Subjects, Disavowed: Romani Europeans and the Challenge of Unthinkable Histories

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Abstract: Current European politics of memory and discourses of Europeanness rarely include Europe's Romani population, despite Romani people's long history on the continent and their five-hundred-year enslavement on the territory of today's Romania. The article draws on Michel Rolph Trouillot's notion of "unthinkable history" in order to address the systematic production of Romani people as unthinkable Others in the European context. I argue that what counts as Europe today mirrors an existing, self-proclaimed "heroic Europe" in the West of the continent that has been shaped by an Occidentalist worldview emerged during Europe's colonial expansion. *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* was complicit in this project. After embedding the production of Otherness in larger discourses of Europeanness in the first part, the article zooms in on the Roma as unthinkable Others in the second. The final section discusses *Acta Comparationis*' ambivalent role with respect to Romani knowledge production as an instance of Occidentalist construction of Europeanness.

Keywords: enslavement, politics of memory, Romani Europeans, Europe, racism, Orientalism, Occidentalism

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Despite having been present *in* Europe for centuries, Roma people are rarely considered *of* Europe or addressed as Europeans today.[1] Like other racialized groups that are not viewed as constitutive for Europe's present—notably Muslims and Afrodescendants—the Roma have been written out of Europe's past. They are therefore rarely part of European institutions' (however infrequent) reckoning with either racism or enslavement. When such reckoning happens, it tends to restrict European racism temporally to the Holocaust, thus conflating racism with antisemitism, on the one hand; and it tends to relegate enslavement spatially to Africa and the Americas, thus equating enslavement with the transatlantic trade, on the other hand. The Roma, whose Holocaust is hardly mentioned, and whose enslavement within Europe is barely discussed, fall through these temporal and spatial cracks in Europe's current politics of memory.

This is not a mere error of omission, to be remedied by the politically and historically correct inclusion of Roma history and present into Europe's memory. Rather, as I argue in the following, the situation is part of the *longue durée* of Occidentalist constructions of Europeanness that, alongside the construction of Self and Other as binary opposites such as European and non-European and of an East-West divide within the continent, involved the manufacturing and relegation of unthinkable Others like the Roma beyond the pale of competing European identities. I start by embedding the production of Otherness in larger discourses of Europeanness and then zoom in on the Roma as unthinkable Others. In the final section, I discuss *Acta Comparationis'* ambivalent role with respect to Romani knowledge production as an instance of Occidentalist construction of Europeanness.

Hyperreal Europe and its Others

Trenchant criticism of Europe's politics of memory has long been voiced by scholars writing from and about Europe's former as well as its present colonies, rather than from within the European continent. Writing in the wake

1. Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Talal Asad, "Muslims and European Identity: Can Europe Represent Islam?," in *The Idea of Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 209–227.

of World War II from the French overseas department of Martinique, writer and pro-independence politician Aimé Césaire famously declared that the violence perpetrated by the Nazis only differed from other national politics in Europe by "having applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been applied only to non-European peoples."[2] The continuities and parallels between European colonial rule and latter-day racial politics in the metropoles that Césaire pointed to would soon thereafter be addressed by scholars across the colonial world and their allies in Europe—from Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre to Hannah Arendt and Edward Said. At the turn of the millennium, Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty referred to "hyperreal Europe" as a reification which, unlike the many actually existing Europes, had been "constructed by the tales that both imperialism and nationalism have told the colonized."[3] As such, hyperreal Europe's self-definition purposefully omitted the European violence, occupation and plunder of colonized territories while monopolizing narratives of modernity and claiming modern industry, technology, medicine, the nation-state, and the modern self as achievements endogenous to Europe.

Around the same time as Chakrabarty, British-Pakistani anthropologist Talal Asad pointed out how Europe's highly selective politics of memory was making it possible to define racialized Others within Europe in terms of their non-European origins and write them out of Europeanness as a result. Echoing Chakrabarty's "hyperreal Europe," Asad maintained that "the 'myth of Europe' defines the extent of its own solidarity. 'The myth of Europe' does not simply suppress the collective memories of violence within Europe; the resurrection of those memories strengthens that myth."[4] The history of hyperreal Europe can thus be written as an unbroken linear development towards enlightened politics. The Holocaust, defined primarily with respect to its Jewish victims, represents the only tragic and uncharacteristic exception to the rule in this narrative. The common European task of "never again" repeating it hence acts as redemption from and overcoming of the violence Europeans allegedly perpetrated only *once* and thereby strengthens the very myth it briefly threatened. Yet, more importantly, Asad pointed out, the reverse does not apply. The violence imputed to Europe's Others is not a past lesson that has been or could be overcome through civilizing efforts, but an irredeemable essence that forever prevents access to (full) Europeanness.[5]

Asad's focus was on European Muslims, who had long been viewed through the lens of the threat Islam was seen to pose to Christendom throughout its history. He therefore cautioned against associating them—individually or collectively, as in the case of the Turkish state—with the Ottoman Empire, whose violent legacy is regularly traced back to its "Asian" heritage, thus rendering both Muslim individuals and an Islamic state external to a presumed essence of Europe.[6] Yet the same logic applies to the Roma, whose Europeanness is often dismissed with reference to their "Asian" origins, and whose history in Europe belies the self-congratulatory tale of a hyperreal, enlightened Europe. According to the teleology of European progress towards the Enlightenment and the protection of human rights, while Western Europe introduced and greatly expanded chattel slavery, it later abolished it and gradually declared it incompatible with the principle of liberty on French or British soil. This truncated history of European enslavement conveniently leaves out Roma slavery, which persisted until the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, but outside of the West. Writing Romani history out of European history and Romani people out of Europeanness therefore obscures the integral role that slavery continued to play on the European continent until the mid-nineteenth century through the violently racist institution that was Romani enslavement—and which also included significant numbers of Muslim Roma.[7]

Since Romani enslavement emerged and endured on the territory of present-day Romania, and thus in the East of Europe, what is at stake in writing Roma people into European history is not only the inclusion of a European minority that has so far been absent from the discourse on Europeanness. This would ultimately only recenter European, rather than Romani agency globally. Rather, at stake is the dismantling of the Occidentalist understanding that what counts as hyperreal Europe today mirrors an existing, self-proclaimed "heroic Europe" in the West of the continent[8]. And, more importantly, that this "heroic Europe" can be absolved from its responsibility for enslavement on its territory in modern history by relegating the enslavers to an "epigonal Europe" located

2. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 36.

3. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 40.

4. Asad, "Muslims and European Identity," 212.

5. Asad, "Muslims and European Identity," 213.

6. Asad, "Muslims and European Identity," 213.

7. Viorel Achim, "Slavery in Southeastern Europe," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Slavery throughout History*, ed. Damian A. Pargas and Juliane Schiel (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 535.

8. For the concept of heroic Europe and its counterparts, see Manuela Boatcă, "Thinking Europe Otherwise: Lessons from the Caribbean," *Current Sociology* 21, no. 3 (2021): 389; Manuela Boatcă, "Multiple Europes and the Politics of Difference Within," *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* 3, no. 3 (2013). https://globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/sites/globalstudies.trinity.duke.edu/files/documents/v3d3_Boatca2.pdf; and below.

outside of proper Europeanness and writing the enslaved population outside of Europeanness altogether.

Acta Comparationis Literrarum Universarum was complicit in this project. Founded in Transylvania in 1877, after slavery had been outlawed by European colonial powers, the U.S., and most independent states in South America—and shortly before Western European states and the Ottoman Empire divided the African continent among themselves at the 1884/85 Berlin Congo conference—it was long celebrated for its anti-nationalist sentiment, cosmopolitan vision and inclusiveness, not least of Romani-language texts. The journal's editorial policies and discourse, however, reveal the effort to secure a place within "heroic Europeanness" for Austria-Hungary, which had not been granted any territories in Africa as a result of the Berlin Congo Conference, but had gained more influence in the European East instead. Investing in strategies that relegated this East to an "epigonal Europe" was an effective means to the end of claiming membership in "heroic Europe" for Austria-Hungary in general and for its Hungarian periphery in particular.

Becoming Unthinkable

In dialogue with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and with Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems analysis, anthropologist Fernando Coronil argued that the Orientalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could not have been conceived without an earlier notion of Occidentalism.[9] Coronil defined Occidentalism as "a style of representation that produces polarized and hierarchical conceptions of the West and its Others and makes them central figures in accounts of global and local histories."[10] Thus, Coronil stressed, Occidentalism does not represent the counterpart of Orientalism, but its precondition, a discourse from and about the West that sets the stage for discourses about the West's Other(s), of which "the Orient" is one among many.[11] Especially for another one of the West's Others, the European East, Occidentalism is thus a more useful term than Eurocentrism. On the one hand, the latter cannot account for degrees and hierarchies of Europeanness within Europe—such as discourses of Balkanism. On the other hand, it also cannot adequately explain claims to Europeanness on the part of Eastern European states that repeatedly invoked their role as "bulwarks of Christianity" against Islam.[12] Instead, Occidentalism emerged as a discourse from and about the hegemonic Western European colonial powers that conquered and looted the Americas, trafficked Africans into slavery for the plantation economy and increasingly defined themselves as the "heroic" Europe that had pioneered modernity. In time, this focus relegated the early colonial powers, Spain and Portugal, to a lesser, "decadent" Europe, while large parts of the European East, which had lost out of colonial possessions overseas, became the "epigonal Europe" perpetually trying to catch up.[13] Occidentalism thus gradually constructed and downgraded both European and non-European Others to the extent that their "Westernness," that is, their Occidentality, became questionable in a given historical and geopolitical context—be it as a decline from hegemony, as an imputed, "lesser" whiteness, as "lesser" Christianity, as the "wrong" religion altogether, or as insufficient modernity.

The Roma feature in this Occidentalist imaginary as a particularly consequential Other. After eighteenth-century European ethnographies of the Roma traced their origin back to India, linguists took up the link between India and Europe as a way of including the Roma in a "European family." Yet, as Anca Parvulescu and I have argued, insisting on the start of the Romani migration in India served to Orientalize the Roma as a group.[14] At the same time, the five hundred years of enslavement of the Roma on the territory of today's Romania as property of the state, the local nobility, and the Orthodox Church—which could buy, sell, gift or bequeath the enslaved, offer them as dowry, or exchange them for debt—reinforced both the collective Orientalization of the Roma and that of the European East as the West's Other. Not only did the West increasingly define itself in terms of humanistic ideals and a Christian penchant towards egalitarianism and social justice that mandated at least leniency toward the enslaved, if not their outright liberation; fears of the Ottoman expansion into Europe gradually put an end to the trade in enslaved people from the Black Sea and to domestic slavery in Western Europe more broadly.[15] In

9. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Immanuel Wallerstein, ed., *The Essential Wallerstein* (New York: New Press, 2000).

10. Fernando Coronil, "Beyond Occidentalism," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (1996): 57.

11. Manuela Boatcă, *Global Inequalities beyond Occidentalism* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), 82ff.

12. Manuela Boatcă, "Semiperipheries in the World-System: Reflecting Eastern European and Latin American Experiences," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 12, no. 2 (2006): 321–46; Manuela Boatcă, "Forgotten Europes," in *Critical Geopolitics and Regional (Re)Configurations. Interregionalism and Transnationalism between Latin America and Europe*, ed. Heriberto Cairo Carou and Breno M. Bringel (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 96–116.

13. Boatcă, "Thinking Europe", 389. Boatcă, "Multiple Europes."

14. Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

15. Sandra Origone, "Christian Slave Traders, Slave Owners, and Slaves in the 13th–15th Centuries," in *Slavery in the Black Sea Region, c.900-1900: Forms of Unfreedom at the Intersection between Christianity and Islam*, ed. Felicia Roșu (Leiden & Boston, MA: Brill, 2022)

turn, Moldavia and Wallachia, in which Roma slavery was legal until 1856 and which paid tribute to the Ottoman Empire up to the end of the nineteenth century, appeared as permanently less enlightened, civilized, free, and ultimately less European—indeed, a despotic Orient. Recent works dealing specifically with enslavement in the Black Sea region continue to reproduce the trope of exceptionalism of Romani enslavement in a slavery-free, Christian modern Europe. The exception is applied, on the one hand, with respect to the racialized character of Romani enslavement. Unlike the enslavement of Tatars and Cossacks, whose roles as raiders and slaves frequently alternated, Romani enslavement was predicated upon a racial other providing enslaved labor and thus resembled chattel slavery in the Americas. On the other hand, Romani enslavement is considered an exception to the trend of relocating the enslavement trade outside of Europe after the fifteenth century: As Felicia Roșu stated in the introduction to the 2022 volume "Slavery in the Black Sea Region," "The only exception from this regional norm was Gypsy slavery in Moldavia and Wallachia, which shared several characteristics with North American slavery, such as the stability and self-reproduction of the slave population and the near-equivalence of a certain ethnic origin with the slave status."[16] For Roma slavery to constitute an exception, it would have needed to be spatially or temporally insignificant, or both. Neither was the case. As an institution central to both Romanian principalities of Romania and Moldavia for five hundred years, it was neither localized nor short-lived.[17]

It was nevertheless as recently as 2019 that Pope Francis publicly apologized to all Roma in Europe for the harm inflicted on them by people and institutions affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. The symbolic gesture made headlines all over Europe and the U.S.[18] Yet the fact that the apology was issued during the Pope's visit to Romania, where Romani enslavement lasted until the mid-nineteenth century, but where no similar apology has ever been offered on behalf of either the Romanian state or the Romanian Orthodox Church, also points to the peculiar location of the Roma within Europe's politics of memory. The Roma, a population that Fatima El-Tayeb described as "the European minority par excellence," is the object of E.U.-wide anti-discrimination policies, protection, and integration measures.[19] It, however, is not the subject of a systematic apology and negotiation of reparations at the European level.[20] As Ioanida Costache pointed out, not even the Pope's much-lauded apology made more than implicit references to Romani slavery or the Roma Holocaust, but rather to vaguely phrased, "many experiences of discrimination, segregation and mistreatment experienced by your communities." Costache's critique of the Pope's speech addresses the very unthinkability of the Roma as subjects of systematic apology, when she asks: "What makes Roma suffering so unspeakable, so unsayable, that the pope couldn't name the Holocaust and Roma slavery?" Indeed, if such an apology were meant as a step towards the inclusion of the Roma into a European politics of memory, rather than as a prominently covered, yet isolated occurrence, "We shouldn't have to fill in the blanks."[21]

Against this background, I argue that the unambiguous acknowledgment of the Roma as *Romani Europeans* today hinges on their status as political subjects in European history. In Occidentalist self-definitions of Europe, Roma political subjectivity has been for a long time unthinkable, a term that Michel-Rolph Trouillot coined to refer to the agency of enslaved Black people in staging and carrying out the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804.[22] Because the notion of Black enslaved people as political subjects capable of collective organization and revolutionary action was inconceivable to Eurocentric historians, Trouillot wrote, "The Haitian Revolution entered history with the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable even as it happened,"[23] and was silenced or belittled as a mere "rebellion" by a Western historiography which lacked the capacity "to express the unthinkable."[24] In the current European context, the notion of the unthinkable strikingly parallels the erasure and active forgetting of the Roma in the conceptualization of Europeanness.

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16. Felicia Roșu, *Slavery in the Black Sea Region, c.900-1900: Forms of Unfreedom at the Intersection between Christianity and Islam* (Leiden & Boston, MA: Brill, 2022), 6.

17. Adrian Nicolae Furtună and Victor-Claudiu Turcitu, *Sclavia romilor și locurile memoriei: album de istorie socială* (Popești-Leordeni: Dykhta! Publishing House, 2021).

18. Kit Gillet and Jason Horowitz, "Pope Francis Apologizes to Roma for Mistreatment and Urges European Unity," *New York Times*, June 2, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/02/world/europe/pope-francis-romania.html; Philip Pullella, "Pope Asks Forgiveness for Historical Mistreatment of Roma People," *Reuters*, June 2, 2019. https://www.reuters.com/article/world/pope-asks-forgiveness-for-historical-mistreatment-of-roma-people-idUSKCN1T30BJ/; BBC News, "Pope Francis Apologises to Roma for Catholic Discrimination," *BBC News*, June 2, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48490942#.

19. El-Tayeb, *European Others*, xxvii.

20. Jacqueline Bhabha, Margareta Matache, and Caroline Elkins, eds., *Time for Reparations: A Global Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

21. Ioanida Costache, "Beyond Excuses: A Critique of the Pope/article/world/pope-as," *IOANIDA* (blog), June 6, 2019. https://www.ioanida.com/blog-forte/beyond-excuses.

22. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995).

23. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 73.

24. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past,* 97.

The Unthinkable across Disciplines

What is it that makes Romani Europeans unthinkable in a European project? Alongside its political implications, the question of the Europeanness of different populations poses important theoretical challenges. In the academic division of labor between the social sciences, my own discipline of sociology has since its emergence defined itself as concerned with the study of modernity, in which "Europe" is the origin and prototype of modern society.[25] This is the same "hyperreal Europe" to which Chakrabarty referred, and which constitutes the subject matter as well as the subject position of most sociological theory. As sociology increasingly ignored the experience of the East and the South of Europe in its accounts of Europe's trajectory towards modernity, nation-state formation, and citizenship rights, Western theories of modernity never referred to the European East except as a counterexample, a region lagging behind modernity, both historically and in the present. As a Romanian sociologist working in German academia, in which neither the theoretical production nor the historical and present reality of the European East featured in the sociology curriculum, "Where is the place of Europe's East within modernity?" was one of my main questions. As such, it was linked to the larger issue of the normative categories that structure the sociological construction of difference, and through it to several European "Others."

Scholarship on Orientalism, Balkanism, racism, and critical whiteness has long taught us that prevailing norms—whether the West, Europe, sedentarity, or whiteness—feature as unmarked categories.[26] It is through the construction of difference that their normative character becomes visible—the Orient is constructed as the non-West, Eastern Europe as lesser Europe, nomadism as non-sedentarity, Blackness as non-whiteness. All deviant categories thus constructed require naming, while their unmarked counterparts remain unnamed, unqualified, or unstressed. The label of "Europe" always includes both Western Europe and its white and Christian populations, but Eastern Europe needs to be specifically mentioned in order to be included in the term. In this context, the fact that the European East is often portrayed as "semi-Oriental" or "somehow Asian" not only serves to sanction Western Europe's position as the norm, but also to legitimate the—geographically untenable—continental division between Europe and Asia. In my previous work, I have discussed at length how the attributes that informed the reigning notion of "Europe"—and its corresponding claims to civilization, modernity, and development—were defined one-sidedly from positions of power mainly associated with colonial and imperial rule.[27] Similarly, for a long time, Black Europe needed to be argued, defended, and explained. And it is thanks to the scholarship and political mobilization of Black European scholars and activists that the category has relatively recently entered sociological discourse.[28] If Trouillot referred to the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804—the only successful revolution of enslaved people, which led to the establishment of the world's first Black republic—as unthinkable, it was precisely because the notion of a revolution led by Black enslaved people did not exist in Eurocentric historical scholarship, so the momentous event was read through Western historians' ready-made categories.

In short, Western sociology has focused on modernity while systematically eclipsing its counterpart, what the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano has called coloniality: "the social classification of the world's population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power [....], but [...] more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established."[29] The effects of coloniality as premised on racialization meant that, in the course of Europe's colonial expansion and domination, certain groups and regions, including within Europe, were ascribed inferior degrees of Europeanness, Christianity, and whiteness, or, in Quijano's words, "were dispossessed of their own and singular historical identities."[30] Just as crucial, however, was their dispossession of subjectivity in cultural and theoretical production, as "their new racial identity, colonial and negative, involved the plundering of their place in the history of the cultural production of humanity. From then on, there were inferior races, capable only

25. Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein and Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, eds., *Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Shalini Randeria, "Jenseits von Soziologie und soziokultureller Anthropologie: Zur Ortsbestimmung der nichtwestlichen Welt in einer zukünftigen Sozialtheorie'," *Soziale Welt* 50, no. 4 (1999): 373–82; Sujata Patel, ed., *The ISA Handbook of Diverse Sociological Traditions* (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2009).

26. Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest," in *The Indigenous Experience: Global Perspectives*, ed. Roger C.A. Maaka and Chris Andersen (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2006), 165–73; Maria Todorova, "Spacing Europe: What Is a Historical Region?" *East Central Europe* 32, no. 1-2 (2005): 59–78.

27.Boatcă, "Multiple Europes and the Politics of Difference Within"; Manuela Boatcă, "Grenzsetzende Macht: Geopolitische Strategien europäischer Identitätsbildung," *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 20, no. 1 (March 2010): 23–44.

28. Darlene Clark Hine, Trica Danielle Keaton, and Stephen Small, eds., *Black Europe and the African Diaspora* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Heike Raphael-Hernandez, *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2004).

29. Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepentla: Views from the South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–580

30. Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," 552.

of producing inferior cultures [...]: from then on, they were the past."[31] While Quijano was primarily interested in the transformations coloniality wrought in the Americas, its impact of Europe was different, yet nonetheless momentous. As a result of coloniality, realities like Black European populations were rendered unthinkable, Muslim Europeans made invisible, and slavery in Europe became unspeakable, even as it flourished as a European transatlantic endeavor. In emphasizing Western Europe's colonial expansion in the Atlantic and the Americas, critical social scientific approaches, from dependency theories and world-systems analysis up to decoloniality and global history downplayed the hierarchies and power asymmetries within Europe. As a result, the migration of the Roma into Europe, their enslavement in Moldova and Wallachia for 500 years, and the consequences of this history of systematic exploitation, genocide and disenfranchisement of a long-standing European population for an understanding of Europeanness have until recently tended to be left out of most analyses of European racism, slavery, and the Holocaust.[32] While calls for the decolonization of sociology have been underway for twenty years,[33] this remains a relatively recent endeavor that faces both considerable resistance and a growing backlash in Europe and beyond.

Around the same time that calls for decolonizing sociology started, a different disciplinary origin story and a distinct potential for rethinking Europe has been claimed for Comparative Literature. According to David Damrosch, Comparative Literature as a discipline has been involved in rethinking the cultural-political landscape of Europe since its inception, even as it has worked to see European literature within the world at large. If comparatists are striving for a more fully global vision today, Damrosch explained, this expansion also involves a more encompassing conception of Europe itself. Nor does it need to be created anew—rather, he suggested, Comparative Literature needs to return to its beginnings: "If we now want to rethink Europe beyond the long-dominant great-power terms, this isn't so much a new idea as a return to a crucial early debate as Comparative Literature began to become an academic field in the third quarter of the nineteenth century."[34] He located this crucial debate in the way relations between major and minor literatures were negotiated in the project of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*. In his view, the journal, premised on the principles of translation and polyglottism, had managed to account for the—often transnational—collective memories on which national identities are built, thus providing a much-needed model for rethinking the relationship between national identities and collective memories in Europe beyond nationalist frames. More recently, Anca Parvulescu and I have discussed how, in editorial practice, the decaglottism advocated by *Acta* shrunk to an imperial diglottism centering Hungarian and German,[35] a decision Meltzl explained through the geographic and cultural proximity of these two literatures to the journal's location in Transylvania.[36] To these were added literatures in three Western European and colonial languages—English, French, and Italian—as well as Latin. While this shortlist still bespeaks a polyglot endeavor that runs counter to monolingual nationalisms, it also betrays *Acta*'s Occidentalist agenda. Neither the programmatic list of ten languages Meltzl proposed on account of their important contributions to world literature, nor the five eventually featured most frequently in the journal included any East European language besides Hungarian. Counter to the geographic and cultural proximity argument, Romanian, the language of the majority population in *Acta*'s home city of Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, didn't make the list. As already noted by Theo D'haen, Meltzl "excluded all other languages of all other minorities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire" while pitting Hungarian against an increasingly overbearing German.[37] At the same time, despite English, French and Italian being both on the list and frequently featured in *Acta*, literature produced in these languages in Europe's colonies overseas was not represented in the journal. Alfred López accordingly considers this "glaring omission" to be the "originary exclusion" that characterized the birth of COMPARATIVE LITERATURE even at its most inclusive—the omission of texts echoing "the single most important historical development of the nineteenth century: the rise and hegemony of European imperialism."[38] Far from "rethinking the cultural-political landscape of Europe" with which Damrosch has credited

31. Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," 552.

32. Adrian Nicolae Furtună, "O istorie a rușinii. Discurs ideologizant între 'robia țiganilor în Moldova și Țara Românească' și sclavia romilor în spațiul românesc," in *Problema românească: O analiză a rasismului românesc*, ed. Oana Dorobanțu and Carmen Gheorghe (Bucharest: Editura Hecate, 2019), 24–36; Marius Turda, *În căutarea românului perfect: specific național, degenerare rasială şi selecție socială în România modernă* (Iași: Polirom, 2024).

33. Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodriguez, Manuela Boatcă, and Sérgio Costa, eds., *Decolonizing European Sociology* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2010); Andrew Zimmerman, "Decolonizing Weber," *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 1 (2006): 53–79.

34. David Damrosch, "Global Regionalism," *European Review* 15, no. 1 (2007): 136.

35. Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern.*

36. Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature," in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton University Press, 2009), 45.

37. Theo D'haen, *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature* (London: Routledge, 2012).

38. Alfred López, "Hugo Meltzl and That Dangerous American Supplement; or, A Tale of Two 1877s," *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 3 (2009): 224.

it, *Acta*'s decaglottism agenda reinforces a hyperreal, heroic Europe—which, in an Occidentalist tug-of-war of belonging, it merely expands by including Hungarian. Indeed, Meltzl believed the Hungarian language lent itself to world literature, as evidenced by his commissioning of translations of Petőfi Sándor, Hungary's national poet, in more than thirty languages. His aim in doing so was to denationalize the framing of Petőfi's work and in turn highlight its regional and global dimensions. Unlike Hungarian, Romanian was, in Meltzl's view, an oral language. And while he admired and collected folk songs in Hungarian, Romanian, and Romani, he placed Romanian and Romani literatures strictly within the framework of folklore.[39] This was a strategic decision that mirrored colonial and imperial differences as well as the geopolitics of knowledge production at work globally: the theory-producing metropole, overwhelmingly associated with the West and credited with having the science, the concepts, and the methods, was also the producer of the literary and social-scientific canon and of proper historiography. In turn, the periphery, systematically reduced to a source of data and a repository of myths, folklore, and indigenous (as opposed to "high") art, could derive neither concepts nor canonical literature from these sources.[40] When in doubt about the position of inter-imperial, semiperipheral locations such as Transylvania, to attest Hungarian, but not Romanian or Romani a world literature vocation was to claim a metropolitan position for the former and to leave the latter to the murky waters of the neither quite peripheral nor quite modern. The developmental model of language and literature underwriting *Acta*, whereby literary cultures develop over time from folklore to world literature, reproduced marginality within the local literary system.[41]

Thus, in *Acta*'s Occidentalist mapping of languages producing world literatures, Hungarian crosses an imaginary border between the epigonal to the East and the heroic to the West, even as it is administratively part of Austria-Hungary and thus bears the imperial East, *Österreich*, in its name. Embedded in the project of founding a discipline dedicated to *Weltliteratur* was thus a geopolitics of knowledge intent on constructing one particular, hyperreal Europe as *Welt*. The double exclusion of other Europes and their languages and literatures—both the ones in the East of the continent and those in Western Europe's colonial possessions—was only one way of fencing this hyperreal Europe in. Just as important was writing those whose literary subjectivity was viewed as unthinkable out of Europeanness altogether. Tellingly, while critics have noted the absence of other languages in Transylvania from the decaglottism agenda, Romani has hardly been listed as one of the glaring omissions. The following section traces *Acta*'s construction of Europeanness through the treatment of Romani literature.

In, but not of *Acta Comparationis*?

In the introduction to this issue, the editors remind us that the narrow window for the kind of work done in *Acta Comparationis* in the 1880s would close quickly in the age of rising nationalism. Both the type of collaboration heralded by Meltzl and Dora d'Istria and the range of authors and languages that the journal boasted would subsequently be claimed for national projects or subsumed to national identifiers.

The same cannot be said for the Romani language or authors, nor for articles on Romani life more generally. Nationalism encroached upon their visibility and treatment as well, but, rather than claiming them for one national project or the other, it served to disclaim their belonging to any national community and, later, discount them from the larger postwar European project. Thus, *Acta Comparationis'* ambivalent role with respect to Romani knowledge production — from the publication of Romani-language texts and collaboration with Romani translators up to the reproduction of racial stereotypes — is symptomatic of the way in which emergent nationalisms engaged not only in the construction of Self and Other as binary opposites, but in the relegation of unthinkable Others off the chart of competing identities. The "inclusion" of Romani among the languages of *Acta* while Romani was not recognized as one of the languages of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, far from registering Romani belonging to the journal's project, was also not the same as the "originary exclusion" López identified in the omission of texts in Western European languages produced in the Caribbean. While it could be seen as originary or foundational in its own way, including Romani folklore in the journal was a way of cementing the imperial distinction between literature and folklore, *Kunstliteraturen* and *Volksliederliteraturen*, *Kulturvölker* and *Naturvölker*, around which the civilizational stakes of European states at the time were being negotiated.

In his programmatic article, "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature," from 1877, Meltzl enthusiastically quoted from Dora d'Istria's introduction to *La poésie des Ottomans* in support of his plea for polyglottism. Yet the very passage he quoted was based on repudiating what he called the "unhealthy national principle" that constituted "the fundamental premise of the entire spiritual life of modern Europe"[42] for being a backward Oriental trait

39. See Luiza Medeleanu's article in this issue.

40. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories—Global Designs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 313.

41. Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern*, 102.

42. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 46.

conducive to violence and conflict, and as such one from which modern, Christian Europe should depart: "We live in effect in an epoch that is hardly literary at all, and Europe—given over to party *hatreds*, to the *battle*s of races, to sectarian *quarrels*, to *class conflict*—attaches little importance to questions that only a few years ago had seemed capable of occupying every cultivated spirit. Too many Christian countries today *resemble the Turkey of the 18th century*."[43] The systematic association of every instance of violence, whether emotional (*hatred*), political (*battles* of races), ethnic/religious (sectarian *quarrels*) or economic (*class conflict*) with an Oriental past (*Turkey of the 18th century*) bespeaks the Occidentalist agenda into which the polyglottism plea was inscribed.

The very few texts published in the Romani language in the nineteenth century appeared in *Acta Comparationis* and included the first translations from Romani into English and German—testifying to a sustained collaboration between Meltzl and Romani translators. Heinrich Wlislocki, who, together with Archduke Joszef and Antal Hermann, was part of the "first triad of Gypsiologists" of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, lived in a Transylvanian Romani community, learned the language, and observed the ways of life and cultural habits of its members. He then turned this ethnography into articles for *Acta Comparationis*. Meltzl advocated for a level playing field on which all literatures belonged and denounced the racial hatred displayed by large literatures and the "missionary zeal" they directed at "ethnic individuality" of "*literatureless peoples.*"[44] In turn, Wlislocki's articles and his later book, "On the Lives and Customs of Transylvanian Gypsies" invoked racial stereotypes of Romani servility and reproduced colonial tropes of the racial Other with respect to the Roma, even as he included them in a fictional German-Aryan genealogy, which he did not want to see destroyed by the assimilation of the Roma in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.[45]

The publication of "The Black Wodas: An Inedited Gypsy Ballad" in *Acta* in 1879 in the original Romani as well as in English and German translations echoed the same racial and Orientalist stereotypes. Meltzl prefaced the Romani original of the ancient popular ballad, a story of love betrayed and deadly revenge and "the first gipsy-poem of this kind, which has ever been printed," with a few details about the transcription method and about the local context the poem mirrored.[46] He explained how, in Hungary and Transylvania, Roma were "only [...] nailsmiths and musicians," which made sense for a poem about a blacksmith who throws his unfaithful wife into the forge fire, but he then added the unwarranted Orientalist notion that "the wandering Gipsies have generally no other handwork than tinkering, horsebartering or rather thieving."[47] Because he considered the last four lines of the original text to be "incoherent," he mentioned that they had been omitted from the translation (although they appeared in a later variant of the translation in the June issue of the same year). At the same time as he attested the poem a rare quality, insisting that "there are certainly few with such beauty and perfection of form in the ballad poetry of the entire literature of the world,"[48] Meltzl pointed to how the name of the main character, Barshoñ Gyuri, translated into English as "Velvet George," was actually a Hungarian one, since "the language of the Roma is swarming with loan words taken from Hungarian."[49] The German word employed to characterize the frequency of Hungarian loanwords in the Romani language is "wimmeln," connoting chaotic, unplanned, rapid movement, usually of insects, fish, or large human crowds. Similarly, even as Meltzl emphasized the poem's beauty and rhythm, he attributed them to its folklore origin and oral character, rather than any learned qualities: "this ballad is sung in a dramatic form in Kolosvár, namely to the tact of the hammer in the forging."[50] Its contribution to the "literature of the world" notwithstanding, Meltzl seemed to suggest, the unparalleled Romani ballad did not make for world literature.

Romani Europeans as Subjects of a Thinkable History

Such apparent paradoxes at the moment a Comparative Literature entangled with a colonial racial ethnography emerges are symptomatic for the place of the Roma in both national and, more recently, European projects to this day. The paradoxical absent presence of the Roma in discourses on Europeanness signals the conceptual and political necessity of a notion of Romani history as European history, and of Romani Europeans as the thinkable political subjects of that history. Much like the previously advocated and by now established concepts of Black

43. D'Istria quoted in Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 48, emphasis mine.

44. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 45.

45. Iulia-Karin Pătruț, "Wlislocki's Transylvanian Gypsies and the Discourses on Aryanism around 1900," *Romani Studies* 17, no. 2 (2007): 181–204.

46. Hugo Meltzl, "The Black Wodas. An Inedited Gipsy-Ballad. Original Text with Translation I,'" *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 5, no. 42 (1879): 23.

47. Meltzl, "The Black Wodas I," *Acta,* 23.

48. Hugo Meltzl, "The Black Wodas. An Inedited Gipsy-Ballad. Original Text with Translation II," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 6, no. 51 (1879): 11.

49. "Die sprache der Rrom wimmelt von lehnwörtern, die dem magyarischen entnommen sind." Meltzl, "The Black Wodas I," 26.

50. Meltzl, "The Black Wodas II," 15.

Europeans, Afropeans and Muslim Europeans, the notion of Romani Europeans pinpoints what has repeatedly been relegated to the unthinkable so that it does not have its own name—or place—within Europeanness. Thinking Romani Europeans as a European population commonly defined out of both Europeanness and whiteness and to whom migration or nomadism is ascribed by default provides a way out of that epistemic exclusion and its material, social and political consequences for the Roma people. The systematic assumption that certain individuals or groups have (recently) migrated, whether or not they ever actually did, is epitomized in the infamous "Where are you from?" question, regularly directed at different groups racialized as non-white. Alyosxa Tudor has referred to this assumption and the attitudes corresponding to it as "migratism."[51] Indeed, for Tudor, "migratism" becomes a form of racism when directed at those racialized as non-white, though it is not restricted to them. While the Roma did migrate from India to Europe, the fact that the nearly 800 years since that process do not warrant their recognition as Romani Europeans today is not only a form of migratism. It is also evidence of how centuries of enslavement and racialization have rendered unthinkable in Western historiography populations as seemingly unrelated as the forcibly migrated and enslaved Black people that carried out the Haitian Revolution[52] and the self-exiled and gradually enslaved Roma whose labor built many Orthodox churches and monasteries in today's Romania as well as the wealth of local slaveholding landowners and the Romanian state.[53] Conversely, as Asad notes, even though European Muslims "may not have migrated to Europe from Asia, they cannot claim a Europeanness—as the inhabitants of Christian Europe can."[54]

Coloniality and the transatlantic slave trade are therefore insufficient explanations for how entrenched the Roma population became in the fabric of the European territories in which they were enslaved for over 500 years and how central their labor was to the economies of the Europe, not only in the east of the continent. The inattention to and insufficient extent to which perspectives focused on Western European colonialism and the Atlantic world account for the impact and longevity of Eastern empires has prompted the notion of inter-imperiality[55] as a hitherto neglected side of modernity/coloniality both within Europe and in Asia. In addition to the encroachment of coloniality on Europe, the inter-imperial history of the European East at the intersection of the Habsburg, the Ottoman, and the Russian/Tsarist empires, which the brief period of the publication of *Acta* captures at its height in the late nineteenth-century, is essential to an understanding of the workings of Occidentalism in Europe. This history of the European East across so-called 'premodern' empires suggests that the coloniality that gradually engulfed the world after 1492 constituted a rather late moment in a larger inter-imperial configuration of power that predated the emergence of the Western Atlantic expansion and vied with it.[56] In the process, it forged its own configurations of racialized labor, social and cultural inequalities, and epistemic hierarchies, for which the institution of Romani enslavement constituted a blueprint of an "otherwise modern" character.[57] Similarly, the recurrent interpellation of Muslims, Roma and Black Europeans as migrants instead of citizens reveals not only the entangled migratisms directed at them, but also that their unequal citizenship status in Europe is only a late moment in a long history of being at the margins of different regimes of belonging that long predated the emergence of citizenship as an institution, but are being reinforced through it.

It would be all the more important to go beyond seeing the Roma through the lens of their enslavement alone, which so far brings them closer to the history of other enslaved people in the Atlantic world, rather than to the history and present of other Europeans and to an acknowledgment of their own Europeanness. If *Acta Comparationis* indeed represents the beginning of COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, Romani language and literature was part of it from the start, so including it would not be an instance of politically correct addition after the fact, but a recuperation of the discipline's history of asymmetrical multilingualism, competing concepts of literature, and minor translations, as well as complicity in Occidentalist imaginaries of unthinkable literary and political subjects.

51. Alyosxa Tudor, "Ascriptions of Migration: Racism, Migratism and Brexit," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 26, no. 2 (2022): 230.

52. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.

53. Margareta Matache, "It Is Time Reparations Are Paid for Roma Slavery," *Aljazeera*, 5 October 2020. https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/10/5/it-is-time-reparations-are-paid-for-roma-slavery.

54. Asad, "Muslims and European Identity," 213.

55. Laura Doyle, *Inter-Imperiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); Laura Doyle, "Inter-Imperiality: Dialectics in a Postcolonial World History," *Interventions* 16, no. 2 (2014): 159.

56. Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern*.

57. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot," in *Critically Modern. Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, ed. Bruce M. Knauft (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 220–37.

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