

Producing Knowledge from within – Critical Romani Studies and the Institutional Role of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC)

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Critical
Romani Studies

Abstract

For centuries, the production of knowledge about Romani communities has been dominated by non-Romani scholars, institutions, and power structures. This monopoly has created a distorted and racialized understanding of Romani identity, history, and culture; an understanding that has profoundly shaped European scholarship, public policy, and everyday perceptions. This article examines the historical trajectory and ongoing consequences of this knowledge regime. It explores the roots of Gypsylorism, the influence of eugenics, the role of ethnographic bias, and the persistent structures of antigypsyism that shape how Roma are represented in academia and society. Then the article analyses the emergence of Critical Romani Studies as an intellectual response to these structures, emphasising Romani positionality and the development of Romani epistemologies as crucial interventions. It further explores the creation and role of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) as a transnational institutional space designed to support Romani cultural and intellectual agency. ERIAC's priorities in knowledge production, such as the development of educational platforms, critical bibliographies, and projects on resistance, are examined as examples of how Roma-led institutions can contribute to epistemic justice, historical reparation, and the transformation of academic canons. Finally, the article reflects on future directions for Roma-led research, arguing that reclaiming knowledge production is not merely an academic endeavour but a political and cultural act. By asserting Romani epistemologies and institutional presence, Critical Romani Studies challenges centuries-old hierarchies of representation and opens pathways for new, plural, and equitable forms of understanding. The article is based on an intellectual dialogue between the authors that took place on 19 September 2025.

Keywords

- Antigypsyism
- Critical Romani Studies
- Knowledge production
- Romani positionality
- Gypsylorism
- European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture

Introduction

Scholarship on Roma has historically been developed through asymmetrical relations of power. For most of modern history, Roma were not the authors of their own narratives but the subjects of external observation, classification, and biases (Surdu 2016, Mate forthcoming). Non-Romani scholars constructed and disseminated ideas about Romani identity, defining how Roma were perceived in cultural imaginaries, academic discourse, and political frameworks. This monopoly of representation has left deep marks on European societies, shaping both scholarly disciplines and social policies that often marginalised or pathologised Romani communities (Matache 2016; Selling 2018).

The lack of Romani agency in knowledge production is neither accidental nor neutral. It reflects broader systems of structural antigypsyism, exclusion from education, and racialized epistemologies that position Roma outside of legitimate knowledge-making institutions. Roma were rarely present in universities as scholars, professors, or recognised intellectuals. Instead, their identities were narrated by others, often through the lens of exoticism, criminalisation, or deficiency. In recent decades, however, a significant shift has begun to occur. The emergence of Romani scholars across Europe, and beyond, has given rise to new epistemological frameworks grounded in lived experience, historical consciousness, academic agency, and scholarly rigour (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2015, 2018; Bogdan et al. 2018). The development of Critical Romani Studies marks a collective effort to challenge and transform dominant discourses, while institutions such as the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERAC) provide crucial platforms for Romani intellectual and cultural production. This article examines these transformations through a critical lens. It first situates the historical context of Gypsyism and eugenics, showing how early academic frameworks established racialized narratives of Roma. It then discusses the significance of Romani positionality and epistemology as tools of resistance and innovation in knowledge production. Finally, it focuses on ERAC's role in institutionalising Romani cultural and scholarly agency, and its contribution to shaping new educational and research agendas.

1. Gypsyism, Eugenics, and Bias in Academia

The historical roots of Romani misrepresentation can be traced to early modern Europe, when Roma were portrayed through stereotypes that oscillated between fascination and fear. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, Roma were depicted in art, literature, and scholarship as either romantic outsiders or dangerous deviants. This duality formed the basis of Gypsyism, a specific form of knowledge production about Roma characterised by exoticisation, racialization, and othering in social sciences (McGarry and Mirga-Kruszelnicka forthcoming; Mate forthcoming). The foundation of the Gypsy Lore Society in the late nineteenth century (1888) marked the institutionalisation of these perspectives. Many of the Society's founding members operated within racial science and early eugenics, classifying Roma through pseudoscientific hierarchies. The aim was not to understand Roma on their own terms but to fit them into pre-existing racial categories that justified their marginalisation. This period coincided with the rise of ethnography as a scientific discipline. Ethnographic methods, while claiming objectivity, often objectified Romani people, treating them as static and ahistorical subjects of study. Scholars documented customs, appearances, and languages with little regard for agency, complexity, or political context. These

studies circulated widely and became authoritative references, even when they reproduced deeply biased and racialized narratives.

The twentieth century brought further entrenchment of these biases. Academic studies often framed Roma as a “problem”, emphasising perceived social deficits rather than historical injustices. Research was frequently used to justify assimilationist or exclusionary policies, reinforcing stereotypes and legitimising antigypsyist practices. Even as the language of racial science faded after the Second World War, many of its underlying assumptions persisted in policy and scholarship (Acton 2015). The impact of this epistemic legacy is not merely historical. It continues to shape how Roma are represented today in education, media, and politics. Stereotypical narratives remain embedded in public consciousness, while Romani scholars still face structural barriers in gaining recognition and authority in academic spaces. Challenging this legacy requires both historical critique and the active construction of alternative narratives grounded in Romani epistemologies.

2. Knowledge Production and Romani Epistemology

Knowledge production is never neutral – it is embedded within social hierarchies, institutionalised power structures, and culturally legitimised systems of knowledge (Brooks, Clark, and Rostas 2021). The historical construction and representation of Romani people exemplify how such relations operate, revealing the persistent intersection of authority, knowledge, and marginalisation. For centuries, knowledge about Roma was produced *about* them but not *by* them (Bogdan et al. 2015; Ryder 2015). This external standpoint created not only inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals but also structural barriers that kept Romani epistemologies invisible or delegitimised. Romani epistemology refers to knowledge grounded in Romani positionality, to the social, historical, and cultural experiences of Romani people. It is rooted in collective memory, oral histories, linguistic diversity, and lived experiences that challenge dominant Eurocentric frameworks. This epistemology does not reject academic rigour; rather, it redefines it by insisting that situated perspectives are sources of legitimate knowledge (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2023).

Romani scholars are frequently regarded as occupying an “outsider within” positionality, formally trained within academic traditions structured by non-Romani frameworks. According to Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, who coined the term, “Outsiders within” possess tools, knowledge, and critical training to be able to re-examine their own personal and cultural experiences, and at the same time to illuminate some of the existing academic anomalies, shortcomings, and gaps (Hill Collins 1986). Likewise, Romani scholars draw on lived experiences and culturally situated knowledge, enabling critical re-examinations of dominant scholarly canons. This positionality enables Romani knowledge-producers to uncover and challenge historical and social biases, stereotypes, and omissions embedded in mainstream Romani Studies. Furthermore, Romani epistemology is marked by a methodological focus on translation that avoids the erasure of knowledge and context. Placing Romani experiences into academic discourse does not mean assimilating them into dominant frameworks but creating new conceptual tools that reflect Romani realities.

This approach values the plurality of Romani agency and recognises that knowledge is produced not only in academic institutions but also in communities, families, artistic spaces, and political movements. Romani

epistemology is inherently dialogical, emphasising reciprocal engagement, relational understanding, and the reconstruction of knowledge across cultural and experiential contexts. It does not seek to exclude non-Romani voices but to create spaces where Romani perspectives have equal authority and visibility. It destabilises traditional academic hierarchies and promotes co-creation of knowledge that respects difference and complexity. In so doing, it provides a critical foundation for rethinking how knowledge is structured, who has access to it, and whose histories are considered and recognised.

Critical Romani Studies represents an epistemological shift from that of being studied to actually producing knowledge. It builds on the understanding that Roma have long been excluded from defining their own identities in academic contexts. This exclusion has not only distorted Romani representation but also impoverished the disciplines that study them (Acton 2015; Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2015; Garapich, Fiałkowska, and Mirga-Wójtowicz 2020). Furthermore, Romani scholars navigate universities that are often unwelcoming and hierarchical, where their expertise may be questioned or overshadowed. They frequently experience epistemic isolation, being the only Romani scholar in their department or institution (Buhigas forthcoming). This positionality is both a challenge and a source of strength. It allows for a double vision, the ability to critically examine dominant academic frameworks while articulating alternative perspectives rooted in lived experience. An essential part of Romani positionality is the reversal of the research agenda. Instead of asking why Roma are different, backward, or problematic, Romani scholars interrogate how majoritarian societies construct stereotypes, marginalisation, and exclusion. They examine how institutions and discourses shape Romani identities externally, while recovering histories of resistance and contribution that have been erased or ignored.

Romani positionality also embraces the entanglement of scholarship and public visibility. The critique that Romani scholars are “too activist” reveals enduring biases that privilege detached, so-called objective scholarship. It also reifies scientism and the problematic understanding of academia as detached, objective exercises where nothing is at stake (Ryder 2015). In reality, all scholarship is situated. Romani scholars openly acknowledge their positionality as a strength, allowing them to conduct research that is ethically grounded and socially relevant. The growing number of Romani scholars, including those outside traditional Romani Studies, signals a broadening of perspectives. Many scholars, who previously concealed their identities due to stigma, are now openly identifying as Roma, contributing to an increasingly confident and self-determined intellectual community. Moreover, a growing number of non-Romani scholars (including Vajda 2015; Dunajeva 2018; Fremlova 2018; and others) also critically acknowledge their own positionality and reflect on questions of privilege and power dynamics,

3. From Discourse to Institutions – The Establishment of ERIAC and the Expansion of Critical Romani Studies

The idea of establishing a Roma-led cultural and intellectual institution, which could effectively counter dominant cultural and academic (mis)representations of Roma can be traced back as far as the late 1960s (Junghaus 2006; 2007). For decades, Romani activists, artists, and intellectuals envisioned creating an international space that would provide Roma with the tools and a joint platform to define their own

narratives. This vision gained momentum in 2013–2014, when a group of Romani scholars, cultural leaders and public intellectuals began lobbying for what would become the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC). This group, catalysed by Zeljko Jovanovic, then director of the Roma Initiatives Office at the Open Society Foundations, eventually formed the Alliance for ERIAC – an informal, voluntary network which became the driving engine behind the establishment of ERIAC, securing the support of intergovernmental partners. Finally, together with the Council of Europe, the Open Society Foundations, and the Alliance, ERIAC was officially established in 2017 as a transnational institution dedicated to promoting Romani arts, culture, and knowledge. It represents a unique intervention: Rather than relying on temporary projects or fragmented initiatives, it provides a stable institutional structure for Roma-led intellectual and cultural production. ERIAC emerged as a response to centuries of exclusion and also as a proactive step toward shaping Romani futures. Its mission was clear: Fight antigypsyism among the majority and encourage ethnic pride among Roma through arts and culture, knowledge-production, history and commemoration, media, and work on the Romani language.

The process of calling ERIAC to life was not without controversy. Some non-Romani scholars, institutions, and networks (including the European Academic Network on Romani Studies, EANRS) expressed concerns that ERIAC might exclude non-Romani voices or impose political agendas (Magazzini 2016; 2021).

Arguably, the heated and often personal and confrontational debates that this debate triggered go beyond the set-up of the ERI itself. Revolving around the concepts of Roma authenticity, legitimacy, ethnic representation and cultural hegemony such exchanges have tapped into a complex set of underlying assumptions that often go unproblematized, and whose analysis can help bring some clarity to understanding wider struggles around Roma identity politics (Beck and Ivasiuc 2018, 4).

These criticisms often revealed underlying fears about losing control over knowledge production and interpretive authority. Despite these challenges, ERIAC established itself as an influential platform. By creating an institution rather than a temporary network, ERIAC increased Romani visibility and authority in cultural and intellectual spaces. Today, it engages with multiple audiences, such as scholars, artists, educators, policymakers, and communities bridging the gap between academic research and public discourse. This institutional presence also provides Romani scholars with a sense of collective belonging in spaces where they have historically been isolated.

Although ERIAC is not a university or research institute in the classical sense, knowledge production is one of its central pillars. As a membership-based organisation, ERIAC brings together Romani and non-Romani individuals and organisations, including many scholars; ERIAC's membership community is organised in five thematic sections, including one explicitly dedicated to knowledge-production. ERIAC functions as a hub connecting scholars, artists, activists, and community members, whose work focuses on transforming how Romani knowledge is produced, disseminated, and accessed. Moreover, ERIAC's dedication to knowledge-production is also reflected in its strategy. In fact, since its establishment, ERIAC has acknowledged the importance of generating impact in academic and educational fields. This commitment is aimed at ensuring the development of Romani scholarship, particularly in Critical Romani Studies, and enhancing the visibility of Romani academic narratives and scholars. The ultimate objective of ERIAC is to

become a referential source of knowledge about Romani culture, history, and identity for higher education institutions, governments, and the Romani community itself. Indeed, one of ERIAC's strategic objectives for the years 2021–2025 is to build on a recent breakthrough: Council of Europe (CoE) Recommendation on the inclusion of the history of Roma and/or Travellers in school curricula and teaching materials. This involves positioning ERIAC as a key institutional partner providing policy input to the CoE secretariat and its member states. Simultaneously, ERIAC aims to establish enduring partnerships with educational institutions, particularly universities. To achieve this, ERIAC has launched several academic initiatives and continues to forge partnerships with academic institutions all over Europe.

One of ERIAC's flagship initiatives is the Barvalipe Roma Online University, created during the COVID-19 pandemic. Barvalipe Roma Online University is an online educational platform where Roma and non-Roma can access knowledge about Romani identity(ies), history(ies), and culture(s) through a collection of high-quality lectures delivered by leading Romani scholars on topics ranging from the Roma Holocaust to Romani cultural productions. This initiative, developed as part of the International Roma Cultural Outreach Programme, is financed by the German Federal Foreign Office (FFO). The first course of the Barvalipe Roma Online University launched on 1 September 2020. The inaugural course, "Introduction to Roma Cultural History", begins with the history of Romani arrival in Europe, traces Romani cultural, social, and political presence in Europe, and ends with a reflection on the importance of contemporary Romani knowledge production. The second course was launched on 21 September 2021. Throughout that year, each week a new lecture was livestreamed on Facebook. Following each lecture premiere, we moderated a discussion with the lecturer and invited guests in which the audience also had a chance to ask questions. Starting in 2022, ERIAC focused on the production of educational videos in a conversational tone that are easier to digest for larger audiences. The idea of the Barvalipe Masterclass was born from a desire for more appealing presentation and higher-quality production.^[1] The Barvalipe Roma Online University brings together leading scholars and practitioners to offer lectures, workshops, and masterclasses to broad audiences (ERIAC 2020a). By providing free and accessible educational content, ERIAC democratises access to knowledge and counters the exclusivity of academic institutions. It also bridges the gap between scholarly research and community learning, ensuring that Romani knowledge circulates beyond narrow academic circles. Another significant contribution is the Critical Romani Studies Library,^[2] a curated bibliography highlighting foundational works authored by Romani scholars. This resource challenges the dominance of biased, non-Romani-centric literature and offers researchers and students a reliable entry point into Roma-led scholarship. It is not merely a library but a statement, as Romani scholarship exists, thrives, and deserves to be central to the field.

ERIAC also works on addressing Romani representation in formal education. Romani history and culture remain largely absent from European school curricula, despite more than seven centuries of Romani presence in Europe. This absence not only marginalises Romani students but also perpetuates ignorance and stereotypes among majority populations. ERIAC responds by developing educational

1 See: <https://eriac.org/barvalipe-roma-online-university>.

2 See: <https://eriac.org/digatal-library-of-curricula-roma-scholarship>.

materials, curricula, and methodologies that can be integrated into national education systems, aligning with broader European recommendations on Roma inclusion in history education. In this sense, ERIAC also serves as a policy adviser by releasing position papers (see, for example, Mirga-Kruszelnicka, Mate, and Greku 2023).

Finally, a key element of ERIAC's agenda is the reframing of Romani history through resistance and agency. Projects like *Rethinking Roma Resistance* (ERIAC 2020b) have sought to overturn narratives of victimhood by documenting and celebrating Romani contributions to European societies. This includes resistance to persecution, participation in political and cultural movements, and creative production that has enriched European culture. Similarly, ongoing research under the European Commission-funded JEKHIPE project (ERIAC 2024) examines how Romani communities in six countries have responded to antigypsyism through academia, activism, arts, and cultural mobilisation. Through these initiatives, ERIAC positions itself as both a catalyst and a connector. It amplifies Romani voices, shapes research agendas, and provides spaces for dialogue and co-creation. Its approach embodies the belief that knowledge production is not confined to academic institutions but thrives in the intersections of culture, activism, and education.

3. Directions and Methodological Reflections for Romani Knowledge Production

As Romani scholars and institutions advance into new grounds of research and practice, methodological reflection becomes indispensable. Critical Romani Studies advocates for methodologies that not only articulate Romani lives but also fundamentally reshape the epistemic conditions under which such knowledge is produced. This transformation requires a deliberate departure from paradigmatic frameworks that claim neutrality while perpetuating inequality, emphasising ethical reflexivity, participatory engagement, and epistemic accountability. By foregrounding Romani positionality, lived experience, and culturally situated knowledge, Critical Romani Studies challenges entrenched hierarchies of representation and opens pathways for more inclusive, dialogical, and socially just forms of knowledge production. Future Roma-led scholarship must therefore articulate methodologies grounded in ethics, participation, and reciprocity. The growing number of non-Romani scholars embracing critical approaches contributes to expansion and the growing acceptance of Critical Romani Studies as a separate scientific branch.

Methodological renewal in Romani Studies begins with ethical reflexivity, acknowledging that research has historically been extractive, with data and stories collected from communities without their consent or tangible benefit. Future methodologies must reject this legacy by embedding accountability to the communities being studied, with participatory and community-based research models offering frameworks in which Roma are treated as collaborators rather than objects, actively shaping research questions, interpretations, and outcomes. Language and research vocabulary remain a critical methodological concern, as much Romani knowledge exists in oral, local, or performative forms that do not easily conform to academic norms. Translating these standards into scholarly discourse requires careful attention to meaning and context, privileging multilingualism and oral traditions as sources of

epistemic innovation, rather than erasing cultural expression to conform to established epistemic canons. Together, ethical reflexivity and attentive engagement with language form the foundation for Roma-centred methodologies that are both rigorous and socially responsible. These considerations should eventually be reflected in a Code of Ethnical Conduct in Romani Studies, yet to be developed.

Future directions must also prioritise the creation of Romani archives, addressing the historical absence of Romani agency in institutional repositories and the resulting epistemic voids. Initiatives such as those undertaken by ERIAC point toward alternative spaces where documents, testimonies, and artworks are preserved and interpreted under Romani curatorship. These efforts ensure that Romani histories are not only preserved but also understood through Romani perspectives. Romani research must be situated within broader critical engagements with academic antigypsyism and systemic social exclusion. Intersectional approaches link Romani experiences to intersecting gender, sexuality, class, and ethnicity that could fill this scholarly gap. In this process, it is worthwhile looking into experiences of other subaltern and racialized groups, seeking inspiration from their own journey to intellectual emancipation (Mirga-Kruszelnicka 2015; 2018).

Concurrently, transnational collaboration among Romani and allied scholars enhances collective capacity to shape and influence global discourses on decolonisation, reparations, and social justice. For Romani epistemology to thrive, it requires sustainable institutional foundations, prioritising the creation of academic programmes, research, and funding mechanisms that support Roma-led inquiry, as exemplified by ERIAC and the Critical Romani Studies Department at Central European University. Providing the necessary infrastructure for continuity and legitimacy, with the long-term goal of not merely achieving representation but ensuring permanence, will make Romani scholarship an enduring and integral component of the European intellectual landscape. As successive generations of Romani scholars emerge, their methodological innovations are poised to continually redefine prevailing conceptions of ethics, evidence, and expertise.

Conclusion

The history of Romani knowledge production is marked by exclusion, bias, and asymmetry. For centuries, Roma have been represented by others, often through lenses of exoticisation, criminalisation, and deficit. This history has shaped academic disciplines, informed policy frameworks, and structured public imaginaries. Yet, the growing movement of Romani scholars, intellectuals, and institutions signals a profound epistemological and political shift. Critical Romani Studies and ERIAC represent the pillar of this transformation. While Critical Romani Studies reconfigures the theoretical and methodological foundations of knowledge production, ERIAC provides an institutional framework to sustain and disseminate this new knowledge. Engaging with critical Romani scholarship enables ERIAC to challenge centuries-old structures that marginalised Romani agency and, parallel to it, opens pathways for more equitable, plural, and self-determined narratives rooted in Romani subjectivity. This development is not merely about increasing the visibility of Roma in academia. It is about rethinking what counts as knowledge, who produces it, and whose perspectives shape collective understanding. Romani epistemologies, grounded in positionality, experience, and historical consciousness, offer new

tools for academic inquiry and cultural reflection and pave the way for a critical re-reading of a Romani historical past – and future. They enrich scholarship, democratise knowledge, and promote more ethical and inclusive forms of representation.

The work ahead remains challenging, as structural antigypsyism persists in education systems, research institutions, and cultural spaces. Romani scholars still face epistemic marginalisation, and Romani knowledge remains under-recognised. Yet, the emergence of Roma-led institutions like ERIAC demonstrates that change is both possible and underway. By building our own archives, institutions, and epistemologies, Romani communities are reshaping our place in Europe's intellectual agenda. In the long arc of history, reclaiming knowledge production is a form of resistance and self-determination. It is an act of imagining futures in which Roma are no longer merely subjects of study but equal participants, authors, and leaders in shaping shared human knowledge. ERIAC and Critical Romani Studies are vital components of this ongoing process, a paradigm shift that is not only academic but profoundly cultural, political, and transformative.

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