WRITERS MOSAIC

SpeakySpokey at the British Library

Traveller Writers

The Romany Diamonds (TRD): [Opening performance]

Gabriel Gbadamosi (GG): Good evening everyone. Thank you for coming. My name is Gabriel Gbadamosi. And I'm the founding editor of Writers Mosaic, which has produced this event in association with the Eccles Centre here at the British Library. And I'd like to invite onto the stage your host for this evening, the novelist Louise Doughty.

And a very varied group of, of writers, filmmakers, and poets, from the many traveling communities. Please, a round of applause for Louise Doughty, who will introduce you to the evening.

Louise Doughty (LD): Thank you, Gabriel, and I'd like to thank him, and everybody involved with Writers Mosaic. It's the most fantastic online magazine, and if you haven't looked it up already, what have you been waiting for? Go and take a look as

soon as you go home. The Romany Diamonds, thank you so much. That was wonderful. You will be hearing more from them later.

You do have to listen to some boring old writers first, but I promise we will get back to the fabulous music after the break. And thank you to the British Library for hosting. I'm going to start by introducing our panel of three terrific writers who were all part of an edition of Writers Mosaic we call Blood and Belonging.

First of all, on my left, we have Jake Bowers, Romany novelist, journalist, filmmaker, activist...

Jake Bowers (JB): Blacksmith.

LD: Producer, blacksmith. I mean, there is no end to your talent, really, is there, is there, Jake? His 2022 series, *60 Days with the Gypsies,* was the first series on British television that was actually made by a community member, as opposed to an outsider looking at our community.

He also founded Rokker Radio, didn't you? As you said, "The only thing the BBC has ever done for us," I think, is the way you described it.

JB: And it lasted about two years.

LD: It lasted about two years.

JB: But it happened.

LD: But it happened. Yeah, the other side of Jake is Jo Clement. Um, Jo teaches creative writing at Northumbria University. She selects and reviews, they've selected and reviewed collections for the Poetry Book Society.

You're a Northern Writers Award winner. The BBC radio appearances include Enchanted Isle, Northern Drift, Poetry Please and Start the Week. And their debut poetry collection, *Outlandish* from Bloodaxe Books in 2022. Um, *Outlandish* is out there, is that right? *Outlandish* is out there everybody. It's shortlisted for the John Pollard International Poetry Prize and the Michael Murphy Memorial Prize and no doubt more to come, I think. And they live in Newcastle, England.

Jo Clement (JC): I do, indeed.

LD: And then, last but not least, Damien Le Bas, writer from the south coast of England. His first book, *The Stopping Places: A Journey Through Gypsy Britain*. I'm going to go on an embarrassingly long list of prizes here that you've been... won, shortlisted, longlisted, nominated for. It's a bit unfair on the other writers really, isn't it, Damien, because you don't give them a chance? But you won the Somerset Maughan Award.

Damian Le Bas (DLB): Didn't win most of them.

LD: A Royal society of Literature Jerwood Award. You were longlisted for the Jhalak Prize. Shortlisted for the Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year. And if that wasn't fair enough, you're about to probably scoop up another load of awards with another book that's coming shortly about the sea, diving, and Atlantis, due to be

published by Chatto and Windus in 2025. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our panel. [Applause],

We're going to start with Jake. It was very difficult to decide the running order because the fantastic thing about this panel is that almost accidentally, we have a really terrific spread. We have an activist and filmmaker and journalist, an acclaimed poet, a memoirist, and non-fiction writer. So, you are going to see something of the spread of writing from the Romany and Traveller community across the country. But we thought it would be a great idea to start with Jake's fantastic film. It lasts about five minutes. I'm going to be asking each of the writers to present for five or ten minutes or so, and then we'll be having some discussion between us.

Before you get to stampede gratefully for the bar and get a glass of wine and listen to The Romany Diamonds some more. But Jake, let's start with you. I'd like you to introduce your film first.

JB: Okay. So, this is one of the things that I've done as a kind of a filmmaker and a journalist is make music videos. That's how you often start when you're trying to kind of make your way in the world of, of filmmaking. And a few years ago, a kind of a hip hop group approached myself and the director I was working with called Josh Cole, and they said, "You know, what ideas do you have for this track that we've got called, 'Could You Love Me?'"

So, it's a track that doesn't come from the Romany community; it's a hip hop track, but we pitched to them this idea that we wanted to take a portrait of the diverse, beautiful, and wonderful Romany communities that live across Britain. So, we made

it in a week, we travelled everywhere, it also features Damien, in his, not that much younger days.

LD: There's so much in there and so many fantastic shots and with so many of the individuals in the film I kept saying, "Oh! I want more of that one. Oh, oh great, we're back." How, how did you put it all together?

JB: One of the things you've got to do as a Gypsy journalist is you've got to make the impossible happen and that's what we did with that.

We kind of, we had a week to make it and we worked out a weird schedule where we started in Kent, on the Isle of Sheppey, then we went down to the New Forest for the drive with all the ponies. Then we went up to London, um, to film some of the Polish Roma community living in London. Then we went, then we went to Glasgow, and then it's just, it's all about, you just get amazing imagery.

It's so much that you don't know what to do with it. And then you just kind of, you just place it all together. The editing process, I mean, I don't know... you just, you just, you soak this stuff up. It was a mad week-long road trip, where I almost wrote off Damien's van by backing into it in London, because we were so tired.

And we, we went everywhere, and we did it. And the intention was for it, just to be a portrait of who we are, which is misunderstood, sometimes a little bit naughty, often quite full of, um, you know, kind of hopefully charisma and kind of presence and to kind of capture that and then put it to a hip hop track, which you wouldn't have thought it would be next to.

And you know, it's been a few years since I've seen it because, um, you do, you kind of, you take a step back and you look at it. And the main thing that I think about it now is, I don't know if anyone saw the research that there was recently about which was done by the Jo Cox Foundation, about who are the most unpopular groups in society.

And they went really big on antisemitism, as they should do, and they went really big on Islamophobia, as they should do. But one of the things that they forgot to say is that the one community which was singled out by more people than anybody else, the people they wouldn't want to marry or have their children marry or work with or live next to, were the Gypsy and Traveller community.

And we've been here for five hundred years. So, it's still a very real question: could you love me? And there's lots in there, there's lots in there to love. You know, we, we could wax lyrical about that there are very lovable things about us that we've contributed over the years; but kind of seeing it in the context of a world which seems to be just kind of tearing itself apart on all kinds of different issues, you know, it's um, yeah, I don't know what I'm trying to say really, but you know, hopefully there is something there to love.

We, we, I think probably all feel that there's stuff within our culture to love. You know, the charades with the, the wonderful music. Some of the community members that are here tonight, people like Sally and Dee and Joe and stuff like that, all of whom I hope you will meet when you have the chance to have a drink and, and, and meet some of us.

Because the one thing that undermines hatred is personal real contact with the communities involved. You can't hate somebody, you know, that you know. And that's what we try to do with that, is for people to get to know us a little bit.

LD: Yeah. And, and just to tell the audience a bit about *60 Days with the Gypsies* and how that came about.

JB: Yeah. So, when I was. So *60 Days with the Gypsies* was, was broadcast in March 2022. It's the first ever series ever produced by a community member. And what we attempted to do, I'm not sure how successful we were in doing it, was we tried to subvert what I would call the 'Gadjo gaze.' Gadjo is a word that we use in Romany, which means people who aren't Romani. We wanted to see the world from the inside out.

In terms of one specific kind of pinch point that there is that you see in all the newspaper coverage is the coverage that there is over where Gypsies and travellers who are still nomadic... who don't have places to put their caravans. And there was a, an Act of Parliament that has now gone through which has effectively outlawed nomadic life in this country.

And we wanted to show the reaction to that from the community but also why it was never going to work. And for those of you who might follow this stuff, it hasn't worked. Thankfully, it hasn't worked. The police don't want to enforce it. The Travellers are still travelling. It was performative prejudice.

Sorry, I'm going to get a little bit political. Performative prejudice from a very tired conservative government in order to get red meat for the shires. And it hasn't

worked. Because people are still, um, still travelling. People like Jo and Damian were involved also in the campaign to try and stop it.

So, *60 Days with the Gypsies* captures that moment in time where we were trying to stop a nasty law coming in, which effectively has proved to be completely ineffective. So, it's on Channel 4, on-demand, it's two hours long. There are some things in it which are controversial, which some people didn't like, but, you know, I think as a journalist you've got to, you've got to look at the tough topics as well.

LD: And that, that's yet another thing I'd recommend to you all if you haven't caught up with it yet. It is available to stream. We could talk all night, but I'm going to move on to Jo. And I think it's an interesting segue, Joe, because you've talked about the idea of poetry as protest. And obviously frontline activism, like Jake's, is one way of protest, one way of illuminating our community, but then you're doing the same thing, but in a different, from a different creative angle, aren't you? Can you, is it possible to isolate what makes you a poet? Because you, you are an activist as well. So, what is, what is it about poetry?

JC: Yeah, I think, um, just writing a poem is a political act. It's a, it's an act of defiance and it's something to... for someone from a marginalised community, it's an act of saying I want to be part of this thing that excludes me, which is the publishing industry. And when I was putting together *Outlandish* and sending it out to different publishers, they didn't really know who Romani people were, even, even groups that were kind of geared towards including, you know, marginalised groups, didn't understand that Gypsies and Travellers were part of that demographic.

Because they couldn't really relate to what, to who we were as an ethnic group, my poems had no chance of ever kind of landing with them, let alone being published. So yeah, poetry is my way of protesting. It's a way of being heard and documenting the kind of people and the places that I love. So, yeah.

LD: And you've got some readings.

JC: Yeah, I will, I will stand and give you some, read you some poems now. Yeah.

LD: Take the podium.

JC: So yeah, I'm actually, I'm going to start with an essay that... well, not an essay, God, no, sorry. I'm going to start with an extract from an essay that Louise commissioned through *WritersMosaic,* and I was really pleased to be asked to write. When I was asked to write the essay, obviously I started writing prose, but it kept kind of jumping back into the rhythms and the repetitions and the images that you find in poetry.

And I'm really interested in prose poetry as a form. So, I just kind of went with the flow and let the piece be what I wanted it to be, um, which is a lyric essay. And that basically means that it is an essay that has all the kind of qualities that we might find in a poem, but it leans towards kind of longer lines, paragraphs, rather than enjambed lines.

And yeah, I'll read an extract from this just from the opening. It's called *Chicken Blood* and it's about my family's yard, which is basically our allotment. And yeah,

having a patch of land that was ours, even though we were renting it essentially from the council, um, that was really important to us. Money was always really tight.

And so, you know, there wasn't ever any money, basically. So being able to grow our own kind of fruit and veg, and it just meant that we could always eat. We'd have things to trade. And yeah, the yard was absolutely my dad's paradise, and his chickens were his little army. And he could sit, and he could watch them for hours and I could watch him watching them for hours too.

So this is *Chicken Blood*. Chicken blood. Travellers fight like cocks, they say. Feet first, we get thrown in many a pit. Crowds circle, laying bets between wheeling air fights and runaways. Spur and knuckle, screech, and spar. Winnings don't bleed down. The dead birds lose. Young lads play chicken. Noses boom and bust.

Land joyride punches until bodies crash. Lasses are just as hard. I've left parks black-eyed with torn hair and red skin. More fights inside. But we keep quiet on that. Especially, we fight the country people. Call them that. Country. Despite us all living in the same town most of the time. Shorten it for those self-righteous ones who call us wrong 'uns.

Those with little appetite for our history, they call us hawkers, gypsies, worse. Shift down this hill for a better view. Pylons chatter in sequence all around our allotment. Pigeons clap there and back. In the familiar ease of metal from metal, we follow the order of sound. Close ourselves in, like they did before. Tin scraps.

Old doors. The lock and key sat safely. Everything is growing up. Slow and soft. Sharp and lush. Turned by fork and foot and hand. The ground eats roots, spits out

seed. Early on, I throw scoops of feed. We're a scattered people, or so they say. Feathers and feet flood out in a brood and hens skirt away in spite of my keenness to hold one. I was writing even then, casting lines on the mud.

And I think Romany people are just the most resilient and optimistic people that you'll ever meet. And it's a real testament to our character because we do face some of the worst kinds of racism, both from individual people one to one but also from organisations and top-down from state oppressions.

Racist attitudes can be kind of ingrained in policies and laws that target nomadic ways of living. And in *Outlandish*, I have a poem that starts to think about this out loud and about how from all that noise and that hate, we can tune out and we can carve something with beauty and with poise and with dignity.

And that even when Travellers are pushed into brick housing or we're forced to move on from a particular stopping place, our culture won't be dissolved. We're not going anywhere. We're here and we always will be. So, this next poem I'm going to read is *Vardo*, and that's the bow top, horse-drawn homes that started to appear in the landscape in the UK from the 18th century onwards.

Vardo, it means living wagon in Romanesque. Sure as the colts will nag the fillies, our living wagon prints itself across my mind. Lacquered like spring woods, where it hatches a spell. It's all cut in bonnie birds and brushed with roses, windows laced with cockled glass. A wheel bird sent up from its scrape, turns like silver in pockets, on my head in this flat, tight as bow top tarp, static as pike skin on flame.

And I think something really special about travellers is the way that we embrace how short life is. Our life expectancies are a lot shorter than people in mainstream society, which I guess is one reason why we embrace it. But I've also met so many travellers who just really like to get on with it. We're incredibly practical. We're very hardworking. We like to get stuff done and we're not afraid of graft. And I've been thinking about why that might be, and I think it's got something to do with the fact that we've had to be extra vigilant and work that much harder and move that bit more just to survive. And that led me to this poem, which I'm going to read, which is from *Outlandish*.

It tracks our diaspora, I suppose, through different modes of transport and sites of safety. And I do this through the kind of making of a Vardo. There's a phrase that appears in this, well two phrases. The first one is wagon time. And that's a phrase that my grandad, Jack always used to say, and it meant life on the road.

Um, and then there's another phrase in here which is, 'shiving light,' and that's borrowed from Gerard Manley Hopkins. I don't really plan on giving him it back. But it, it describes the way that light kind of splinters through the tops of trees in a forest. And I just think it's a beautiful phrase. So, this last one is *Craft*.

Soon, like the first oar carved in oak, our tents called for wheels. Horses pulled vardos, spun on necessities' knave. Rom found harbour under bow top eaves, tight-knocked, and steeped in mordant green. Lessons in light opened windows. Knives released roosting wagtails from cedar, split the lips of boxing hares.

These wanes, hooped with leaves of guilt. Generations stood proud in the shiving light they were built by. Votives for the golden rule that we should only do as we'd be done to. Wagon time passes by like smoke. Thank you.

LD: Thank you, Jo. We're going to move on to Damian in a minute, but there's one question that I wanted to ask you in particular, which is about the relationship between the oral storytelling tradition that we all grew up with and your poetry, because it won't have escaped anyone's notice how beautifully you read there. Is that an intimate relationship for you?

JC: Definitely. I think when I was growing up, language was always this kind of... it's like a secret thing between the family. So, my dad was always… have names for people, um, that they didn't know about. Um, and it was kind of a protective thing because we could speak to each other, and we could refer to people and things without other people knowing.

So, we, you know, we felt kind of safe in that zone and that really... yeah, that passed into, into the poems. Although I'm not a, I don't think I'm a storyteller; I think I'm a poet. So, I lean also into the music of, of a poem and I love the songs and the sounds of it. Although I kind of grew up more with, um, like Lee Scratch Perry and, and things like that, rather than folk song, um, which is where I've ultimately started researching and looking a bit more into.

LD: I love that thing about language, because I'm sure all of us could come up with words we were taught by relatives, and then occasionally you share them with someone else from the community and they go, "What?"

JC: Yeah.

LD: Because it comes on so many layers. It's layers between the community, but there's also within a family, aren't there?

JC: Yeah.

LD: There are certain words that my family used that they swore blind. Romanesque... I've never, ever found anyone else who used them.

JC: Yeah.

LD: So, what do your family think about you being a published poet and that broader question that we'll get onto after I've spoken to Damien, of, you know, the idea of talking to people outside the community about the community?

JC: Well, my mum and dad are, like, massively proud of me. Um, and I think at first, they were a little bit dubious because they don't want you kind of sharing things about the family and about, you know, the culture with other people. But um, yeah, they're super proud of me and it was a challenge I think kind of getting into... getting into college, getting into university purely because within the family we didn't really have anyone that had like finished school before. And so, being that like first person through the door there was a lot of weight on my back basically to, to carry and I felt like if I'm going to do it, I'm going to have to do it well.

And a lot of pressure as well because my dad was also disabled, which meant that, you know, I was a carer at home and so when I, when I left the nest, as it were, it

was very much, you know, you, you better be sure of what you're doing going out into the world. And yeah, he, he couldn't read or write, but he, I recorded all my poems for him, as I started writing and he loved to listen to them.

He eventually started listening to Charles Dickens and Charles Dickens became his favourite writer, so, yeah.

LD: Wonderful. Thank you so much. Like with Jake, we could go on forever, but Damian, um, tell us a bit more about, you're going to read from *The Stopping Places*, is that right?

DLB: Yep.

LD: Or are you going to read from your essay on *WritersMosaic*?

DLB: No, I am going to read from it. I thought the other thing was a bit depressing, so.

LD: Right. Um, before you do, introduce it, uh, for the audience. You've got, you're reading your own blurb to remind yourself why you're watching that.

DLB: No, I'm looking at it wistfully. I grew up, not on the road, but amongst people who'd lived and been born in wagons and tents and in trailers. And they seemed to have a strength inside themselves that I didn't feel like I had. They'd also obviously had a hard time of it. But their view of that life seemed to be split really into two. There were two sides to it and two seasons, really, rather than four.

Winter and summer, more or less, and winter was a bad time to be a traveller or a Gypsy, a Romany person. We can talk about why we use these different words a bit more maybe. And summer was, was alright and people sort of envied the freedom of that life in the summer, but in the winter, it was at times such a desperate life that the church would send missions to ease people's suffering.

So, it was a, a split life, but it definitely imbued its livers, those who survived it, with a strength. And if you grow up in the shadow of that, or in the sort of warmth of that fire, but not part of it, it can give you a bit of a complex, that you're a sort of lesser form of your own ethnicity, your own trine, a lesser son of greater sires, as J. R. R. Tolkien said. That's what I felt like. But I wasn't just sad, I was also angry that I kept being told that I hadn't lived on the road because it wasn't my fault. I just, they were the ones who bought ground and settled down and they're sort of rubbing my face in it in a way. So, when I came to a bit of age and passed my test and got myself a van, I thought well I'm going to give it a go and see how it goes and see which of these places that they used to live in I'm still able to go to at all... see where that road takes me. It was a very different journey for me; I was by myself most of the time. Sometimes my then wife was with me but because I was just traveling about with a van, I wasn't visible like travellers normally are. Normally you travel as a big family group.

You'll have a lot of vans and pickups, a lot of trailers. So, people see you coming into town, and they sort of take action straight away. It wasn't like that for me. I sort of could disappear below the surface and observe and that was the way I liked it and that was my luxury really. So, I wouldn't say I was traveling as a typical traveller, but I was still living on the road for a year, and it was cold a lot of the time.

LD: Yeah, and hence the stopping places.

DLB: Yeah, the stopping places are what we call places our families used to live, places that have an historical connection with, with Romani people. In the Romany language, they used to be called ‘achimaskotan,’ but nowadays we call them 'atchin tans', stopping places. As you know. I'm sort of telling everyone through you.

LD: Which bit are you going to read for us?

DLB: I'm going to read a bit. This is sort of, I changed my mind about what I was going to read because of watching Jake's video again and some of the themes we've been talking about. We are one people in a way, but in another way, we're absolutely not.

Um, in, in one way, referring to the Roma or Romany people is a bit like saying Europeans. There's a lot of mutual incomprehension and sometimes that can lead to tension and sometimes it's quite funny. So, I was quite heartened when this bit of, of this book was, ended up on a secondary school syllabus.

I think the reason they chose it is people don't really think that of gypsy culture. I think they see a kind of mystical unity that isn't always there. But sometimes through exploring our difference, we make friends. And uh, this is something that happened to me when I was driving along the A27 after a miserable couple of days living in my van by myself.

Half a mile up the road, I noticed a small white shape which seems to be working its way up the carriageway verge, heading in the opposite direction to me. It stands out

against the green of the grass and glows bright in the westering sun. As I come closer, I see it's a short man or possibly a woman. I can't quite tell which because of their loose clothes with something large attached to their back, bound in colourful silks.

I turn around at the next roundabout and get alongside the figure. The large silk wrapped object is a guitar and its bearer has jet black slicked back hair and a contented looking dark face. He's a young man wearing a garment that is somewhere between a long coat and a North African jalabiya. I look back to the road and then at him again as I pass by.

He looks like a Roma, a Romany person from abroad. I can hardly believe what I'm seeing. There's a five-bar gate up ahead with about thirty square yards of grass in front of it. I hastily indicate left and pull in, reversing the van and churning up the still water sodden spring turf. I get out and throw open the doors, and a waft of wind from a speeding truck blows through the van, setting my silks and curtains fluttering, as if I'm camped on the steps.

I make sure everything is tidy and set about fixing myself a cup of tea. I sit down to drink it, trying to look nonchalant. A few moments later, the man with the guitar on his back comes walking slowly along. He's in no hurry whatsoever, but he's clearly coming towards me. I wonder if it's obvious that I've pulled up here because I saw him and wanted to talk.

I gingerly sip my tea, stone faced, try to look uninterested in him. He comes up to me and stops, and I see that he has a friendly look. Hazel eyes streaked with piercing

green, staring out from his lightly bearded, gold, brown face. "Hello," he says. "Hello," I say back. "Please, you have water." I can't place his accent.

"Of course. Sit down, please." I hand him a folding stool and he sits on it, exhaling with relief as the weight leaves his feet. I pour him a glass of water, taking care to keep the spout of my water jack clear of the rim of the glass in case he keeps a conservative version of the Romanipe, which are like Romany customs.

"Thank you," he says, and takes a big gulp of the water. "Are you sleeping in this?" He gestures towards the van with the glass in his outstretched hand. "Yeah, it's good, yes?" "Okay. Cold in the winter." He nods. Drinks some more water. I decide to break the ice. "Rom, son. You are Roma." His calm face breaks into a smile.

He doesn't answer but nods in reply. "Tu son Rom? Are you one?" I tell him yes and he starts to talk quickly in a form of Romany I can hardly understand. Every other word seems to end in the syllable ‘oi’, which throws me as it's not usually a common sound in the language. I nod along, smiling, but turn my palms upwards to show I'm not really following what he says.

Finally, I hear a phrase I can understand: "Katar Avilan?" Where are you from? To which he adds a final customary, "Oi!" I point to the ground and tell him, England. To which he responds, "Čechuj, Ongaruj," believing I must have some Central or East European roots. I shake my head and laugh and tell him again, "I'm from England."

He seems to find this absolutely hilarious and starts to laugh with me and shake his head. The laughter is contagious and self-propagating, and we have to fight through it and catch our breath in order to swap names. "Mirojnav si o Damjan," I say. My

name is Damjan. He shakes my hand with a slow, soft handshake and then says simply, "Pauli."

Code switching between Romany, English, and tourist hand gestures, I offer Pauli a cup of tea and some food, but he waves the suggestions away with his hand, and just asks for another cup of water. He drinks slowly but steadily, finishing cup after cup. Eventually he's had enough, and I wash his glass and my teacup and offer him a lift.

He only wants to go as far as the next town, wherever that happens to be. We take off in the van and I ask him, "Yec gili pe amarodrom?" To play me one song for the road. Pauli obliges, unwrapping his guitar with great care from its colourful silks. He eases into picking the strings with the grace of someone who's been playing since they first learned to walk.

He starts off with a bit of nuage by the great Manouche, French-Romaniyjazz guitarist, Django Reinhardt, before breaking into a faster paced rumba tune that I don't recognise. He sings along in a language I can't understand at all. I slap my thigh trying to keep tight rhythm and he smiles, either because I am staying in time or because my timing is so bad it deserves his pity.

He stops and I shout out, the Eastern European equivalent of the better-known flamenco, 'ole', of approval. And he stops playing, wraps his guitar up in its fabric and smiles. He asks me once again where I'm from. And when I tell him for a third time that I'm from England, he asks about my family, who I say are from England as well.

He chuckles and just keeps on shaking his head, as if I've told him I come from the moon. I ask him where he is from and he says, "Kataronga, from Hungary." I tell him I once spent a week in the town of Nagykörös and he nearly chokes himself laughing at my inept pronunciation of the name, before repeatedly saying it in what sounds to me like exactly the same way.

A few minutes later, Pauli starts to get fidgety. We've been driving for less than 15 minutes, and I can see he's already had his fill of this journey; the journey I've been on for months. He doesn't seem like a 50 mile an hour man. Perhaps this is why he wasn't thumbing for a lift when I saw him. He'd rather just walk.

He keeps asking me how far it is to the town until we get to a roundabout a little way north of Eastbourne. At this point, he gestures to get out, and I tell him I might as well take him all the way, but he's not having any of it. He wants out, and he moves to open the door. On the left, an extremely long lay by rises into view, full of camper vans and trucks.

I swing into it, then ask Pauli if I can take a photo of us by the van, because I'm scared nobody will believe this has happened. He obliges, and when I look at the picture, we're both pulling a similar face, a bemused smile. Pauli says thanks, shakes my hand, then swings his silk-wrapped guitar back up onto his back and sets off along the road at his slow, steady pace.

I watch him until he's out of sight, disproportionately sad that I will probably never see him again; this man I've known for less than half an hour. It occurs to me that our sense of connectedness springs as much from the feeling that we are connected as

from the fact that we actually are. The gypsies are descended from common stock, but so ultimately is all of humanity.

Perhaps the difference is not whether you're part of a tribe, but whether you care to notice that you are.

LD: Thank you. That was a fabulous reading, Damian. Gabriel's given me the five-minute gesture before the break, so we, we just have a short amount of time, uh, to have a little discussion amongst us. And I wanted to lead on from that reading, um, because it is hard to explain to people who don't know the community just how diverse it is within the community itself, which is why it was in many ways very appropriate that we all contributed to an online magazine called Writers Mosaic, because that, that's exactly what we're talking about here, isn't it, the mosaic?

But of course, what that leads to is an issue of representation. Because we're all so diverse within a community, it means that no one individual or even one group can represent that diversity. So, um, where, where do we begin? Jake, I'll start with you.

JB: I think we, we, we begin by, by recognising that we are, as Damian said, a kind of a collection of people that in some ways are divided, but also kind of united.

And actually, the more I've explored it, the more I realise that there is to know. Like, I've spent 20 years and the, the thing that I wrote for you was called Reporting Romanistan. And I've had, I've had the, the pleasure and the, and the honour to go to Romani communities right away across Europe. And I see commonalities.

I say, I hear words that my family use, that I use. I see things that, you know, that, that, that, that totally chime with me. You know, when I, when I see Cindy, she reminds me of my sister Misha. And, and that's not to do with colouring, it's like, it's like... it's just like a way that we hold ourselves and the way that we exist in the world.

And it's a fascinating thing to, to explore and, and see. And you know, it's, it's easy. It's really easy. You know, and that's the other thing that Damian seemed to have picked up is, is for one group to look at another and say, "Tu san Gadjo. Tu san parno." Like a lot of Eastern Europeans will look at us and they'll say, "Well, you're light-skinned. You can't possibly be Romani." To which we say, well, we respond with all kinds of, uh, you know, word, words in response to that. What we've got to do is we've got to see what those commonalities are and work and work together. And in, in a lot of cases we do, and we're, we're getting better at it. But actually, you know, we're here, sorry, I'm going to shut up in a minute, because I know we haven't got much time.

We're here the day after Romany National Day, which started in Britain in 1971. But actually, if you want to look where the real stuff's happening, it's not happening in this country. It's happening in Eastern Europe, where you have entire institutions that are run by Romani people and Romani leadership who are working in prime minister's offices, who are lawyers; who are doctors; who are all of those things. And for me, one of the pleasures that I have is reconnecting with that. So, hopefully that we can import a bit of it into this country. Sorry, I've said it.

LD: No, thank you. Jo. Yeah.

JC: Yeah, I mean, I think there are minorities within the minority as well. And I think that there are lots of ways in which, you know, you're only as strong as kind of your weakest link, as it were. And I think as a community, we kind of, we come together so brilliantly, and we support each other. And so, I love being able to meet new people and kind of see where they sit on the intersections and in the margins, like, just like in broader society. You know, there are disabled people who are travellers, there are people who are experiencing poverty, there are LGBTQI + people. We have trans and intersex people in the travel community and it's, yeah, it's, it's a huge thing for me to just feel like I'm part of a family and also part of a chosen family and being able to kind of connect with people and work together with them.

Um, yeah, yeah. That I think is the biggest form of protester's love, isn't it? So...

LD: Damian, I think…

DLB: I think we're doing all right, to be honest, um, because people are starting from a number of different starting points. I mean, in Moscow there was a professional Romani theatre troupe 130 years ago. There have been educated Roma people in Britain, including perhaps the author of *A Pilgrim's Progress* for a long time.

But still, in the 1960s, many schools would refuse to have gypsy children on the register. In 1950s editions of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Romany people were classified as mentally subnormal. Those were still on the shelves when I was at school. So, you know, how do you want to spin it? But given the various, sort of,

starting points that people are approaching life from, I see amazing signs of progress all over the place.

I also see deeply alarming signs of, entrenched, very old, very ugly prejudice. And actually, what we have to frankly call apartheid in parts of eastern, central, and eastern Europe. So um, a mixed bag, but lots to be hopeful about and, and lots of unity and love here.

LD: Well, I'm, I'm really glad that in the very, very limited time that we've had, we've been able to celebrate that connectedness because we did want this evening to be a celebration and I think it really has. And it's been fantastic to give the audience just a very, very small showcase, um, of all of you.

So, we're going to have an interval now. Afterwards, we'll come back for more fabulous music from the Romany Diamonds. But for the time being, would you please put your hands together for Jake Bowers, Jo Clement, and Damian Le Bas? [Applause]

This is the Czureja, am I pronouncing it right? Czureja family from Poland, the Romany Diamonds. Romali!

TRD: Hello, so we are the Romany Diamonds. Um, the first song that we are going to play for you is called Kaj o Bergi, Kaj o Versha; which means, 'where are the mountains, where are the forests?' So, when the Roma were travelling, their safety was in the mountains and in the

forests. And the song is a bit sad because it talks about the outsiders were trying to burn them.

So, saying that, 'where are the mountains, where are the forests?' They are trying to burn me. So, it's a bit sad, but it's an emotional song that every Roma people within the European side kind of knows and sings. So, we hope you enjoy it.

[Song: Kaj o Bergi, Kaj o Versha]

Thank you very much [More songs from The Romany Diamonds]

So, we are a three-generational, uh, music band. Uh, this is our youngest member. Can everyone make a round of applause for Malachi?

He's only five years old. And, uh, yeah, he's going to be singing for us today. Malachi (M): I'm going to sing for you. Okay.

GG: Wow. What song are you going to sing?

M: Uh, ‘majanikai.’

TRD: ‘Majanikai,’ which means don't go nowhere. So, for now, don't go anywhere, please.

JB: Because they're fighting. Majanikai.

TRD: It's okay, it's okay.

M: [Malachi singing]

[Applause]

[The Romany Diamonds continuation]

So, this next song is called The Lock. Yes, the Lock. So, it's like a bird. So, if you listen to the song, please try and pick out what kind of animals you hear when you are listening to this song. You might pick up different animals, you might pick up different sounds. So, kind of use your imagination with this song.

Hope you enjoy. Yeah! One, two, three, start!

[More singing]

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands! If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands! If you're happy and you know it…

One, two, three, start!

[Final song from The Romany Diamonds]

[Applause]

A recording of this transcript can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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