

Reclaiming the Narrative: A Critical Turn in Romani Studies

Diana Aburas

aburasdiana@gmail.com

PhD candidate at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7419-3464>

Diana Aburas is a PhD candidate in International Studies at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest. She holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology and Political Science as well as a master's degree in East Asian Studies, both from Tel Aviv University. Her current research focuses on the experiences of Roma in higher education across Europe, with particular attention to culture shock, resilience, and identity formation within academic institutions. Her work explores how structural and cultural challenges intersect with memory politics and institutional support in shaping the academic journeys of Romani scholars.



Critical
Romani Studies

Abstract

This article explores the evolution of Romani Studies from a frequently stereotyped field that reified Romani people and fostered several grave misconceptions and biases, such as “Gypsies” are thieves, criminals, or beggars, to a more compounded and interdisciplinary academic field. Initial studies conducted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often romanticised and differentiated Romani people. However, from the mid-twentieth century, studies have encompassed a wider range of perspectives and a more critical examination of the experiences of Roma. Today, studies on Roma aim to dispel prejudice while critically analysing their social realities, histories, and cultural heritages. Through activism, policy involvement, and interdisciplinary research, it seeks to advance Romani agency, inclusion, and rights.

Keywords

- Critical Romani Studies
- Decolonisation
- Gypsylorism
- Intersectionality
- Knowledge production

Introduction

Traditional academic methods, which have their roots in Gypsylorism, have reinforced essentialist views and biases about Romani people, limiting them to symbols of cultural difference and exoticism, rather than recognising their diversity. These reified portrayals have reinforced discriminatory policies and practices that have marginalised Romani people throughout Europe (Hancock 1997; Lee 2000).

However, studies on Roma have undergone a radical change and prevailing, external narratives led to the birth of Critical Romani Studies (CRS). A historic meeting at Gólya Presszó (a café) in Budapest in 2015 marked the beginning of Critical Romani Studies (CRS) as a separate academic and political discipline. Dissatisfied with the limitations of traditional Romani scholarship, frequently dominated by external, Eurocentric, or paternalistic perspectives, this conference brought together Romani and non-Romani activists, educators, and students. This change prompted a more self-reflective, inclusive method that prioritises Romani voices and perspectives; it also emphasised the historical, political, and social struggles of Romani people, challenged conventional scholarship, and gave priority to Romani agency (Kóczé, Rövid, and Zentai 2018). A deeper comprehension of Romani identities has been demanded by academics promoting this movement, including Ethel Brooks, Nicolae Gheorghe, and Ian Hancock. This understanding must acknowledge the historical oppression that Roma have endured and their agency, resilience, and active roles in determining their own futures (Hancock 1997; Brooks 2017).

The path from reification to critical engagement in Romani Studies is examined in this article. It investigates how “Gypsylorists” used to characterise, romanticise, criminalise, or labelled orientalist portrayals that historically affected a large scholarship on Roma (Hancock 2002). This method presented Romani people as disconnected from history and modernity, ignoring their socio-political realities (van Baar 2011b). These romanticised portrayals supported institutional prejudice and exclusionary policies. The traditional framework, namely Gypsylorism, is questioned by Critical Romani Studies, which also disputes its reductionist perspectives and makes the case for the significance of Romani-led research in changing perceptions of Romani people. Critical Romani Studies presents a framework for increased social justice and empowerment in academic and policy circles through this alteration, in addition to redefining how Roma are studied (Gheorghe 2001; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, Mate, and Greku 2023).

Critical Race Theory, Postcolonial Studies, and Social Justice Research (I will elaborate on them later) have all influenced the development of Critical Romani Studies which calls for proactive, emancipatory research practices, methodological reflexivity, and a priority for Romani voices and experiences (Matache and Bhabha 2020). In addition to being the focus of research, CRS academics contend that Roma should also be the creators of knowledge, influencing scholarly and policy discussions that have an impact on their communities (Kóczé 2019). This paradigm change has real-world ramifications for social justice, action, and legislation; it is not merely theoretical. Critical Romani Studies offers a more multifaceted and equitable academic and policy environment by dismantling reified ideas of Romani identity and past, replacing them with those that recognise the diversity and agency of Roma (Brooks 2017).

Early Scholarship on the ‘Gypsy’

The concept of Orientalism which was introduced by Edward W. Said (1978) garnered significant scholarly attention by revealing that Western depictions of the East were not neutral or objective, but rather intricately linked to colonial power dynamics. However, the roots of Orientalist ideology were established during the height of European colonial expansion long before Said. In the late eighteenth century British jurist and colonial researcher Sir William Jones contended that maintaining imperial and economic interests necessitated a thorough comprehension of the culture, customs, and language of the colonised people. By 1784 he had suggested that this kind of knowledge was necessary for a more effective administration, and exploitation, of colonised society (Mate 2024).

Orientalism grew at the same time as economic capitalism. States also set up systems that increasingly controlled and manipulated cultural and creative expression, as well as knowledge creation. In order to support colonial power and commercial interests, these factors combined to create racialized and exoticised perceptions of the “Other especially non-Western peoples (Said 1978; Spivak 1988; Mitchell 1991; Shohat and Stam 1994; Appadurai 1996).

The way colonial administration engaged with, approved points of view on, explained, instructed, and governed over the colonised is extensively examined in Edward Said’s ground-breaking work *Orientalism* (Said 1978). John M. MacKenzie’s theory, which builds on this paradigm, emphasises how Orientalism still permeates contemporary academic knowledge creation, political views, and cultural representation (MacKenzie 1995).

Academic antigypsyism, highlighted in Dezsô Mate’s work, has been a constant in Romani people’s lives since the publication in 1783 of Heinrich Moritz Gottlieb Grellmann’s “Dissertation on the Gypsies”. For hundreds of years, their historical records and memories have been shaped and obliterated by the manifestations of antigypsyism in social sciences (Mate 2024). The way the Romani people were described and managed in academia had a significant impact on national and international practices throughout Europe, ranging from forced assimilation to the Roma Holocaust. Academic antigypsyism, as a result of Grellmann’s publication, spread around the world and had a substantial influence on social sciences and political decision-making over the previous 240 years (Willems 1997; Mate 2024).

Ian Hancock’s scholarship on “Gypsyism” examined the historical memories and misrepresentation of Romani people. His studies demonstrate how “Gypsyists” have created and maintained misconceptions about the “Gypsy”, frequently depicting them as exotic, enigmatic, criminal, or archaic (Hancock 1987; 2002)

According to Angela Kóczé, “Gypsyism is a contemporary challenge to Roma self-representation in an increasingly globalised world, in addition to being a legacy of historical misrepresentation” (Kóczé 2010). As Nicolae Gheorghe notes, pushing Roma into a single, fixed identity, Gypsyism has historically denied them autonomy and the right to self-determination. He urges Roma to be empowered via representation, education, and active involvement in all societal decision-making processes (Gheorghe 2004).

Gypsy Lore Society

The scholarly interest in Roma is longstanding, dating back to the establishment of the Gypsy Lore Society (GLS) in Great Britain in 1888 (<https://www.gypsyloresociety.org>). This society was the first of its kind, dedicated to the systematic study of various ethnic groups, including Cale, Irish Travellers, Ludar, Rom, Romanichels, Romungre, Scottish Travellers, Sinti, and others. Initially, the society published the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, which focused on scholarly customs, folklore, and linguistics.

A complex web of colonial officials, writers, artists, media, legal organisations, and academics created and maintained stereotypes about Roma, which led to a deeply ingrained set of false beliefs that went beyond the GLS or “Gypsylogists” alone. But their influence was widespread because they presented themselves as a community of scientists and academics offering scientific “truths” and denigrating opposing views (Hancock 1987). As a result, their work became the foundation of Gypsylogism. In fact, in a 2000 article, Deborah Lee notes:

[...] for any understanding of Gypsylogism, the foundation and operation of the GLS and publication of the GLS in 1888 and the constitution of ‘The Gypsies’ as specific subjects for study must be the starting point. The members of the GLS and GLS claimed a privileged epistemological position, asserting that they were the only intentionally recognized source of scholarly information about ‘The Gypsies’ (Lee 2000, 133).

By portraying Roma as dishonest, untrustworthy, or prone to criminal activities, several studies strengthened negative stereotypes. These representations strengthened ingrained social preconceptions and legitimised discrimination. The fact that many Roma were compelled to live nomadic lives due to socio-political factors, including persecution, exclusion, and displacement, was not taken into consideration in these early depictions. Colonial attitudes that portrayed marginalised or non-Western cultures as essentially alien or primitive and disinterested in modernity were linked to these depictions. Numerous people have criticised this type of academic romanticism for dehumanising Roma, denying their agency, and causing them to be marginalised in modern European societies (Selling 2022).

Non-Romani academics predominated in the GLS, studying Romani people without including Romani perspectives in scholarly discussions (Acton 1974). Roma were not regarded as intellectual contributors to science but rather as passive subjects of study for many years (Brooks, Colin, and Rostas 2019). The concept that Roma were objects of curiosity rather than active participants in their own history, knowledge production, and self-representation was strengthened by this exclusion. Gypsylogism ignored Roma’s cultural, linguistic, and historical memories in favour of portraying them as a single, static community. Numerous academics have described Roma as people who have not been impacted by history, and who do not participate in contemporary political conflicts or national identities. The ways that Roma have adapted, fought against persecution, preserved their cultural heritage throughout history were overlooked by these essentialist opinions (Acton 1998, Hancock 2002; Mayall 2004; Selling 2022).

Academic discourse has traditionally perpetuated antigypsyism by promoting essentialist and homogenised portrayals of Romani communities. In her scrutiny of the roots of Romani Studies, Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka underlines how scientific racism and frequently silenced Romani voices shaped early scholarship. She promotes a more plural, and context-sensitive approach to ethnic identification and highlights the significance of Romani scholars in dismantling these narratives. Mirga-Kruszelnicka urges a critical reframing of the area, rejecting essentialism, embracing theoretical and methodological diversity, and placing Romani agency at the centre of knowledge production, as opposed to dictating a strict research agenda (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2018).

Research from the GLS has occasionally been used to support discriminatory practices against Roma. For instance, multiple European governments supported forceful sedentarisation programmes, assimilation practices, and even racial profiling by citing linguistic and ethnographic research conducted by Gypsyologist researchers. Gypsyologist studies were cited by racial anthropologists in Nazi Germany to classify Roma as a racial “problem”, which aided in their persecution during the Holocaust (Willems 1997; Lewy 2000; Hancock 2002; Selling 2022).

Societies and academic circles were slow to embrace Romani-led perspectives when Romani intellectuals like Ian Hancock, Ronald Lee, and Nicolae Gheorghe appeared and began challenging GLS narratives. Hancock specifically criticised the GLS for its archaic and patronising practices, arguing that Romani self-representation knowledge productions should be run by Roma themselves (Hancock 1987; Lee 1997; Hancock 2002; Gheorghe 2007).

These critiques illustrate why many Romani academics and activists have turned away from the Gypsyologist legacy and sought to establish Romani-led research institutes that place an emphasis on community-driven scholarship, political activism, and self-representation.

Development of Critical Romani Studies

The flaws in conventional Romani studies, particularly those that were carried out under the influence of Gypsyologism, gave rise to the academic discipline of Critical Romani Studies. These conventional studies were criticised for maintaining essentialist and stereotyped views about “Gypsies” and frequently were directed by Gypsyologist academics. Critical Romani Studies, on the other hand, place a strong emphasis on Romani agency, self-representation, and the historical, social, and political memories of Roma (Lee 1997; Hancock 2002; Gheorghe 2007). Through the perspectives of Romani researchers themselves, the field aims to challenge the marginalisation of Roma in academic discourse and policymaking by showcasing Romani cultures, histories, and voices (Ryder 2019). Romani communities initially began to question prejudice and misconceptions in the 1960s and 1970s, in the spark of Romology, in which Critical Romani Studies had its origins (Hancock 1987; Lee 1997; Gheorghe 2007). Romani academics like Nicolae Gheorghe, Ronald Lee, and Ian Hancock started challenging conventional methods of studying the Romani people and promoting a new paradigm that would give Romani self-representation top priority.

The official recognition of a collective Romani identity and memory was an important breakthrough in the field. During the 1980s and 1990s, academics such as Nicolae Gheorghe contributed to the development of a shared Romani recognition, while recognising the cultural, linguistic, and geographic variety within the Roma people (Hancock 2002; Gheorghe 2007). This was a departure from the one-dimensional representations that prevailed in previous studies.

As Romani activism and political movements gained momentum, particularly with the First World Romani Congress (1971), scholars began to examine Roma not merely as objects of anthropological inquiry but as active participants in shaping their own future. So, with an emphasis on topics like prejudice, forced assimilation, the Romani Holocaust (*Porajmos*), and the struggle for political representation, Critical Romani Studies started to converge with Romani rights organisations. In the 1990s and 2000s Romani scholars began to become more prominent in academia. Grattan Puxon, Ian Hancock, and Ronald Lee all played a significant role in promoting Romani-led scholarship, which favours internal perspectives above external, frequently paternalistic ones. This change highlighted the importance of Romani perspectives in scholarly settings and public policy debates.

Over the last 10–15 years Critical Romani Studies has addressed how historical processes such as colonialism, racism, and nationalism have influenced Romani identity by applying postcolonial theory, intersectionality, and other critical frameworks (van Baar 2011b; Tremlett, McGarry, and Agarin 2014). To make linkages between the challenges Roma and other marginalised groups face, scholars started addressing topics such as gender, class, and the experiences of Romani women (Trehan and Kóczé 2009; Matache 2016; Kóczé 2018). Ioanida Costache argues that although oppressive classifications have historically defined Romani identity, it also gives Romani communities a sense of empowerment and unity. Recognising the intersections of racist and gendered experiences, she highlights the significance of rethinking Romani identity as both performed and embodied. She fosters a new Romani subjectivity based on counter histories and cultural narratives that reject prevailing standards by referencing post-Hegelian hermeneutics and post-positivist realism (Costache 2018).

Scholars like Frantz Fanon (1961), Edward Said (1978), and Gayatri Spivak (1988) gave rise to postcolonial theory, which looks at the long-term implications of colonialism, notably the historical oppression of racialized and marginalised groups by dominating forces. Despite not being colonised in the conventional sense, some academics contend that the treatment of Roma in Europe can be examined via a postcolonial perspective (Acton and Ryder 2013). For example, enslavement in Romania until 1856, forced assimilation, expulsions, and genocide (*Porajmos*) have all been experienced by Romani communities; these events reflect systemic oppression also observed in colonial history (Hancock 2002; Achim 2004; van Baar 2011a; Matache 2016).

Regarding intersectionality, which was first proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, it studies how overlapping social identities – like class, gender, and race – give rise to certain kinds of privilege and oppression. Margareta Matache (2016) highlights the importance of intersectionality in comprehending the experiences of Romani women, whose voices have traditionally been excluded in both male-dominated Romani movement and mainstream feminism (Matache 2016). Angela Kóczé (2018) criticises how gender-specific concerns such as domestic violence, education for Romani girls, and reproductive rights are frequently ignored by EU

initiatives (Kóczé, Zentai, Jovanović, and Vincze 2018). Critical Romani Studies ensure that Romani women's perspectives are not neglected but rather are at the forefront of scholarly and policy debates by employing an intersectional approach. Within Critical Romani Studies there is also recognition of LGBTQ+ individuals. Dezso Mate points out the most noteworthy change is the increased visibility and recognition of feminist activists and Romani LGBTQ+ individuals within both activist and academic domains since mid-2010s. Mate claims the change is rather the consequence of a more profound counter-intellectual current challenging systemic subjugation, such as antigypsyism, anti-Romani racism, and LGBTQ-phobia (Mate 2021).

In addition to these theories, Critical Race Theory is also used in Critical Romani Studies, which questions the notion that racism is merely personal prejudice. It makes the case that racism is systemic and ingrained in organisations, laws, and policies. According to Trehan and Kóczé (2009), Romani exclusion is ingrained in economic and legal systems that systematically disadvantage them, going beyond prejudice while, as stated by van Baar (2011), EU security initiatives frequently portray Roma as a “threat” to the stability of Europe. By employing Critical Race Theory, academics assert that Romani exclusion is the product of deeply ingrained institutions that require active dismantling rather than a mere chance phenomenon.

Another aspect of Critical Romani Studies is the decolonisation of Romani Studies. In her work Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka argues that non-Romani perspectives have historically influenced Romani Studies, reinforcing stigma and structural exclusion (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2022). Critical Romani Studies advocates for a decolonial shift in Romani study and criticises Eurocentric and paternalistic scholarly methods (Kóczé, Rövid, and Zentai 2019).

In the inaugural issue of the *Critical Romani Studies Journal* (Vol.1, No.1, 2018), the authors challenge the historical marginalisation of Roma in scholarly discourse by articulating the need for a forum that prioritises Romani voices and perspectives. In order to address the complexity of Romani experiences, they stress the value of multidisciplinary approaches and the incorporation of critical perspectives. The journal seeks to support scholarly work that empowers and emancipates Romani communities while simultaneously advancing academic understanding (Bogdan et al. 2018).

Critical Romani Studies and Activism

Political and social activism are integrally linked to Critical Romani Studies (CRS), which goes beyond a mere academic trope. By highlighting the importance of knowledge production in empowering Romani communities and influencing policies that address systematic inequalities, scholars at CRS actively seek to close the gap between research and practical activism.

Antigypsyism is a structural and institutionalised kind of racism that influences public attitudes, government acts, and policies, according to CRS researchers. CRS supports advocacy campaigns against racial profiling, police brutality, housing discrimination, and obstacles to education and employment by recording and evaluating these unfair systems (Matache and Bhabha 2020). In the 1990s, for instance, Nicolae Gheorghe (2001) played a key role in promoting Romani political mobilisation, calling for political participation and civil society organisations led by Roma. CRS researchers frequently cooperate

with grassroots movements, international organisations, such as the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe, and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) to promote legal frameworks that safeguard Romani rights in addition to promoting academic knowledge production.

The notion that Romani people should actively promote their memories and lived experiences within knowledge production rather than being passive objects of foreign study or official programs is one of the fundamental principles of CRS. Increasing the number of Romani in academia, government, and civil society leadership is one way to achieve this. Romani intellectuals including Ethel Brooks and Ian Hancock have maintained that policies impacting Roma should be created *with them*, not only *for them*. Initiatives like the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015) and the EU Roma Frameworks that followed, which aimed to involve Romani voices in decision-making processes, reflect this point of view. Nonetheless, top-down strategies that tokenise Romani involvement without actual impact, or that do not question established power systems, continue to draw criticism from CRS researchers.

The significance of solidarity between Romani activism and that of other marginalised groups is also emphasised by CRS researchers. According to scholars such as Mate (2021), who draw on intersectionality and decolonial theory, the oppression of Roma is comparable to that of other racialized and marginalised communities. For instance, analogies have been made between postcolonial disputes and Romani experiences, especially regarding marginalisation, racialized poverty, and forced assimilation. The struggle against anti-Black racism and antigypsyism, with academics emphasising the necessity of inter-movement unity against systematic discrimination and police brutality, feminist movements and Romani women's activism, emphasising the dual prejudice Romani women experience because of their ethnicity and gender (Brooks 2017).

This wider critical involvement guarantees that Romani advocacy is not isolated but rather contributes to the worldwide struggle and call for social justice and human rights. In contrast to traditional Gypsyism, which frequently disassociated itself from political fights, Critical Romani Studies places strong emphasis on political and social activity. Critical Romani Studies strive to eliminate structural oppression and build a more equitable society for Romani communities by shaping policy, advocating for Romani self-representation, and establishing partnerships with other social organisations.

Conclusion

The shift from reification to Critical Romani Studies marks a significant change to the way Roma are viewed, represented, and discussed in scholarly and policy contexts. Conventional Gypsyist methods, which presented Roma as a homogenous and ahistorical people, have long been used to support discriminatory practices and perpetuate prejudices. The dynamic, introspective framework provided by Critical Romani Studies (CRS), on the other hand, acknowledges Roma as an active participant in politics, history, and the creation of knowledge.

CRS opposes paternalistic scholarship and promotes a more egalitarian academic environment that recognises the historical injustices, structural disparities, and current hardships faced by Roma by elevating Romani voices and perspectives.

This paradigm change has been facilitated by Critical Romani and pro-Romani academics, who have argued that intersectionality, self-representation, and political participation are essential components of Romani scholarship.

Ultimately, the shift to Critical Romani Studies is not only a change in academia but also an essential step towards Romani communities' acknowledgement, empowerment, and justice. It is crucial that Romani-led research keeps expanding in order to completely eradicate historical distortions and systemic discrimination, guaranteeing that Roma are no longer subjects of study but rather creators of knowledge and agents of change in their own right.

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