

Teaching the History of Romani Slavery: Advancing Justice and Combatting Anti-Roma Racism

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Critical
Romani Studies

Abstract

This article delves into how the history of the system of slavery in the Romanian Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia can be taught to advance justice and prevent and combat anti-Roma racism. Although this specific form of racism is prevalent in Europe and beyond, and despite the recognition of history education's role in fighting racism, the history of Roma slavery is notably absent from European curricula and textbooks. This omission often leads to victim-blaming due to a lack of understanding of Roma's oppression and marginalisation. However, teaching a traumatic period of history brings dilemmas. Drawing on American slavery education, we discuss both pitfalls and best practices for the teaching of Roma slavery, if the goal is to prevent anti-Roma racism. We highlight four significant steps to effectively teach Roma slavery: (a) emphasise the perspectives, stories, and narratives of the enslaved, (b) provide a balanced account that highlights acts of resistance, resilience, and the agency of enslaved Roma in the face of slavery's brutality, (c) explicitly connect past injustices to present-day racism, demonstrating the ongoing legacies and impacts of Roma slavery and how the vicious circle can be broken, and finally (d) highlight examples of allyship between Roma and non-Roma, and to provide anti-racist role models for all pupils.

Keywords

- Antigypsyism
- Anti-Roma racism
- Roma slavery
- Slavery education

Introduction

Romani people were enslaved in the territories of contemporary Romania (Wallachia and Moldavia) for over 500 years (1300s–1856), by the crown or voivodeships, boyars, and the Orthodox Church^[1] (Achim 2004; Petcuț 2015). It was an ethnic-based chattel slavery: Roma were considered property who could be bought and sold. Approximately 250,000 Roma were freed at abolition (Achim 2004).

But the significance of this history extends beyond Romania's borders. First and foremost, it is an integral part of European history. It is not only the history of a minority group but part of the shared history of all Europeans. Second, it concerns Romani communities across Europe and the Americas, as many Roma escaped before or emigrated after abolition. Descendants of enslaved Roma are now citizens of countries all over Europe, in addition to Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Columbia, and the United States. Third, Romani individuals and families today continue to live with the consequences of this history, through phenomena like transgenerational trauma (Hancock 1987; Furtună 2022). Finally, centuries of enslavement shaped the power dynamics and relations between Romani and non-Romani populations. Anti-Roma racism travels across borders, carrying with it persistent racist attitudes and stereotypes, as well as structures of cultural, economic, and social marginalisation.

Anti-Roma racism remains one of the most persistent forms of racism in Europe. Rostas describes it as operating across four levels: the public imagination, discourse, institutions, and practices (2022, 30). A survey by the Centre for European Policy Studies highlights manifestations such as negative stereotypes, discrimination, institutional ignorance, political mobilisation against Roma, unequal law enforcement, and violence (Carrera, Rostas, and Vosyliūtė 2017). Historically, anti-Roma racism has enabled atrocities such as genocides and slavery. Its persistence today demands critical reflection and proactive interventions, including within the education sector.

Despite this knowledge of the widespread nature of anti-Roma racism both historically and today, a report from 2020 found that the history of Romani slavery is nearly non-existent in European curricula and textbooks (Spielhaus et al. 2020). This is staggering, given that history education is regarded as an important tool to combat intolerance and build a fairer and more just society. The Spielhaus et al. (2020) report specifically addresses the potentially damaging consequences of not explicating the connection between slavery and present-day anti-Roma racism:

Very few books refer to slavery, maltreatment and discrimination as possible causes for the marginalisation of minorities. When social structures such as institutional and structural racism are not mentioned, the blame can easily be placed on the victims (Spielhaus et al. 2020, 23–24).

¹ The syntagma “Orthodox Church” in the context of slaveholders in the medieval period in Romanian territory refers, in particular, to the monasteries and annexed administrative units that held slaves.

In other words, oblivion creates or maintain a thriving ground for racism, where present-day marginalisation and poverty may be explained through victim-blaming. Teaching the history of slavery could, on the contrary, provide a fact-based understanding of how the past continues to shape the present. Thus, this paper aims to discuss how the history of Romani slavery can be taught to promote anti-racism and social justice in European education systems.

1. Current State of Romani Slavery Education in Romania and Europe

Research indicates that the history of Romani slavery is largely absent from both Romanian and European educational curricula (Spielhaus et al. 2020; David 2021). This absence reflects a broader marginalisation. Although the research literature on the history of Roma slavery is slowly growing (see, for example, Achim 1998; Necula 2012; Iordachi 2019; Chiriac 2020; Furtună 2020), it is still not included in the mainstream canon of slavery history. For instance, it not even mentioned in *The Routledge History of Slavery* or *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* (Lauritzen and Selling 2023).

The Romanian Ministry of Education's lack of interest reflects this neglect. There are no official textbooks, auxiliary teaching materials, or compulsory subjects that broadly address Romani slavery or Romani history. Without systemic inclusion, teaching about Romani slavery remains marginal, despite the critical need for it in fostering intercultural understanding and combatting anti-Roma racism.

Yet, in Romania particularly, there are numerous examples of associations and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs)^[2] trying to include elements of Romani culture and history, including the history of Romani slavery, either in classroom activities or extracurricular activities. A common feature of these initiatives is that they are initiated, developed, and implemented by private institutions, not public authorities or the state. Furthermore, the state often refuses to do so, or significantly delays adopting these models of good practice and integrating them into the mandatory national curriculum. As a result, they remain isolated, limited to small regions, and last for short periods of time.

An example of auxiliary educational material addressing Romani culture and history is *Caietul de 10* (Workbook of 10), developed by the National Centre for Roma Culture “Romano Kher”, coordinated by political scientist Florin Nasture. The workbook is an intercultural guide containing lessons and worksheets especially for students, some of which can also be used with parents. Among the topics included in the workbook are themes such as: Romani personalities, “Why Roma and not G*psy/Ț*gan?”, Stereotypes and prejudices, Equal rights vs. discrimination, Who are Roma?, Romani language, Calendar of Romani holidays, Institutions and structures of Romani representative organisations, and so on.

2 Examples of NGOs that have implemented projects with the aim of integrating Romani cultural elements in educational activities are: Amare Rromentza Roma Centre, with the project “Stop school dropout – Promote education!”, in the community of Boldesti-Scaeni, Prahova County; Roma Education Fund Romania, with the project “Build your own future through education”, implemented in Mures County; Centrul comunitar “Împreună”, with the project “Together for an inclusive school”, implemented in Ilfov County.

The workbook also includes resources and additional materials, “Did you know?” sections, definitions of fundamental terms and concepts related to intercultural education, themes for reflection, and questions for further discussion. The content is also available online on the institution’s platform^[3] and can be accessed easily by teachers, trainers in intercultural education, or even directly by students or parents.

Another example of an initiative that sought to bridge the gap is the project “Segregation on the minus, Diversity on the plus”, which integrated Romani culture, language, history, and literature into the educational curriculum through a transdisciplinary approach. The project’s aim was to include elements of interculturality in everyday lessons, even though the national curriculum did not include this. The curriculum developed through the project had the potential to serve as a model of good practice at a national level, particularly because of the positive results and impacts^[4] observed in pilot schools. At the conclusion of the project, in late 2024, an official document with a series of concrete recommendations was submitted to the Ministry of Education. These recommendations were based on public consultations involving key educational actors. They sought to initiate broader discussions and to propose the integration of these practices into the national curriculum. The proposals were issued at the end of 2024 and were monitored the following year.^[5]

In addition to methodological developments like “Segregation on the minus, diversity on the plus”, NGOs and civil society have focused extensively on training teachers. They offer professional development in intercultural pedagogical methods, highlighting the diversity and specificity of Romani culture and history. Through these trainings, many teachers encounter the topics of Romani slavery and the Roma Holocaust for the first time – highlighting the absence of these subjects in their university-level teacher education.

Moreover, NGOs and civil society have made continuous and strategic efforts to influence public policies. A significant moment came in 2023, when the National Education Law underwent reform. NGOs^[6] presented detailed and precise recommendations, arguing for the inclusion of Romani culture,

3 See: <https://ikultura.ro/biblioteca/caietul-de-10>.

4 At the end of the project a measurable evaluation was conducted to observe how the introduction of Romani cultural elements (Romani history, Romani language, art, and culture, and so on) in different subjects (Romanian language and literature, English language, French language, Civic culture, History, Mathematics, and so on) had a positive impact on the evolution of pupils in the educational process in terms of performance, school results, and effectiveness.

5 The official document appeared because of the activity: A7. *Develop and submit to the Ministry of Education a set of recommendations for the application of the Methodology for the prevention and elimination of school segregation of Roma children*, in the framework of the project: “Segregare pe minus, Diversitate pe plus – Educatie de la egal la egal pentru comunitatile roma si non roma”, implemented by Teach for Romania and Roma Education Fund Romania, in the period March 2021 – February 2024.

6 A relevant example, that has circulated since the period of public consultations, initiated by the Ministry of Education, is the document signed by the Community Development Agency “Together” and Amare Rromentza Rroma Centre entitled, Submission Letter – Proposed amendments to the Draft Law on Pre-university Education, aiming at the inclusion of Roma pupils. It sought to attract other associations and members of civil society to join this endeavour to include Romani cultural elements such as Romani language and history, as part of the national obligatory curriculum in the new education law. A concrete recommendation in this regard is the one in Article 45: “In schools with at least 20 per cent of pupils belonging to a national minority, the language of the respective national minority and the history and culture of the respective national minority will be compulsory subjects, which will be part of the common core curriculum.”

history, and language into the national curriculum. Among these recommendations was a strong and explicit demand, made on behalf of Romani civil society organisations, for the inclusion of a substantial chapter on the slavery of Roma in the Romanian territories. However, these recommendations, were almost completely ignored, and a substantial chapter on Romani slavery – or Romani history as a distinct comprehensive school subject – will probably have to wait until any future fundamental change of the National Education Law in Romania is made.

Attempts also have been made to provide educational resources that address Romani slavery more thoroughly. One notable example is the auxiliary textbook *Istoria și Tradițiile Romilor*, authored by Petre Petcuț, Delia Grigore, and Mariana Sandu. This textbook covers Romani slavery from multiple perspectives, including Romani groups and traditional occupations, the settlement of Roma in various Romanian Principalities, their socio-economic and political status, the legal frameworks that codified their status as property, the practices of buying and selling slaves, and the long process toward emancipation in modern Europe.

However, *Istoria și Tradițiile Romilor* was published in 2003 as an auxiliary textbook intended mainly for sixth and seventh-year students (and occasionally for high school students) who chose to study Romani history and traditions as an optional subject. Furthermore, the book was published with support from UNICEF and printed in only 1,000 copies, distributed free of charge in selected schools – primarily in schools with high Romani student populations. This case underlines two important points: first, the initiative was again driven by an NGO, and the Ministry of Education was only co-opted as a partner; second, the book's reach was limited and only appeared in schools with predominantly Romani students. Most Romanian students were not exposed to its content. Yet the need for education about Romani slavery is not only for Romani students, but for all students across the Romanian educational system.

In short, NGOs and civil society in Romania have developed and piloted promising methodologies for teaching Romani slavery, trained teachers in Romani history and pedagogy, and made substantial efforts to influence state policies. However, the Ministry of Education has yet to fully utilise or integrate these models. The persistent lag in adopting these initiatives into the national curriculum reveals a systemic issue: While private and civil society actors work actively to fill the gaps, the responsibility for mainstream, compulsory education on Romani history remains neglected by the state.

In this article, we will discuss how Romani slavery can be taught in a way that contributes to anti-racism and social justice in a European context. Spielhaus et al. (2020) conclude their report by stating that there is a “necessity for European nations that aim to promote inclusion and antidiscrimination to address both the lack of representation of Roma and their misrepresentation in European curricula and textbooks”. The Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers reached a similar conclusion for the first time in 2020, when they adopted a recommendation calling on its 47 member states to include the history of Roma and Travellers in school curricula and teaching materials (Council of Europe 2020).

At the same time, research has consistently highlighted the complexities and potential pitfalls inherent in teaching history and controversial issues. This paper therefore poses the following question: How can the history of Romani slavery be taught in ways that contribute to advancing social justice and preventing and combatting anti-Roma racism? Our discussion draws on both historical scholarship on Romani slavery and

pedagogical research concerning the teaching of Romani history and slavery more broadly. This paper is conceptual and programmatic in nature, rather than empirical, aiming to articulate and critically examine some challenges that effective education about Romani slavery may face in contemporary classrooms. Our objective is to propose pedagogical approaches suited for mixed classrooms – comprising Roma, non-Roma, and other racialized students – across diverse age groups and educational contexts.

2. Approaches to Teaching Romani Slavery

2.1 Terminology: Centre the Stories of Enslaved People through Language

Scholars in slavery studies have highlighted that language matters. In a community-sourced writing guide, senior slavery scholars proposed principles for writing about slavery that “complicates the assumptions embedded in language that have been passed down and normalized” (Foreman et al. 2023). The most important principle they propose, regarding language to consider and language to avoid, is a shift in perspective from the enslaver-perspective to the perspective of the enslaved. In the following we will discuss what such a shift may imply when teaching Romani slavery.

Slave vs. enslaved: The term “slave” is dehumanising and implies a slaveowner point of view. In the words of Browning-Mullis (2020), “The noun slave implies that she was, at her core, a slave. The adjective enslaved reveals that though in bondage, bondage was not her core existence.” The term “slave” is in other words ripping people of humanity by reducing enslaved Romani people to belongings. Using the term “enslaved” on the other hand, highlights that slavery was something that was done to people. As Matache (2021) puts it: “the term enslaved (forced to become a slave) also calls attention to the act and culpability of forcing someone into slavery, not only to the status of slave”. Romani people were not “born slaves” but born with either “free” or “slave” status.

Slaveholder vs. enslaver: According to Matache (2021), “In Romania, the *enslavers* (those who forced people into slavery and held them there) are still timidly called ‘boyars’, the nobility.” “Slave owner” or “slave masters” are also frequently used terms. These terms are better replaced by “enslaver”, which emphasises their active participation in creating and upholding the institution of slavery rather than taking their status for granted.

Runaway slave vs. fugitive from slavery: Similarly, people escaping from slavery are often referred to as “runaway slave”, which again is from the enslaver’s perspective, who saw escaping as wrong. Alternative ways to describe this would be “fugitives from slavery”, “self-liberated”, or “self-emancipated” individuals.

Roma people vs. racial slur: A range of derogatory terms are used to describe Romani people in Europe, including variations of t*gan/z*geuner and G*psy.^[7] The term “t*gan” developed from the Greek word

⁷ The right to self-definition should always be respected. For example, in the UK, “Gypsy” is commonly used as a self-definition. But in most contexts, it is considered derogatory and should be avoided. Therefore, here, to minimise the reproduction of racial slurs, we replace the letters y and i within such terms with an asterisk.

“atinganos”, which meant “untouchable, impure” (Grigore 2001, 36).^[8] The origin of the term is thus in itself derogatory, which is strengthened by its entanglement with Romani slavery in Romania. The term *t*gan* appears for the first time in writing in the Romanian territories in 1385, together with the first mention of enslaved Roma, when the ruler of Wallachia Dan I gives the Tismana monastery 40 “aṭigani” (DRH 1972–76, 75). From this first appearance onwards, the term continues to appear repeatedly with each that follows, throughout the medieval documents. At the same time a particularly important aspect of the status of Roma in that period is shown; the fact that they were enslaved. During almost 500 years of slavery, through the indivisible use of the two terms “rob” (meaning slave) and “t*gan”, the two became synonymous. For example, in documents from the fourteenth century from Wallachia, in a total of seven documents, Roma are mentioned as follows: a. 1385 “t*gani, 40 settlements”; a. 1387 “40 t*gani settlements”; a. 1388 “300 t*gani settlements”; a. 1390 “17 tent t*gani”; a. 1391–1392 “40 settlements of t*gani”; a. 1392 “t*gani, 40 settlements”; a. 1392 “t*gani, 300 settlements” (DRH 1972–76, 19–45). In the following centuries, when Roma start to be identified with anthroponyms, with personal names, in many cases, forms of overidentification even appear, although the enumeration of the ethnic category mentioned by anthroponyms is specified at the beginning, their names are accompanied by the exonym “t*ganul”, as in the examples from Wallachia: a. 1470 “Andrea t*ganul”, a. 1558 “Oprea t*ganul”, a. 1582 “Răducul t*ganul”, a. 1582 “Rova țiganul”, a. 1599 “Buda t*ganul”. So, although the ethnic category mentioned is specified by formulas such as “and the t*ganii” at the beginning, their names are accompanied by the exonym “t*ganul”, and this type of notation is used without exception, with excessive rigour, most likely for the purposes of clear identification and better management of the situation of enslaved Roma in the two regions of Moldavia and Wallachia.

The historical use of the term “t*gan” in Romanian territories is evidenced by official documents from the medieval period to the Second World War, including significant events like the abolition of Romani slavery^[9] and the deportation of Roma during the Holocaust.^[10] These official records, along with the widespread use of derived words and anthroponyms in the Romanian language, have deeply entrenched the term at both administrative and societal levels. Despite its widespread use across Europe since the fourteenth century,^[11] it is important to note that the term “t*gan/G**psy” does not originate from the Romani language, where “Rrom” or “Rom” signifies a man of Roma ethnicity and “Rromni” or “Romni”

8 Greek etymology is also supported by the initial form of the term “atigan”, with particular privative initial “a”, which refers directly to the Greek term “atinganoi”, where the morpheme “a” has the same role, its meaning being “ne”. Later, this initial “a” disappeared, and “Tsigani” remained – a term that has been preserved until today.

9 “The Legion for the emancipation of all Gypsies from the Romanian Principality. Art. 1. Slavery is abolished. Any Gypsy who is in this category today should be released and immediately registered among the guardians of the State” (Petcuț, Grigore, and Sandu 2003, 61).

10 Citing from a report of the gendarmerie inspectorate: “Situation Regarding the Evacuation of Nomadic and Non-nomadic Gypsies in Transnistria” (Ionescu 2000, 58).

11 Here is a list of locations and dates in sequential order: “Serbia – 1348; Bulgaria – 1378; Wallachia – 1385; Slovenia – 1387; Czechia – 1399; Transylvania, the Land of Făgăraș – 1390–1406; Germany – 1407; Moldavia – 1414; Switzerland – 1414; France – 1418; Belgium – 1419; Holland – 1420; Italy – 1422; Spain – 1425; Denmark – 1433; Poland – 1501; Russia – 1501; Scotland – 1505; England – 1522; Portugal – 1526; Norway – 1540; Finland – 1559; and Wales – 1579” (Sărau 1998, 56).

a woman, highlighting a clear distinction in self-identification among Romani people. This historical and linguistic context underscores the complexity and longevity of the term's usage in Romania and beyond.

2.2 Teaching What Really Happened

In their proposed reparations agenda for Roma, Matache and Bhabha (2021) start with the category of “truth telling”, which implies both “systematic collection of accurate historical information” (263) and “information diffusion” (264). Including Romani slavery in curricula, textbooks, and teachings is a powerful tool for information diffusion.

When doing so, however, it is crucial that the content speaks truth about what really happened. There has been a tendency to relativise Romani slavery, also in the language used to describe it. In the Romanian language, it is commonly referred to as “robie” (“bondage”), for example, in Romanian textbooks (David 2021). The tendency to relativise and minimise the importance of Romani slavery in Romanian history is also present in school textbooks. For example: in a year-12 textbook, published in 2007 by the publishing house Gimnasium, the chapter entitled “Modern Romania. Majority and Minorities” describes the situation of Romani slavery as follows: “Ever since their settlement here, Roma have been considered, due to their backward standard of living and physical appearance, an inferior population. Therefore, from the very beginning, they were marginalised and isolated.” This statement shows, on the one hand, that the problem of slavery is not the responsibility of the administration and enslavers, it was not a factor determined and controlled by them, and on the other, it insinuates the idea that Roma themselves are to blame^[12] for the situation they found themselves in due to some of the characteristics attributed to them. But, added to the importance of truthful teaching around what happened during the period of slavery, it is important to remember the effect this tutoring might have on different students. Recent years have revealed the minority stress that racialized students experience, including in education. The topic of slavery often elicits strong emotional reactions from students, due to the horrific acts of violence, cruelty, and dehumanisation carried out during slavery (The Historical Association 2007). The lingering impacts of this historical event continue to affect many, and students may respond with anger, apathy, blame, guilt, or racism (The Historical Association 2007).

Ward (2023) identifies three broad categories of minority stress: (1) fear of being dominated by a more powerful figure, (2) fears of being rejected and abandoned, and (3) fears of not being understood by, or being able to understand, the world (Ward 2023, 98). If translating this to slavery education, slavery is a history of white domination over racialized people, such as Roma. If slavery is taught from a White perspective, the teaching might continue this domination. The importance of including the racialized perspective in slavery education is also emphasised by the second and third point: A white perspective on slavery might be experienced as rejection and abandonment, and indeed cause experiences of not being able to understand or be understood by the world.

12 An idea also emphasised by David, Cezara (2021) in *Teaching of Roma History is Distorted and Racist*.

Matache (2021) argues, that the very silencing of Romani slavery is a racist mechanism: Racism caused the enslaved and their descendants to interpret the oppression as personal weakness and a cause of shame, which in turn served the cause of the oppressor who benefit from the story being silenced. Or as Costache (2021) notes, “this suppression of history serves a very specific purpose; to superimpose a false sense of racial harmony on the world”. This leads us to our next topic, that slavery education with an anti-racist ambition should explicate present-day racism as a consequence of slavery.

2.3 Interpret Present-day Racism as a Consequence of Slavery

Loewen (2009, 190) argues that slavery in the United States has a twin legacy: cultural racism, and social and economic inferiority. In the following, we will use these categories to discuss aspects of teaching about Romani enslavement.

Cultural racism

During the Covid-19 pandemic, anti-Roma racism peaked in Europe. In seeking to understand this peak of anti-Roma prejudice, researchers have unpacked how specific stereotypes and prejudices were not invented during the Covid-pandemic, but that they were rather a continuation of already-existing prejudices, some of which date back to slavery (Dumitru 2021; Matache, Leaning, and Bhabha 2021). Matache, Leaning, and Bhabha (2021) show how epidemics often have led to the scapegoating of marginalised communities historically. This includes the portrayal of Roma as carriers of diseases. One specific example was that enslaved nomadic Roma often were forbidden from entering cities at the first signs of an epidemic outbreak and were expelled from Bucharest for a whole month during a plague outbreak in 1793, as they were seen as carriers (Matache, Leaning, and Bhabha 2021, 96). The anti-Roma rhetoric and practices against Roma during the Covid pandemic bear striking similarities to these historical abuses. As Matache, Leaning, and Bhabha (2021) note:

From Brazil to Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine, local or state authorities have enacted disproportionate or militarized measures in Romani neighborhoods or towns. Many justify the racist narrative portraying Roma as carriers of disease and as a collective health and safety threat (102).

Another example of a continuation of cultural racism, is the portrayal of Romani women. In a case study of the portrayal of Romani women in abolitionist literature, Maria Luiza Medeleanu found that the authors portray Romani women as sexualised and passive victims; “promiscuity mixed with a kind of primitivism” (Medeleanu 2022, 6). Despite counter-histories of Romani women fighting for their freedom (2022, 7–8), Medeleanu shows through examples from arts, literature and the media that the exoticized image of Romani women created during slavery continues to the present-day.

More research is needed to trace the genealogy of anti-Roma prejudices and stereotypes, and its connection to Romani slavery. In the meantime, teachers may use the above-described examples, or examples from other contexts, to illustrate how slavery gives rise to specific racist prejudices and to discuss similarities with the racism faced by other previously enslaved peoples and Roma in Romania.

More than anything, the teachers and students could reflect on how slavery may have contributed to normalising a racial hierarchy in Romania, which brings us to the second part of slavery's legacy: social and economic inferiority.

Social and economic inferiority

Social and economic inferiority, or inequity, can be understood as a materialised form of racism. Racism promotes a hierarchy, where racialized people are placed below those considered white or superior. This logic of oppression is intersectional, and race intersects with social class and sex (Loewen 2010, 188). In his book from 2009, Loewen writes that in the United States, a median white family had 12 times as much wealth as a median black family (189). Loewen argues that this significant wealth gap exists due to the accumulation of wealth during slavery in white families, which has been passed on through generations, and the lack of opportunity for African-Americans to do the same. There is a huge research gap when it comes to the specific link between Romani slavery in and its consequences in Romania and beyond, and similar figures do not exist for Roma and white Romanians. But survey data from 2021 show that 78 per cent of Roma are at risk of poverty and 53 per cent of Roma experience severe material deprivation.

As Matache (2020) notes, “it is self-evident that the history of 500 years of economic exploitation stripped Roma people of any prospect of accumulating intergenerational wealth”. To illustrate this point, Necula (2012) makes a rough calculation of the unpaid salaries from the period of enslavement. He argues that for an approximate number of 266,335 enslaved Roma, who were enslaved for 471 years, with € 5.4 as an average salary per day, the total would be € 247,249,700,235. While the figure itself cannot be regarded as a precise economic estimate, given the absence of rigorous methodology and the simplifications made, it nonetheless highlights the scale of the wealth extracted from enslaved populations. It serves as a reminder that the effects of enslavement extended beyond the immediate deprivation of freedom: enslaved Roma were systematically denied the right to benefit from the economic value of their labour, while simultaneously contributing to the accumulation of wealth among enslavers and the broader society. As such, even imperfect estimates like Necula's can function as important pedagogical tools. They invite critical engagement with the historical economic dimensions of slavery and offer a point of departure for discussions on the enduring socio-economic disparities faced by Romani communities in Romania today. By situating such figures within broader historical and structural analyses, educators and students alike can better understand how historical injustices continue to reverberate across generations.

If the goal, then, is to advance social justice and prevent anti-Roma racism – including the structural racism that unequal distribution of privilege is – the history of slavery must be unpacked, and narratives of earned and justified privileges challenged. The South African academic Jonathan Jansen has introduced the concept of “disrupting received knowledge” through post-conflict pedagogy. He emphasises that education can play a crucial role in challenging inherited narratives which contribute to racial tensions, for example, by fostering critical dialogue among students of different racial backgrounds. Jansen argues that even though the children in the classrooms have not experienced the history in question directly, they have inherited memories from their communities, parents, and grandparents. Disrupting indirect knowledge is important to challenge the taken-for-granted positions of groups in society. As Loewen puts it:

If members of the elite come to think that their privilege was historically justified and earned, it will be hard to persuade them to yield opportunity to others. If members of deprived groups come to think that their deprivation is their own fault, then there will be no need to use force or violence to keep them in their places (Loewen 2018, 304).

Even without specific figures comparing Roma and white Romanians, the poverty experienced by Roma in Romania could be used as a starting point to explore racialized poverty as a consequence of slavery. Students could be challenged to reconstruct how wealth may have been passed on from slaveowners to their descendants.

2.4 Avoid a ‘Curriculum of Tragedy’: Romani Agency and Resistance

The most important argument for including agency and resistance in the teaching of slavery, is that these aspects need to be included if the history is to be taught as correctly as possible: Omitting enslaved people’s agency and resistance would be a kind of falsification of history. That slavery history concerns historical trauma of marginalised communities such as the Roma, adds to the importance of transcending a solely tragedy-focused curriculum. While it is essential to acknowledge the harsh realities and injustices faced by enslaved Roma, it’s equally important to illuminate their agency, resilience, and acts of resistance to avoid reducing their history to a mere “curriculum of tragedy” (Berry and Stovall, 2013). Brazelton (2021) highlights a problematic trend where educational content disproportionately focuses on suffering, which he claims is disrespectful to historical victims of slavery, might normalise “Black suffering” (57), and might potentially re-traumatise “students living in slavery’s afterlife” (59).

To avoid this pitfall, it is important to include stories of resistance and resilience among enslaved Roma, countering the notion of passivity. A first step towards moving beyond enslaved Roma as an anonymous and passive mass of people is to name enslaved individuals where possible, acknowledging individuals’ personhood and individual stories (Foreman et al. 2023). Although in its very beginning, research unveils stories of resistance and resilience among Roma. Examples include fugitives from slavery (Hancock 1987), and how enslaved Roma used “formal requests for legal emancipation” in courts and the role this played in the struggle for resisting enslavement (Furtună 2020, 201). Such narratives underscore the active efforts by Romani individuals to challenge and resist their oppressive circumstances.

In teaching about Romani resistance, teachers might find it useful to use the impactful work of Alina Serban, a Romani actor, playwright, and director, and her film *Letter of Forgiveness*. The film, based on a true story, portrays the enslaved Roma mother Maria in 1855 Romania, and her fight to secure freedom for her son Dincă. Their acts of bravery contributed to the historical movement towards the abolition of slavery (Central Council of German Sinti and Roma and Documentation and Culture Centre of German Sinti and Roma 2021).

Another important story of resistance is that of Ioana Tinculeasa Rudăreasa. Rudăreasa fought over a decade (from 1843 to 1856) for liberation from slavery for herself and her family. What was extraordinary in her case is that all her initiatives were enacted in a Wallachian court at the time, which was truly

remarkable for an enslaved Roma. At the same time, this story is taken from official documents and confirms that the boyars were against the abolition of slavery and by all means tried to stop it, or at least to prolong it. But the resistance of enslaved Roma, and furthermore their resilience, was manifested even at the legislative level in a court of law through the remarkable efforts of Ioana Rudăreasa. ERIAC has developed a book, teaching materials, and a didactic game about Romani resistance, which also includes the story of Ioana Rudăreasa and her fight for freedom from slavery (ERIAC 2020). Another Romani cultural institution that has integrated the incredible story of Ioana Rudăreasa in an artistic act is the National Centre for Culture “Romano Kher” through the theatrical project “Roma Voices from the Slavery Period” (Romano Kher, n.d.).

In addition, we believe that literature also plays an important role. Mateo Maximoff’s book *The Price of Freedom*, portrays a movement of Romani slaves as warriors, fighters against the oppressive system and the enslavers. Therefore, even if the story is slightly nuanced and idealised and does not refer to specific moments in history, it describes the general framework of slavery and sheds light on the revolt. Although the book is a work of fiction, revolt and resistance were part of the history of Romani slavery, and such literary examples can be seen as metaphors for the true resistance of those people during slavery. Literature can reconstruct moments and communicate this history to students in a different way to textbooks.

But examples of resistance and resilience can also be found today, where Romani individuals continue to resist the aftermath of slavery. Notable examples include the Romani musician and politician Damian Draghici, who had a memorial plaque installed at the Tismana monastery, marking a historical reference point to Romani slaves (Matache and Bhabha 2016), or academics such as Margareta Matache, who has played a crucial role in highlighting the link between Romani slavery and contemporary anti-Roma racism, emphasising the importance of acknowledging past injustices to address current inequalities and discrimination effectively (Matache and Bhabha 2021).

Incorporating such narratives in slavery education is particularly important if the goal is to prevent and combat anti-Roma racism, as this approach moves beyond stereotypes, challenges prejudices, and gives examples of historical justice and reparations.

2.5 Highlight Examples of Allyship between Roma and non-Roma

When all are guilty, no one is; confessions of collective guilt are the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits, and the very magnitude of the crime the best excuse for doing nothing.

– Hannah Arendt

In Wallachia and Moldavia, people were born with a status as either free or enslaved. The agency of each individual within this established system was therefore limited. But as Hannah Arendt describes above, “confessions of collective guilt are the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits”. In other words, portraying all people born with a free status as guilty might lead to us collectively cleansing them of guilt. It is important to uphold that, even within this system of slavery, it was possible for those born

free to see slavery as wrong, and to resist it. This will not purge the collective of enslavers of guilt but rather confirm that their contribution to enslavement was an active choice.

A similar point is highlighted by The Historical Association (2007), who point out that the downplay of the role of white abolitionists in favour of economic factors and Black resistance can alienate white working-class pupils, and that a focus solely on technological inferiority and brutality can lead students to dismiss the past and its people as inferior. Such forms of alienation might also lead to an alienation from present-day anti-racism.

Loewen (2009, 192) uses the term “racial nationalism” to describe the tendency to identify with people of our own race – either through feeling pride for their achievements or shame for their brutality. Although breaking patterns of racial nationalism is a goal in anti-racist education, it is also important to be aware of its existence. And because of this, it is also important to provide white students who “still harbor some racial nationalism within their minds” with white, anti-racist role models (Loewen 2010, 202).

In educational settings, this could mean including stories of non-Romani people who in different ways fought against slavery. According to Achim, liberal intellectuals played a crucial role in putting emancipation from slavery on the agenda in the 1840s and 1850s (Achim 2010, 24). Two examples to mention here could be the Wallachian Prince Alexandru II Ghica who in 1836 freed 4,000 enslaved Roma. The act was important in itself but also had a great ripple effect as it initiated a policy where the state purchased Roma who had been enslaved by private enslavers and gave them their freedom. Another example could be Mihail Kogălniceanu, who wrote several academic works in order to contribute to the abolitionist movement.^[13]

The historical examples of non-Romani allies could be used as a starting point for discussing how non-Romani pupils and students can be allies in the ongoing mobilisation against anti-Roma racism and for historical justice. From this perspective, it might also be worth providing examples of present-day allies. However, if teaching about Romani slavery is to advance social justice and prevent anti-Roma racism, it must centre on Romani perspectives, both in regard to history and to the consequences of slavery today. The topic of non-Romani allyship should be just that, allyship, not the central narrative.

Conclusions and Ways Forward

In concluding, it is essential to acknowledge the state’s responsibility in the educational narrative, particularly in integrating the histories and contributions of marginalised communities. Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in Romania have addressed the need for inclusion of Romani slavery in curricula, developed materials and piloted training of teachers. But their efforts must be supported and adopted into official policies by the Romanian state to achieve broader and more impactful change. Furthermore,

13 See Chiriac (2019) for a description of different works by Kogălniceanu, including Kogălniceanu’s *Esquisse sur l’histoire, les mœurs et la langue des cigains, connus en France sous le nom de Bohémiens, suivie d’un recueil de sept cents mots cigains* from 1837.

the history of Romani slavery also concerns Romani and non-Romani communities outside Romania's borders and should be taught all over Europe and beyond.

At present the teaching of Romani history resembles history teaching in the United States, where Loewen (2018) among others have highlighted a significant bias towards «white» narratives. As we pointed out in our introduction, Spielhaus et al. (2020) found that the history of Romani slavery is close to non-existent in European curricula and textbooks. Where it is included, it is a largely biased and distorted narrative. Such bias is likely to have consequences at many levels. In the United States, the educational gap between white and Black students is larger in social studies than in any other subject (Loewen 2018, 343). This suggests a resistance from minority students against learning a history that appears to assimilate and exclude their own narratives. Knowing that there are significant disparities in education between Romani and non-Romani students in Europe, educational reform seems urgent. In waiting for the states to take responsibility, educators might resist the exclusion of Romani history from their teaching and shift the focus from blaming the victim to addressing institutional and structural racism (Spielhaus et al. 2020, 23–24).

This paper has made a few suggestions regarding how slavery education could be taught:

- Emphasise the perspectives and narratives of the enslaved, ensuring their stories are told in language, visuals, and accounts that reflect their experiences.
- Provide a balanced account that includes both oppression and resilience, showcasing acts of resistance and the agency of Romani individuals alongside stories of suffering, including literature.
- Explicitly connect past injustices to present-day racism, demonstrating the ongoing impacts of Romani slavery and how the vicious circle can be broken.
- Highlight examples of allyship between Roma and non-Roma, illustrating how support for reparations and anti-racism efforts can be enacted today.

Although we see these guiding principles as important, we recognise that this is a contribution to a discussion that is just starting out. For example, the Afro-American educational theorist LaGarrett J. King has proposed a framework he calls “Black Historical Consciousness Principles”. King’s core argument is that American schools often have taught *about* Black history and not *through* Black history. Black history, he argues, has been reduced and used to tell the white narrative. Part of this process has been to portray Black history as a one-dimensional phenomenon – *history* rather than *histories* – which has been defined by “the oppression and liberation paradigm”, where history has been seen from the perspective of the powerful (2020, 336). The “Black Historical Consciousness Principles” are proposed as a tool to recentre Black narratives, present nuanced histories, and portray the full humanity of Black people. The themes he proposes are: Power and Oppression; Black Agency, Resistance, and Perseverance; Africa and the African Diaspora; Black Joy; Black Identity; and Black Historical Contention (2020, 339).

The Recommendations from the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers (2020) share a similar concern. They use the teaching of the Roma Holocaust as a starting point but highlight the importance of complementing teaching of the Holocaust with “historical episodes when Roma and/or Travellers were not victims”, mentioning “positive narratives about Roma and/or Travellers’ history, such as their

contribution to the local, national and European cultural heritage (...), to national economies, such as trade, metalwork and other handicrafts, as well as animal husbandry, (...) [and] various aspects of Roma and/or Travellers' history and culture, such as storytelling, literature, religion, music and traditions”.

King's critique of “the oppression and liberation paradigm” and the additions to Roma Holocaust education proposed by CoE serve as important correctives to this article, where we, in our discussion of the teaching of Roma slavery, have primarily focused on topics resembling “Power and Oppression” and “Black Agency, Resistance, and Perseverance” from King's framework.

This paper therefore also raises a whole set of new questions, for example, related to the relevance of the four remaining Black Historical Consciousness Principles: Africa and the African Diaspora; Black Joy; Black Identities; and Black Historical Contention. The key concepts for teaching about slavery proposed by “Teaching for justice” build up progressively from slavery practiced by Europeans before they invaded the Americas, to the use of sources in current education. Inspired by this, we see a need for discussing whether and how the following questions should be addressed in Romani slavery education: What were the practices of slavery in the Principalities (and related areas) before Roma were enslaved? What were the lives of Roma like before enslavement? How has Romani slavery impacted Romani communities outside of Romania? Should teaching of Romani slavery be linked up with topics such as Romani cultures, intersectionality, present-day resistance movements, and contentious narratives?

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