policing Bill' (as it was known) during my fieldwork in England and Wales, and online, between the summers of 2020 and 2022.⁴ This legislation would officially criminalise trespass and, therefore, all Gypsies and Travellers in England's mobile lifestyles. Most New Travellers – the group at the centre of this study – I had heard this reply from were 'old school'. This means they had either been living on the road (or on and off the road⁵) for decades, or were from the second generation and had, therefore, been born into this community. All Travellers and Gypsies know that if the police want you off the land you are living on, more likely than not, they will get you off (Howarth 2019), regardless of the law. Those still travelling also know that since at least 2008, specialist security firms have found a legal loophole which, for a fee, enables them to evict Travellers from private land within 24 hours, with accompanying police protection standing by to 'keep the peace'.⁶ Some of those I had asked this question to, or their parents and grandparents, had been deeply concerned about and protested against previous anti-Traveller legislation intended to put a stop to Travelling lifestyles in the UK, such as the Public Order Act 1987 and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (CJPOA 1994). The Conservative Government of the time constructed the CJPOA as being targeted specifically at stopping the New Traveller mobile

² All names are changed except for Punk Kath who chose to be identified by name during her interview.

³ In the same way most other Gypsies and Travellers in the UK do, most New Travellers (particularly ones who still live a mobile lifestyle) refer to themselves as 'Travellers'. Therefore, as this group is the focus of this paper, when 'Travellers' are mentioned, unless stated otherwise, it is New Travellers I am referring to.

⁴ I employed a mix of digital and in-person ethnographic methods; this was also supplemented by my having 30 years of connections to this community.

⁵ As with other 'nomadic' groups across the globe, there is less of a strict dichotomy between sedentism and mobility than is often imagined by outsiders.

⁶ This was how their role was described to me by a policeman during an eviction, though it transpired that what this really consisted of was ensuring Travellers were removed and did not physically retaliate. If they did, they would be arrested.

anarchist lifestyle,⁷ and the raves and free festivals associated with their community, which had grown too much for the comfort of establishment figures and landowners of the time. Many of my interlocutors felt powerless; all their past concerns and protests had not stopped previous anti-Traveller legislation being introduced so what could *they* do about the new Policing Bill? Some who were still travelling said that they had survived on the road for all this time, so another new law was not going to stop them.

At the same time, they also knew, and at gatherings often commiserated with each other, that out of what was once a close community of thousands, there were very few left on the road, or indeed alive, living *that* lifestyle anymore. There were, however, new people taking to the road in the UK (and elsewhere) often termed 'van dwellers' or 'vehicle dwellers', whom some New Travellers had lived with and claimed were 'just like us'. Others, including those following the 'VanLife' phenomena online, drew a boundary between what they saw as a group of people with different norms, values and practices than themselves. With limited opportunities⁸ for the new vehicle dweller generation to become part of the New Traveller community, as had happened with other new groups taking to the road over the previous 50 years, the strength of the insistence that there would 'always be Travellers' perhaps could seem incongruent. This paper will ask how this community face the future despite their situation of marginalisation and uncertainty. In doing so, I will explore whether Gerald Vizenor's (2009) conceptualisation of survivance, a term employed in Native American studies, may aid an understanding of this context.

Uncertainty

Much previous academic work has characterised Travellers, Gypsies and other marginalised people as being oriented to the present, partly due to the challenging and apparently uncertain circumstances in which they live (e.g. Day et al. 1999).⁹ Indeed, all Gypsies and Travellers in the UK (and beyond) have been subject to ongoing oppression, discrimination and violence from state and society, including successive anti-Traveller legislation. This has led to these communities now experiencing widespread sedentarisation and dispersion (James 2005; The Children's Society 2010). Gypsies and Travellers also have some of the highest mortality and morbidity rates in the UK and, due to belonging to close families and communities, are consequently required to provide a high level of care to loved ones while also experiencing personal and collective grief (e.g. Howarth 2019). Nevertheless, some contemporary researchers of Gypsy and Traveller groups have started to suggest that members of such communities, rather than managing uncertainty and difficulties by focussing only on the present, in fact, do orient themselves to the *future* (Fotta 2019; Howarth 2019). For example, Martin Fotta argues that it is central to (male) Brazilian Calon Gypsies' identity to be able to

⁷ Though in fact Section 80 of the Act repealed the duty laid out in the Caravans Act 1968 requiring councils to provide sites for Romany Gypsies (Parliament UK 2004).

⁸ This may be currently starting to change whereby in UK cities where there are a lot of van dwellers and New Travellers, they are being moved off the road and onto council sites together. Also, van dwellers are beginning to attend New Travellers' grassroots festivals.

⁹ Exceptions to this include Okely (1983), Blasco (2001) and Stewart (2004).

exploit uncertainty within their economic practices, in order to successfully 'make the future' (Fotta 2019: 587). Furthermore, in his work with Irish Travellers in the UK, Anthony Howarth (2019) suggests that individuals from this group employ future imaginaries in order to offset present uncertainties, such as impending eviction. Given their engagement in such dynamic future-focussed activities, perhaps members of these communities would, like my interlocutors, insist that 'there will always be Travellers'. However, the histories of the groups Fotta and Howarth worked with constituted long-standing connections of culture and kinship, whereas the community my research focusses on are often (in NGO and academic circles at least) termed 'New' Travellers because they only began to form in the 1970s, as a mobile alternative to mainstream society. With this in mind, what does it mean for *them* to insist that there will 'always be Travellers'? Who are this community, and why, if so short-lived, do they seem to wish so much to preserve their group against all odds?¹⁰ And how do they balance their personal and group marginalisation, oppression and high mortality rates, with the sense that something will remain? How do they make the future for themselves and their group in what could be viewed as a context of great adversity?

Survivance

In this regard, the concept of 'survivance' seems potentially helpful. And yet, even Gerald Vizenor, the literary theorist who developed the term for Native American studies, suggests that theories of survivance are 'elusive' (2009: 1). Hardly surprising then, that many have tried to simplify the concept. However, Vizenor strongly critiques these oversimplifications, such as Ernest Stromberg's suggestion that survivance is 'eas[y] to explain' and that it only means to 'go beyond mere survival to acknowledge the dynamic and creative nature of indigenous rhetoric' (Stromberg 2006 in Vizenor 2009: 20). Vizenor argues that this definition does not take into account the 'compound history of the word' (2009: 20). However, the two words Vizenor suggests make up this compound are not 'survival' and 'resistance'. Instead, Vizenor traces the term first through its meaning in French (survival, relic), then its outdated legal use in English (regarding rights of succession to estates) (2009: 19). Finally, he draws attention to the definition of the suffix '-ance', an action, state or condition, to elucidate the nature of the compound, 'survival' and '-ance', which he actually intended with his conceptualisation of survivance (2009: 19). Survivance for the latter, then, 'is the action, condition, quality and sentiments of the verb survive "to remain alive or in existence," to outlive, persevere' (Vizenor 2009: 19). Here Vizenor emphasises that, though 'Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories *not a mere reaction*' (my emphasis, Vizenor 2009: 1).

From this we can deduce that, beyond survival, Vizenor envisages that survivance is a practice that involves *but is not limited* to resistance. Then, we may ask, what else *does* survivance involve? What might these actions, conditions and sentiments of remaining alive

¹⁰ These questions are often asked about Gypsies, Travellers and the marginalised, but my point is that I am asking this in relation to the determined self-preservation of a highly marginalised and criminalised cultural group that *only recently formed*.

and in existence that Vizenor describes, be? Further, what does he mean by 'an active sense of presence', and what are the nature of survivance 'stories'? It is beyond the scope of this, largely ethnographic, paper to provide a full account of the literature pertaining to these questions (no mean feat). But I will draw out some of the main (and those which are immediately relevant to this discussion) tenets of survivance Vizenor describes in his edited volume *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (2009).

Vizenor states that: 'Native stories are the sources of survivance, the comprehension and empathies of natural reason...' (2009: 11). Here, and throughout his thesis on survivance, it appears that Vizenor is arguing that native stories do not just contain scripts of oral history passed down. Instead, they provoke a way of being, Vizenor's 'sense of presence', which is passed on both through the content of stories and through the way they are told, lived and developed. This presence produces senses of both individual and communal responsibility, as well as a lack of necessity for accountability (Vizenor 2009: 18). It is also developed through non-dominant, responsible ways of being with the natural world (Vizenor 2009: 18). As well as this, Vizenor's sense of presence is a way of being that continues in spite of, but in resistance to, domination and attempted extermination (Vizenor 2009: 1). I will return to these modes of presence in the discussion later in the paper.

Making a new community

Though a few first-generation New Travellers had Romany¹¹ roots, and others originated from countercultural families, most were initially born into what could be loosely described as 'mainstream UK society'. Growing originally out of free festivals and various countercultural and activist movements of the 1960s and 70s, the group became a loose mobile community known (amongst other things) as 'the peace convoy' and 'New Age Travellers'. They had no formal hierarchy and created themselves as an alternative to, and sometimes in opposition with, what they perceived as problems with UK society, such as encroaching nuclear militarisation, environmental degradation, consumerism, individualism, exploitative 9-5 wage labour and a lack of autonomy over one's own life. To do so, they initially drew on such things as texts about, imaginaries of, and direct experience with, nomadic, non-western, and indigenous peoples.¹² In particular, this included Native American and South Asian groups,¹³ and long-standing Gypsy and Traveller communities. These influenced such things as the style of their free festivals, modes of mobile dwellings, clothing, community-based child rearing and living, various forms of spirituality, morality and ideals, and off-grid lifestyles. There also developed an oppositional relationship between this group and the state and police. Travellers' free festivals and 'sites' (encampments where they lived) were considered by the

¹¹ Some New Travellers were born and raised in Romany Gypsy families, while others trace more distant ancestry, though the sum of these people are a minority of the group.

¹² This included fictional and non-fictional works; here there is also an entwined history between anthropology and New Travellers which there is, unfortunately, no space to explore here.

¹³ Some of these influences were aided by the 'magic bus' trips, whereby in the 1960s and beyond the 'hippy trail' led from Western countries across land to India and Nepal either on paid tours or under people's own steam.

former to be events of public disorder and trespass, and consequently attracted high levels of state violence, surveillance and oppressive control (James 2005; James 2006; Clark 1997).

Due to this situation, by the 1990s many New Travellers had come to live by a radical anarchist principle. Part of this was the development of a new, shared way of being involving rejecting some of the norms, values and practices of mainstream society, and living within those of the New Traveller world instead. Engaging in this new way of life, based on the political ideas and other imaginaries already outlined, was initially a conscious and intentional process for group members. However, over the years, this became automatic through *engaging in the practice* of this lifestyle, largely cut off from (but also somewhat in opposition to) mainstream society. This separation was first a geographical one, through often living in out of the way rural sites, second social, by engaging in communal living with nearly exclusively other 'site people',¹⁴ and third psychologically, by coming to consider themselves as part of a group distinct from and superior to mainstream society.¹⁵ Here, New Traveller morals, values and practices were produced, defined and reproduced through intensively engaging in everyday life together with many others from the group, as people travelled and lived between different sites and free festivals. This cultural becoming included and was reinforced by the intense telling of, and listening to, stories about personally or vicariously known others in the group. Through this, specific norms, values, practices and relations were developed.

The future?

Returning to the time of my fieldwork, it was not only Dan, whom I'd surveyed the festival field with at the opening to this article, who expressed a sense of certainty regarding the continuation of this community. Every New Traveller whom I had asked the general question, 'So what do you think the future is [for this group]; do you think it's all going to carry on in some way?', said 'Yes' and gave me descriptions and examples of ways they thought this would be the case. Indeed, during fieldwork I saw and heard how first and subsequent generation Travellers contribute to making this collective future through socialising the children into the group's cultural ways.

One example of this was described to me when I visited Jane in 2022. She told me how it was important to her, having spent a lot of her own childhood growing up on site, to bring her daughter up the same way. Once she'd reached adulthood, she had moved out of the house she had formerly moved into with her mum, back onto the road. She and her boyfriend, whose parents had also lived on the road, had found it difficult to find space on any sites near to where they had lived and worked. So, together with their young daughter, they had parked up in their truck on their own, getting moved on as and when local authorities and landowners saw fit. When I went to visit Jane, now a lone parent, she was still in her truck renting a space on private land. She described to me how, despite the lack of sites and, therefore, the opportunity for her daughter to be raised in a communal way with other children as she had been as a child, she took every opportunity to go to grassroots parties and festivals. This was

¹⁴ This is one of the ways New Travellers refer to themselves and is a term specific to their group only.

¹⁵ As is the case with many mobile (and perhaps other) groups.

because they provided the opportunity for her daughter to experience, even if only for a few days at a time, having that sense of freedom and communality from being part of the New Traveller 'family'. Jane described how she had recently been to one such event; though she knew in advance it was coming up, she had not felt the necessity to arrange to go with someone or ask any friends if they would also be attending. Jane said this was because she already knew there would be old friends and close people there, someone they would be able to camp with. Though it wasn't certain who she would see, there was a sense that that didn't matter – whoever she bumped into the experience would be the same; it would be a space in which the future she desired for her daughter and her community could be made through her socialisation into New Traveller cultural ways.

Socialising 'the kids'

Earlier that year, I had been at a festival with some other second-generation Travellers who were taking the opportunity to catch up with friends and family and provide a similar socialisation experience for their children to that which Jane had described. Sitting on a camping chair with a friend's two-week old baby snuggled inside my jacket, I was surrounded by a circle of laughing and talking faces illuminated by firelight in the otherwise thick darkness of the spring Beltane festival's night. My attention was drawn to the two toddlers playing together in a lamplit caravan next to me. The smallest had a large kitchen knife which he gleefully brandished as the two of them chattered and played together. Swiftly jumping up, with a kind but firm demeanour, I removed the object from the infant's grasp and placed it above his reach. Both of this child's parents were present, in the sense that their caravan was only a few metres away. They were either chatting by the fire, standing next to the caravan where the children played, or making quick trips back to their own caravan a few metres away to socialise with friends. After all, their caravan door was open and for New Travellers the living space, here consisting of the inside of all their vehicles and the space in between and around, is considered to a large degree as shared and the children inhabiting it the responsibility of all present. In this milieu this was perfectly usual; there were plenty of us sitting by the fire next to where the children played to watch out for them, as indeed I had done.

When Bessie, the mother of the child, next returned to her spot by the trailer, I relayed to her what had just occurred. Rather than being concerned, though there was a degree of comical performative frustration with the child's antics, the overarching tone was that of pride:

Oh yeah, he's always after knives, the bigger the better, give him toys to play with and he doesn't want them. You can hide them but then you look back, and he always has them again!

Later, after it had been dark for some time Helen, a girl of around ten years old, appeared in the circle around the fire. 'Look how much I've made reading palms!' she said, showing off a

handful of pound coins. She was a third-generation New Traveller, known to most people present. There were cries of 'well done' and 'come and read mine' from those sat around the fire. She eagerly plied open the fingers of the nearest potential customer, her own small, agile fingers tracing the furrowed lines of their larger, more life-worn hand. Speaking quickly, she gave them her summary of their future before receiving the golden coin in payment for her services. Her customer, a second-generation Traveller who would have grown up engaging in similar activities at festivals themselves, nodded in approval that 'the kids'¹⁶ were still keeping up the traditions. For New Travellers, house dwellers - including (or perhaps especially) festival and rave 'punters'¹⁷ - were considered 'fair game' as a potential source of money. The kids traditionally found multifarious ways to get money from these people, including selling jokes, selling rocks, temporary tattoos, glowsticks, homemade cakes, and drinks. In this regard, it was not palm reading that was a tradition in itself, it was independently initiating ways to make money. This likely began as children's emulation of adults at festivals supplying goods and services to those who had come to the countryside to party, bringing little except money to spend. As with other occupations the adults engaged in, children were encouraged, and wanted, to follow suit. But it is not just punters who buy from the kids, adult New Travellers will encourage youngsters from their own community who are engaging in money-making activities, by buying things from them if they can (as long as they do not push too far with their demands).

I saw Bessie again a few months later, at the late summer festival referred to at the opening of this paper. I was again helping to look after one of the third-generation Traveller babies, this time a six-month-old. Bessie and her friend, another second-generation New Traveller mother, Hazel, were at this gathering without their own children. While we looked after the six-month-old together, Hazel was talking about a time she had tried out living in housing with her non-Traveller boyfriend. Having lived with other Travellers all her life, this had not gone well, and she had chosen to move back onto site where there would 'always be someone there if you needed them', something she had apparently not been able to live without. But now, as a mother herself, there also seemed to be an unspoken issue hanging over our conversation. Voicing it, she turned to Rose, a teenager who was there with her mother though they now lived in housing. 'Have you ever lived on site?' 'Yes.' 'Which do you prefer [living in a house or on site]?' Rose proceeded to succinctly outline what she saw as the plusses and minuses of both. Amused on hearing her daughter reflecting on the experiences of her younger, feral self, Rose's mother, Sandra, interjected in the same vein of feigned comical frustration Bessie had used when speaking of her toddler's desire to play with knives, back in May:

When we moved out of a vehicle, Rose wasn't 'house trained': the first thing she did when we moved into our new place was to turn all the taps on and flood the bathroom, then she messed with all the heating switches. It seemed

¹⁶ 'The kids' or 'site kids' are terms New Travellers use to refer to children who have grown up living on site. Because of their practices of close living all who have shared sites with them are their 'aunties' and 'uncles', and because they constitute a generation raised within this culture, these children are considered to be very special.

¹⁷ In this community this is used as a derogatory term which distinguishes attendees at raves and festivals from Travellers and others who stage these events.

like she'd broken them, and I thought: 'Oh my God what have I done moving in here with her!'

Hazel looked approvingly at Rose, and said to her: 'Ah yeah, well done!' And, to me,

Kids these days are over protected, they can't do anything... I let my little one cut wood with a saw because that's all he wants to do: some people wouldn't agree with it but I'm around keeping an eye on him!

Bessie joined in at this point, proudly adding:

Yeah, we bought Jonny [the toddler whom I had taken the knife off back at the Beltane festival] a mini set of real tools because he doesn't want the toy version either.

Certainly, children's use of tools and woodcutting implements aligned with the desire of their parents for them to be socialised into New Traveller 'ways'. Here, as with finding ways to generate money, the skills needed to fix one's vehicles (essential knowledge for a mobile community) and use woodcutting tools (where wood burners and fires were used for heat and sometimes cooking, and money could be made by selling chainsaw carvings) were highly valued. In this sense, they would be passed onto the next generation in order for them to become part of the group, and for the group itself to continue to be remade through the ability to undertake these essential practices. But I suggest it is not simply the passing on of this kind of skill itself that is at issue here, it is also that there is a cultural norm for this group that this can and should be learnt by children at a young age, that is significant for exploration. This could partly be down to New Travellers, being such a new group, explicitly encouraging their children to learn particular cultural ways in order to distinguish themselves from mainstream society, due to its proximity to them. However, long standing mobile groups of the UK, such as Irish Travellers and Romany Gypsies, also share a similar attitude to children's engagement with adult activities and tool use (Howarth 2019). This norm, in some senses, registers a different kind of division between adulthood and childhood than that generally found in what these communities respectively describe as 'country people' and 'Gorgios' ('straight people' for New Travellers), meaning non-Travellers.

There may be different reasons and practices associated with this norm for New Travellers in comparison to other Traveller groups. However, all Gypsy and Traveller groups share the experience of having limited state protection. In fact, as aforementioned, the state has instead itself been a source of physical violence and oppression toward these communities. In this sense, New (and other) Travellers have to prepare themselves and their children to be ready for violence and other altercations at the hands of police, farmers and landowners, members of the public, and other Travellers and Gypsies from inside and outside their own communities. This is part of everyday life and may itself partly explain the expectation for earlier child maturity. Perhaps then, for New Travellers at least (I cannot comment on the context of other Gypsies and Travellers in this regard), uncertainty stemming from potential threats of violence is ameliorated by encouraging early maturation and autonomy through the

development of a sense of independence, resilience and adult-style skills. This independence, however, is undergirded by the knowledge that other members of the community will come to your aid when needed.

The effects of this style of socialisation were demonstrated to me when talking with second-generation New Traveller Meg. Now in her mid-twenties, she had moved into housing as a child. However, she had continued being socialised within the New Traveller socio-cultural sphere in everyday family life and with extended family and friends, as well as during summer travelling and at festivals. This had apparently shaped her experiences of and responses to contemporary situations, including when the Covid-19 pandemic hit while she was living in shared housing with 'straight' friends. She described to me how she had been surprised that they seemed so fearful and that, to ameliorate this, they had taken comfort in strictly following the guidance outlined by the government. She compared this to how she herself had felt little need for concern, saying she had considered news programming and government guidelines of the time as untrustworthy population control and scare tactics. Certainly, many marginalised communities had good reason to be dismissive of government guidelines, due to histories of unwanted and harmful public health interventions. Although this was not the historical experience for this group, children who had grown up on New Traveller sites in the 1990s, such as Meg, had experienced evictions, violence, surveillance, and conspiratorial operations enacted on them by the state (e.g. James 2005; Clark 1997). But this was not just a sense of resilience through living without the protection of the state. As with many marginalised communities, New Travellers seemed to have a sense that their group, and therefore themselves, had unlimited powers of endurance against all odds. In this regard, Meg had told me she had known that *whatever happened she would be ok*; that there would be some way through the situation.

But how to conceptualise this sense of certainty without reverting to a simple interpretation of the emic perspective being different from the 'objective', etc, structural context of this situation? How should we avoid belying New Travellers' own modes of producing a sense of certainty by falling back into a construction of them as 'actually' living in a constant state of uncertainty? And how can we conceptually balance their sense of infallibility and survivability, with the destruction of their community through intentional state tactics and high rates of morbidity and mortality? To respond to this situation, I will now explore how New Travellers personally and collectively mediated death.

Endurance beyond death?

Despite the apparent sense of certainty New Travellers have that they will 'always be', the older generation are acutely aware of, and often commiserate with each other about, their high rates of mortality and morbidity. As well as the more overt physical threats and oppression already referred to, slower kinds of violence and other effects of marginalisation such as poverty, lack of access to healthcare and other resources, as well as, significantly, mental health and addiction issues, have a significant impact on many people in this community.

As in the squats and council estates of inner cities, the late 1980s and the 1990s saw an epidemic on New Traveller sites of sudden, early deaths by overdose, as heroin flooded the UK. However, nowadays more common causes of early demise for older New Travellers are organ failure, cancer and other deaths associated with chronic alcohol and substance use, often undiagnosed (New Travellers cannot, or do not, always access health services). Consequently, this is experienced by those around them as a sudden, unexpected death, traumatising those they currently live on site with, as well as adding to the already high burden of collective grief experienced by the wider community, many of whom the deceased may have lived with or otherwise been close to over the decades. Every long-term New Traveller who passes on is felt as a deep loss by those that knew them, as well as those who only knew of them: all are entwined together by stories, chosen and blood family connections, and through many intense shared utopian and dystopian experiences. The loss of their life, and the experiences and memories they carried with them, are collectively mourned on social media and at funerals and wakes, as well as in stories, dreams and memories for as long as there are people who remember them, or the stories of their escapades.

The last few decades of the 20th century, particularly before the mid-1990s when free festivals and rave parties hosted by the community were outlawed, are a particularly important time for older New Travellers and there is a concern for this generation that the memory of it will be forgotten and lost. When talking to people who lived on the road during that time, they said such things as: 'It was the best time of my life', 'It made me who I am', but also, commonly, 'If I hadn't left [site], I'd be dead by now.' There are certainly also those, often known as 'together'¹⁸ Travellers, some of whom still live in vehicles (often on permanent sites or their own land) who did not succumb to addiction. In this sense, for many New Travellers everyday life is based around work and family – albeit that this is embedded within their broader cultural milieu and punctuated by festivals and other community events. But there are also those (mainly of the older generation), now disparately scattered in housing and on sites about the country, or living an austere mobile existence, who are afflicted by chronic addiction, grief and loneliness. Many of these people have physical and mental health issues and, subject to constant news of the deaths of close people, reflect on their own mortality.

During my fieldwork, John often talked to me at length about recent deaths of close friends from site. He had taken to drinking vodka, though he said he had beaten his long-term heroin addiction; after all, alcohol had always been his 'poison'. When in the zone of grief, he would reminisce and if dead friends were mentioned he would break down suddenly into tears. But almost as instantly, the subject would be left aside again: on to the next story of the past or gossip about what is happening in the lives of New Traveller friends today. The tears were gone as quickly as they came. On one of these occasions, a mutual friend, Tommy, who had also been part of this world but now had his own business, unable to sit by watching another of his close friends 'killing himself' in front of his eyes, told John: 'It'll be you next if

¹⁸ This denotes people from the community that led comparatively less chaotic lives, and/or perhaps were able to access or generate greater resources for sustaining themselves. However, divisions of this kind between subgroups are not always as strict as they seem; someone who starts out being 'together' may change habits of life and vice versa.

you don't stop.' Flexing his arms as he stretched them up towards the ceiling, inviting all present to judge his distance from death, John replied: 'No, I'm fit and healthy, look at all the muscle on me from living on the road.' 'Yeah, but what about inside there', Tommy replied, gesturing towards John's torso and the organs, damaged from years of abuse, he insinuated were inside. 'Well, no... I'm tough you know!' the latter wavered. But it seemed Tommy had decided the time had come for some 'straight talk':

Well, I've lost too many and I don't want to lose you too, so if you want to stay alive you should stop drinking vodka and [Special] Brew.

This is a common kind of exchange between those with long term addictions from this community, and their loved ones. There are also people in this community who, though having comparatively moderated their intake of harmful substances, are still cognisant that much internal damage has likely already been done. Watching as the last of their now few peers from their heyday die around them, they, like John, assess their own still living bodies, and estimate how much time they may have left. One man who had 'cut down' for the sake of his children told me he is aiming to 'last 'til I'm 60'. Sixty was an old age for a long-term New Traveller who still continued to live a mobile lifestyle over many decades, or on long term unauthorised sites, or who did not 'come off' drugs and alcohol in their earlier years.

After life?

Though early on in the life of their community some New Travellers dabbled in (New Age) Christianity, and many older and newer members of the group observe the cycle of the seasons and/or identify as adhering to other forms of spirituality, many are against organised Christian religion (viewed as an oppressive institution). An example of expressions of this were loud vocal complaints at funerals where the deceased's name is associated with a Christian God or afterlife: shouts that 'He/She wasn't religious!' would be heard.¹⁹ So, does this mean they face all of this death with nothing beyond?

When long term New Travellers, especially of the older age group, talk about the death of someone from the community, they often state they will see them again at the party²⁰ or festival 'in the sky'. This refers to a kind of collective utopian imaginary in which all deceased New Travellers are together partying on into eternity. In some senses it bears similarities to 'Mary's dream': the future desired imaginary of one of Howarth's (2019) Irish Traveller interlocutors. This latter, though about life on *this* plane, also featured aspects of a longed for but now gone past. In it, her intergenerational family would be able to live within their own cultural and moral sphere, untarnished by the concerns and dangers of the world of 'country people'²¹ that were so negatively impacting herself and her family in the present. For my

¹⁹ As in Okely's (1983) work on Romany Gypsies, New Travellers transformed the spaces and rites of Gorgio/straight funerals, cemeteries and churches to meet their own cultural beliefs and requirements.

²⁰ A term for an illegal rave.

²¹ An Irish Traveller term for house dwellers.

interlocutors, the party in the sky is somewhat similar. It is a place unaffected by the reach of consecutive UK government legislation that all but outlawed New Travellers' free festivals and parties, and their lifestyle in general. Here they would be able to be together again as a cultural group, and there would no longer be the threat of early demise from the effects of drink, drugs and alienation.

In a way again similar to Mary's dream (Howarth 2019), those conjuring up the image of the party in the sky do so using elements of a desired but lost cultural past (albeit that this culture only dates back to the 1970s, rather than for centuries as Mary's does). As mentioned, this was a heyday for this generation of New Travellers. Thousands of them lived on sites around the UK, free festivals and raves were hosted and attended throughout the summer, money was to be made from punters, and there were enough people on the road with the will to push back against local police force's attempts to control and contain them. But it is also different. In Mary's case, though circumstances seemed levelled against her wish to have a field somewhere away from country people, this was not completely out of the question (for reasons I won't go into here, despite being threatened with eviction her family did have prospects to be able to remain together, their primary cause of concern). But for what we have already established as being a non-monotheistic community, New Travellers' apparent collective focus towards a utopian afterlife fashioned on their previous lifestyle, may seem more like living in the past than bringing the past forward into the future-present as a means to offset uncertainty, as Howarth suggests Mary is doing in *her* imaginary. Where Mary's dream could be seen as a way to instigate hope in the face of crisis, New Travellers' party in the sky seemingly amounts only to cruel optimism (Berlant 2011). However, I suggest the party in the sky could be seen as a kind of story through which New Travellers retain their sense of certainty regarding their shared future, by portraying themselves as always finding a way to endure. The centrality of stories in shaping and reproducing the New Traveller world will now be further explored.

New Traveller stories

New Travellers often discussed the necessity for someone to record all their stories so that they do not get lost in time. A lot of these are tales about defying and outwitting the police. This was because, from the early 1970s the state via police forces had used disproportionately violent tactics to evict New Travellers' festivals and sites, as well as employing targeted interventions and surveillance to monitor, control and disband the group. Respondents suggested that to begin with they had responded non-violently, continuing to attend festivals and live on public land regardless of attempts to discourage this way of life. However, Travellers suggest that the early 1980s saw Margaret Thatcher's government using the same tactics, and sometimes even the same special police forces, they used to break the miners' strikes, to attempt to destroy their community. During this period, particularly violent and therefore memorable events for the group occurred. These included such things as gangs of unprovoked police beating Travellers trying to access Stonehenge festival in 1985 with truncheons, leaving them screaming and bloody, then destroying and confiscating their homes

and arresting all adults present. There were also other incidences of unprovoked violence and mass arrests, and stories of New Travellers' children being taken temporarily into care and their dogs being destroyed on such occasions. Such events are renowned inside the community. As well as the incident at Stonehenge, which New Travellers term 'The Beanfield' (abbreviated from 'The Battle of the Beanfield' as it was called in the press), two more of these significant events are known as 'Stoney Cross' and 'Nostell Priory' after the sites where they took place. All long-term New Travellers (whether they were present or not) have heard and passed on stories of these events. These are not just chilling tales about what was meted out by the police, but also often ones told with bravado, of the ways individual Travellers and the group in general showed defiance and resilience regardless of state actions against them. In these, police are constructed as cowards, only able to overpower them due to their far greater numbers. For example, one Traveller who was at Nostell Priory and The Beanfield described them sneeringly as 'petty' for 'pouring all the sticky things from our cupboards into all our stuff' when they had confiscated their homes. In one instance in the early 1980s, Travellers made homeless at one of these events through mass vehicle confiscation were offered sanctuary at Glastonbury Festival by its founder and landowner Michael Eavis. This cemented a sometimes turbulent relationship between himself and New Travellers. It also made Glastonbury festival a kind of home for them, whereby it still offers the chance for many to come together, to party, and to work, as they continue to provide large sectors of the infrastructure and entertainment for the event.

In this sense, these violent incidences were shaped by and shaped the New Traveller world, as well as the stories it told about itself, which in turn acted as historical and moral exemplars of who they were and where they came from. These events also affected how the community responded to the police from then on, whereby some rebuilt their broken homes as 'battle buses' – reinforced with metal sheets and bars over windows, and grills over bumpers. From this time onwards there was much conflict between New Travellers and the British State, until their numbers dissipated following the implementation of the Criminal Justice and Public order Act 1994. At gatherings, stories continue to centre on how New Travellers outwitted, resisted or sometimes managed to overpower the police during those years:

Remember when X got chased back to site by the pigs and he rolled in mud and lay under a log, so even when they brought out their dogs and heat-seeking helicopter they didn't detect him there!

I was at the front of the convoy when hundreds of us stopped on the M4 and blocked it with our vehicles because they wouldn't let us off the motorway to go to Avon free festival.

There were also the many stories of group members using their vehicles to break through police barricades, which were used regularly throughout the 1980s and 90s to stop New Travellers moving between counties and accessing their festival sites. As well as facing off police, continuing to exist as a group throughout this context also necessitated sticking together and helping each other. Though there was no group hierarchy or formal structure,

there were respected characters made infamous through stories. These would be those who could both 'lead a convoy' but also who 'would not leave anyone behind' (i.e. they would fix or tow the vehicles of those who were not able to move under their own steam when eviction struck).

Some Travellers who told the old stories also reproduced a narrative about their own potential early demise and of that of beloved others who had 'left too soon'. This is that, despite everything, it was 'worth it'. For example, one grieving man stated he himself had 'lived so much' that he didn't mind dying, and that he took solace that his many departed friends had experienced exceptional lives of freedom. However, it is hardly surprising there is ambiguity with this; he also expressed gratitude that he and others were 'still here'. It seems then that collective grief is coupled with an insistence that living through – and making – those times was so intense, real and free, that it mattered more to have been part of it than to even have stayed alive to tell the tale *as long as there are others left to tell yours*. For some, then, it seems that a short life as a Traveller is worth more than a longer one outside of this community. It is the intensity, perhaps, – how *much* and how fully you were able to live life – that mattered. Therefore, maybe, uncertainty about future survival is offset by the sense of certainty that oneself and one's community have lived a life as full and free as it gets.

But I suggest that it is not just the sense that oneself and one's 'family' have lived a full and free life that makes individual death less problematic. Through all this, it seems there is a sense of something new having been made by those living this lifestyle through those times, that remains and that needs to be protected and passed on. Partly, perhaps, this elusive phenomenon is a particular 'New Traveller' attitude, outlook and way of being, developed through their novel relations with the environment, the state and each other. As we have seen, it is also a certain set of norms, values and practices, or New Traveller cultural ways, that are part of this.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, all New Travellers I asked about the future of the group expressed certainty that it would continue. However, when pressed, unsurprisingly it was often difficult for them to say what exactly would remain now that they had been sedentarised by successive rounds of anti-Traveller legislation. Of course, there were those with children and grandchildren, who felt that whether they were in housing or not, they were joined together by the memories of 'playing in puddles together on sites' (denoting togetherness and freedom) when they were infants. Others I

spoke to about the form of this 'New Traveller-ness' and how it would endure, called it 'anarchy'. Punk Kath,²² infamous in the New Traveller and associated alternative communities, described it to me as a sense that 'there will always be something out there', and that 'they won't be able to iron out all the square pegs that don't fit into the round holes', seemingly placing the New Traveller phenomenon into a kind of abstract history of resistance against domination, stretching both into the past and future. What is seen as, and intended to, endure, then, includes a kind of latent freedom and resistance, perhaps an alter-ness. This could be compared in some ways to Deleuze and Guattari's (1987[1980]) notion of energy, an ever-present potential opposition to state forces.

²² It was common for people in this group to acquire prefixes, to distinguish them from the hundreds of others in the community who may have the same forename.

Survivance?

To think conceptually about New Travellers, and their modes of endurance and orientations to the future, we will return to the question as to whether and how the notion of survivance may aid an understanding of how new groups survive the uncertain. As we have already heard, theories of survivance are elusive, and the term is consequently interpreted in varying ways by different writers. But does it hold potential for understanding the New Traveller case?

To answer, I will first return to Vizenor's privileging of stories as 'sources of survivance' (2009: 11). As already discussed, throughout his thesis on survivance, it appears that Vizenor is arguing that the content and style of Native stories promote a way of being or 'sense of presence' which in turn shapes their practices of survivance. We have seen that stories are also central for the New Traveller community. I have suggested that the way Travellers position themselves and each other in such stories, shapes the way they mediate and ameliorate potential risk and uncertainty. For example, the stories mothers proudly tell about their children's wildness and desire to learn adult skills, shapes and reinforces such norms and practices of child rearing. This, then, enables the kids to experience freedom from accountability in the form of discipline, which in turn, teaches them to be responsible for themselves. However, as we have also heard, young children and new people first joining the group also learn the norm of taking responsibility for each other through the stories and experiences of oppression and eviction, where it is necessary to pull together to endure. As seen through Hazel's experience of trying to move away from site, this shared responsibility is balanced with shared care whereby in everyday life there is always the sense someone will be there if you need them. Often living rurally in converted trucks, buses and caravans, with only a thin sheet of steel or aluminium between themselves and the elements, New Travellers take pride in their resilience to live with their environment. In this regard, wood burning stoves are usually their only heat source and, therefore, a central piece of their material culture, hence Hazel's pride and supportiveness for her son's incessant desire to emulate the adults and learn to saw wood.

These New Traveller modes of being could then relate in some ways to Vizenor's senses of presence described earlier in this paper. For example, their norms of individual responsibility and lack of accountability, as well as how this is balanced with communal responsibility, reflect those described by Vizenor in his account of survivance. The ways New Traveller stories mediate and reproduce these norms, as well as how they live with – rather than dominate and objectify – the natural world also bears some resemblances to Vizenor's practices of survivance.

The concept of survivance does help us make sense of New Traveller practices then. However, we should remember that Vizenor's development of the idea was within the context of Native American studies. By contrast, my subject here is a contemporary Western group. New Travellers' stories are not passed down from ancient ancestors within an indigenous cosmology. Instead, this group exists between a disappearing lifestyle and a burgeoning culture. They are Travellers who are largely no longer mobile, and do not have a

very long or widely recognised history of culture and kinship. Not quite an ethnic group, but more than a subculture, they differ from 'traditional' Gypsies and Travellers but have four generations of social and biological reproduction: they are very much alive, but with many dead. In this sense, although New Travellers' cultural continuity is set against a background of oppression and existential threat, the term *survivance* has become synonymous with the experience of Native American groups who have suffered genocide at the hands of colonial settlers. Is it, then, respectful and appropriate to extend this term to this non-indigenous group?

Alternative worldmaking

Due to New Travellers' somewhat liminal status – being between a subculture and an ethnic group – rather than too ready an assimilation of their case to Vizenor's account of *survivance* then, perhaps Elizabeth Povinelli's notion of alternative worlds (2011) could be a helpful complement for an understanding of their context. I suggest this because Povinelli employs the concept to explore the experiences of both indigenous and new groups, such as new anarchists, new animists and the precariat. Because of their inhabitants' inability, or refusal, to be fully co-opted within neoliberal states, Povinelli suggests such worlds hold potential for new forms of social life (Povinelli 2011: 9).

Here, Povinelli built on Foucault's (1984) concept of heterotopias to describe these spaces of difference within contemporary states. Foucault described these as constituting a 'simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space' of mainstream society (Foucault 1984: 50). This reflects how New Travellers' imaginaries of, and ways of engaging with, the land their sites were on – as temporary dwelling places for their mobile community – differed from the state's perception of this as squatting illegally within a privatised landscape. As we have seen, this has meant their sites and festivals were not only places to live but were battle grounds on which New Travellers' relations to the land, the state, and each other were shaped and contested.

Povinelli suggests she is interested in the nature of the contexts in which new kinds of life and new forms of politics can emerge and be 'thought' (Povinelli 2011: 9-10). However, uncertain as to the potential for the success of new alternative worlds, she asks:

How can new forms of life, let alone the political thought they might foster, persevere... How can new social worlds endure the 'wavering of death' that defines the[m]? (ibid)

Unconvinced of the likelihood of 'new life surviving in these spaces', Povinelli even goes so far as to describe instances of such as moments of 'miraculization' (ibid).

With this in mind, can Povinelli's conceptualisation of new alternative worlds aid an understanding of New Travellers' ways of dealing with uncertainty, given her own doubt as to the likelihood of such groups' survival? In answer, I argue this paper has already extended Povinelli's work by providing an ethnographic account of a new alternative world which has

endured over four generations. Therefore, how could Povinelli's concept be adapted to the context of this new but enduring alternative world? What could be done to enable this to become a framework through which to explore how such communities mediate their marginalisation and look to the future; how they at the same time form and preserve their worlds? In answer, rather than the static concept of 'new alternative worlds' (which Povinelli constructs as conceptual future imaginaries that in the actual contemporary world are destined for failure), I propose instead the concept of 'alternative worldmaking'. The notion of alternative worldmaking, I suggest, is more able to capture the dynamic processes of both producing and reproducing such new communities, including how their novel norms, values, and practices – their ways of being – develop and endure.

Conclusion

This paper has explored New Travellers' orientations to the future in what seems from the outside to be their context of uncertainty regarding individual and cultural endurance. I have argued that, through particular forms of child socialisation, the telling of stories, and by constructing the imaginary of the 'party in the sky', they were able to produce and reproduce a sense of certainty regarding the continuation of their world.

I explored whether these processes could be seen as similar to some of the practices of survivance described by Vizenor (2009). Although there were indeed many parallels, because this was a term developed as a framework to capture the experiences of indigenous groups who had been subject to settler colonialism and genocide, it seemed less appropriate to employ this to conceptualise the lives of a new group formed in a contemporary Western context. Instead, I suggested the New Traveller community might better be understood as one of Elizabeth Povinelli's new alternative worlds (Povinelli 2011). However, I argued that the static nature of the concept did not fit the case in hand. Therefore, I proposed the more active term 'alternative worldmaking' through which to better explore the processes of producing and reproducing a new alternative world.

Due to the domination and reach of global neoliberalism and the nation state model, it is not just Povinelli but the wider milieu of anthropology that is uncertain about the possible success of new alternative cultural forms. Such worlds are usually conceptualised as a future *potential* (e.g. Graeber 2004; Weston 2021) or only of the past (Scott 2009). Therefore, this paper provides a novel case through exploring the development and nature of the norms, practices and values of a new alternative community, recently formed within a contemporary Western nation state but having continued over four generations. In doing so, I reposition the temporal lens by conceptualising such a world as *already having begun* and *already having endured*. My research with this self-created, mobile, anarchist, off-grid community also constitutes a unique exploration into what alternative socio-cultural forms could look like beyond a cultural collapse of liberal capitalism, and within the changing environmental conditions of the Anthropocene. In this sense, the paper, and my conceptualisation of alternative worldmaking, provides a framework through which to help explore pressing anthropological issues regarding human possibilities (Graeber 2007).

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