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## The Practice of Testimony and Social Intervention: The Roma in Montpellier, France

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The Practice of Testimony and Social Intervention:  
The Roma in Montpellier, France

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**Abstract**

This project was generously funded by the Hoskins Global Scholar Program [<https://www.bgsu.edu/international-programs-and-partnerships/education-abroad/scholarships/hoskins-global-scholar-program.html>], which made it possible to research the situation of the Roma in Montpellier, France during the spring of 2015. This project challenges some preconceptions targeting this population and explores contemporary responses by the city of Montpellier to integrate the Roma into the mainstream society while also flagging issues that still seek resolution. It is part of the “Hoskins Papers” section of the *International ResearchScape Journal*.

## Introduction

Who are the Roma? To me, the Roma were the people I saw everyday while studying abroad in France and Spain, people with whom I crossed paths in the street, whether it was in front of churches or the local grocery store. They were an enigma, in other words, I had no idea who they were besides a group of people who begged for money and seemed to have no active place within French or Spanish society. I knew nothing of their heritage or how they had arrived in Western Europe. My desire to unveil the mystery they created in my mind led me to question my European friends. They told me that they are simply gypsies and that they are not to be trusted. I was warned against communicating with them and told not to give them money. After hearing such strong opinions and stereotypes, I began to question— why? Why are they labeled as such? How does a stereotype lay claim to an entire minority? My desire to find an answer to these questions led to my research on the Roma. I came to realize through my research and volunteer work in Montpellier, France, graciously funded by the Hoskins Global Scholar Program, that overgeneralizations and biased remarks about the Roma stemmed from an ignorance of this population and that through education one can overcome the limitations that a closed mind fosters.

## Groundwork

Before embarking for Montpellier, I began researching Roma and reaching out to contacts in Montpellier as directed by my mentor Dr. Beatrice Guenther. She kindly put me in contact with two of her friends, Bernadette and Daniel Gatouillat, who reside in Montpellier. Madame Gatouillat responded quickly to my questions and offered to house me while I conducted my research, as well as put me in contact with the organizations that aid Roma with whom she was familiar. Having established the

groundwork, I planned a first trip to Montpellier from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> of March 2015, and then scheduled a second trip that lasted from the 15<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> of May 2015. The March trip helped to solidify contacts in the area, with whom I stayed in contact via email, and exposed me to the Roma population of Montpellier. While in Montpellier the first time, I met with Marie-Paule Cordonnier and Denise Jaubert, both Roma mediators through the NGO, ATD Quart Monde (All Together in Dignity Fourth World), an international organization that works towards the eradication of poverty throughout the world. Their vision statement declares their war against poverty:

We hold a vision of a world without poverty, a society where each person is respected. Poverty is an affront to human dignity, and people in poverty have unique knowledge and experience that can lower the barriers separating people and communities. ATD Fourth World is a movement that gathers people from all backgrounds in order to think, act, and live together differently.<sup>1</sup>

The May trip afforded me the opportunity to interview again people I had previously spoken with as well as set up meetings with CLAT, Centre de Lutte anti-tuberculeuse, [Center for fighting against tuberculosis.] I was fortunate to meet with Dr. Catherine Corbeau, the director of CLAT. Over dinner at her home, she explained to me the health concerns faced by Roma with other social justice workers. While at dinner I met Danièle Grenier Turpin, former director of UNISAT (National Union of Institutions for Social Action for the Tsiganes (Romany)) and current volunteer for MDM (Doctors of the World). I will return to the specific health concerns faced by Roma later in this paper.

In addition to interviewing Danièle Granier Turpin and Dr. Catherine Corbeau, I

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<sup>1</sup> <http://atd-fourthworld.org/who-we-are/vision/>

interviewed Slavka Radenez, a Roma from Bulgaria who did her master studies in France and who currently works with the Roma community in Montpellier. Slavka explained to me firsthand the struggles facing Roma, as she identifies with the community on a personal level. My time spent with Slavka showed me the struggles facing the Roma in a new light, such as forced evacuations, fear of familial separation, lack of schooling due to xenophobia, and a fear of the French state. Before continuing further, I would like to review Roma history briefly.

### Historical context

What does *Roma* mean? The term Roma comes from the Roma language, Romaní, and translates to man or married man. Roma was first introduced in 1971 as an umbrella term to label the vast ethnic groups all stemming from the same point of origin, in northwestern India. This umbrella term encompasses Roma, Gypsies, Travellers, Manouches, Ashkali, Sinti, and Boyash. The European Union is essential to combat the issues of racism and discrimination among Roma, as well as to create and to fund educational initiatives directed towards raising the education level and helping them to escape a cyclical poverty. Roma have been present within EU politics since the 1970s. However, within the last twenty-five years more time and resources have been dedicated to them. “Since the mid-1990s, Roma have become a political project imagined and sustained by non-Roma, such as civil society and national and international advocates, but has also included Romani elite, which has had a crucial role in elevating Roma up the political agenda in the European Union (EU) and its member states” (McGarry 759). In addition to having political backing from the EU, the International Romani Union (IRU) and the Roma National Congress have been working together since the 1970s to adopt and use the term Roma as all-encompassing.

The use of such a term makes lobbying and representing all of the groups easier.

Where are the Roma from? Roma populations have been traced back through linguistic, anthropological, historical, and genetic data to northwestern India. Many scholars believe that Roma left their point of origin between the 5<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries (Common Era). After leaving India, they migrated “through Persia, Armenia, Greece and the Slavic-speaking parts of the Balkans” (Mendizabal et al. 1). Roma continued to migrate from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries onward settling in Eastern and Western Europe. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Roma arrived in Spain and Portugal, and those who settled there are today most commonly referred to as Gypsies.



Before continuing, I would like to highlight the historical marginalization faced by the Roma: slavery; racism; and persecution during the Holocaust. Many Roma were forced into slavery after arriving in Eastern Europe and remained slaves until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Romania, equality between Roma and non-Roma was not put into law until 1923 and was not put into effect until between 1940 and 1944.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 220,000 Roma were exterminated during the Holocaust. More recently, on January 3, 2015, a Roma infant passed away in the town of Essonne, France

<sup>2</sup> Loret, Nils. *Les Roms en France, un problème? Les dessous de la gestion sécuritaire d'une question sociale*. Juin 2013. p. 20.

and the mayor refused to permit the interment of the child.<sup>3</sup> Another instance occurred in Montpellier, France in April of this year, when Dominique Granier, a delegate of Force ouvrière (FO) of TaM (Transportation of the urban area of Montpellier), proposed the creation of a bus strictly for Roma. His justification was that the Roma pose a health risk to the rest of the population due to their lack of hygiene. This not only underscores a xenophobic ideal but, as the article states, reminds one of the segregation that occurred in the United States through the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> It is important to reiterate that this controversy occurred while I was conducting my research in Montpellier.



(Photo credit: 90' Enquêtes)

### A little story to start...

Prior to my second trip to Montpellier, I was waiting for my train at the station in Alcalá de Henares. While waiting, I was approached by a woman, whom most Alcaláinos (citizens of Alcalá de Henares) would refer to as one of the city's gypsies. She advanced towards me saying

*No tengas miedo* (Don't be scared), to which I quipped back, *No tengo miedo*, (I'm not scared). She introduced herself to me saying her name was Carmen. I told her my name, Philip. She then proceeded to ask me if I would like my fortune told or if I had any spare money. I told her that I didn't have enough time to hear my fortune because I needed to catch a train shortly, but that I did have some spare money. So, I reached into the pocket of my jeans and pulled out a few euros and placed them in her hand. She then again asked if I would care to hear my fortune, I replied again, *no*, that I had to catch a train. She then extended her hand out towards me and offered me a sprig of rosemary and a little blue rock that she told me would protect me on my journey. I said *gracias* and she wished me a pleasant journey. I then boarded my train. While on the train I thought back to my interaction with her—her words, her actions, and her persistence. Then, I thought about all the people who were around us—their faces, their looks, looks that displayed a sense of caution or relief that she had not approached them, looks that seemed to say *Why is he talking to her? Be careful! Don't give her money! Tell her to work! Tell her to leave you alone!* These looks not only revealed what I had been told previously about Roma, but also revealed how I had been taught to think. I had let these stereotypes penetrate my thoughts. My interaction with Carmen helped me to self-reflect on my shortcomings and to be aware of the prejudices that had infiltrated my mind. That experience taught me to be more self-reflecting as well as to push myself outside of my comfort zone and to rise above societal misconceptions of this population in order to learn from them and better connect with this topic.

### Conclusions from interviews

Interviewing mediators and interacting with the Roma led me to

<sup>3</sup> "Un maire de l'Essonne refuse l'inhumation d'un bébé Rom dans sa commune." *Leparisien.fr*. 3 Jan. 2016. Web. 14 Nov. 2015.

<<http://www.leparisien.fr/flash-actualite-politique/un-maire-de-l-essonne-refuse-l-inhumation-d-un-bebe-rom-dans-sa-commune-03-01-2015-4416727.php#xtref=https://www.google.com/>>.

<sup>4</sup> De Montvalon, Jean-Baptiste. "A Montpellier, l'idée d'un bus réservé aux Roms crée la polémique." *Le Monde.fr*. 10 Apr. 2015. Web. 12 Nov. 2015.

[http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2015/04/10/a-montpellier-l-idee-d-un-bus-reserve-aux-roms-cree-la-polemique\\_4614049\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2015/04/10/a-montpellier-l-idee-d-un-bus-reserve-aux-roms-cree-la-polemique_4614049_823448.html), n.d.

conclude that three issues face the Roma: Social Acceptance; Healthcare; and Education. Behind these obstacles perhaps lies the biggest hindrance, the French Constitution, which refers to a Republican tradition of assimilation and a strong opposition to “positive discrimination” (the French term for “affirmative action”):

...the term ‘Roma’ refers to a concept of ethnicity, which cannot be used under French law to construct public policies. The French republican tradition, which involves a strict interpretation of the principle of equality, does not allow measures to be specifically targeted at a particular ethnic group. Article 1 of the Constitution of 4 October 1958 states that the Republic shall ensure equality before the law, without distinction in terms of origin, race or religion. The French government therefore firmly refuses to allow any differentiation of rights based on belonging to a community defined by its origin, and will continue to do so in the context of national, Community and international processes.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, Article 1 renders any laws mentioning ethnicity unconstitutional and therefore the French government is unable to pass laws that would aid them or any other minority group. The only option afforded to Roma is assimilation into French society. However, they are not afforded the means to integrate; that is, easy access to education,

<sup>5</sup> An equal place in French society: *French government strategy for Roma integration within the framework of the Communication from the Commission of 5 April 2011 and the Council conclusion of 19 May 2011* p. 1

French language courses, vocational training etc.

### Social Acceptance

How does one achieve social acceptance when one doesn’t even reside within society? The Roma with whom I interacted live illegally on empty plots of land on the outskirts of town because that is the only place they can find sufficient land to build their homes. Homes that are made by their hands, mixing caravans, scrap metal, tarps, boards, and anything that can be used to fabricate a shelter from the elements. It is important to note that their homes have no electricity or plumbing.



This photo displays a Roma encampment in Montpellier. As one can see from the picture, the homes resemble a shantytown. Marie-Paule introduced Madame Gatouillat and myself to the Roma families with whom she works. Thanks to Marie-Paule, I was able to visit a Roma encampment. When I walked into the encampment, I noticed that everyone was observing me. Marie-Paule quickly introduced Mme Gatouillat and me to the community and we were warmly welcomed. After introducing myself and speaking in French, I went from home to home with the children collecting chairs and then setting them up along with tables

<sup>6</sup> Photo credit: Stanchescu, Dorin. "Près du luxe, les mendiants: Port-Marianne: Ils sont riches, très riches. mais d'esprit. Rencontre avec les 60 familles du camp rom." *Midi Libre* 17 Aug. 2015. Print.

directly in the middle of all of their houses. After we finished setting up, I was approached by some of the kids to read to them while others asked me to help them with their reading. Along with reading, we colored and I taught them how to make paper airplanes. We spent the last few minutes of my visit throwing paper airplanes and speaking in French. When it came time to leave, I helped to return the tables and chairs and pick up the scattered paper airplanes. As we were leaving the encampment, the children followed us out all the while asking when we would return. I left there feeling extremely grateful for their hospitality and kindness but also with a sense of sadness. I saw firsthand the conditions they live in—no electricity and no running water. Access to water requires a long-distance walk to a public drinking fountain after which they carry heavy water jugs back home. It is hard to imagine people living in such precarious conditions within a first-world country.

As stated above, the Roms reside illegally on plots of land on the outskirts of town. Forced evacuations threaten the homes and safety of the Roma because they have no legal right to reside where they make their homes. The image below is taken from a 90' *Enquêtes: Les Roms: immersion dans une communauté mal aimée*; it accurately shows the brutality of a forced evacuation and what takes place after the inhabitants are forcibly removed from their homes.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, I did not witness any forced evacuations while in Montpellier.



(Photo credit: 90' Enquêtes)

One of the biggest obstacles to social acceptance in my opinion is forced evacuations. Not only do they create unnecessary daily stress, they also result in long lasting psychological damage in the children that can be observed by their reluctance to attend school for fear of familial separation. Slavka walked me through what she calls a typical *expulsion* (forced evacuation). She told me to imagine waking up at 5 am to find my home and neighbors' homes surrounded by police. The police explain through a megaphone that you have approximately 10 minutes and sometimes less to gather your affairs and vacate the premises. Slavka stressed that it is illegal to destroy personal property and not to allow someone sufficient time to collect their personal belongings according to Article 426 of the French Civil Code.<sup>8</sup> Slavka explained that after the Roma are forcibly evacuated they then watch as bulldozers destroy their homes. In addition to the psychological damage that results from an *expulsion*, many times official documents can be lost. Without official documents (passports, licenses, birth certificates) new problems arise; for example, they cannot prove that they are European citizens. They no longer possess

<sup>7</sup> "90 Enquêtes: Les Roms Immersion Dans Une Communauté Mal Aimée." *90 Minutes Enquêtes* 2015, 26 May 2015. Web. 8 Nov. 2015. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lJE7j4ho\\_ek](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lJE7j4ho_ek)>.

<sup>8</sup> Art. 426 du code civil: Protection du logement, des meubles et des objets personnels du majeur protégé, <http://www.senat.fr/rap/106-212/106-21234.html>

the right to reside in France, and children can no longer be eligible for education.

### Healthcare

Access to healthcare can be one of the hardest obstacles facing Roma. Fortunately, MDM and CLAT offer health services to them. As I stated earlier, I attended a dinner party with Dr. Catherine Corbeau where I asked her and Danièle Granier Turpin all of my questions regarding Roma healthcare. A simple dinner party allowed me to understand essential health issues facing this population (hygiene, nutrition, sexual health, tuberculosis, and normal health concerns [such as diabetes, heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure]) as well as the services MDM and CLAT offer to the Roma population, such as free medical health care, vaccinations, and help applying for access to public health insurance (Le PASS— *Permanence d'accès aux soins de santé*).

When I asked what le PASS was and how one obtains it, I was told that it was a public assistance health card valid for one year that covers the whole family. In order for a family to obtain it, they have to fill out an application in French, which poses a problem for Roma who have very limited French language skills. In order to be eligible for health coverage, the family must have resided in France for a minimum of three months and provide proof of address or residence. Since many Roma reside illegally in encampments, providing proof of residence is almost impossible to do. Many mediators will help them with this process, although sometimes listing their agency as the address of the family. Another issue that arises from obtaining le PASS is that according to French immigration law, after residing in France for a total of three months, one must obtain employment or have proof of financial means to continue residing in the country, and if employment

or financial proof is not obtained, they must leave the country or face deportation.<sup>9</sup> This creates a catch 22 because many Roma are too anxious to come forward and apply for healthcare out of fear of being deported back to Eastern Europe. In addition to these services, MDM visit Roma encampments and provide health care as well as sexual education to reduce the spread of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI's).

I would now like to direct my attention towards key healthcare issues mentioned by MDM and Dr. Catherine Corbeau, which challenge the Roma population. First, I mention hygiene as a major concern due to the environment in which Roma live, specifically their lack of plumbing. They are unable to attain basic hygiene measures that one can normally obtain by living in a modernized home—electricity and plumbing. Also, due to the extreme poverty in which they live, they have difficulty purchasing healthcare essentials: soap; toothpaste; deodorant; etc. Second, I list nutrition because, due to their poverty, they have a hard time obtaining nutritional food to sustain them as well as to maintain food in a safe manner due to a lack of modern methods to preserve food, in short: refrigeration. Food poisoning is a risk that many Roma face because they do not have the means to store food safely. Third, I mention sexual health as a main concern; both Slavka Radenez and Danièle Turpin informed me that there is little sexual education within the Roma community, which results in a higher number of sexually transmitted infections and young pregnancies. Along with sexual health, prostitution is a concern as some young Roma turn to prostitution as a means to

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<sup>9</sup> Referenced Article 11

[http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid=04F3A5F42AD186926AC94BA1E07EAFDF.tpdila08v\\_2?idSectionTA=LEGISCTA000006088048&cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000266495&dateTexte=20060725](http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid=04F3A5F42AD186926AC94BA1E07EAFDF.tpdila08v_2?idSectionTA=LEGISCTA000006088048&cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000266495&dateTexte=20060725)

support themselves and their families. They prostitute themselves to *gadjé* or non-Roma. I learned more about prostitution in the Roma community through the documentary by 90' Enquêtes, which touches on the prostitution of young male Roma, many under the age of 18, with older French men at the Gare du Nord in Paris. Fourth, I list tuberculosis because according to Dr. Corbeau, tuberculosis is still a main concern even though it seems to be declining within the community. She said that her organization offers tuberculosis testing and screening for Roma. She also told me that they record and report the cases they discover and offer medical care to those who are infected. Dr. Corbeau stated that they are fortunate not to have many cases of tuberculosis in Montpellier, but that it is still a concern with Roma who travel to and from their homes in Eastern Europe. Lastly, I mention normal health concerns to highlight that Roma have the same health concerns (heart disease, obesity, diabetes, cancer, high blood pressure, etc.) as the rest of us. What makes this more significant for them is the fact that they face more hindrances in accessing healthcare than a typical French person would experience.

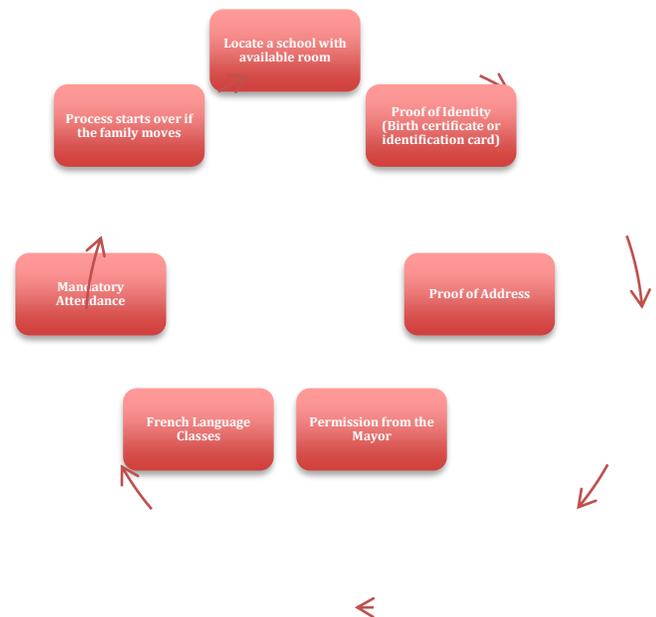
## Education

The last obstacle facing Roma in my opinion is education. We have already discussed social acceptance and healthcare and how both impede Roma inclusion and acceptance within the French context. I would like to begin this section with a quotation from *Political and Legislative Framework for the Education of Roma Children Reference Texts and Support Systems*:

Studies show that for long-term development, the problem of low education levels is one of the most pressing issues facing the Roma as the lack of education creates barriers

to employment, healthy lifestyles, and participation in civil society.<sup>10</sup>

This section is heavily based on my conversations with Slavka Radenez, Denise Jaubert (Roma mediator through ATD Quart Monde), and Madame Joelle Schneider (kindergarten teacher at Blaise Pascal Primary School in Montpellier, France). I will first start with Slavka Radenez' and Denise Jaubert's explanation of how to enroll a Roma youth in school. I have also attached below a chart that I put together explaining the difficulties that Roma associate with enrolling in school.



As the chart displays, the first step to being enrolled is locating a school with available room. Many times mediators are the ones who volunteer their time tracking down schools with available room. Next, the child must have valid proof of identity whether it be a birth certificate or a passport. Third,

<sup>10</sup> "Political and Legislative Framework for the Education of Roma Children Reference Texts and Support Systems," <https://pestalozziprogrammelibrary.wordpress.com/2015/01/03/political-and-legislative-framework-for-the-education-of-roma-children-reference-texts-and-support-system/>, p. 6.

they need to have proof of residence, which is all but impossible for them to provide since they live illegally on an open plot of land. Here is where the mediators really help Roma, because many mediators will list their personal addresses or the address of the agency they volunteer with as the legal residence of the child. Fourth, permission from the mayor of the town must be granted to the child. It is important to note that the mayor is required legally to educate every youth residing within his or her jurisdiction as stated within the French Constitution. After receiving permission from the mayor, mandatory French language courses are imposed on the child to ensure they can effectively communicate and succeed within French courses. The issue with these courses is twofold: first, many times the students have to wait until an available class opens up; and second, they have to pass the course before being able to enroll in regular courses. After they have successfully passed the language courses, they must then attend school without missing class in order to be successful. Lastly, if they are forcibly evacuated or move, the process has to start all over again. Many times simply enrolling in school can take from several months to a year.

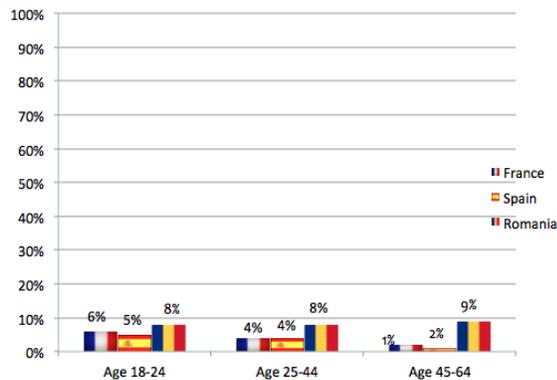
In addition to the process for enrollment, I have identified six main obstacles: distance; valid proof of identity; attendance; local governance; bullying; and fear of familial separation. If one considers distance, we have to remember that Roma live on the outskirts of towns and therefore have longer distances to travel in order to access education, which tends to take place within the town limits. Also, they are not able to go to whichever school they prefer or even the closest school. They can only attend the school that has adequate room for them. Moving on to valid proof of identity, let us reflect on forced evacuations. What occurs if a child has lost their proof of identity in an evacuation? Quite simply, the child has no access to education until he or

she can furnish some form of valid identification. Attendance may be one of the biggest obstacles for Roma youth, as many will skip school in order to help their families earn money. Sometimes, it is a choice between education and eating. The mayor can either serve as a hindrance or be a support, as is illustrated by the story mentioned earlier about the mayor who refused to bury an infant Roma. One can easily see that discrimination is present and poses a threat to young Romas' success in education. Next, the issue of bullying arises for Roma youth due to a lack of hygiene and a marginalized presence within society. Lastly, a fear of familial separation leads many children not to want to go to school; many parents also do not want to have their children attend school for fear they will never see one another again if they are forcibly evacuated while the children are at school. While interviewing Joelle Schneider, I asked her to name the biggest issue facing Roma education. She replied that a lack of attendance and familial pressure to earn money to support the family unit were noticeable obstacles to education.

Some additional data relating to the secondary education completion rate among Roma bears mentioning. The following chart only compares France, Spain and Romania.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Roma (household members) who have completed at least upper secondary education (vocational or general), by EU Member State and age (%) 2011 Study  
[http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014\\_roma-survey\\_education\\_tk0113748enc.pdf](http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014_roma-survey_education_tk0113748enc.pdf)



As one can see from the data, a very small percentage of Roma complete secondary education in these three countries. It is also important to note that secondary education is defined by this study as vocational or general.

On a more positive note regarding education, while visiting an encampment I spoke with a young Roma woman who had recently graduated from high school. To many, this would not carry anything of importance. However, to her and to her community it meant so much. As you can see from the data provided, a small percentage finish schooling in her age group. She told me of her plans to attend university, but before enrolling, she first wanted to return to Romania long enough to visit family she had left behind and to pass her driver's test. After I finished asking her questions, she asked me a few questions. She wanted to know where I was from. I told her that I was from the United States and that I was currently studying in Alcalá de Henares, Spain. She then asked me how I had arrived in Europe. I responded nonchalantly that I flew over to Spain and then rode a train up to Montpellier. She looked back at me awestruck. What I did not realize at that time was that she had never had the luxury of flying in an airplane, let alone riding on a train. Her forms of transportation were extremely limited; she had only ridden in the back of a caravan to travel to France. It was hard for her to imagine that I took a plane to Europe because that was a form of transportation

not afforded to her. Her question opened my eyes to the world I live in and the one in which she resides.

## Conclusion

The term Roma encompasses seven minorities: Roma, Gypsies, Travellers, Manouches, Ashkali, Sinti and Boyash. Their origins have been traced back to Northwestern India through linguistic, historical, genetic, and anthropological evidences. My time spent in Montpellier and my interviews with mediators and volunteers, along with interaction with Roma individuals led me to conclude that three key issues face Roma in France: social acceptance; healthcare; and education. Roma inclusion is no easy task due to these three hindrances; however, mediators and volunteers dedicate their time to ensure Roma have the best opportunities for social inclusion.

I believe that affordable housing or housing options that permit Roma to live within the city and disperse among the general population would aid in reducing societal misconceptions and prove beneficial for Roma inclusion. That being said, I personally believe that they should not be forced to assimilate into French society and that they should be permitted to maintain their culture without fear of having to integrate fully. However, as stated earlier, the French republican model mandates just that—full assimilation—but does not provide any aid for the process of assimilating. This flawed system only further perpetuates Roma exclusion as well as the exclusion of other minorities, rendering them invisible and removing any cultural or societal value they potentially possess. As David Blatt points out in “Immigrant Politics in a Republican Nation,” the republican model was not always enforced in relation to the North African immigrants but was only reinforced when xenophobic sentiments surfaced after it became evident that North African

immigrants were in France to stay in the 1980s. Consequently, the republican model of assimilation was once again enacted.<sup>12</sup> I argue that the republican model is not the best approach and that a mandate for total assimilation into a culture is an affront to every culture. Roma as well as any immigrant should be afforded the opportunity to thrive within any context: free to maintain their culture without being forced to assimilate into the dominant society.

Lastly, I would like to conclude with a story and some advice with the hope that this research will motivate others to explore and investigate a topic they are curious about or would like to discover. One Saturday I accompanied Madame Gatouillat to *La Bibliothèque de la rue*, which translates as “the library in the street.” She is a regular volunteer and runs her library through ATD-Quart Monde. It is designed as an outreach program to the Gypsy population in Montpellier. When we arrived at the site, I quickly noted similarities between the Gypsy population and Roma population. Both resided on the outskirts of town, while the Gypsies lived in homes with electricity and plumbing. I quickly observed the ghettoized neighborhood in which they lived: far from town, with only other Gypsies and trash in the street. While I was observing, I helped Mme Gatouillat unload her car. I carried blankets, books, and board games. We set up shop in the middle of the street between houses. We spread blankets on the ground and children quickly started emerging with smiles on their faces and then they surrounded me because I was new. They asked me what my name was. Then they asked me if I was French. I told them that I was not. This response confused them seeing how I was speaking in French. They

then asked if I spoke other languages, and I responded that I speak French, Spanish, and English. Quickly one little boy yelled out that I was a gypsy just like him and that he spoke French, Spanish, Romaní, and a little bit of English. I had to tell him that I was actually from the United States when he started to speak to me in Romaní. He then asked me one last question. He asked me if my teeth were real. His question startled me and struck me as quite random. I responded yes that my teeth were real. All he could muster up was a wow. My conversation with that little boy revealed a lot. It showed the lack of access to healthcare among a community that has legal French citizenship and it showed childhood innocence. My ability to speak multiple languages and the fact that I traveled made me, in his eyes, a gypsy just like him.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with some advice. The next time you see someone on the street or someone you see daily, take the time to talk and reach out. Social interaction and the willingness to help are the tools that we all possess to bring about social change and accept everyone from all different backgrounds. Also, if you have a passion or a desire to explore, do not just contemplate it; instead make it a reality. I first came into contact with Roma when I was studying abroad in Angers, France in 2010. After studying abroad two more times, I still had yet to pursue the answers to the questions I had regarding Roma, but finally in Spring 2015, I did just that. I explored my surroundings and educated myself about Roma and Roma issues. In addition to this, I have continued to keep up to date with current Roma matters, as well as to educate those around me on the importance of social interaction and social justice.

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<sup>12</sup> Blatt, David. “Immigrant Politics in a Republican Nation.” *Post-Colonial Cultures in France*. Ed. Hargreaves, Alec G., and Mark McKinney 1961. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.

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