

A Critical Review of Remembrance: Romani Slavery in Romani Activism, Arts, and Research

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Critical
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Abstract

This article examines how the memory of Romani slavery persists in the contemporary collective consciousness of both Roma and non-Roma in Romania. It explores the tension between social amnesia and efforts to rebuild remembrance through activism, arts, and research as a way to understand the past and facilitate truth-telling and reconciliation.

The article examines how – more than 170 years after the final act of abolition of Romani slavery in 1856 during an era of induced oblivion of the memory of Romani slavery – remembrance is beginning, step by step, to be rebuilt through Romani activism, arts, and research contemporary Romania after 1990, when Roma were recognised as a national minority.

It analyses the memory of Romani slavery in Romania through the lens of “social amnesia”, a concept coined by historian Russell Jacoby and defined as society’s repression of remembrance – the Romanian state rejects its negative past not to be placed in a bad light, as oppressor.

Keywords

- Memory
- Roma
- Self-esteem
- Slavery
- Social amnesia

Introduction – Approaches

Romani slavery in the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia (hereinafter, Romanian Principalities) lasted over 500 years – its earliest written attestation was documented in 1385 (Petcuț 2015, 39) and its final act of legal abolition occurred in 1856 (Petcuț 2015, 157). Enslaved Roma were considered property, subjected to extreme exploitation, violence, and abuse (Petcuț 2015, 81–86). Unlike serfs, slaves had no rights, and their families were torn apart at the will of their masters (Petcuț 2015, 78–88).

The abolition process, driven by Romania's modernisation efforts and European pressure, faced strong resistance, particularly from the Orthodox Church and landowners (Petcuț 2015, 135–154). However, only enslavers received compensation (Petcuț 2015, 157–164), and post-abolition policies failed to integrate Roma into society (Petcuț 2015, 171–175), leaving them economically and socially marginalised long after their legal emancipation (Petcuț 2015, 214–221).

The article examines whether members of the Romani minority and broader Romanian society have experienced a chronic lack of collective memory about Romani slavery. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that after 1990, some efforts to remember slavery's history have emerged in Romani activism, arts, and research.

To investigate whether the collective social amnesia concerning Romani slavery in Romania exhibits a comparable pattern, I am using the concept of “social amnesia”. Russell Jacoby defines “social amnesia” as society's willing repression of remembrance – the rejection of its own inconvenient past that puts a group or, in the Romanian case, the state itself, in a negative light, as oppressor. Russell Jacoby describes two forms of social amnesia (*Social Amnesia: A Critique of Contemporary Psychology*, 1975). First, Jacoby frames amnesia as a forgetting of the past and a pseudo-historical consciousness, arguing that “society has lost its memory, and with it, its mind”. Second, he argues that the inability or refusal to think back takes its toll on the inability to think: “[...] exactly because the past is forgotten, it rules unchallenged; to be transcended it must first be remembered. Social amnesia is society's repression of remembrance – society's own past. It is a psychic commodity of the commodity society” (Russell 1975, 3–5).

In addition, I analyse Romani slavery by foregrounding my own positionality as a Romani activist, community worker, scholar, and woman. As an author, I switch between the third person and the first person to openly assume my positionality in my research. I argue that acknowledging cultural background and lived experience does not diminish but strengthens the validity of research, especially when addressing histories of injustice and their ongoing legacies and effects.

Building on scholarship on subjectivity and positionality (Stanley and Wise 1993; Bhabha 1994; Letherby, Scott, and Williams 2013), I highlight the importance of researcher accountability and insist on centring lived experience and empathy rather than detached objectivity. I stress the ethical responsibility of research to avoid reproducing stereotypes, to respect participants, and to approach Romani history with humility and care, developing a methodology in close dialogue with those

interviewed.^[1] Additionally, I argue that scientific literature written by Romani researchers is a more reliable source because it is more empathic with the topic, and it is free of anti-Roma racist biases.

To test my hypothesis, I combined field research (interviews) and a review of literature and artworks that I identified as relevant to and representative of the topic.

The historical foundation of this article is built on a literature review of the scholarship lead by Romani historians, such as Petre Petcuț and Ioan Valentin Negoï, as well as the sociological work of Ian Hancock, Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, and others.^[2]

1 The driving force for my research on Romani slavery is the injustice and internalised stigma within ourselves – members of the Romanian Romani community. I believe that acknowledging one's cultural background and personal involvement in the research topic enhances rather than diminishes the validity of the study, as true understanding arises from embracing subjectivity with honesty and self-awareness (Upadhy 1999). I am a Roma woman, so there are pain and trauma involved in this research. In research, objectivity refers to a viewpoint that is free from personal biases, emotions, or opinions, while subjectivity is influenced by personal perspectives, feelings, or preferences. Objectivity relies on verifiable facts and evidence, whereas subjectivity involves interpretations based on individual experiences and opinions. While striving for objectivity is crucial in research, it's also important to acknowledge and address potential subjectivity, especially in qualitative research in human sciences. In this matter there are important works to consider: *Objectivity and Subjectivity in Social Research* (Letherby, Scott, and Williams 2013), provides a detailed exploration of objectivity and subjectivity, moving beyond the traditional view of them as opposing forces and examining the philosophical underpinnings of objectivity and relativity; *Breaking Out Again. Feminist Ontology and Epistemology* (Stanley and Wise 1993), highlights the importance of accountability in research and the researcher's personal and political standpoints; and *The Location of Culture* (Bhabha 1994) offers a postcolonial perspective on subjectivity and identity, exploring how culture shapes our understanding of the world and how the colonial past of a country influences the thinking embedded in the local research. I emphasise the ethical responsibility of research to acknowledge its subjectivity based on previous knowledge and on both conscious and unconscious internalization of some general views circulated in society and developed into norms of thought, particularly when studying human subjects, to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes or policies, as has happened in history, especially concerning Romani people (Schmidt 2025). In my research, I focus on ensuring respect for people, humility, integrity, no harm to participants, and empathy over condescension and pity. I stress that research must come from a place of deep reflection rather than an authoritative stance. That is why the methodological approach of this research was developed in close consultation with the interviewed persons, sometimes skipping, adding, and changing questions on the way, in direct dialogue with them.

2 To build the historical research basis for this article, I relied on scientific literature primarily written by Romani researchers. I focused mainly on Romani slavery studies elaborated and published by two Romani historians: Petre Petcuț, PhD in history, author of *Roma – Slavery and Freedom: Establishment and Emancipation of a New Ethnic and Social Category at the North of the Danube 1370 – 1914* (2015), editor of *Roma from Romania. Documents. Vol. I (1370–1580)* (2009), co-author of *Textbook of Romani History and Traditions* (2005) and *Romani History and Traditions* (2003); and Ioan Valentin Negoï, PhD in history, history teacher and researcher, creator of Romstoria – explanatory videos aiming to popularise the history of Roma – and of teaching materials, including about Romani slavery in the Romanian countries. I also explore the work of prolific sociologists like Adrian Nicolae Furtună, PhD student, also published in this volume and coordinator of research by National Centre for Roma Culture “Romano Kher” on Romani slavery, founder of the “Romane Rodimata” Cultural and Social Research Centre, coordinator of the booklet “Romani Slavery in Wallachia” (2019), author of “A history of shame. Ideologising discourse between ‘tzigans’ robia in Moldova and Wallachia” and “Romani slavery in the Romanian space” (2019), co-author of “Romani Slavery in Wallachia: Pieces of social history: Sales and donations of children, marriages, requests for emancipation from slavery” (2020), co-author of “Sclavia romilor și locurile memoriei-album de istorie socială: Romani slavery and the places of memory – Album of social history” (2021), and author of “Les Lieux de Memoire and the Legacies of Romani Slavery in the Collective Memory. Case Study in Tismana, Gorj County, Romania” (2022), co-author of the article “Three Documents from the Archive of Roma Enslavement” (2024). I also relied on the findings of “Rromii... în căutarea stimei de sine” [Roma... in search for their self-esteem], the first exploratory study on this topic in the world, carried out by the research team of Amare Rromentza Rroma Centre (2007). Co-funded by UNICEF Romania, the study examined the consequences of slavery upon the self-image of Roma whereby most Roma still face negative self-image and low self-esteem, leading to ethnic self-stigma.

I also reviewed the National Centre for Roma Culture's archive research work on Romani slavery, a collection which began building a digital database of archive documents, research done by Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, scientific researcher at the same institution. This digital archive also includes research on Ioana Tinculeasa Rudăreasa, a Romani woman enslaved by voivode Gheorghe Bibescu. She was freed from slavery in 1843 through the crown slaves' abolition law in Wallachia and fought in court for 10 years to gain her children's freedom. The documentation is accompanied by a short film about her true story. (Furtună 2019).

The article also draws on the landmark 2007 UNICEF-supported study by Amare Rromentza on the impact of slavery on Romani self-esteem, linking centuries of slavery with contemporary stigma and internalised racism. My research hypothesis draws from this exploratory qualitative study, which examined the connection between Romani self-esteem and history, including 500 years of slavery, and their lasting impact on negative stereotypes and internalised stigma that Romani people still face today.

Following the publication of the 2007 study, my field research has persisted through observations and discussions with the beneficiaries of various projects undertaken by the Amare Rromentza Association, particularly in areas such as anti-racism initiatives, culture, education, and employment. Over the past 15 years, I have empirically conducted qualitative research through participatory observation. However, I did not document it as scientific results. Instead, I have used it mainly as a basis for other projects, working directly from within the open wound, with a heavy heart or, better said, tucked away in a corner of the mind. This approach, in terms of understanding, uncovers the nightmare of what must be noticed in contemporary society: the consequences of slavery. Thus, in this article, I draw some arguments and conclusions based on this ongoing research because contemporary Romani discourse about their ethnic belonging indirectly links the consequences of slavery to their low self-esteem.

In addition, I conducted individual and collective semi-structured interviews about the memory of Romani slavery with different members of local communities with Romani inhabitants, communities mainly located in areas historically known to be in the vicinity of former major slave owners, such as monasteries and/or former boyars' mansions. Even if most Romani participants in the interviews, with the exception of the activists and teachers, had no idea about slavery and its context and consequences, their self-esteem and social status have been influenced by their former slave positions in Romanian society and these are noticeable in dialogue and direct participatory observation.

Specifically, I conducted 44 interviews in Alexeni, Bărbulești, Broșteni, Fetești, Manasia, and Slobozia (all in Ialomița County) and in Brăila (Brăila County), in February and July 2024. I used semi-structured interviews, with a guideline of questions discussed and decided within the Memorobia project, in the framework of which I conducted the field research.^[3]

3 *MEMOROBIA or Memorialisation of Romani Enslavement in Territories of Contemporary Romania* is a research and development project implemented, between 2022–2025, by MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society, under the coordination of Solvor Mjølberg Lauritzen, Associate Professor, MF, in partnership with FXB Center for Health and Human Rights of Harvard University and Amare Rromentza Roma Centre, with the financial support of the Research Council of Norway (RCN).

The participants included Romani and Romanian community members, Romani and Romanian teachers, especially history teachers, local public authorities, Romani local councillors/experts/public servants, Romani local nongovernmental activists, and Romani and non-Romani priests, included because the Orthodox Church was the largest Romani slave owner (Petcuț 2015, 72). The participants/interviewees/informants were recruited during the fieldwork, but beforehand local networks of Romani organisations, activists, teachers, and local experts/councillors, local public authorities, and schools were contacted to guide and advise me in my fieldwork. I collected the informed consent of the participants in each case. I made the content analysis of the interviews, using them as case studies, with no sociological sampling method, so my research was qualitative at its core.

Complemented by this recent fieldwork, including interviews and participatory research in historically significant communities, this study situates contemporary Romani identity within the legacies of slavery. In doing so, it contributes both to historical scholarship and to current debates about memory, identity, and the ethics of research with marginalised communities.

1. What Is Social Amnesia in the Romanian–Romani Slavery Context?

1.1 Self-esteem and Internalised Racism

In this section, I focus primarily on sociohistorical and cultural and psychological models conveyed by and to Romani individuals from one generation to the next to identify less obvious consequences of slavery on Romani thinking frameworks and patterns.

The slavery system of exploitation has had indelible, visible consequences. After the abolishment of slavery, alongside a complete lack of repair and healing mechanisms, an immediate consequence was that many former Romani slaves, especially individuals who had belonged to boyars and monasteries, were forced to return to their former ‘masters’ and continue to work for them, compensated only with food and shelter, in a state of semi-slavery (Petcuț 2015). This transition to a social status similar to their previous status unfolded in a context of powerlessness and neglect of Romani people in public policies and reforms. Over time, marginalisation, cheap labour, and exclusion of formerly enslaved Roma have triggered significant long-term socio-economic inequities, stigmatisation based on their ethnic belonging, and a cultural power gap between the majority population and Romani communities (Furtună, Neacșu, and Grigore 2007).

Besides inequities and racism, there are other, less apparent remnants and legacies of this system, especially a widespread mental framework of Otherness, that still influence us today. In most interviews with Romani participants, a pattern of stigmatised self-identification, low self-esteem, or a negative self-image, manifested in at least two oppositional yet related and multifaceted forms: (a) the inferiority of members of stigmatised and oppressed ethnic group of belonging / origin – feeling “less than”; and (b) at times, an apparent ethnic

superiority complex – a form or a mask of the disguised inferiority complex, necessary for survival in a hostile world – posturing “more than”. These expressions of negative self-images are relational to external and internalised racism, as well as a manifest expression of a superiority complex by the reference group majority. In all its forms, stigmatisations lead to psychosocial harms (Lamont et al. 2016), meaning low self-esteem, fewer expectations in life, with such beliefs and traumas being transmitted from one generation to another.

Across the globe, in social and cultural processes of Otherness, in-power groups are framed as reference groups, while historically oppressed groups are essentialised as inferior. Because of their social exclusion, historically oppressed groups are not seen as prestigious. They lack positive social capital, which translates into lower social and economic status, and they also lack well-established symbolic capital, like ethnic institutions or cultural recognition. Therefore, Otherness does not offer an individual a high status in society and a state of security. Consequently, group members look for escape channels to self-realisation in other groups, especially in the majority dominant group, seen as superior; however, to be accepted there, they must copy the Otherness models as authentically as possible.

In the Romani case, as Romanian-American political scientist Delia Popescu argues, “The Roma community in Romania, and in Europe generally, occupies a specific and long-standing outgroup position that can be categorized as the quintessential ‘Other’” (2023). Relationally and additionally to the external labelling, Roma’s acceptance of harmful labels, and more broadly, of the mental model of Otherness, which is almost like accepting a state of unawareness about the history of slavery, occurs in the words, sentences, narratives, or descriptions that Romani individuals share about themselves.

Most of Romani individuals who I interviewed have absorbed and assumed societal messages related to their inferior role in society, often, at times, at a subconscious level – an understanding that cannot be easily changed or measured. Such a position of implacable inferiority was also apparent in the interviews I conducted for 2007’s research on Roma’s self-esteem.

Reflections of feeling “less than” frequently appeared in the expressions used by Romani individuals who I interviewed in 2024, as: “What do you want, I’m a Gypsy, I will never be the boss!”; “I have four classes: more than enough for a Gypsy! I’m just not going to be a priest! Where the hell have you seen a Gypsy priest?”; “I don’t need school, I’m just a Gypsy! What to do with too much school? That I’m just not going to become a doctor! Where the hell have you seen a Gypsy doctor?”; “Us, the Gypsies, you know, more with trade than with school!”; “That’s how us, the Gypsies, are: backward!”; “He’s a Gypsy, but he’s smart!”; “A Gypsy is still a Gypsy: until he steals a little from you, he doesn’t give up!”; “The truth is that us this is how us, the Gypsies, are, we don’t really like the work!”; “Black and ugly, really a Gypsy!”; “The Gypsy is a great thief!”. In the context of a stigmatised ethnic consciousness, the Roma can only see themselves as less smart, that’s why the use of the adversative “but” is required when it comes to a smart Roma: “He’s a Gypsy, but he’s smart!” “Gypsies” can neither be doctors nor priests nor leaders, and their aspiration level is quite low: more trade, less school.^[4]

4 Being a qualitative research, Roma of different ages, genders, and levels of studies were interviewed, without a representative sampling or data disaggregated by axes of inequity, so these forms of internalised Otherness cannot be generalised, and the findings cannot be broken down further.

Similarly, Romani interviewees from the 2007 study also have internalised external labels and stereotypes, which were crafted and amplified during the history of slavery. Expressions like “What to do, that’s why I don’t know much, I’m a Gypsy,” or “We’re just Gypsies, what should we do?” were used by some of my interviewees from 2007’s research, a pattern that reflects deep traces of exclusion in paradigms of self-stigma.

Romani individuals know that markers of Roma-ness are stigmatising, while markers of Romanian-ness grant a superior status. Interviewees used expressions like: “She’s so white and beautiful, you don’t even say she’s a Gypsy!”; “She’s so white and beautiful, you say she’s Romanian!”; “A Romanian is a Romanian: he is two steps higher than us, the Gypsies!”; “Let’s clean the house at our best, because the Romanians come to us and we don’t want them to say – look at these Gypsies, a Gypsy is still a Gypsy!”; “A Romanian took you as his wife, defiled his baptism, take care to cherish this thing! It’s a big deal!”; “He took a Romanian woman, white, beautiful: good for him, the Gypsy!”; “He has a beautiful daughter-in-law, you say she’s Romanian!”; “Look what a beautiful and blond boy I have, blond and with blue eyes! When he grows up, he won’t need a Gypsy, he’ll get a Romanian girl!”; “Look, if they are Romanian, they send their children to school!” Thus, in such contexts, access to a social status higher than their inferior internalised status is obtained either by masking or concealing their own ethnic belonging, possible in the case of white Roma, or by hypergamous intra-community marriages.

Distinct gendered labels, with deep-rooted origins, also continue to influence society today. Reflecting on the image of Romani women as slaves as depicted in the abolitionist literature and analysing the way modern and contemporary literature and visual arts present Romani women, we can affirm that the present-day social representation of the Romani woman has also been impacted by practices of sexual violence during slavery. To the enslavers, the “Gypsy woman” was useful only to the extent that she increased the number of slaves. Moreover, as reflected in the abolitionist literature (Rosetti 1839), young Romani women, especially unmarried girls – “*chaia baria*” (virgin girls) were used as objects of pleasure both for their masters, boyars or monks, and for their guests. An effect of sexual abuse and rape was the stereotype of “beautiful and hot Gypsy women”, which, at times, Roma internalise in the form of the apparently positive stereotype of beautiful and passionate Romani women. Thus, consequently, the internalisation of the exotic and beautiful “Gypsy woman” can be explored as a reflection of low self-esteem, especially when seen as the greatest, if not only, qualities of a Romani woman. As an interviewee from the 2007 research on Romani self-esteem noted, “You should know that we have beautiful and hot women! That’s what they say, that’s what the Romanians say, but also the Gypsies say, and I think that’s how it is!”

Even without being confirmed through scientific knowledge, the state of slavery persists in the ancestral collective memory of many Romani individuals and families, with all its psychosocial consequences. This complex of inferiority, sometimes disguised in a complex of superiority, can be observed in most interviews I conducted with Romani individuals.

Negative self-esteem is deeply interconnected with external and internalised racism. While most of the scientific literature has focused more on the nexus between external racism and self-esteem, little has been written about the tie between internalised racism and anti-Roma racism itself (Hancock 2010).

In fact, Romani slavery has received little attention in general historiography, and the dimension of a possible “post-traumatic slave syndrome” has received almost no attention at all.

Hancock acknowledges that Romani slavery was a popular research topic in nineteenth-century Gypsylorist literature from racist and romanticised perspectives, which paralleled a genre in fictional literature of the time. He also states that this literature commonly had what we might call an apologetic bias, such that “Roma slavery was not that harmful,” and “the Roma preferred slavery to freedom” (Hancock 2010). Hancock’s conclusions lead us to consider the process of vindication, as a necessary means for recognising Roma as the agents or subjects of their own history. Still, Ian Hancock has gradually and, at times, implicitly addressed it in the past few decades. He addressed it in *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution* (1987) and *We Are the Romani People* (2002). More recently, Hancock references a study by Joy De Gruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (2005), as a potential theoretical model.^[5]

De Gruy’s theory could potentially be used, yet modified and enhanced, when analysing Romani slavery. The legacies of slavery, which, for more than five hundred years, denied Roma in the Wallachian and Moldavian Principalities (now modern-day Romania) not only their dignity and autonomy but also their human nature, treating them as chattel, with all consequences coming from this status. And the effects still resonate in the collective memory today. As Ian Hancock (2013) argued – “What’s in a Word” to the Uppsala International Conference on the Discrimination, Marginalization and Persecution of Roma (23–25 October 2013) – “the psychological damage that persecution [of Romani people] has brought with it – not just the fear Roma live with daily in too many places, fear that affects both mental and physical health, but the deeper psychological damage that history has wrought. I don’t believe that any attention has been paid to this at all” (Hancock 2013).

5 In 2005, the African-American researcher Joy DeGruy published, in the United States of America, her fundamental book, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, a work that made history in a research specialty through the innovative multidisciplinary perspective on the consequences of slavery through the traumatic legacy imprinted both on the generations that followed the victims and on society in general. DeGruy argues that post-traumatic slavery syndrome is a result of unresolved post-traumatic stress disorder arising from the experience of slavery, transmitted across generations down to the present day, along with the stress of contemporary racial prejudice (for example, via racial microaggressions). Multigenerational trauma combines together with continued oppression and absence of opportunity to access the benefits available in society. This manifests as a psychological, spiritual, emotional, and behavioural syndrome that results in a lack of self-esteem, persistent feelings of anger, and internalised racist beliefs. DeGruy states that post-traumatic slavery syndrome is not a disorder that can simply be treated and remedied clinically but rather requires profound social change in individuals, as well as in institutions, that continue to reify inequality and injustice toward the descendants of enslaved Africans. The enslavement of African-Americans and the subsequent systemic racism and discrimination they have faced throughout history have had long-lasting psychological and emotional effects on individuals and the collective community. The post-traumatic slavery syndrome encompasses the intergenerational trauma experienced by African-Americans as a result of slavery. The trauma includes the physical, emotional, and psychological abuse endured by enslaved individuals and the ongoing oppression and racism that have persisted in American society. This ongoing trauma has been passed down through generations, affecting the mental health, identity, and well-being of African-Americans today. DeGruy argues that healing from the post-traumatic slavery syndrome requires acknowledging and understanding the historical context of slavery, addressing and challenging systemic racism, and promoting individual and community resilience. Healing also involves providing access to resources, promoting education, fostering positive cultural identity, and creating safe spaces for dialogue and support.

My field research also shows, through answers elicited to the relevant questions about ethnic self-image, that the situation of Roma in their relationship with slavery and with the historical and ongoing anti-Roma racism shares both specificities and similarities with the situation of African-Americans, with self-image of the Roma today being one of ethnic self-stigmatisation, self-loathing, and even self-hatred.

1.2 Stereotypes' Roots in Slavery

Observing the contemporary relationship between Roma and non-Roma, we see some of the consequences of slavery that can also be read today in sociohistorical, cultural, and mental processes and models conveyed by the Romanian majority population from one generation to another. Such processes and models push and pull individual consciousness, sometimes blocking access to unbiased knowledge and, thus, an accurate understanding of Romani culture as a valid cultural alterity. The dominant culture often defines its collective imagery and mentality toward Roma through stereotypes, which are predominantly harmful in nature.

This pattern is evident in Romanian folklore, traditional media, and social media, where stereotypes such as collective criminality, inferiority, laziness, and others are reinforced continuously. Among other negative consequences, such stereotypes push and pull the stigmatisation of Romani identity, the internalisation of stigma, and the rejection of Romani individuals and families of their belonging to the Romani ethnicity. The more reality loses to the imaginary, the more Roma are accepted in the paradigms of ignorance that perceive themselves as knowledge. As sociologist Adrian Nicolae Furtună argues,

Representations about Roma, which are based on prejudices and stereotypes of Otherness, are of prime importance, because they determine attitudes and behaviours. Most of the time, in the context of a negative sociohistorical, cultural, and mental legacies and in the absence of information about the Roma from school curricula and textbooks, thought and language clichés are the only source of knowledge that connects the Roma with the surrounding social environment. The Roma seem to be a reality familiar to everyone: any Romanian asked has an opinion, often categorical and negative, about them (Furtună, Neacșu, and Grigore 2007, 22).

Over the centuries, a whole set of images and labels has been built and developed, crystallising collective stereotypes and creating a reservoir of representations transferred from the collective memory to the individual one. Whether they promote exclusion or assimilation, hatred of exoticism, these representations serve as a backdrop of justifications for discrimination actions. In fact, the Roma are never defined as they are, but rather, they are labelled as in-power groups decide to justify the policies and behaviours of the others towards them.

The dual process of hetero-identification and enslavement of Roma by non-Roma during slavery – *tigani* – aims to correspond to the collective horizon of expectation, which is eminently negative; therefore, any deviation towards the positive is felt to be an exception to the rule. Here, we can quote the famous myth of a Roma friend from childhood, the prototype of the good, the exception to

the norm of the bad “Gypsy”, evoked by those who start their speech with the stereotype, “I’m not racist, but these Gypsies...”, and continue it with another stereotype, “I had a Gypsy friend / a Gypsy neighbour in my childhood / in my youth, a special man, if all Gypsies were like him, how good it would be!” Marked by all the rules of racism, including the *avant la lettre* apology, the evocation of an indeterminate positive past, and the generalisation of negative attributes at the group level, this type of discourse refers to childhood as a golden age of absolute tolerance, a time when there could also be found the good “Gypsy”, certainly an exception to the norm of evil, both in Romanian and universal literature.

The myth of the “dangerous” Roma has also persisted since slavery. Nomadic enslaved Romani people were viewed as a health threat during epidemics and were prohibited from entering cities. Broadly, during crises (for example, economic, health, wars), thus, in times of enhanced struggles for resources, human hierarchies and stereotypical concepts add up to a moral crisis of values and beliefs, the aim being for the dominating majority to escape from responsibility by throwing it on the alien – the Romani minority – mainly seen as dangerous. As Matache argues, “Racist scapegoating of the ‘Other’ in times of epidemic as a carrier or transmitter of disease is a strategy with an ancient pedigree” (Matache et al. 2021, 93). Thus, “COVID-19 is simply the most recent public health, social, and economic crisis to precipitate publicly sanctioned attacks on Romani individuals and communities” (*Ibid.*, 99).

Who else could be held responsible for the situation of the whole society if not the former slaves, the Roma, eternal scapegoats for all the frustrations, failures, and fears of the majority of people? This way, the majority’s contempt for Roma is considered natural not only by the majority but, unfortunately, through stigma’s internalisation, also by Roma themselves. Analysing the discourses embedded in the interviews, we can almost detect a pattern of thinking where the Rom says: “If he is Romanian, he definitely hates me,” and the Romanian says: “If he is Rom, he is definitely inferior to me.”

This model of biased thinking is perpetuated in Romanian society, either through an explicit position of rejection or through the systematic destruction of ethnic identity, due to a monocultural, ethnocentric model of existence, in which the attitude of the majority towards Roma is either explicit or implicit exclusion culminating with extermination or ethnic cleansing, understood by physical ethnocide and also by cultural assimilation or cultural ethnocide, the last one asserting that the Roma can be “civilised” only “if they become Romanians” (Furtună, Neacșu, Grigore 2007). In this thinking paradigm, the unique model of reference circumscribes itself autarkically and inflexibly to the values of the majority, rejecting any form of difference that is perceived as deviant and dangerous.

The way Roma were persecuted and systemically destroyed, beginning with their enslavement in Romanian countries, followed by a chronic lack of knowledge of this history that led to social amnesia could be framed in what Fricker named to be “epistemic injustice” (Fricker 2007, 9), a chronic phenomenon that affects the persecuted groups, in our case Roma, through deprivation of knowledge, with its two sides: “testimonial injustice”, meaning deprivation of memory (Fricker 2007, 14) and “hermeneutical injustice”, meaning deprivation of understanding (*Ibid.*, 147).

1.3 Chronic Social Amnesia

To all these, contemporary research adds another critical aspect: the individual and collective oblivion of the past as a deprivation of memory – chronic social amnesia.

Ordinary non-Roma do not know anything about Romani slavery as they have never learned about this in school, society, family, or elsewhere. Consequently, many of them lack feelings of guilt in their relationship with their ancestors as potential owners and traders of enslaved human beings. Notably, they still think Roma are *a priori* inferior to them.

Without any knowledge about Romani slavery, contemporary non-Romani society lives in oblivion, thinking that the history of Romanians is only positive. The concealment of slavery, or the erasure of the slavery memory from the Romanian collective consciousness, has led to a chronic ignorance of the Roma's and of Romania's history, which freed the way towards anti-Roma prejudices and stereotypical and negative hetero-identification of Roma.

During the individual and collective semi-structured interviews with different members of local communities, I learned that many Romani individuals do not know anything about their ancestors' enslavement either. In fact, most have never learned about this in school, society, family, or elsewhere. Nevertheless, a lack of awareness about slavery or exactly because of this lack, may have led some interviewees to feel like they have a lower status in society as well as low ethnic self-esteem.

The testimonies of the investigated Romani communities' members prove that slavery is not known or realized as a historical phenomenon. Instead, the dehumanisation and the historical persecution are seen as a continuum – Roma kept repeating “*na samas manush, samas rande*” (we were not persons, we were at the boyars) – interrupted only by the time of the socialist regime, but to which they returned at present.

Although there is no explicit memory of slavery in the Romani collective consciousness, at times, slavery is merged and/or confused with the Holocaust – the Deportation to Transnistria (Petcuț 2015, 238), a more recent experience and another institutionalised form of violence and dehumanisation. Thus, there is a memory of a dehumanising status, oppression, and hardship, which started during slavery and continues until today, but that memory is expressed particularly in relation to the experiences of its most horrific recent expression.

During the research, some Roma interviewees underscored the harms and memories of harsh working conditions and exploitation: “*kerasas phari buki saste gesende, butvar ji kana pherasas tele*” (we were working very hard every day the whole day, till we were falling off our feet). Others talked about starvation: “*butvar na hasas khanci, sasas baroges kana denas amenqe iekh plancita*” (many times we did not eat anything, it was a holiday when they gave us a slice of pie). Torture was also mentioned: “*but var samas marde*” (many times we were beaten). In addition, inferior status and the notion of subhuman were emphasized: “*na samas manush, samas rande*” (we were at the boyars). Consequently, some also mythologised the socialist regime as a “somehow better” time for Roma.

The absence of any slavery memory from the Romani collective mind led to the lack of understanding of causes of Roma's inferior status in majority society, which left with no explanation, seems to be natural and, eventually, caused by the guilt of Roma themselves, and also led to an unconscious and unexplained stigmatised self-identification.

In the field research carried out in 2024, the only individuals knowing about Romani slavery are Romani history teachers, Romani activists, some Romani intellectuals and researchers, some Romani journalists, and some Romani writers and visual artists who were especially interested in this topic, so they personally searched for specific information. The only interviewees who explicitly knew about Romani slavery were Romani activists and scholars, especially Romani historians who have studied Romani history, and a few Romani and non-Romani history teachers who have either attended specialised trainings or teach Romani history themselves. In the current research, we counted around ten such respondents who had information about Romani slavery.

Some notable examples include: Romani history teacher Ion Sandu, a specialised school inspector for national minorities at Ialomița County School Inspectorate, very much involved in research activities and remembrance events; Romani activist and local leader Daniel Ganea, who is also working within the public local authorities in Ialomița County; Roma Party county leader Leonida Mandache, very much involved in remembrance events; Romani priest Nicolae Gangă, director of the Professional School "Professor Ioan Man" from Broșteni Village; Ion Roată Commune, Ialomița County, very much involved in research activities and in remembrance events, who is working on his PhD thesis on the relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and Romani slavery.

These cases are noteworthy particularly because of having a very good knowledge and understanding of Romani slavery and a high consciousness about its consequences until contemporary times, about the high importance of researching Romani slavery and keeping alive its memory through remembrance events and through building Romani slavery memorials. In particular, a collaborative example of involvement and cooperation was on 20 February 2024 at an event that honoured 168 years since Romani emancipation from slavery. Under coordination of the Romani priest Nicolae Gangă and officiated by priests from the Coșereni Pastoral Circle from the Urziceni Archdiocese officiated, a memorial service for Roma who died in camps, prisons, and deportations was held in the church of Borănești Parish. Notably, the only priest who also evoked Romani slavery was Romani priest Nicolae Gangă.

Without proposing quantitative research, this field research, strictly qualitative in its nature, also found a few non-Roma informed about Romani slavery, especially a few history teachers and some public local authorities and priests, and all of them had participated in trainings and other remembrance events on the topic of Romani slavery mainly held by Romani organisations or by Romani specialists. Only some young history teachers, mainly in their twenties or thirties, who graduated in the last 10 to 15 years, reported that they learned about Romani slavery in their initial university training but not as an extended separate topic or lesson, but in passing within the framework of the 1848 Revolution that included the abolitionist current of thinking.

2. Critical Vision of Research and Public Space

The history of Romani slavery is overshadowed by official and scholarly amnesia and relativisation. This system of exploitation is still neither adequately recognised and remembered in Romanian education nor in sites of memory, arts, and culture. Moreover, institutions have long ignored their consequences and have not put in place any process of reparation to date. Romani slavery and its consequences have also been relativised in knowledge production and public discourse. The Orthodox Church still does not formally and repeatedly recognise Romani slavery or the fact that it owned Romani slaves. Romani slavery is not taught in schools, its topic is just tangentially touched within the 1848 Revolution's larger subject, if touched upon at all.

Even books authored by some of the most prominent and proficient historians are, at times, marked by prejudices, minimisations, or distortions that diminish the extreme severity of Romani slavery. For instance, some knowledge producers assert that Roma were already slaves when they arrived in the Romanian countries (Giurescu 1943; Achim 1998), hypothesis that were clearly dismantled by well-documented research a long time ago. However, these assertions do not negate the fact that the Romanian Principalities themselves institutionalised this system of racialized slavery (Matache 2025).

Furthermore, historian Viorel Achim, affiliated with the History Institute "Nicolae Iorga" of the Romanian Academy, implies the same level of severity between slavery and other types of dependencies in those times, mainly economic, a relevant example being Romanian peasants who were economically dependent of the boyars or the landowners whom they worked for (Achim 1998). Achim, alongside other historians, tends to focus more on the similarities between Romani slavery and the Romanian peasants' serfdom, equating the two, instead of also unpacking the differences (Achim 1998).

Yet, these two systems of exploitation were totally different, the first one representing the personal dependence on the slave from his/her master who owned him/her as a movable good, and the second one being an economic dependence of the serf on the boyar who owned the land worked by the serf, but did not own the serf as a person, not being able to sell him/her as a good, as he/she can do with his/her slave. As historian Petre Petcuț shows:

The characteristics of slavery emerge from the legislation regarding slaves and from the acts and documents with legal value. Slavery, as a form of corporal servitude, is not defined, but appeal is usually made to ancient custom, thus generating various interpretations of it, in the sense of proximity or distance from serfdom. Within slavery, there were concrete differences in status between slaves, depending on the sedentary or semi-nomadic lifestyle, their belonging to the kingdom or their possession by the Church and the boyars (Petcuț 2015).

Gadjikano (or outsider) knowledge production on Romani slavery is the fundamental view concerning the very states where Roma were enslaved and had the status of slaves for more than half a millennium. For instance, Viorel Achim names the principalities "countries with slaves" and not institutionalised slavery or slave-owning states. To support his claim, he controversially argues that slavery was not systemic enough

in the case of the slave-owning state for its economy to rely on slave labour, and the number of Romani slaves in the Romanian countries was too insubstantial for the economy to base itself on their work.^[6]

Such arguments have led to an avoidance of the fundamental responsibility of the Romanian Principalities and the modern state of Romania regarding the issue of Romani slavery. This is a distortive argument because, on one side, the way documents were stored and archived in those times does not allow us to estimate the exact number of Romani slaves, so we do not know how many Romani slaves were, and, on the other side, a state can be considered as practicing an institutionalised form of slavery and a slave-owning state if it has legislation which regulates slave status, this being the situation of the Romanian countries.

Moreover, both official and research discourse use and/or prefer the language of “*robi*” when naming Romani slaves. While “*robi*” is an actual synonym of the name “*sclavi*”, in the Romanian collective memory, “*robi*” had a better situation in comparison to that of slaves, such as those enslaved in the Transatlantic slave trade. This toning down of language creates societal confusion, decreases the responsibility of the Romanian state regarding slavery, and diminishes the severity of Romani slavery.

Fortunately, in the past few decades, Roma-led and critical research has grown, so Roma history, stories, and truth are examined from an anti-hegemonic perspective, in articles and books of Roma historians such as Petre Petcuț, Valentin Negoî, Ion Sandu, and Bogdan Chiriac, and Roma social scientists such as Maria Dumitru, Adrian Nicolae Furtună, Luiza Medeleanu, and Margareta Matache, who critically question and examine the way non-Roma narrated and perceived history about us. This wave of critical scholarship relies both on archival documents and on oral history, without non-Romani research’s biases.

Alongside scholars, Romani advocates and leaders in various fields have fought against slavery amnesia in society as a whole. In the following, I will discuss current expressions of slavery amnesia and its counterpart, resistance and remembrance, in Romania.

2.1 Legislation, Celebration, Messages – Small and Superficial Steps towards Romani Slavery’s Recognition

A first yet very small and superficial step towards the official recognition of Romani slavery in Romania was the adoption of Law No. 28/2011 by the Romanian Parliament. This law, which commemorates the emancipation of the Roma in Romania, took effect on 18 March 2011:

Article 1 – The emancipation of the Roma from Romania is commemorated on February 20th of each year.

⁶ Achim’s assertion in the working group of the National Agency for Roma, in December 2022, resulted in a National Agency for Roma’s internal document about the concept of a Romani history and culture museum, document submitted to the Romanian Government to serve as the basis for the establishment of this museum.

Article 2 – The Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, central and local public administration authorities can materially and financially support the organisation of public events and social-cultural actions dedicated to the commemoration of this day.

This is the only law referring to Romani slavery, and there are some issues of superficiality with it. First, instead of speaking about the *celebration* of Romani emancipation, it speaks about the *commemoration* of Romani emancipation, as if it was not a happy but a sad event. Actually, one cannot celebrate the Abolishment of Slavery without previous knowledge, understanding, recognition and acknowledgement of Romani slavery itself, which is why the actual legislation is superficial. The justification is that the day is also dedicated to a commemoration of the victims of Roma's status before emancipation, but the extremely short text of the law does not allow for nuance and specificities. Second, the law does not recognise the harms of slavery but focuses solely on the emancipation, without specifying emancipation from what. Emancipation is presented as if it were not preceded by wrongs. The wording rather suggests that Roma were freed by Romanians and the Romanian state from a status they were given by somebody else. In other words, the law makes Romania invisible as an institution of enslavement and only visible as a liberator. Third, regarding the support of the central and local public authorities in Art. 2, the law only speaks about the *possibility* for these authorities to commemorate, without making it mandatory.

It is mainly Romani-led state agencies such as central public authorities specialised in Romani issues (National Agency for Roma, National Centre for Roma Culture “Romano Kher”) and local public authorities (Prefectures' County Offices for Roma, schools from localities with significant Romani communities), nongovernmental organizations in collaboration with such national or local public authorities, which yearly, on February 20th, celebrate the Abolishment of Slavery and commemorate the victims of Romani slavery. For example, the National Centre for Roma Culture, a state agency, organises remembrance events including concerts, debates, conferences, book publishing and launches, exhibitions of archive documents, and production of docu-dramas or short films. High-level government representatives, namely the prime minister, the general secretariat, national ministries for education, domestic or international affairs, the Department for Interethnic Relations, parliament, or the presidency, very rarely attend in person. Notably, some do send messages to be read at public reunions by a superior councillor or a spokesperson.

We actually face a blank space of social amnesia, that includes state amnesia, because the Romanian state has never apologised for slavery and because the only existing law itself conveys only a celebration of the abolition of Romani slavery as a possibility, without any mandatory provision, to be supported by the public authorities, with no reference to the tragedy of a half millennium of Romani slavery. As a positive exception, the 2024 official meeting holds relevance. For the first time in the history of Romania, on 20 February 2024, on the occasion of Romani Liberation Day in Romania, the National Agency for Roma, in collaboration with the “Nicolae Iorga” Institute of History and the Romanian Academy, organised a colloquium on “Romani Liberation and its Significance for the Romani Minority and Romanian Society”. In this context the president of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, sent an appropriate message which was presented at the event by Sergiu Nistor, presidential advisor in the Department of Culture, Religion, and National Minorities. The introduction of the speech read as follows:

The emancipation of the Roma from Slavery represents a significant historical moment in modern Romania, February 20th marking 168 years since the acquisition of freedom for this ethnic group, a complex process that still has reverberations in our current society. The marking – by law – of the Day of Roma’s Emancipation from Slavery demonstrates the joint commitment of politicians and citizens to make possible a real political, economic and social-educational inclusion of the Roma and to support the members of their communities to reach their potential, as active participants in the nation’s life. By marking this day, the Romanian state recognises the centuries-long sufferings of the Roma and pays tribute to the victims of discrimination, all the more so since the legal Roma’s Emancipation from Slavery of the mid-19th century could not eliminate the remaining gaps that, over time, have led to the stigmatisation of the Roma. Although liberated, the Roma continued to suffer through pauperisation, marginalisation and the attempt to cancel their identity, a dramatic moment being represented by the deportations during the Second World War. Only by overcoming this legacy can we talk about a modern, European, and resilient Romania^[7] (Iohannis 2025, author’s own translation).

This message was important because it came from the highest public authority in the Romanian state, the presidency. As many other official messages, it spoke well about the dramatic history of Roma and its consequences until today. It also addressed the responsibility of the Romanian state and society, and of the need for education and remembrance for the new generations to know and understand history and to fight discrimination and hate speech. Unfortunately, it lacked realism and still did not assume any responsibility for slavery by way of an apology or by planning concrete measures, and almost none of this is put into practice. The only specific good step forward, is the inclusion of the optional subject “History, Slavery and Deportation of Roma” in the school curriculum from 2025, according to the new Pre-University Education Law. As of April 2025, this has not yet been implemented.

2.2 Orthodox Church’s Position towards Romani Slavery

Despite the historical evidence of its position as owner and trader of slaves for almost five centuries, one of the most, if not the most problematic current official positions towards Romani slavery is that of the

⁷ The remainder of the text follows:

Today’s day, dedicated to the emancipation of the Roma, allows us to evaluate Romanian society’s progress in terms of Roma’s inclusion, but, above all, to make us aware of the responsibilities we still have. I welcome the efforts carried out to fulfil the objectives assumed in the Government of Romania’s Strategy for the inclusion of Roma 2022-2027, through which Romania continues to mobilize its energies in building a society of equal opportunities for all. Coming to terms with the past remains one of the most important challenges of the present. Without understanding the history and the causes that led to terrible suffering, extremism will continue to threaten both Europe and the whole world. According to the new Pre-University Education Law, the inclusion of the optional subject “History, Slavery, and Deportation of the Roma” in the school curriculum from 2025 represents more than a simple adjustment of study programs. Secondary school and high school students will be able to study the centuries-old traditions of the Roma, but also the fact that their slavery and deportation were dramatic realities of our common history. These painful aspects of the past must be known to new generations in order to combat discrimination and hate speech through education, tolerance and mutual respect. Let the remembrance of history inspire us in our common effort to make Romania a space of equal opportunities for all its citizens, regardless of ethnicity!

Orthodox Church. It is even worse because, as the most important spiritual institution in Romania, one would have expected acceptance of guilt, regret, and repentance, if not reparations or remedial measures. Unfortunately, none of these have happened.

Analysing the discourses of the Romanian Orthodox Church's representatives on the topic of Romani slavery, we can see clearly that the Church assumes no responsibility in relation to Romani slavery. It does not even recognise that Orthodox monasteries owned Romani slaves. Instead, the leadership of the Church claims that the Orthodox Church did its best, in the social context of the times, to help Roma by offering them shelter and food in exchange for their work and that Romani slavery was totally different from the other types of slavery, obfuscating further that slavery was much broader in scope than in the Romanian kingdoms and that Romanians were also slaves (Patriarch Daniel 2016). There was never a word uttered by the representatives of the Orthodox Church about the very clear and proven historical fact that Orthodox monasteries owned the highest number of Romani slaves, and that the Church opposed the emancipation of the Roma from slavery (Petcuţ 2015, 72).

In its public discourse, the Orthodox Church frames Romani slavery as a different and easier form of slavery, with more rights for Roma, than “the slavery practiced in the Atlantic countries or in the colonies of some Western empires”. For instance, Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, delivered the following message on the occasion of the 160th anniversary of Roma's emancipation from slavery in the Romanian countries^[8]:

It must also be said that the phenomenon of the slavery of the Gypsies in the Romanian Countries presents differences of understanding compared to the slavery practiced in the Atlantic countries or in the colonies of some Western empires, where the slaves did not have as many rights as the Roma ethnic slaves in the Romanian Countries. [...] Many Romanian Orthodox priests had a humanitarian attitude towards the Roma, both during the dark period of deportations in Transnistria, between 1941–1943, and later, up to the present day. [...] Today, the Romanian Orthodox Church contributes to the efforts to integrate and help the Roma (Patriarch Daniel 2016).

The Patriarch's statement disregarded the topic of those Orthodox monasteries that owned Romani slaves and what this meant for slaves from the point of view of cruel exploitation, abuse, family members' separation, the sale of human beings, and a lack of minimum human rights. All these are extensively described in the abolitionist literature and journals. In fact, my advocacy experience shows that the representative of the Romanian Orthodox Church misrepresented the so-called humanitarian attitude towards Roma during the Holocaust, when history tells us that the Orthodox Church was on the side of the Nazi government of the dictator Antonescu and supported the extermination both of Jews and Roma (Popa 2017, 238). It is well-known that the Legion of Michael the Archangel, established by and activating under the Orthodox Church, played an important role in the extreme-right political and

8 An event organized by the Department for Social Inclusion and Human Rights within the Government of Romania on 19 February 2016.

ideological movement against Jews and Roma, including support for their deportation for extermination in Transnistria. The statement claims that the Orthodox Church has supported integration and aided Romani communities. However, the first necessary steps for the Church are to acknowledge that Orthodox monasteries were involved in the ownership of slaves because reconciliation cannot take place without recognising and assuming this historical reality. This recognition should be accompanied by expressions of regret and apologies for such practices. The Church has to take remedial measures, such as allowing access to and supporting research about Romani slavery in the monasteries' archives, establishing slavery memorials, or taking other reparatory measures. Instead, the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church solely emphasised a claim by historian Viorel Achim (1998), who argues that “the monastery Gypsies fared better than the rest of the Gypsies” (Patriarch Daniel 2016).

In most of their discourses on the occasion of 20 February, including in 2024, in the official meeting organised by the National Agency for Roma held at the Romanian Academy's library, representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church insisted exclusively on highlighting a few enlightened clerics who held abolitionist or progressist views (Popa Radu Șapcă, Iosafat Snagoveanu, Eufrosin Poteca, Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu). These were in fact exceptions. In their own time, they were, for their modern ideas, seen as radical, and were not only persecuted within the Orthodox Church but also excommunicated from the Church. They were therefore dissidents of the Church, eventually expelled from it, so, by no means, its representatives (Totorcea 2024).

In his message sent, through his representative, Patriarch Daniel spoke about the “Three Orthodox archimandrites from Wallachia fighting for the emancipation of the Roma”: Eufrosin Poteca, Iosafat Snagoveanu, and Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu, the last two being seen as Roma who, as a sign of appreciation, were conferred, by the Romanian Orthodox Church, with the highest rank for the monastic clergy - the rank of archimandrite”. Asserting this, the message is actually trying to convince that the Orthodox Church fought “for the freedom and for the dignity of her Roma sons” (Totorcea 2024).

What the message avoided saying was that all the three archimandrites were persecuted and excluded from the Church exactly because they campaigned for the emancipation of Roma from slavery (Totorcea 2024). Moreover, the message reflects a total and meaningful amnesia or a clearly wilful oblivion about the Orthodox Church as the most important owner of Romani slaves and about the fact that the Orthodox Church as an institution, with a very few priests being exceptions, actually had a fundamental contribution to the enslavement of Roma, legitimised Romani slavery, and fought against the abolishment of Romani slavery, doing all it could to stop it or at least postpone it, because the Church was afraid to lose its most important and only free labour force – Romani slaves. Furthermore, and still hiding this tragic part of its history, not only Roma's history, the Church contributes to the social amnesia linked to Romani slavery. And this social amnesia prevents both Roma and non-Roma from knowing and understanding why the relations between them are marked by chronic mistrust, prejudice, and negative stereotypes.

Over the past 50 years, most Western Christian churches apologised for the times they owned slaves. As a relevant example, on 21 May 2001, the French Parliament passed Law 434, named after its main initiator and fighter Christiane Taubira, making slavery a crime against humanity:

Article 1: La République française reconnaît que la traite négrière transatlantique ainsi que la traite dans l’océan Indien d’une part, et l’esclavage d’autre part, perpétrés à partir du xve siècle, aux Amériques et aux Caraïbes, dans l’océan Indien et en Europe contre les populations africaines, amérindiennes, malgaches et indiennes constituent un crime contre l’humanité.

Article 1: The French Republic recognises that the Transatlantic slave trade and the slave trade in the Indian Ocean on the one hand, and slavery on the other, perpetrated from the fifteenth century onwards, in the Americas and the Caribbean, in the Indian Ocean and in Europe against the African, Amerindian, Malagasy, and Indian populations constitute a crime against humanity.

In fact, even in the specific case of Romanian Roma, in 2019, at the meeting in Blaj with Roma, Pope Francis told them that he was asking for forgiveness “for the moments when, in the course of history, I discriminated against you, mistreated you, or looked at you in a wrong way”, adding that “through indifference we feed prejudice and incite hatred” and that when “one is left behind, the human family stops moving forward” (2019).

The Romanian Orthodox Church never made such a moral gesture of repentance and apology, nor has it ever asked for forgiveness. This indicates that the Church does not feel sorry about its past as an enslaver and sees slavery as a normal phenomenon in that historical context. Instead of asking for forgiveness, the Church is constantly looking for excuses, ignoring reality. If the Romani slavery is not recognized, nor seen as the mistake or sin of the Church, there is nothing to regret or for which to ask for forgiveness. Insisting on the idea that we cannot judge the past with the moral tools we use today, the Romanian Orthodox Church does not regret anything. When no repentance is involved, asking for forgiveness makes no sense. This symbolic gesture would have been the most important step towards reconciliation and peace, and towards a moral reparation which includes at least supporting, by the Church, archival research in the monasteries, establishing slavery memorials, and contributing to the establishment of a Romani history and culture museum.

3. Critical Vision of Activism and Arts

3.1 Rebuilding Remembrance through Romani Activism, Arts, and Research

As I have previously shown, as a way of resistance, breaking away from amnesia, and rebuilding memory, Romani activists and organisations were the first to celebrate the commemoration of the victims of slavery on 20 February. I have also touched upon how Romani researchers have challenged established research about Romani slavery as incorrect. In this section, I will therefore focus on two further areas for remembrance initiatives, namely journalism and arts.

A notable mainstream initiative that offered space to Romani scholars and artists to discuss slavery was the “The Custom of the Land” project, a multimedia journalistic project about Romani slavery

run by the independent magazine *Doar o Revistă* (DoR – Just a Magazine) in 2022. The project was led by reporter Ana Maria Ciobanu, and a Special Issue was curated by Margareta Matache (DoR 2022). The articles and podcasts produced dealt with both the history of slavery and its memory in present-day Romania. The podcast series has six episodes: (1) *Social Amnesia*, about the chronic and systemic oblivion of Romani slavery's history and about a total lack of reparative policies; (2) *500 Years*, about Romani slavery's history and the dehumanised status of the slave; (3) *Places of Memory*, underlining the chronic shortage of recognised slavery memory sites; (4) *The Bridge*, about activism through theatre arts or *artivism*, taking the model of the Romani actress, director, and playwright Alina Șerban, who wrote, directed, and performed the first play about Romani slavery, *The Great Shame* in 2016; (5) *Racism is convenient* addresses the deep and sometimes unconscious anti-Roma racism as one of the consequences of slavery; and (6) *Debts*, which underlines the need of reparation to build the reconciliation and enable a better living together in a better society.

This conversation has been continued in mainstream media in 2025. In an article from the magazine *Scena9*, journalist Andrei Popoviciu explores what Romania can learn from truth and reconciliation processes in countries like Rwanda and Gambia, to confront its own past with slavery. For this, there is to be evoked the concepts of reparatory justice, historical justice, and transitional justice, which go beyond legal provisions towards the decolonisation of the mind through regaining the memory of historical injustices (Bhabha, Matache, and Elkinks 2021; Selling 2021; Popescu and Stan 2025).

Besides mainstream journalism, Romani artists and their arts have been important voices, tapping their sources and means to speak about history, inform knowledge and empathy with the past, create heroes, and build and rebuild memory. To include Romani artists' perspectives in this article, I used past interviews and discussions with different Romani artists who have approached the topic of Romani slavery in their artistic creation.^[9]

Let me cite some relevant examples of Romani artists who approached Romani slavery in their bodies of work. In 2016, Alina Șerban wrote and directed the first play about the history of Romani slavery with a cast of professional Romani and non-Romani actors. In *The Great Shame*, Șerban played the main role, and most actors were Roma, namely Doinița Oancea, Oana Rusu, Elena Duminiță, and Sorin Sandu.

At least four films have been produced about Romani slavery. Alina Șerban wrote a screenplay and directed the first short film about Romani slavery, *Ticket of Forgiveness*. The term “forgiveness” was used during Romani slavery and meant the release of an enslaved individual from slavery, so the enslaved was “forgiven” from slavery. The film is based on a true story from the 1800s that describes the tragic fate of a Romani slave who committed suicide because his master did not accept to free him and let him marry the woman he loved. The short film was released in 2020.

9 Romani artists addressing Romani slavery include Alina Șerban (actress, director of theatre and film, screenwriter and playwright), Marian Petre (sculptor), Emil Iulian Sude (poet) and Marian Ghiță (poet), Eugen Raportoru (painter), Viorel Curt (painter and graphics artist), George Vasilescu (painter and sculptor), Mihaela Cîmpeanu (sculptor), Viorel Gongu (writer), Mihaela Drăgan (actress and playwright), Zita Moldovan (actress), Sorin Sandu (actor and poet).

Romanian filmmaking offers one exception in the field. In 2015, the only feature-length artistic film addressing Romani slavery was launched. Its title *Aferim!* is the Romanian version of the Turkish word *aferin*, which means *bravo*. The film is a Romanian-Bulgarian-French-Czech co-production directed by Radu Jude. It is a historical drama with features of a road movie. It is based on archive documents and follows a story from the nineteenth century, centred around a Romanian father and son, who arranged to return a Romani individual who escaped slavery to a Boyar enslaver. Awarded with the Silver Bear for the best director at Berlin Film Festival and winner of the most categories at the 2016 Gopo Film Gala, *Aferim!* actually represents an exception in Romanian film production, and it remains an exception as a unique feature-length artistic film that approaches the subject of Romani slavery.

The National Centre for Roma Culture “Romano Kher” has further produced two films about Romani Slavery: *Roma Slavery – The Long Road to Freedom* (2018), a docu-drama, and *Ioana’s Truths. 10 Years of Fight against Slavery* (2022), a short biopic based on the life of the Romani heroine Ioana Rudăreasa who fought in court for more than a decade to free herself and her children from slavery.

Another example comes from sculpture: a theme of Romani slavery runs through, like a red thread, the works of the leading Romani sculptor Marian Petre.^[10] One of his sculptures, *Himerotronic*, reflects a terrible image of a Romani slave wearing a torture instrument known as the slave’s horns, meant to punish a slave to a dreadful death by fracturing his/her spine in the cervical area. The enslaved is a human being made of wood in Petre’s sculpture, because the wood is warm and alive like a tree, representing emotion, empathy, and compassion, but it is considered as non-human by the enslaver, so he is incarcerated in iron in Petre’s sculpture, because the iron is frozen and harsh like a knife, representing hatred, torture, and horror.



Figure 1. *Himerotronic*, by Marian Petre, 2022. “Simeza” Gallery of the Visual Artists’ Union of Romania. Photo © Delia Grigore.

10 More about Marian Petre’s portfolio: <https://vatra-mcp.ro/artisti-si-patrimoniu/sculptori-romani/olt/marian-petre-sculptor>.

As for Romani literature, two well-known and valuable poets who approached the theme of Romani slavery include the contemporaries Emil-Iulian Sude and Marian Ghiță. In Emil-Iulian Sude's poem *Emptiness in the Chest*, the slave's status is depicted as absolute non-existence, a total sense of void, through which even birth and death do not belong to the one who is not perceived as human, so slavery is felt as the absolute dehumanisation of person and of society.

Marian Ghiță's poem *Origins* is a manifesto against a past seen as a perpetual present: slavery seen as the absolute murder of the body and soul by the master of slaves whose God "is coming from the monkey". The lack of any human feeling makes a slave the best slave and all the dead slaves are buried in today's Roma, as a tragic continuity of spiritual slavery.

In Marian Ghiță's poem *Half*, no redemption seems to be possible because the souls of the ghost slaves were totally destroyed, everybody – mothers, fathers, and children – died, fate disappeared "the flesh became wound / and the blood became water", so the only way is the uprising, the physical and spiritual fight: "Give me a rock / I am yelling / to break the head / of the dragon / at least one / to free / our souls / at least one / to free / our minds."

In his poem *Traum*, Marian Ghiță's poetic ego directly yells out the pain of slavery "The boyars called them / slaves / Tziganes / and stole from their chests / their freedom / and from the eyes the light," which symbolises the killing of the very roots of Roma, the traumatised and desacralised Indian origins.

In summary, while Romani slavery remains largely absent from public memory and mainstream historical consciousness, activists, artists, journalists, and researchers are playing a critical role in reclaiming and reconstructing this history. Through journalism and artistic expression such as theatre, film, literature, or visual arts, Romani voices are not only preserving the memory of slavery but also challenging collective amnesia.

Conclusion: New Approaches

Different from the recognition of other systems of racialized slavery, particularly the Transatlantic slave trade (Bhabha, Matache, and Elkins 2021), Romani slavery was neither comprehensively recognised nor assumed by Romanian society, historiography, its school system, the Romanian Academy, the Orthodox Church, or Romania's highest political powers. This pattern of amnesia has extremely serious consequences both on Romani collective consciousness (amnesia about what concerns Romani slavery and inexplicable stigmatised self-identification), and on the Romanian collective consciousness (ignorance about Romani slavery and a stereotypical and deeply prejudiced hetero identification of Roma). Because all these occur in the subtle realm of the subconscious, the spiritual liberation of Roma from slavery requires, if not as many centuries as slavery itself, then at least political will at least as strong as anti-Roma impulses from the time of slavery.

Social amnesia linked to Romani slavery has two faces, both hideous: forgetting the past by killing memory and building a pseudo-historical consciousness based on false images, stereotypes, and prejudice.

Romani scholars, artists, and nongovernmental activists and their allies are actually the only people who are trying, with very limited means, to break this social amnesia and to rebuild Romani slavery's memory.

Stigma and racism are both distinct and subtle when it comes to Romanian Roma. To this day, many *gadje* do not understand the background of Romani people and often make them feel as though their struggles are their own fault, rather than a result of historical injustices. This misunderstanding further exacerbates feelings of self-hatred among Romani individuals. In fact, stigma and racism are based on a subhuman status assigned to Roma during slavery and still perceived as such until today.

Most likely a marking of the attestation of the Gypsies at Tismana (1385) or at Cozia (1388) would create an uncomfortable precedent, because what follows naturally would be the creation of a Slavery monument [...], where the Roma could gather, honour the memory of their ancestors, recall history and, last but not least, aware of ethnic and group specificity (Petre Petcuț 2015, 41).

Erasing the memory of slavery is a manifestation of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). The paradox of buried, unexpressed traumas are the social psychological consequences of slavery which are experienced, despite the cultural amnesia regarding slavery. For healing, the trauma must be remembered and expressed, and the pain mourned.

No law can simply abolish slavery's amnesia: that becomes a new type of slavery, a spiritual slavery, without the firm and concerted contribution of all actors in society, from public authorities to opinion leaders. Here comes, for public policies, the role of transitional justice and remedial/reparatory measures rooted in the right to rectification. Here comes, for society as a whole, the ethics of guilt, that should be taught in school, beginning with very early stages of education.

But there is still much to do. We could start by acknowledging this past at the highest level by having a commission to look into slavery and recognise the effects on the present. The Orthodox Church should publicly condemn the 500 years of slavery, symbolically asking for forgiveness. The Romanian state should, among other things, prioritise and support research projects about slavery and rename cities, buildings, streets after Roma and non-Roma who fought against slavery. The school could be more inclusive – textbooks, celebrations and symbols about Roma should be used in a dignified way that does not reinforce stereotypes (DoR 2022).

The Romanian state needs to move beyond mere discussions and occasional ceremonies and take substantial action. This includes the implementation of slavery memorial plaques, the establishment of slavery monuments and memorials, and a national program for archival research on slavery that is supported by a comprehensive database. Additionally, there should be a Romani slavery museum and mandatory teaching of Romani slavery in schools at all educational levels, rather than just as an elective. Furthermore, the creation of documentaries and feature-length films about slavery, along with various other reparative policies, is essential.

The solutions must focus on two key areas. First, majority society and state institutions need to foster recognition and acceptance of history. And second, there is a need for institutional support to help regain ethnic dignity and reconstruct Romani identity. The aim is to ensure that Romani people no longer feel like inferior human beings, and that Romanians are freed from their own fantasies and prejudices about Romani people. The only way towards reconciliation in Romanian society is the institutionalisation of Romani slavery's recognition through public policies measures such as: extensive and mandatory teaching about Romani slavery in schools, at all pertinent levels in step with wider actions like establishing a Romani history museum with extended sections dedicated to Romani slavery, establishing a national research program on Romani slavery and a national institute of Romani history research with a section dedicated to Romani slavery, building a Romani slavery memorial/monument and placing other memorial plaques at slavery memory sites such as monasteries.

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