

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Publications and Research

College of Staten Island

---

2017

### Documenting Documentaries: Flotsam of Prejudice

Rebecca Schiff

*CUNY College of Staten Island*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/si\\_pubs/84](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/si_pubs/84)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

Sare Patra: Romani Action, New York University -- April 28, 2017

## Documenting Documentaries: Flotsam of Prejudice

May I say how honored I am to be able to play if only a small part in this gathering, this extended conversation. I attended the conference for the first time last year, and I truly and deeply appreciate its significance, its importance, and the contribution it's made and continues to make.

As you've heard, I'm an academic librarian working on a research paper dealing with collection development of documentary films about the Roma, and whether such films can serve to dispel and deconstruct the many cultural, historical, sometimes fanciful distortions and stereotypes that continue to confront the Romani people today. In my work, I've come across a number of unanticipated experiences that brought my research to a more palpable level. The experiences may not come as a revelation to many of you, but I was nonetheless taken aback by the culturally insensitive notions I found floating around in the popular imagination, even in the world of higher education. The random encounters I had with students, faculty, and fellow librarians further alerted me as to how pervasive the misunderstandings of the dominant culture and its projected fantasies onto the Roma continue to be. Some of the examples are disconcerting and some are sad.

Here are some cases. About a year ago, I organized a campus screening of Mona Nicoara's documentary film, *Our School*, co-sponsored by the college Library and its School of Education. The film deals with the blatant, institutionalized racism facing Roma children in

Romania when they try to enter the regular school system. The issue, of course, is not confined to Romania but exists elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, where students are placed in segregated Roma-only schools, special schools, known as practical schools, where they are placed in classrooms for children with disabilities. And, if they do find themselves integrated within a regular class, they are relegated to the back of the room. In order to promote the program the Education department produced a flyer with the working title, *School Segregation Beyond the U.S.: The Plight of the Roma*. Something in that title didn't sit right with me, and I emailed the Dean of the school to recommend dropping the "beyond the U.S." part. I thought if you included those words the question of Roma segregation might appear to have an interest only insofar as it related to the domestic racism in this country rather than as a separate, tragic injustice in its own right. Furthermore the evident similarities between the racism the Roma face and school segregation in the U.S. would almost certainly be brought up in a post-screening discussion of the film, maybe even to be *discovered* by the viewers. But I think Roma life should be viewed through its own lens. Fortunately the Dean was easily persuaded to make the change. The film, by the way, continues to be screened each semester by students in the School of Education.

But the truly poignant moment in that first screening came about when one of the students in the class, a graduate student whom I'd known for some time since she worked in the Library sought me out. She rolled up her sleeve and displayed her tattoo, *Gypsy*, written in huge cursive letters down her forearm, "I don't know how I can live with this now," she said, despairingly. "I didn't know anything about what *Gypsy* really meant. I'm ashamed and embarrassed." She went on to explain she was a Fleetwood Mac fan, especially fond of Stevie Nicks, and when she heard their song "Gypsy" the first time, she immediately related

to it since she never seemed to live in one place, seemed instead to be an eternal wanderer, who couldn't keep a job, and she saw herself as a "free spirit."

Another example. In trying to have my research published, I contacted several scholarly library journals, and I received a rather startling response from the editor of one of the more prominent ones. My proposal furnished essential information about the Romani people, also known as Roma, also known as Gypsies. The editor's response was, "Your future article sounds like one that would be of interest, especially if you emphasize the criteria needed to develop a film collection that librarians might be able to use for other subject areas beyond *Romanian Studies*. So expanding your article to ethnic and geographical studies would be important."

Yet another case. Last fall I attended a New York Technical Services Librarian forum held at the New York Public Library. The event's title was, *Like Nailing Jell-o to a Wall: the Maintenance of Library of Congress Subject Headings*. Juicy stuff, perhaps but of particular interest to me since as with other ethnic minorities and marginalized groups (African-Americans; Native Americans), the Roma have a long history concerning the way the group self-identifies, and the labeling that the outside or majority community uses to define the group. Needless to say, this has been a sensitive issue. It wasn't until the summer of 2001 that the Library of Congress, after years of lobbying by librarians, Romani scholars and activists, most notably Dr. Ian Hancock, along with representatives of some political constituencies, officially changed the pejorative and historically inaccurate subject term *Gypsies* to *Romanies*. I sat through two hours hearing about recently approved headings such as *garden gnomes*; *stop and frisk (law enforcement)*; *gender-neutral toilet facilities*;

the controversy between the Sea of Japan, labeled as such on American maps, and the East Sea, as it is known on Korean ones. The Senior Cataloguing Policy Specialist at the Library of Congress giving the talk went on to say that there is enormous responsibility in maintaining LC subject headings, in that you need to remove bias, keep updating, and put emotions aside.

And still there was no mention of the term *Romanies*. After the formal presentation, I got a chance to ask the librarian privately about the change. She explained that she had planned to talk about it in her presentation, but about forty-five minutes before speaking, she scrapped it because she thought it is still too controversial to deal with. She continued, “We were pressured to change the term, and you must know that they all don’t define themselves by *Romanies*; they still use *Gypsies* and there’s a lot of infighting among them. Let me say that this is not the *final solution*. Oh, dear,” she paused, “I guess I used a poor choice of words. Let’s just say it’s an ongoing issue.”

I should add that in 2007, a scathing article about the library subject headings change entitled “Vanishing Gypsies” appeared in the Charleston Conference Proceedings, written by Alice Crossetto. Crossetto, I’m sad to say, seems brazen enough to write, “In recalling the description of this ethnic group, by its very nature and overwhelming anonymity, how can anyone speak on its behalf? This ethnicity is so spread out—how can one person, one group speak on behalf of an amorphous ethnicity?”

These encounters, experiences, call them what you will, left me with troubled feelings. It’s apparent that so many people out there know so very little about the Roma. Working as I do in a field that *usually* prides itself in providing information and resources for learning about

*all* subjects, and in particular concerning issues of racism, representation, and diversity, I do believe that librarians can become a partner in this endeavor to raise awareness about Romani representation and *mis*representation. We can host film screenings, in particular films by Romani filmmakers, lectures, forums, and exhibits—things we already do for other groups. Events memorializing World War II and the Holocaust, ought to acknowledge the only other people who were subjected to total extermination by the Nazis—man, woman, and child. And information about current issues regarding migrants, refugees, and human rights, should also be widely disseminated.

Enough said. Altogether my anecdotal account intends to say only this—that there is still a long way to go, practically and theoretically, in order to give the Romani people a proper, fair, unprejudiced hearing before the court of the family of peoples. But saying this over and over again, to this audience in particular, may be, literally and figuratively and aphoristically, preaching to the choir.

Thanks very much. I welcome your questions and comments.

## References

- Crosetto, A. (2008). The vanishing Gypsies. In B. R .Bernhardt & T. Daniels (Eds.), *Charleston Conference Proceedings, 2007* (pp.133-138). Westport, Ct: Libraries Unlimited.
- Library of Congress. (2011). *Romanies – LC linked data service: Authorities & vocabularies*. Retrieved from <http://id.loc.gov/authorities/subjects/sh85058109.html>
- New York Technical Services Librarians. (2016). *Like nailing jell-o to a wall: The maintenance of Library of Congress subject headings*. Retrieved from <http://nytsl.org/nytsl/like-nailing-jell-o-to-a-wall-the-maintenance-of-lcsh/>