

Foreword – Racialized Slavery in Moldavia and Wallachia: Legacies and Silences

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Critical
Romani Studies

Margareta Matache writes here on behalf of fellow members of the Thematic Issue editorial team: Maria Dumitru, Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, Delia Grigore, and Solvor Mjøberg Lauritzen.

Roma have been integral to the European local, national, and regional realities and histories for centuries. However, the archives and narratives that shape our collective understanding have been overwhelmingly constructed by *gadjikane*^[1] (non-Roma) regimes of truth – systems of power and knowledge that dictate what is recognised as truth.^[2] Consequently, the stories and lived realities of Romani people, especially accounts of oppression, exclusion, and resistance, have frequently been distorted, marginalised, or completely erased, from neighbourhood chronicles to broader continental histories.

These patterns are distinctly apparent in the historical and historiographical records of enslavement inflicted on Romani people in the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. For five centuries, beginning in the 1300s or earlier, this institutionalized system of racialized slavery (hereinafter, slavery) deprived Roma of their culture, labour, lives, and skills, while generating wealth for the aristocracy, monasteries, and voivodeship. Far from being a peripheral phenomenon, slavery was a force that both shaped and was shaped by the very birth of the Romanian principalities.^[3] It also influenced major historical events, including the 1848 Revolutions, the unification of Wallachia and Moldavia in 1859, and the subsequent formation of the Romanian state. However, a deep hegemonic hypocrisy persists although the history of slavery is embedded in the past and present economic, political, and societal fabric of the state, it has been pushed to the margins of Romanian history and public consciousness, not only through neglect and silence but also through both subtle and overt misrepresentations.

These displays of hegemony have left deep, lasting scars and effects, not only influencing historical awareness but also reinforcing current structural inequities and, broadly, anti-Roma racism. Against this backdrop – and in tandem with other forms of resistance – academic resistance, ranging from the trailblazing and path-setting works of Ian Hancock (linguist) to Critical Romani Studies, has emerged as a vital intervention. This Thematic Issue, titled *Racialized Slavery in Moldavia and Wallachia: Legacies and Silences*, is a contribution to past and present waves of scholarly resistance, hosted within a journal that both bears the name and embodies the ethos of Critical Romani Studies.

This Thematic Issue pursues a dual aim: to advance new research and to examine the existing historiography on slavery from anti-racist, critical, and feminist perspectives. Contributors like Bogdan Chiriac (historian) and Maria Dumitru (feminist social scientist) provide new analyses of the political debates during abolition and the gendered dimensions of slavery, respectively. In addition, Adrian-

1 An adjective in the Romani language denoting the internal articulation of an external social and broad category – based on cultural, symbolic, and social markers – of people and processes outside of Romani culture.

2 In *Truth and Power*, a June 1976 interview, Michel Foucault analyses the relationship between truth and power, particularly in the history of the West: “‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power that produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which induce and extend it — a ‘regime’ of truth.” Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power”, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, 1st American edition (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 201–208.

3 Margareta Matache, *The Permanence of Anti-Roma Racism. (Un)uttered Sentences* (London: Routledge, 2025).

Nicolae Furtună (sociologist), Delia Grigore (ethnologist), Solver Mjøberg Lauritzen (social scientist) and Alexandru Zamfir (philologist), Maria Luiza Medeleanu (cultural scientist), Petre Petcuț (historian), and Oana Rusu (actress) interrogate persistent absences, distortions, and silences in arts, education, historiography, and public memory.

From the outset, the MEMOROBIA project,^[4] of which this Thematic Issue is a part, has aimed to contribute research on the history, legacies, and memory of slavery through critical, anti-racist, feminist, and decolonial theoretical frameworks while co-centring and honouring Romani specificities and scholarship. In doing so, we seek to move knowledge production and scholarly alliances forward.

The Thematic Issue contains materials that may be distressing and triggering. It explores painful histories and incorporates accounts of rape and other forms of sexual violence. These were stark realities faced by enslaved Romani women that must be acknowledged and included in scholarly analysis and processes of memorialization to comprehensively understand the scope of this system of exploitation and oppression. Our editorial vision and theoretical frameworks take inspiration from Romani-American linguist Ian Hancock's and Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot's call to interrogate the archives, imagery, narratives, and sources that define our understanding of the past.^[5] The articles are organized around three central themes, as follows:

1. Revisiting History and Historiography on Slavery

As we approach the 170th anniversary of abolition in February 2026, this Thematic Issue reflects on previously overlooked perspectives and spearheads new research on slavery in Moldavia and Wallachia. This Thematic Issue showcases a foundational work in Romanian Romani slavery studies: a recently translated article by sociologist and distinguished Romani activist *Nicolae Gheorghe*, originally published in Romanian in 2006 in a jubilee brochure by Amare Rromentza, which marked the 150th anniversary of abolition. Gheorghe's groundbreaking work offers a crucial analysis of the origins, institutional development, and civil discourse surrounding slavery in the Romanian Principalities, while also examining the role of abolition within the broader international context of the mid-1800s "European integration" of the principalities. Building on this foundation, many contributions in these Thematic Issues further examine and expand upon topics and questions posed in Gheorghe's seminal work.

Historian *Bogdan Chiriac* unpacks the abolitionist rationales and debates of the nineteenth century in Moldavia. His article pioneers an examination of an extensive correspondence between Mihail Kogălniceanu, a liberal reformer advocating immediate abolition, and Petrache Roset-Bălănescu, a

4 MEMOROBIA: Memorialisation of Romani enslavement in territories of contemporary Romania, was funded by the Research Council of Norway. See: <https://mf.no/memorobia>.

5 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past Power and the Production of History*, 20th-anniversary and Kindle edition (Boston, MA: Beacon Press).

wealthy conservative aristocrat who favoured a gradual approach to emancipation. Chiriac shows that, despite doctrinal differences, both supported an elitist approach to social reforms, favouring controlled change and economic transformation, without actively involving Roma in debates or decision-making.

Social scientist *Maria Dumitru*, a doctoral candidate whose doctoral research was part of the MEMOROBIA project, offers an examination of the history of sexual violence under slavery through a critical feminist and anti-racist lens. Dumitru's research breaks new ground by focusing on the intersections between gendered labour and sexual violence against those enslaved. Dumitru concludes that enslaved women were "subjected to different forms of rape, euphemistically called *jus primae noctis*, *sex tourism*, *sexual initiators*, and "foot rubbing", and ultimately they were forced into sexual slavery – "*țitoare*".

Historian *Petre Petcuț* concludes this analysis of history and historiography with a broad exposé of how this system of slavery has been framed in Romanian historiography, from early chronicles to contemporary scholarship. He identifies four key periods: (a) foundational (1837–1918); (b) interwar (1919–1944); (c) state-socialist (1945–1989); and (d) post-1989 professionalisation. Petcuț's work aims "not only to recount a history of facts but also to chart a history of forgetting and institutionalized silence around a crucial episode for understanding majority–minority relations within the Romanian space".

The historical silences and absences that these scholars bring to light mirror some of the ways in which white scholars have traditionally dominated and shaped narratives about the Transatlantic slaver trade. Moreover, similar to other histories of oppression, along with other factors, these silences have been sustained by an expertise hierarchy – one rooted in racism and Western ideas of scholarly rigor and objectivity. Despite significant contributions and an expansion of scholarship, Romani researchers are, at times, still dismissed as biased, labelled as merely activist-driven, and deemed inferior. These persistent dynamics of power urge for greater critical inquiry diversity, and reflexivity into whose notions of objectivity prevail and who shapes the academic canon.

Critically, the fact that pathbreaking social scientists like Ian Hancock and Nicolae Gheorghe, and contemporary historians such as Chiriac and Petcuț, along with social scientists like Dumitru, Furtună, Grigore, Medeleanu, Rusu, and Zamfir, are leading some of the scholarship on slavery signifies a notable breakthrough. These voices, in addition to others, have precipitated a significant shift against the prevailing scholarly hegemony.

2. Teaching and Remembering Slavery

The scholars contributing works on this topic argue that the silences and distortions of slavery's history extend into Romanian schools, curricula, and public culture. At the same time, the authors argue that Romani-led activism, arts, and research offer sites of resistance to historical amnesia and misrepresentation. *Maria Luiza Medeleanu* uses critical discourse analysis frameworks to examine if and how Romanian textbooks and curricula have reproduced silences around this history. Specifically, she investigates Romanian history textbooks for years 4, 8, and 12, which were approved by the Ministry of National Education for the 2023–2024 school year. She concludes that the history of slavery is presented in "the

Romanian history textbook from a dominant perspective, without questioning the ‘ideology of the master’, which turns the history book into an oppressive tool for Romani and Romanian students, which reproduces cultural and behavioural racism.”

Solvor Lauritzen and *Alexandru Zamfir* examine not only challenges but also opportunities for teaching about enslavement and its institutionalisation. This article is more programmatic in nature, rather than empirical. It proposes four key pedagogical steps for effective teaching: centring perspectives, stories, and narratives of the enslaved; highlighting acts of resistance and agency; connecting past injustices to present-day racism; and foregrounding examples of allyship between Roma and non-Roma, particularly those kept in a system of servitude, to provide solidarity as an anti-racist tool.

Delia Grigore turns to the role of cultural production, unpacking the tensions between historical amnesia in local communities and the arts and the rebuilding efforts of remembrance through Romani activism, arts, and research. She discusses and critiques a typical form of distortion, which claims that institutionalised slavery was “beneficial” to Romani people, which serves to suppress or sanitise both the history of structural and direct violence and the resistance of enslaved Roma. Grigore also shows that contemporary remembrance of Romani slavery exists between social amnesia and a rebuilding of memory through activism, cultural work, and scholarship.

Ultimately, distortions and silences in textbooks and public culture surrounding this system of racialized slavery both conceal the deep suffering it caused and support racialized forms of Romanian nationalism and patriotism.

3. Contemporary Sites of Memorialisation

The analysis of memorisation expands Delia Grigore’s arguments about activism, cultural works, and scholarship as forms of resistance, adding physical spaces – villages and theatres – as sites of memory and resistance. *Adrian-Nicolae Furtună* examines the *Dezrobiți* (freed people) village in Vâlcea County, as a living site of slavery memory, illustrating how reclaiming physical places can foster collective remembrance, memory, and resistance to historical amnesia. As Furtună concludes, such mnemonics serve as “continuous testimony for an unreconciled past”, reflecting persistent power relations and cultural trauma.

Oana Rusu, actress and PhD candidate, offers an experiential analysis of *The Great Shame*, an award-winning play written and directed by Alina Șerban. In this production, Rusu portrays a central character – Ms Oprea – a teacher who serves as thesis supervisor for Magda, the main character, a Romani master’s student studying Romani slavery. As Rusu concludes, “*The Great Shame* brings to the fore the experiences of those who have been historically oppressed, excluded, and underrepresented. Therefore, the role of cultural productions, of Romani artists, regardless of the field, is not only to inform, but also to provoke emotions and critical reflections among the public.”

Finally, the Thematic Issue features a book review of *Particularitățile Misiunii Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în Comunitățile Romilor Căldărari* (The particularities of the Romanian Orthodox Church’s mission in Căldărar

Romani communities) by Marius Căldăraru. Political scientist *Cristina Dragomir* offers a critical analysis of the work, arguing that while the book provides valuable insights into the historical dynamics of enslavement and the role of the Orthodox Church, its heavy reliance on descriptive narratives and theological perspectives hinders a more profound examination of the systemic oppression faced by enslaved Roma.

In sum, *Racialized Slavery in Moldavia and Wallachia: Legacies and Silences* not only brings new knowledge and anti-racist, critical, and feminist perspectives to the scholarship on slavery but also challenges and disrupts Western-centric and *gadjikane* knowledge and lexicons. We hope this Thematic Issue sparks transformations in social sciences, history, and historiography – fields that need openness to new voices, methodologies, theories, and co-creation of knowledge.

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We are thrilled to feature *Emanuel Barica's* digital artwork, *The Abolition of Slavery*, on the cover of this Thematic Issue. This piece reinterprets Theodor Aman's renowned painting *The Emancipation of the Gypsies*, presenting a Romani-centred and feminist perspective, inviting us to imagine that historic moment from the standpoint of those who experienced enslavement. Barica created this piece as part of the MEMOROBIA project's exhibition.

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