

# Reparative Memory and the Visibility of Roma Subjectivity in Otto Mueller's 'Gypsy' Depictions – Anger, Pride, and Shame

## Dezso Mate

dezso.mate@uni-flensburg.de

Associate Researcher, Europa–Universität Flensburg (EUF) – Interdisciplinary Centre for European Studies (ICES)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4602-9939>

*Dezso Mate* holds a PhD in Interdisciplinary Sociology from Eötvös Loránd University. Currently, he is a Research Fellow at Europa–Universität Flensburg and Visiting Research Fellow at Heidelberg University – Research Centre on Antigypsyism. In 2025 he was elected as deputy chair of the Barvalipe Academy at the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture. He also lectures at Södertörn University in the Critical Romani Studies Department. His research interests encompass the science of racism, intersectional antigypsyism, and social resilience.

## André Raatzsch

andre.raatzsch@uni-marburg.de

PhD candidate in Art History at Philipps University Marburg, Research Associate

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6379-3864>

*André Raatzsch*, MA, is a PhD candidate in Art History at Philipps University Marburg and a research associate in the interdisciplinary Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft “Antiziganism and Ambivalence in Europe (1850–1950)” Research Unit. From 2016 to 2025, he was a research associate at the Documentation and Cultural Center of German Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg. From 2015 to 2019, he curated the RomArchive section “Politics of Photography”. His research focuses on postcolonial image politics, visual representation, and transcultural archive and collection concepts.



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## Abstract

This article offers a critical reflection by Romani intellectuals on their joint engagement with the Otto Mueller exhibition at the LWL Museum of Art and Culture in Münster (2024–2025). Moving beyond an art-historical experience, the exhibition prompted a profound confrontation with colonial memories and stereotypical representations of Romani bodies, evoking ambivalent emotions such as anger, hope, pride, and shame. Positioned as German and Hungarian Romani scholars, the authors analyse Mueller's work through a transnational and intersectional lens that foregrounds lived experience, collective memory, and epistemic responsibility.

At the same time, it is important to consider Mueller's position and function within German Expressionism – connected to Die Brücke from 1910, later professor at the State Academy in Breslau (1919–1930), and a key author of the “bathers” pictorial formula; the subsequent denunciation and confiscation of works in the Munich “Degenerate Art” exhibition of 1937 (posthumously) further underscores the visibility of his modern visual language in the period's cultural discourse. The authors emphasise the necessity of visibility as subjectivity, shifting from being objectified to asserting agency in knowledge production and cultural representation. They highlight the limitations of counter-narratives within the exhibition and argue for deeper institutional reforms, including active participation of Romani scholars in curatorial practices.

Drawing on feminist epistemologies and critical memory studies, the article articulates reparative memory culture as a transformative practice that challenges hegemonic narratives and centres Romani voices. Dialoguing with artworks by Tamás Péli and Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, it illustrates how Romani art creates reparative spaces of memory and dignity, contesting historical erasures. Ultimately, the article advocates for a decolonial and participatory memory politics that recognises Roma as knowledge producers and co-creators of culture, thus reshaping European art, memory, and scholarship without seeking to destroy them.

## Keywords

- Antigypsyism
- Exhibition review
- Expressionism
- Memory
- Otto Mueller
- Reparation

## Introduction

In this text, we reflect as Romani intellectuals on our joint visit to the Otto Mueller exhibition at the LWL Museum of Art and Culture in Münster (20 September 2024 – 02 February 2025). For us, this engagement was more than just an art-historical experience – it confronted us with colonial memories of our ancestors, the impact of which we felt both academically and personally. The more than 60 exhibited artworks evoked in us ambivalent emotions, such as pride, shame, anger, and hope. These feelings form the starting point for our analysis, which combines lived experience, memory, and critical reflection. As German and Hungarian Romani scholars, we analyse Mueller’s work from a transnational perspective, grounded in our familial histories and shaped by shared by identity experiences.

Our self-positioning is not rhetorically simply a gesture but the expression of an epistemic reflection and claim for reparation as to who speaks and from what position, which is central in memory, political, and postcolonial discourses. Visibility here means no longer positioning oneself as an object, but as a subject of rebuilt memories and unresolved pasts. In an art history in which Roma were objects, denied the chance to speak, we understand our authorship<sup>[1]</sup> as a counter-narrative to hegemonic images and historical erasures.

Our critical engagement with postcolonial, memory, and critical race theory leads us to challenge the colonial gaze in visual cultures. The depictions of Romani women’s bodies shown in Mueller’s work, referred to as “Gypsies,” as the original,<sup>[2]</sup> is an antigypsy and orientalist term which is not an abstract and innocent choice by Mueller but a deeply personal and direct choice. We consciously align with the assessment of Tanja Pirsig-Marshall,<sup>[3]</sup> who rejects a blanket labelling of Mueller as a racist; at the same time, she underscores that Mueller’s imagery has historically contributed to the consolidation of certain stereotypes and that such patterns are, at times, uncritically perpetuated in his depictions. Against this backdrop, it is clear to us that a portion of these works participates in a traditional, racially grounded exoticisation that typifies Romani bodies and – particularly in some representations of women – encourages sexualised projections. They embody epistemic violence – erasing Romani dignity and denying Romani possibility to articulate their lived experiences and memories. This phenomenon echoes Spivak’s well-known question, “Can the Subaltern speak?” (Spivak 1988).

The exhibition was organised and launched on the occasion of Otto Mueller’s 150th birthday sesquicentennial. In addition to an art historical retrospective, it explicitly addressed the debate surrounding the depiction of women’s nudity and the reproduction of stereotypical images. A curatorial

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1 The spelling “authorship” is deliberately chosen here to include gender-sensitive and non-binary perspectives. It reflects our aspiration to go beyond mere representation and to ensure the visibility of marginalised positions in language

2 The term as the original is a racist connotation, used here exclusively for critical analysis.

3 Tanja Pirsig-Marshall, born in 1973, studied art history, history, and archaeology in Bochum and Bonn. She received her doctorate from the University of Essex in 2004 with a thesis on Otto Mueller. She is Deputy Director of the LWL Museum of Art and Culture in Münster and has been Head of Exhibitions, Collection and Research Department since 2022.

decision was made to partially cross out original titles and include artistic positions from Romani academics and artists, such as Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, Luna De Rosa, and Vera Lacková, who offered attempts at critical refractions. These contributions opened up spaces of aesthetic self-empowerment, and further assert themselves in reparatory discourse in the field of arts and culture, knowledge production within museum representation (Pirsig-Marshall 2025).<sup>[4]</sup>

The counter-narratives were only able to interrupt stereotyping devaluation at certain points. Colonial images resurfaced with full intensity in the first instance of our direct encounter with the works, and then were reenforced when we read labels emblazoned with historical titles: some struck through, marked as “Z\*\*” – our redaction of the German slur “*Zigeuner*”, roughly equivalent to “Gypsy” – or replaced entirely. Although the introductory wall text clearly contextualised the racializing terms (“Gypsy”, the “N-word”), the visual presence of the historical designations remained powerful. For us, these works remained difficult to accept, because the perspective of the exoticised object continued to dominate reception.

Taking our critical reflections and lived experiences into account, we ask: how can colonial and racializing regimes of looking be deconstructed through counter-images and critical knowledge production, and how can Romani subjectivity be made visible and open to debate in art, culture, and scholarship? In doing so, we deliberately engage with Mueller’s visual language – especially the nude and the Brücke context (Brücke-Museum 2025) – as both a point of reference and friction. We call for a critical examination of aesthetic, historical, and political dimensions. The public debate mirrors these tensions: Till Briegleb (2024) criticises a moralising “tribunal” framing, while Tanja Pirsig-Marshall (2025) stresses that the exhibition is not only about Nazis, rejects a blanket labelling of Mueller as racist, and at the same time underscores that Mueller’s work has historically contributed to the reproduction of stereotypes – a fact that institutions must address explicitly today.

The disproportionate attention given to the works in which Roma are depicted is especially revealing, considering they represent only a small fraction of his overall oeuvre. The so-called “*Zigeunermappe*” (1926–1928) had a particularly strong influence on these receptions, which depictions reproduce stereotypical ideas of closeness to nature, nomadism, and wildness. Titles such as *Z girls on the beach* show how colonial attributions are anchored in curatorial practices, regardless of actual identification. These considerations lead us to a central insight: reparative memory for Romani people must be grounded in critical reflection and scholarly analysis.

As the “ancestors” of the depicted Romani bodies by Otto Mueller, we do not write for them but with them, supported by transnational and transgenerational collective memories and lived experiences. We bridge between personal and analytical levels and thus try to offer antigypsy image constructions in the European art world.

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4 The exhibition was curated by Tanja Pirsig-Marshall, Flora Tesch, and Ann-Catherine Weise, with the help of external experts, including one of the authors of this text.

# 1. Epistemic Responsibility – Between Lived Experiences and Knowledge Production

Our paths as Romani intellectuals have crossed several times in the past at different youth meetings since 2009, and later at various national and international roundtables and conferences. Despite these coincidences, we share a common origin from southern Hungary, a region characterised by racialization and social marginalisation as the vein of the social structure. Currently, we do not place ourselves into self-victimisation; simply, we just confront society with its blurred antigypsyist constructions. These experiences form a shared social and identity resonance that continues to shape our starting points, reflections, and critical scholarship frames. Today, we work together in the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft Antiziganism and Ambivalence in Europe Research Unit, an interdisciplinary research unit that is negotiating Romani perspectives in an institutionally legitimised way for the first time in Germany.<sup>[5]</sup> We see our voice as part of a collective dialogue and as an intervention in an academic field that has long marginalised our position. The decision to write together is a form of reclaiming Romani memories and methodological, which allows us to navigate differences and develop a common voice with more than just the results of individual contributions. Our aim is not only to make marginalised experiences visible but also to bring them into academic discourse as critical knowledge. We understand epistemic responsibility as the obligation not only to decolonise knowledge but also to question the institutions that produce it, as earlier Ethel Brooks in 2017 analysed the interrelations of subjectivity, representation, and exclusion.

Reparative memory culture refers to a form of remembrance that goes beyond mere preservation: it critically examines colonial and racializing narratives and creates new, dignified narratives from the perspective of those affected. This practice is not only aimed at the majority society but also at marginalised groups themselves in order to regain historical continuity, dignity, and agency. Access to knowledge is a social privilege that has historically been secured and maintained by those in hegemonic, advantaged positions. In the social sciences and arts and cultural productions, as soon as we articulate our origins and emotions, we risk being devalued as “biased”, “self-victimised”, “sensitives”, “subjective”, or “subjective insiders”. This “white fragile” defence fails to recognise and underestimates Romani lived experiences, narratives, memories, and academic knowledge production. What is often framed as our weakness is, in fact, the foundation of situated knowledge, rooted in lived experience and capable of challenging hegemonic narratives.

As bell hooks points out, passionate narratives of marginalised groups often are dismissed as sentimental unless they conform to hegemonic academic norms. Furthermore, she emphasises that emotion is knowledge that makes violence not only analysable but tangible. Looking at racism analytically is necessary. Experiencing racism and reflecting on it scientifically at the same time is a layered burden because it operates through multiple structures, manifesting in personal gestures, perceptions, and institutional practices (bell hooks 1995).

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5 DFG Research Unit, “Antiziganism and Ambivalence in Europe (1850–1950)”, European University of Flensburg. <https://www.uni-flensburg.de/fogr-antiziganismus>.

This reflection also mirrors our experience in academic practices, as normalized forms of sets, with countless unspoken experiences, subconscious categorizations that often exclude or exoticise our European heritage. And yet, even if we have the chance to take only a few seats around an imaginary academic table, we do not see ourselves as permanent participants but as temporary guests and visitors, even though the discussion is about us. We are initiating to set up the table, although the critical Romani voices are maintained to be hidden under the tablecloth with ignorance. Therefore, our responsibility lies not only making ourselves heard but in actively reshaping European knowledge landscapes in the societies. One of the manifestos of the early Romani intellectuals' resistance in critical scholarship is based on the memory of Tamás Péli (1948–1994), who addressed the value of self-assertion and dignified cultural memories and representation. Although we have never met him in person, his words from the past speak directly to us, as if someone had grasped our challenges in the present-day. His message, written in 1993 for future generations of Romani intellectuals, is a call for social responsibility, self-esteem, and resistance to forced assimilation:

You who come after us will no longer be forgiven as special savages [...] When someone tells you to be like me, it doesn't mean to live better, it means not to exist. [...] Don't allow them to demand that you behave differently as a 'gypsy,' because in doing so, they are demanding that you give up your life. And you shouldn't do that (Choli Daróczi 1998, 3–4).

This warning is still valid today, for all of us who are on the threshold of self-denial or emancipation. His metaphor of the *"gardener of culture"* is particularly powerful:

You will not be the fruit trees of the 'Gypsy' and universal human culture, you will be the gardeners (Choli Daróczi 1998, 3–4).

This metaphor challenges us to cultivate our cultural roots – not nostalgically but as an embodied practice. As Romani intellectuals, we see this as a call for the collective continuation of his work while honouring his legacy. Péli's painting *Születés* (Birth), from 1983, is a particularly important artwork for Romani reparative memory, which we develop below in relation to Mueller's visual language and its reception.

## 2. Art as a Reparative Practice of Romani Memory

Tamás Péli's political and poetic appeal to future generations finds its visual equivalent in the monumental mural *Születés* (Birth). The 41-square-meter work was created in the dining hall of a children's home in Tiszadob Castle (Hungary) and unfolds a symbolically dense visual language. It shows central figures from European Romani history – embedded in a setting that links origin, resistance, and collective identity. *Születés* creates an alternative history of creation that challenges colonial erasure with a self-determined visual counter-narrative.

Otto Mueller depicted Romani women with a pictorial language that, in the 1920s, was received as artistically legitimate within expressionist aesthetics. In more recent scholarship, however – especially

with regard to the “Gypsy” portraits and certain nudes – his works are discussed as embedded in colonial visual regimes and marked by exoticising effects, without ascribing to Mueller a blanket colonial or racializing intention.



Figure 1. Tamás Péli, *Születés* (Birth), 1983, oil on wooden panels, 41 m<sup>2</sup>, Tiszadob Children's Home, Hungary.  
© Photo: courtesy of ERIAC – European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, Berlin.



Figure 2. Otto Mueller, *Seated Gypsy Girl* (German original title: *Sitzendes Zigeunermädchen*), 1926, distemper on burlap, 100.5 × 75 cm, Inv.Nr. 958 LM. © Photo: LWL Museum of Art and Culture, Westfälisches Landesmuseum, Münster, Hanna Neander.  
Note: The original German title contains a racialized term. The LWL Museum preserves the historical title but strikes through the term *Zigeuner* to indicate and critically contextualise its problematic nature within a colonial visual framework.

We, the authors, stress this explicitly. At the same time, today's reception of the so-called "Gypsy" depictions can foster stereotypical habits of seeing and revive colonial regimes of looking. Mueller's motif also stands within a long European pictorial tradition: from Caravaggio's *Fortune Teller* (1594/95) and Georges de La Tour's *The Fortune Teller* (c. 1630), through Henri Rousseau's *La Bohémienne endormie* (The Sleeping Gypsy, 1897) and Édouard Manet's *Gypsy with a Cigarette* (c. 1862), to Kees van Dongen's *La Gitane* (1910/11), Amedeo Modigliani's *Gypsy Woman with Baby* (1919), and – in the German context – Max Pechstein's *Junge Zigeunerin (Kopf)* (1928), as well as August Sander's typological photographs (*Gypsies*, c. 1930). Moreover, it should be borne in mind that Mueller was uninterested in a broad spectrum of different role images of Romni but worked with a narrowly defined circle of models/sitters. According to current research, these sat, among other places, in the Hungarian city of Szolnok; some depictions are based on drawings and photographs made on site, which Mueller later developed into paintings and prints in his Breslau studio. What becomes visible, then, is a specific slice – by no means the diversity of the Romani community. The historical work and series titles using the designation "Gypsy" are experienced today by many members of the minority as demeaning and discriminatory; they complicate an open, art-historically informed engagement with Mueller's work. Our aim is to build a bridge here: we acknowledge Mueller's formal achievement and his role in German Expressionism and, at the same time, through reparative contextualisation – visible historicisation of titles, naming and biographical contextualisation of the sitters, and the inclusion of Romani voices in museum interpretation and reception – we enable an empathetic, non-exoticising reading. In this way, critique does not become "cancel culture" but the condition of a shared practice of remembrance.

While Mueller's pictorial world invokes colonial visual regimes, Tamás Péli responds in *Születés* with a reparative grammar of visibility. At the centre is a symbolic birth scene attended by personalities such as Sándor Bari, János Bihari, and other figures from Roma history who gather around a new-born. They embody cultural heritage, resilience, and continuity. The composition does not follow a linear historical narrative but refers to cyclical, mythical structures, a form that makes European history visible anew from a Romani perspective. Later on in 2022, *Születés* was presented also at documenta fifteen in Kassel, in the exhibition "One Day We Shall Celebrate Again: RomaMoMA" at the Fridericianum, organised by OFF-Biennale Budapest. This made it clear that Péli's work must not only be located transnationally in terms of the politics of memory but also in terms of art history.<sup>[6]</sup> In this context, cultural theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay speaks of the "unlearning of the imperial gaze", that refers to the conscious questioning of the colonial order of the visible, such as: who is allowed to show, who is shown, and how (Azoulay 2019). Reflecting on *Születés*, it breaks with this order and it replaces objectification with self-representation, silence with voice, the image of the other with self-representation. Consequently, in this case reparative memory means unlearning colonial viewing habits and enabling new forms of recognition. Following Azoulay, critical engagement means contextualising and unlearning. The so-called "Gypsy" depictions in European art history should also be read anew against this backdrop. They are not mere testimonies to artistic freedom but part of a colonial image system that exoticised,

6 "One Day We Shall Celebrate Again: RomaMoMA", documenta fifteen, Fridericianum Kassel, 2022. organized by OFF-Biennale Budapest. See <https://www.offbiennale.hu>.

marginalised and politically disempowered Romani bodies. Thus, Romani women were cast as screens for hegemonic desires; the visual regime operates in a racializing register – even where no explicitly racist intention can be established.

Małgorzata Mirga-Tas pursues a related remembrance-political and feminist approach, particularly in her installation *Re-enchanting the World* (Venice Biennale, 2022). In the Polish pavilion, she presented a visual history of Roma that deliberately distances itself from folkloric or exoticising depictions. Her textile imagery combines everyday scenes, personal family stories, and historical references to create a multi-layered self-image. The memory of Zilli Schmidt, a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and her own ancestors is particularly moving, as it embodies the intergenerational transmission of trauma and resilience. Alongside her, important cultural figures such as Papusza (Bronisława Wajs) and János Bihari are symbolically present in the mural, representing the continuity of Romani intellectual and artistic traditions and belongings.<sup>[7]</sup>



Figure 3. Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, *Morning Tea*, 2023, Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Inv.-Nr. ML 10438

© Photo: Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln mit Rheinischem Bildarchiv, Walz, Sabrina, 22.11.2023, rba\_d060371\_01.  
Courtesy of the artist and Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw.

7 Biennale di Venezia, *Re-enchanting the World*, official exhibition catalog of the Polish pavilion, curated by Wojciech Szymański and Joanna Warsza, with contributions by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas and others, 2022. See <https://labiennale.org/en/art/2022/national-participations/poland>.

Both works call for a new cultural public sphere in which Roma subjectivity is not only represented but recognised as an active presence. They stand for a growing movement within the Romani community that is committed and that advocates for a reparative practice in arts, culture, and academic knowledge productions. This development marks a break with colonial pictorial orders, and at the same time opens up a framework in which our reception of Mueller's works can be critically situated – without calling into question their artistic quality and canonical significance. In this sense, we understand art not only as a mirror, but as an active agent in the struggle for ethical representation and recognition.

### 3. Colonial Construction of the 'Gypsy' Image in Mueller's Work

Mueller's images do not give voice to Roma themselves; instead, they articulate a colonially inflected gaze that makes the historical term "Gypsy" appear as a universal image, even though it is a European construct. The Otto Mueller exhibition in Münster confronted us with a multifaceted ambivalence. On the one hand, with the visualised entrance of Romani bodies into European art history; on the other, with their aesthetic fixation in colonial-racializing pictorial traditions, as well as with the incorporation of Mueller's work into canonical mediation practices that at times continue problematic representations without sufficient contextualisation. Although artists such as Tamás Péli or Małgorzata Mirga-Tas are increasingly finding their way into museum spaces, their works rarely are recognised as independent aesthetic-political traditions. Instead, they are often only seen as well-intentioned "counter-positions". This devaluation is also reflected in the reluctance to deal with racializing titles or labels. Many institutions elsewhere leave it at halfway solutions between original title and brief commentary, rather than consistently deconstructing colonial image regimes. This ambivalence triggered a tension of recognition and pain in us, the desire for visibility, but also the experience of continued reduction to stereotypical images. The artistic counter-positions within the exhibition were only able to interrupt the effect of these images at certain points which were insufficient to permanently disrupt the colonial visual order. Following Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, this raises the question of an "imperial unlearning": What must museums do, not only to name colonial viewing habits but also to counteract them institutionally and symbolically. The central prerequisite is the involvement of affected communities, not as retrospective corrections but as active, curatorial co-creators. Museum spaces must face up to their ethical responsibility, set new standards, and integrate critical self-reflection into their practice. Museums therefore have a dual obligation to preserve the heritage of Otto Mueller, for example, and at the same time, as Toni Morrison has called for, to initiate a change of perspective in *Playing in the Dark* (1992). Her analysis of literary representations can be transferred to art: What effects do works like Mueller's have on those who are represented or imagined, and on those who view them? What obligations to act arise from this for curatorial practice and knowledge production? Furthermore, Azoulay also calls for viewers of historical images not to remain passive observers, but to understand the people depicted as "citizens" – as subjects with rights, dignity, and participation (Azoulay 2008).

This fundamentally changes the museum space from a place of aesthetic reception to a place of ethical responsibility. Mueller's depictions of half-naked Romani women in particular demand a new perspective

as they are sexualised and racialized bodies whose family histories, in a further historical course, became linked to persecution, deportation, and extermination. Such a perspective shifts the gaze away from the exoticising distance and towards a recognition based on the politics of memory. Ethics and aesthetics are not mutually exclusive – on the contrary: therefore, a reflective reception of art requires combined both aspects. Mueller’s works undoubtedly belong to European modernism. However, their formal quality must always be read in relation to their social impact and political significance. Only in this way can art become a cultural testimony that demands responsibility.

The terms anger, pride, and shame are not merely emotions for us, but figures of speech that structure our engagement with Mueller’s work. Pride is not a naïve expectation but a stance of memory, an insistence on visibility despite persistent resistance. It enables a mode of remembrance that remains critical while also progressive. Yet, this pride exists in tension with a sense of powerlessness in art spaces, where Romani people are expected to take pride in depictions as naked, anonymised, and dehumanised savages. Therefore, as long as racializing labels persist and museums fail to take responsibility, this question remains unresolved and painful. Our shame does not result from the nudity itself but from the lack of dignity, from the absence of context, and from the erased names and untold, forgotten stories. Our anger is not directed against art but against a system that places aesthetic form above historical responsibility. It is the experience that our bodies are shown, while the mediation underexposes our voices. Nevertheless, we seek ways of re-appropriation, as we do not want to suppress these images but reinterpret them with us, about us, and from our perspective. Ethel Brooks reminds us that representation also means control over narratives. In *Why It’s Time to Reclaim Romani Art History*, she emphasises that visibility alone is not enough, it must be linked to agency and memory, otherwise it remains a subtle form of erasure (Brooks 2019).

Stuart Hall, in turn, emphasises: “Identity is never given, but a construction of experience, exclusion, becoming” (Hall 2022, 247). Mueller’s works allow for ambivalent readings but are often received in ways that favour repetition over transformation. As a reparative thought experiment, we propose to bracket the racializing title for a moment and to look at the person: What if we recognized Mueller’s Z[] portrait as one of the most beautiful depictions of a Romni – without downplaying the historical violence of the designation? Should archival research substantiate the designation of the “Gypsy portfolio” as secondary (for example, by trade/gallery) and not given by Mueller, then a two-track curatorial solution could be tested: (1) visible historicisation of the transmitted title (explicitly marked as historical)<sup>[8]</sup> and (2) a reparative parallel designation (focusing on person, relationship, place/time). In this way, acknowledgment (beauty, presence, subjectivity) would be rethought together with critique (the marking of title politics) without reproducing paranoid attributions regarding Mueller’s intentions. For Hall, cultural representations are always also places of power struggles for meaning and visibility. His theory of *diasporic identity* (Hall 1990) helps us to understand the ambivalence of such images – and to recognise our own position as part of this conflict. If identity was formed through omission and distortion, then writing, like image criticism, is an act of re-appropriation. Our authorship is part of this struggle for

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8 Pending clarification of title provenance, no conclusive evidence shows that Mueller himself assigned these series/work titles; until clarified, we recommend marking them as historical/ascribed designations and offering a parallel person- and place-based labeling.

representation, not as a distanced analysis but as a situated intervention. Hall's understanding of cultural identity as a contested process in particular makes it clear that the museum space is not a neutral place but a zone of hegemonic and resistant production of meaning. A combination of Azoulay, Brooks, and Hall creates an epistemological triangle: representation is never innocent – it oscillates between affirmative and disruptive, hegemonic and resistant effects. The question of who speaks, who is exhibited, and in what narrative framework, is never merely curatorial – it is political.

## Conclusions

This article examined the importance of a decolonial and just form of memory reparation from a situated Romani perspective. As Romani authors we critiqued the historical and ongoing marginalisation of Sinti and Roma in European memory culture. Our intervention challenges nationalistic and colonial frameworks that have rendered Roma either invisible or exoticised and calls instead for a memory politics rooted in justice, participation, and shared responsibility.

The article adopts as its engine the view that Roma should not be merely as victims of history but as active agents who have contributed to European culture through craft, intellectual production, music, and resistance. This perspective counters the dominant portrayal of Roma as strangers or outsiders and emphasises their integral role in shaping European societies. Furthermore, we have argued that a just memory must acknowledge the historical continuity of exclusion, such as slavery, the Holocaust, and contemporary antigypsyism, as systemic and not isolated events.

Central to our analysis is the call for reparative epistemic practice and recognition. For too long, Roma have been spoken about without being heard. The demand for recognition of Roma as knowledge producers with authority, particularly in arts and culture and academic knowledge production is crucial, essential, and timely. We view memory reparation not as symbolic but as a structural task that must address access to education, representation, and institutional participation. Connecting Stuart Hall's postcolonial thought, the article examined how emotions like pride, anger, and shame become epistemological tools. These emotions reveal the continued power of colonial representations, such as Otto Mueller's *Zigeunermappe*, and inspire critical reflection and curatorial interventions. Hall's notion of "thinking from the in-between" resonates with our own sense of existing between exclusion and resistance, visibility and erasure.

Artistic voices such as Tamás Péli and Małgorzata Mirga-Tas offer alternative visual languages that centre Romani subjectivity and reclaim representation. Their works shift the gaze from exoticisation to dignity, creating reparative spaces of memory and future-oriented narratives.

The article concludes by emphasising that decolonial memory must be participatory, intersectional, and transformative. Institutions must not merely include Roma as objects of display but must empower them as co-creators of history and culture. A shift from speaking *about* to speaking *with* Roma marks the beginning of shared memory practices that recognise Romani people as central to, and not peripheral to, Europe's past, present, and future.

On this basis, we turn in conclusion to curatorial implementation. Taking our critical considerations and lived experiences into account, we ask how colonial and racializing regimes of looking can be deconstructed through counter-images and critical knowledge production – and how Romani subjectivity can be made visible and negotiable in art, culture, and scholarship. We deliberately take Mueller’s visual language (especially the nudes and the Brücke context) as a reference and point of friction, and we call for a critical examination of aesthetic, historical, and political dimensions. We do not intend to label Mueller’s depictions as consciously colonial across the board; our critique is directed primarily at contemporary reception and title policies that can reactivate racializing habits of seeing.

The public debate reflects these tensions: Till Briegleb (2024) criticises a moralising “tribunal” framing and recalls that Romani motifs make up only a small part of Mueller’s oeuvre; he also emphasises that Mueller worked without a documentary or socially critical intent, painted his models in the same sensual manner regardless of origin, and left the self-description “I can only paint what I love.” We take these ambivalences seriously as touchstones, without conflating them with our reparative reading. At the same time, we align with Tanja Pirsig-Marshall’s assessment (2025), which rejects a blanket labelling of Mueller as racist while underscoring that his work historically contributed to the reproduction of certain stereotypes – a fact that must be addressed explicitly today.

From this dual perspective, we argue for participatory, reparative mediation: visible historicisation and contextualisation of historical titles; shared authorship with Romani voices (for example, in labels and audio guides); and precise dual labelling (a formal reading and a critical reading). Where provenance research indicates that titles were assigned secondarily – for example, by dealers or editors – and not by Mueller himself, we recommend a two-track solution: (1) display the transmitted historical title clearly marked as historical; (2) offer a reparative parallel designation that foregrounds person, relation, and place/time. Such measures open alternative reading modes – for example, approaching selected works as expressionist female portraiture or studio-based nude studies – while explicitly naming the colonial frame. The aim is not exoneration but accountable looking and shared responsibility.

In this way, Mueller’s canonical significance can be thought together with an emancipatory representation of Sinti and Roma – and a decolonial, participatory politics of memory can be fostered that reshapes European art, memory, and scholarship without calling Mueller’s artistic quality into question and without damaging these fields.

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