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ROMA IDENTITY:

From Stigmatization To Reconstruction

by Luiza Medeleanu

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Stigmatized for centuries based on a history of social exclusion and institutionalized racism, the Roma identity is struggling to make its way and break through to the path of self-knowledge. Among the prototypes of Roma characters such as witches, beggars, and criminals that are illustrated in literature or cinema about Roma in Europe, there are also Roma characters like Alina from *I Declare at My Own Risk*, Emilia from *Chameleon Girl*, Szomna from *Who Killed Szomna Granca*, and Roxana from *Del Duma*, who tell us stories about what it means to fight with yourself to rebuild your Roma identity.

It was in 2011 and I was twenty-one years old when I saw the first Roma social play. It was called *I Declare at My Own Risk*, written by and starring the young Roma actress, [Alina Serban](#). It was a one-woman show inspired by the artist's life and the story was about the difficulty and the need to assume her Roma identity. Alina tells us the story of a Roma girl who struggles with the poverty of her family and with the marginalization and discrimination from others. But, even more, she struggles with herself to discover who she really is and accept herself as a Roma in a world where the Roma are disrespected and ostracized.

I truly found myself in Alina's story. As someone who comes from a culturally assimilated Roma family and who was encouraged to hide my identity in public spaces, I was still labeled as a Gypsy by my schoolmates. I was always in search of an identity with which to be comfortable. I recognized in the story presented by Alina Serban the same torment that I had gone through and was still going through. *How will others look at me if I admit that I am a Gypsy?* Every time I knew I had to admit it, I did it with knots in my throat because it didn't suit me to be a Gypsy. This word is one of the worst labels in the world. Most of the time, I was viewed with a look full of rejection that fixed on me. Because of that, people end up hating and ridiculing me.

We were represented by how others saw and perceived us. That led, over time, to a Roma identity based on negative stereotypes created by non-Roma that were internalized by Roma.

I Declare at My Own Risk was the first production about the Roma in which I felt represented. Until then, I had never identified with Roma characters from literature or cinema such as Esmeralda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Carmen from the opera of the same name, or the “beautiful Gypsy” Rada from the

film *Satra*. I understood, even then, that these so-called Roma characters show the Roma in both a superficial and contradictory way, without taking into account the cultural specificity of the community.

On one hand, they present the Roma as marginalized, extremely poor vagrants or uncivilized criminals and, on the other hand, they present us as bohemians, romantic and free. These characters behaved as dictated by the stereotypes of the dominant culture about the Roma because for a long time, the Roma did not have the opportunity to represent themselves. We were represented by how others saw and perceived us. That led, over time, to a Roma identity based on negative stereotypes created by non-Roma that were internalized by Roma.

I Declare at My Own Risk is the first, but not the last, Roma play that tries to transform an identity built by others' negative views into a mobilizing identity that determines social change and builds an alternative to the exotic image of the Roma created by the dominant culture. The play *Chameleon Girl* produced by Tamás A. Szegedi and Emília Lovas, who are both from Hungary, also explores Roma identity by introducing us to Emilia: a Roma teenager who struggles to find herself among the negative stereotypes imposed by others and look for what really defines her. At the beginning of the play, we see Emilia do everything she can to be a "good Gypsy"; to be invisible as a Roma and blend into the society she lives in like a chameleon. Since childhood, Emilia has known that a "good Gypsy" denies her ethnic identity and tries to assimilate to the majority culture because being Roma does not help you find a job or make friends.

For Emilia, being a "good Gypsy" means being a good student and behaving better than the non-Roma children. If her colleagues laugh at her, she is not allowed to get angry; she has to be smarter, cleaner, and more beautiful than non-Roma children. A "good Gypsy" studies until they become non-Roma. But during the play, Emilia goes through a series of changes and searches inside herself. By the end of the show, we see another version of her: a mature and balanced Emilia who understands that "only stupid people imitate others, those who do not understand their own identity." Emilia understands that she doesn't have to try to be like everyone else—she has to decide and fight for who she is without waiting for others to do it for her.

When someone splits their own identity, they end up not knowing who they really are.

Another story that explores self-searching and denial of ethnicity is the monodrama *Gypsy Wheels*, performed by Nataliya Tsekova from Bulgaria. Here we see a family that wants to run away from the Roma identity because they can't have a job or be accepted by others unless they manage to “integrate” into the world of *gace* (the non-Roma world). The main character is a young Roma woman who works at a bank and has a model of success from her own family: her aunt did well in life through education. As is mentioned in the play, “She was a Gypsy who had a real job.”

But her aunt was ashamed of her ethnicity and her Roma family because, like other Gypsies, she internalized, society's negative stereotypes about them. She does not introduce her family to anyone and she does not introduce anyone to her family. She visited her family only for the New Year's celebrations and the [*Erdelezi*](#)—and even then, she remained at the door. The aunt denied her ethnic identity until the end. No one ever found out she was a Gypsy.

The aunt's storyline highlights how we internalize the hatred of others and their unlove so much that we end up hating ourselves and our families, denying ourselves as human beings. We want with all our might to join the dominant culture, to be like non-Roma people, and to run away from ourselves. In the end, the main character follows her aunt's example and succeeds through education; she has a job and assimilates into the dominant culture as much as possible. However, she also ends up not feeling comfortable with herself and questions who she really is.

This play illustrates very well the drama experienced by many “integrated” Roma who managed to obtain a fragile place in the world of *gace*. But the more one hides from the world, the more they hide from themselves. When someone splits their own identity, they end up not knowing who they really are. As [*Delia Grigore*](#) claims in the paper, “*Romii...In cautarea stimei de sine*”: “By rejecting their identity, the individual assumes a divided self, acting as if they were not themselves, but someone else. That leads in time, to the decrease of self-esteem and implicitly to identity traumas.”

Another character that experiences this is Szomna Grancsa from the play *Who Killed Szomna Grancsa?*, written by Mihai Lukács, Mihaela Dragan, Zita Moldovan, and Liana Ceterechi, and produced by the Romanian independent theatre company, [*Giuvlipen*](#). Szomna, a Roma student from a traditional family, is trying to

leave the protective space of her community and go to school—a space of gage that doesn't belong to her. Unfortunately, Szomna, doesn't find herself anywhere.

This is a double exclusion, not just from that of the community to which she used to belong to but also from the non-Roma world that blames her because she is Roma. The lack of love from others condemns her to not love herself which eventually leads to self-hatred. Thus, in fighting with herself to define who is she without support from the community or the school, Szomna ends up committing suicide. She leaves behind a message: “The school is me.” Her death becomes a manifesto for those she left behind and exemplifies how the humiliation caused by rejection generates behaviors that can activate self-hatred. This self-hatred can become unbearable and eventually lead to suicide.

But what can be done in order to fight trauma and avoid these tragic losses? A possible approach is presented to us by the characters of the play *Del Duma*, written, performed, and produced by the Roma actress, Mihaela Dragan. In this play, Dragan manages to transform self-hatred into self-love by presenting fragments from the lives of four Roma women: Maria, Calofira, Roxana, and herself. The four stories are very different, belonging to women with opposite lifestyles, but they have the same common denominator: their struggles with identity as it relates to the dominant culture. None of these women want to camouflage or deny their ethnicity; they want to learn what defines them as Roma women. They want to have the opportunity to decide for themselves.

The characters in the Roma social theatre are not perfect and do not intend to be. They do not aim to be models or heroes but become so because they urge us to rediscover our Roma identity and to fight with ourselves in order to define ourselves as Roma. The Roma characters in these plays do not tell the audience what to do or give the perfect solution to finding oneself—nor do they set out to do so. However, they show Roma audiences that they are just like us and let us know that we are not alone in this fight with ourselves and others to rebuild our identity.

The characters in these Roma social plays succeed in transforming themselves from inauthentic Roma, whose main desire is to be assimilated, to authentic Roma, who embrace their identity no matter how complex or incoherent it may be. The self-hatred and self-rejection from yesterday can hardly survive when we define and assert our personal culture and vision of the world and life.

