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# Staging the Romani Queer Revolution: New Approaches to the Study of Romani Queerness

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## Abstract

In this paper, I provide an intersectional analysis of *Roma Armea*, a theatre play staged at Berlin's Maxim Gorki theatre. I wish to challenge preconceptions and representations of Romani queer and feminist identities by investigating the personal narratives and self-envisioning of queer and feminist Romani performers. While there are notions that Romani queers live only as victims, perpetrators of violence, or unwitting exoticized objects of desire for mainstream queer consumption, I favour a more complex image, showing how some Romani queers articulate their own sexuality, race, class, and agency. I look at how these articulations are met in some Romani communities, and by majoritarian audiences in Berlin and Stockholm, in order to problematize the complex nature of being a minority within a minority. I end with remarks on the revolutionary potential of the play, by arguing that the play creates spaces for healing and can be seen as a significant contribution to an epistemic and ontological shift when it comes to Romani queer and feminist knowledge production.

## Keywords

- Critical Romani Studies
- Feminism
- Gender
- Intersectionality
- LGBTQIA Roma
- Queer Studies
- Theatre Studies

## Introduction

In this article I aim to deconstruct the ways in which notions of Romani queer subjectivities have been articulated and represented in mainstream LGBTIQ+ and feminist social movements, academic knowledge production, and cultural production in Europe. My focus is the play *Roma Armee* (*Roma Army*), a production by the Maxim Gorki theatre in Berlin. In addition, I include ethnographic field notes, combining them with a textual analysis of the script adapted by the playwright Iryna Szodruch (2017). This play has been performed in five countries: Germany, Sweden, Italy, Romania and Austria. The cast represents Roma from different parts of Europe as well as their Turko-German and Israeli allies. The play is devised as a dialogue between sisters Sandra and Simonida Selimovic, it is directed by Yael Ronen, with costume designers Delaine le Bas and Maria Abreu, and the late scenographer Damian le Bas. It is based on the performers' personal testimonies, shifting from experiences of oppression, based on migration status, forced sterilizations, menstruation shame, class injustice, same-sex love, and the ongoing persecution of Roma, to name but a few. These are performed as rap, cabaret songs, and Romani soul, in English, German, and Romanes.

The play is an ideal case study because it brings to light challenges and seeks to transcend preconceived notions of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class relations within Romani communities. The play also highlights the tensions between the general conditions of oppression that Romani communities face, and the singular oppression of LGBTIQ+ and feminist Romani community members. These tensions form a significant part of the intersectional analysis I later make. The accumulation of data and visual/narrative analysis methods reflect my interdisciplinary approach. I used George Markus's (1995) multi-sited ethnography and Kimberlé Cranshaw's (1991) intersectionality perspective to create a map of counter-narratives. By referring to Muñoz (2011), I contextualize knowledge production on Roma within a system of power relations that pushes Romani subjectivities into counter-public spheres. Dominant discursive representation politics frame Roma as passive victims of violence and racism. I deconstruct this victimhood image by incorporating hooks (1994, 2009) and reflections on representation politics and the gaze, while creating a deeper, intersectional, understanding of Romani subjectivities. This self-envisioned and self-forged subjectivity is articulated through creative artistic practices, relying on complex decolonial labour and drawing strength and power from cruel pasts and presents, in order to create a different present and future. My ambition is to contribute to the ongoing epistemic and ontological shift in the understanding of Romani queer lives by not solidifying subjectivities into vulnerability and precarity, but rather by opening up cognizance to multiplicity and complexity. The play and its analysis stress the importance of solidarity between Black and Brown queer and radical feminist thinkers, and their struggles, with all their similarities and differences. I build on the accumulated insights of scholars who have contributed to a transformative understanding of Romani experiences and positionalities in mainstream research, such as Vera Kurtic (2013), Daniel Baker (2015), Jekatarina Dunaeva, Angéla Kóczé and Sarah Cemlyn (2015), Dezső Máté (2017), Katarzyna Pabijanek (2018), Ethel Brooks (2019), and many others who are creating this paradigm shift. The analysis focuses on anger as a driving force of revolutionary change. By drawing on the work of Audrey Lorde (1984), Sara Ahmed (2010) and José Esteban Muñoz (2011), explore how anger is used in healing the wounds of the past, as well as becoming a trigger for creative processes in which a new type of Romani queerness emerges. I also explore how the

creativity and vision in the play transforms shame by releasing anger and generating a new calmness and communitarian kinship. This healing potential opens a door to a process of self-creation, through love, joy and self-respect and adds a positively charged value that was missing from analyses of Romani queer lives in both academia and cultural production.

## 1. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

I used George Marcus's *Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography* in order to collect the data and create a map of emerging narratives. The decision to approach this topic from an interdisciplinary perspective reflects the complexity of the movements of people, artefacts, ideas, and politics across national borders. Marcus (1995, 109) states that: "There are stories or narratives told in the frame of single-sited fieldwork that might themselves serve as a heuristic for the fieldworker constructing multi-sited ethnographic research." *Roma Armea's* significance could be analysed in the context of its original performance at the Maxim Gorki theatre in Berlin; however, that would be at odds with the transnational character that is at its core. The play makes visible narratives that existed within Romani queer communities but remained at the margins of dominant histories. Marcus's (1995) methodological approach allows us to see how narratives travel and work in a broader system of oppression and resistance. I read counter-racist narratives against and within a context of a complex network of a seemingly common *Antiziganist* core that the performers highlight in a time of far-right mobilization across the continent. In addition, Marcus's (1995, 108) multi-sited ethnographic approach enables me to respect nuance and avoid generalizations, while mapping stereotypes and investigating their social impact. The figurations of *Antiziganism* I saw in the play are: the dirty, uneducated, uncultured, victimized, poor, and oversexualized "Gypsy."

In order to deepen the understanding of methodological choices, I resort to feminist and queer research on self-reflexivity and situated knowledge production. Donna Haraway in *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, emphasizes the importance of situated knowledge that is at the core of feminist knowledge production. Rather than producing transcending universal knowledge claims, that cannot be traced back and are projected to levels of generalizations, which is both dangerous and damaging, Haraway (1988, 583–89) argues for knowledge claims that are rooted in epistemologies of location. Self-positioning and embodied situating, with all its complexities and contradictions, are important in feminist knowledge production. One should keep in mind that identity itself does not produce knowledge (1988, 586). Hence, the standpoint I occupy, as a Romani gay man from Bosnia and Herzegovina, informs the ways in which I have collected the data and the vision from which knowledge has sprung, but ultimately does not determine it. The knowledge in this article is developed from the margins of academic knowledge production, activist interventions, and cultural production. It belongs to a sphere that is marginal, but also a counter-public domain. Muñoz (2011, 31) defines counter-public domains as complex domains in which minoritarian subjects have limited capacity for self-representation. This space is re-negotiated via the concept of disidentification, which is a process of recycling and rethinking encoded meanings. Disidentification helps rearticulate the figurations in a way that exposes the universalization and exclusionary power structures that push minoritarian subjects into the counter-public sphere, while empowering minoritarian identities. Roma

queer and feminist actors, in *Roma Armea*, deconstruct the multiple layers of oppression while creating a space for self-envisioning and reclaiming history, embodiment, and agency. However, one must keep in mind that positionalities with intersecting identities that shape constant negotiation and articulation are not innocent ones. Although Haraway (1988, 584) calls it a “subjugated standpoint,” I believe it chimes well with the minoritarian positionality and expands on Muñoz’s concept in a way that deepens the understanding of how disidentifications can be used against minoritarian subjects or appropriated by the mainstream. Subjugated standpoints are the preferred positionalities, as they are least likely to allow a denial of the critical core of knowledge. This positionality is one which, at its core, understands how power operates in relation to repression, forgetting, denial, and so on. This is useful to the oppressor, so is often used against minoritarian subjects. Additionally, I have concerns about claiming knowledge from a subjugated position which manifests in two ways: when knowledge is produced, minoritarian subjects face the ambiguity of either self-exoticization or appropriation. This ambiguity is also addressed in the play, where centuries of oppression have left the wound of being psychologically frozen by the inability to overcome yet, at the same time, when the experience is shared it can lead to misinterpretations, claiming the victimhood position; however, I believe its articulation and naming is an act of resistance rather than victimization. When we add Brooks to this debate, we see what the consequences are from Romani subjectivities. Ethel Brooks (2019), a North American Romani Scholar states:

Passed down through generations within communities, the work of Roma has often gone unrecognized, while the people themselves have been equally disregarded. Yet, as artists, intellectuals and activists, we Roma have generated extensive knowledge and created a vast array of cultural and artistic practices as part of a global legacy that has been co-opted and colonized by others – from individuals to nation-states to entire continents.

To summarize, producing knowledge from the counter-public domain standpoint has benefits and dangers. Temporarily accumulated privileges enable critical standpoints that challenge structures of racism, but, simultaneously, the very critique ties me to counter-public spheres, limiting access to majoritarian debates and the discomfort such confrontation would entail. The interdisciplinary approach of this paper helps dehomogenise perceptions of existing representational frameworks for queer Romani persons. Consequently, the methodological approach diversifies understandings of Romani sexualities and ethnicity, in comparison to scholarly work that looks at individual national contexts. Intersectionality and precarity, together with a debate on representation and self-envisioning in the following paragraphs, help comprehend some of the diversity that exist in Romani queer and feminist movements.

Intersectionality as a methodology has been widely debated over the last 20 years. It has been introduced by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in her work *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, in which she proposes intersectionality as a way of framing and analysing social, economic, and political inequalities and injustices, based on interactions between multiple categories that impact the lives of people of colour generally and women of colour specifically. Intersectionality will be used in this article as an addition to multi-sited ethnography to analyse the ethnographic data (i.e., narratives and visual data). Specifically, I am interested in the values that are attached to Romani subjectivities in various European contexts, and the ways in which different dominant social structures render certain people within Romani populations less or more valuable,

depending on a complex interaction of categories such as gender expression and sexuality. However, we need to understand that categories interact in specific contexts and historical trajectories, so it is important to reflect on Yuval-Davis's work on intersectionality. In *Intersectionality and Feminist Politics*, Nira Yuval-Davis (2013) points to the various uses of intersectionality in policymaking at the UN and in academia; however, she notes that there is no clear agreement on what intersectionality constitutes as a methodology outside of Crenshaw's field. I have seen intersectionality being used in litigation and policymaking by the EU, as well as by academic research on Romani communities, and I observed that the use of intersectionality can often be decontextualized and become a traveling concept (Lewis 2013; Salem 2016) that disregards complex histories of power structures and resistance against oppression. Some disregard negotiations of positionalities and hierarchies within Romani communities, while others see intersectionality as a quick fix in transnational approaches to social justice and mitigation of the same, which can cause more harm than good. That is why I believe Yuval-Davis's (2013, 195) contribution to the intersectionality debate is an acknowledgement that each social division (race, class, gender, sexuality) has a different ontological basis that is grounded in differentiated historical processes of hegemonisation, which need to be taken into account, when approaching analyses of oppression. The importance of this differentiation warns researchers to look at every intersection and its historical development in a very specific context rather than borrowing the concept and making it travel across different contexts (Yuval Davis 2013, 199). Rather than taking an oppositional standpoint, Yuval-Davis (2013, 195) acknowledges that intersectionality can do both, look at differences and similarities: "... being oppressed, for example, as 'a Black person' is always constructed and intermeshed in other social divisions (for example, gender, social class, disability status, sexuality, age, nationality, immigration status, geography, etc.)."

The multi-sited ethnography, intersectional methodological approach, and theoretical design for this paper were chosen on the complexity of narratives in a context of rising far-right nationalist movements and *Antiziganism*,<sup>[1]</sup> as well as *Antiziganist* homo/lesbo/bi/transphobia. *Roma Armee* offers a space to deconstruct and rearticulate the lived experiences of Romani queer subjectivities in a struggle to create an awareness of the diversity of Romani populations as well as the specificities of the struggles that European queer Roma face in the contemporary socio-political setting. I believe that by using intersectionality and multi-sited ethnography, as well as auto-ethnographic notes, one can decentralize genealogies and canons of knowledge production essential to struggles that are not only queer and feminist but also Roma. This decision, to voice these genealogies and ontologies alongside the concerns mentioned above, is not an exotic attempt to fetishize myself or the people who helped me understand myself better, but rather to share a process that occurs in spaces that are not traditionally considered of value for academic knowledge production or real theatrical or artistic engagement.

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1 I use Soraya Post's definition on antiziganism, articulated in an interview for the European Roma Rights Center. For more see: <http://www.errc.org/blog/in-conversation-with-soraya-post/21>.

## 2. Roma Armee: The Revolution Is Here and Queer

### The Angry Feminist Club

Anger is one of the central affective roles in the play. Anger, as an affect in social movements and performances, has been widely discussed in feminist studies and Black feminism, but the potential for anger in Romani Studies has yet to be explored. In this segment I look at the occurrences of anger in the play and offer a manifold intersectional analysis. Mihaela, a Romanian Romni queer/lesbian feminist actress, takes central stage with a homage to Audre Lorde. In act 2, scene 8, *Anger* (Szodruch 2017, 35), Mihaela talks about the revolutionary potential of anger:

I'm an angry Roma woman. I have lived with that anger trying to ignore it, but I've learnt to use it before it laid my visions to waste. Once I used it in silence, afraid of its power. My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of my anger will teach you nothing, as well. Growing up in Romania where Roma people were slaves for 500 years, but nobody speaks about this, not even in school. [...] Nothing in museums, no references and no memorials.

In paying homage to Audre Lorde and her 1984 essay “Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” the music intensifies, transforming into a rhythmic chainsaw type sound, followed by actors and actresses performing martial arts moves and getting ready for the battle. The stage is red, reflecting on the audience's faces that turn from happy and jolly into terrified expressions as they observe the militaristic moves and listen to the speech she delivers. As she speaks, Mihaela points at the audience, her face communicates her accumulated anger. I see the pointing as a performative identification of guilt, in regard to the *Antiziganism* she faced. In response I read guilt, shame, and also fear, on the faces of the Berlin audience. After the play ended, I asked several audience members how they felt, and they responded saying they felt heavy and scared but also felt it is unjust that every white person is put in the same basket. A sense of wanting to be taken care of is in the air. In Stockholm on the other hand, her Audre Lorde reference received ovations. Some audience members were reciting along, remembering each line of the original quote. I could sense that there was an atmosphere of solidarity. It took me by surprise, as I was told that Stockholm audiences are quite reserved, especially as it was performed at Dramaten, the Royal Dramatic Theatre. On my tram ride back, after I saw the play for the first time in Berlin, I was writing some notes and overheard a conversation among three women. They articulated a feeling of extreme discomfort (*Unquemütlich* in German), adding that they cannot see how another woman could be responsible or held accountable for racist crimes against Romani women, when they themselves are victims of a system of oppression. Their discomfort echoed Sara Ahmed's figuration on feminists as killjoys in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). Ahmed states that feminists are often identified as the source of bad feelings and killers of good atmosphere in spaces of solidarity (2010, 65). However, she sees these figures next to the angry Black woman referring to Lorde (1984) and hooks (2000), where women of colour do not only kill joy in general, but feminist joy by “pointing out forms of racism within feminist politics.” (2010, 67). The rest of the conversation continued by listing all the reasons why they themselves are victims. I turned around to catch sight of them, all three were white-passing women in their mid or late twenties. I felt sad that such a powerful play was viewed as an attack rather than an invitation to act in solidarity.



Anger is an emotion that has been historically devalued in minoritarian movements. It has its history, its heritage, linked to sexuality and gender; it has a context and creates a complex set of consequences for a woman of colour, specifically for a lesbian Romni to express. Heteronormative majoritarian societies and their allies across the world have tried to suppress the creative potential of anger in Black movements and the feminist and gay liberation movements because of the potential for change they ignite. Mihaela realized that anger, with its long decolonial affective trajectory, disrupts the denial of a colonial history of Romani slavery. Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984, 150) states that anger is to be seen as a response to systematic racism, exclusion, unquestioned privilege, silencing, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, and co-optation. Rather than responding to it with defensiveness and guilt, she suggests using it to grow and learn. I believe that Mihaela's creative use and subversive force of anger is rooted in the oppressive past which she, as a Romni lesbian experienced and witnessed, and a forward driving force that, as Lorde states, has a potential for growth. However, it is washed away by the feelings of guilt and shame embedded in some majoritarian subjectivities that react repulsively and defensively towards her performative action. Lorde (1984, 152–3) recognizes that anger is rooted in oppression, both personal and institutional. Instead of containing and suppressing the anger, she suggests focusing on it and using it as a powerful source of energy that drives radical change in the minoritarian subject's life and can be used to prompt a futuristic vision that is liberating and clarifying. Therefore, I see Mihaela's action as a step forward, compared to previous generations, our parents', confronting the white majority with complicity in oppression, creating a generational shift and breaking the silence. I believe that the remark on complicity is a safe generalization, with few exceptions, when it comes to our parents' generation in regard to diverse sexualities.

The release of anger brings to the fore the complexity of the dynamics within the field where Mihaela's experiences are rooted. Mihaela (Szodruch 2017, 37) calls for internal unity as a core value of the revolution, and surpasses the victimhood position, in a historical moment reclaiming spaces and power:

But we have to know: There can be no Roma-Gadje unity until there is first some Roma unity. [...] Because it's not only the society that is our enemy, when you were oppressed long enough you begin to do it to yourself. We divided our communities, denounced and abandoned each other and created our own imaginary hierarchies and adopted the idea of exclusion against each other.

Mihaela's articulation of anger brings forth internalized forms of *Antiziganism*, developed as a result of centuries of oppression. Her monologue speaks to Romani thinkers conceptualizing the "Roma Spring." In their paper entitled *The Roma Spring: Knowledge Production and the Search for a New Humanity*, Maria Bogdan et al. (2015, 34) define the "Roma Spring" as a significant moment of critical consciousness in which a process of decolonization is triggered with a new sense of militancy and assertiveness. While such shifts are commendable, they are simultaneously met with exclusionary practices as a result of challenging hegemonies. I believe that as a queer Romani identified academic and activist, I have often been told not to bring sexuality to the forefront of my activism as it disturbs a sense of unity, or more conservative members, the same way as addressing racial issues in majoritarian communities does. What Mihaela touches on, as well as everyone else in this play, are topics that are avoided or suppressed by a large number of heteronormative movement leaders. Each movement, whether feminist or mainstream,

national or transnational, has strategies that reflect on the local and European Romani movements' agendas. What *Roma Armee* articulates is a backlash against the feminist and queer agenda for liberation and emancipation of Romani members of such communities. This liberation is often not part of the so called "Roma Agenda." Alliance building, therefore, is very important for the process of liberation. Jekatarina Dunajeva, Angéla Kocze, and Sarah Cemlyn (2015, 75) note in their work entitled "LGBTQIA, Feminist and Romani Studies": "Alliance building was one contentious issue: while some saw a clear opportunity in LGBTQIA, feminist and Roma communities joining forces in their struggle for equality, others were wary that the very idea of premature alliance would dilute the Roma cause." Many other minoritarian movements across the globe saw similar dynamics when queer liberation began taking place. The reason for this might be manifold. Some of it is rooted in homo/bi/lesbo/trans/intersex-phobia, as no community is immune to it. Others might be distribution of funding, slow pace of adaptation, lack of understanding and willingness to hear out the needs of LGBTQIA community members, shame, and so on. Therefore, I believe that the play and Mihaela's articulation of a critique towards the Romani establishment represents a critical point of recognition that the oppressor is not only the white man, but heteronormative patriarchy within our communities as well.

Sandra's Malcom X inspired anger speech adds to this debate. Sandra (Szodruch 2017, 39), in act 2, scene 8, *Sandra Malcom X*, defines the Romani revolution in a militant and assertive manner:

You bleed when the white man says bleed; you bite when the white man says bite; and you bark when the white man says bark. I hate to say this about us, but it's true. How are you going to be nonviolent when your own people were murdered, enslaved, sterilized and are still set on fire and being deported, oppressed and discriminated? But we don't fight for them. We don't bleed.

Sandra performs her anger in order to expose the willingness of some Roma to fight for the white oppressors, to perpetuate the *Antiziganist* cause, and to participate in oppressing their own community members, not only in regard to enslavement and forced sterilizations, access to education or jobs, running water or electricity but also exclusion based on sexuality, class, or gender expression, something which will become more evident later in the analysis. This indicates the complex nature of the perpetuation of racism, and the fact that its internalization is imminent.

In *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, bell hooks (2009, 49–50) states that contemporary African-Americans need to remember the ways in which life was sustained and nurtured by generations during and after slavery, rather than surrender agency and embrace the victimhood position. Consequentially, this is what Mihaela's and Sandra's monologues do for the queer and feminist Romani movements. I believe that bringing anger to the stage enables multiple levels of social transformation. It has an educational character, in terms of exposing those unfamiliar with Romani histories to centuries of oppression, while simultaneously opening discussions that are necessary for inner transformations, within our communities, to create what hooks refers to as life-sustaining values.

## The Romani Sexual Revolution

As discussed above releasing anger summons the multiplicity of oppression that shapes the existence of Romani queers and feminists alike. In this segment I focus on transformative anger situated in feminist performance practices (Schneider 1997). I then try to connect those practices to the process of envisioning by following the roadmap set out by Lorde (1984, 153–4) to analyse where that anger takes Romani movements. The play acknowledges its impact yet deconstructs the victimhood narrative. The actors engage in a process of dismantling hundreds of years of intergenerational trauma. This deconstructive practice furthers what Rebecca Schneider (1997), a theatre and performance studies scholar, calls feminist performative practices that are rooted in the radical feminist movements of the 1960s. I draw parallels between the play and Schneider's concept of explicit body in performance (1997). The play, at the point of the body, can be seen as a space for elucidating social relations and structural inabilities (Schneider 1997, 2, 38). Performances produce a transgressive shock and are considered the feminist avant-garde (Schneider 1997, 38–41). In *Roma Armee*, the performance of anger through an intersectional contextualization of the Romni's body via reflections on menstruation, vagina love, and sexuality, position the play within a genealogy of feminist performative art, while addressing structural injustices that Romni feminist artists encounter in society. In addition, I believe that the play dialogues with Eve Ensler's (2001) *The Vagina Monologues*, as the monologues on menstruation and vagina love deepen understandings of structural injustices and discrimination based on gender. The odes to vagina love and menstruation in *Roma Armee*, evoke a formation of the Romani feminist avant-garde. This play brings forth what Chambers-Letson (2018, 4–5) defined as "More Life" and freedom at the point of the body. Chambers-Letson, like Muñoz, acknowledges that minoritarian subjects have limited capacity to make the impossible possible and to improvise with what is around them to create freedom. The play is a testimony to Romani queers and feminists carving out and claiming spaces for self-envisioning, healing, surviving, and being in this world, together.

It is never either one identity or the other that shapes a life, but as bell hooks (1992, 1–2) notes in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, being part of the counter-public sphere also means that Blackness and Brownness exist surrounded by white supremacy. hooks (*ibid.*) argues the necessity of acknowledging the diversity of Black and Brown communities, followed by the development of analytic tools to articulate both the beauty and the pain that Black and Brown communities in USA face. She (*ibid.*) sees misrepresentation as a tool for maintaining institutional oppression and reifying exploitation of Black and Brown bodies via the mass media and dominant culture, something that Baker and Hvalajova (2013, 8) acknowledge as a general problem for Romani cultural representation. Although, since 1992, there has been a significant qualitative shift in terms of representation of Blackness in the USA, I believe that some similarities could be drawn with where the Romani movement is right now. hooks' (1994, 4) intervention calls for setting imaginations free, a mode which allows a vision outside of the oppositional and responsive framework. By breaking out of oppositionality, one creates space for transgressions, rebellious visions, and transformations. Self-envisioning is grounded in this call for transgression and non-oppositionality, performativity and subversives. However, it escapes the representational narrative in a way that focuses and serves a healing process that is oriented inward. When performed it leaves space for identifications but does not intend to be representative. Minoritarian subjects, such as us, queer

Romani individuals, have been fed imagery, been ashamed by it, and tried to escape such damaging and hurtful representations. We rarely dared to self-envision, look at our past, and be grounded in the present while reaching out and creating a future. Self-envisioning allows us to sit with the pain that injustice, misrepresentation, and othering has inflicted; it is a healing moment, in which there is calm and clarity. It is the moment after anger settles down, burns out, and creative vision takes over: a moment that many of us never had, or never will have the privilege of enjoying, but which we still have despite the odds. It is the moment when we ask ourselves who we want to be, who we are, and what we project on our environment. What our talents are, what/who our loves are, what our hopes are? This, in itself, is an act of rebellion. Sometimes, being queer and Roma means not having time, as we are continually beset by destructive forces. Self-envisioning in such an oppressive system allows us to reclaim agency as a revolutionary practice. Mihaela and Sandra craft visions of themselves in which they are Roma, queer and feminists. As their testimonies show, these interlocking identities make them fighters on multiple fronts. As Sandra (Szodruch 2017, 26) says: “I am a lesbian. I know some of you don’t understand why I have to mention it on stage, why it should come as a topic in a show that is supposed to deal with Roma issues. But this is a show about us, and I bring my entire identity into the show, I’m Roma and I’m queer, and I do not apologize for either.” This statement urges recognition of interlocking identities. Those that assume that she should be apologetic for bringing up her identity as a queer or lesbian, as if it is a burden on both Roma and *Gadje*. For one, it is a burden of shame for having to occupy an identity that might, for some Roma, be not true to our ways, while for some *Gadje*, she becomes either a helpless victim in the eyes of the saviour to be saved from her own kind, or an exotic Brown lesbian, essentialized for her appearance and her otherness.

The power of art in social movements of change is described by bell hooks (2009, 126–7) in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* where she identifies art as a tool of liberation and inspiration for resistance. However, she also warns against essentializing Blackness and creating art that serves nationalist agendas. This raises the question: can Romani queer art hold ground by being collective yet committed to countering heteronormative cultural production? While on the one hand, heteronormative cultural production within Romani communities exists already in the counter-public sphere, on the other hand Romani queer art and the experiences Sandra articulates depict the complexity of the processes determining the position of Romani queers in society. This means that as a lesbian, an artist and a Romani woman, it is hard to carve a place within the current discursive regimes. I would argue that by critiquing and creating a vision of herself as a proud Romni, speaking and rapping in German, English, and Romani, appearing as a butch lesbian on the stage, she does not counter or create a dichotomy between the us and them, but rather her articulation invites us to consider the political implications of her coming-out statement. Her self-envisioning transgresses the normative understanding of what a Romni should be, while creating spaces for more Romni lesbians to identify and give a sense of belonging during her performance and the spaces she goes to once the performance is done. Sandra’s political vision is inclusive of closeted Romani queers; she invites them to join the journey. However, she does not pretend that the process is easy but rather acknowledges the complexity and rejections that happen in the process. Mihaela (Szodruch 2017, 26) speaks to this as well: “They all beg me not to talk about my love for my vagina and especially not about my love for other vaginas and in general to avoid any queer issues because ... well, since homosexuality is an invention of you, *Gadje*! And we, Roma people, are not gay.” It might seem that Mihaela is essentializing and othering homosexuality and vagina love as an “imported” concept. However, I believe that her utterance

is a counter-strategy, countering heteronormative Romani intellectuals and leaders, who perpetuate this narrative in order to enforce homo/lesbo/bi/trans/intersex-phobia towards queer Roma. I see Mihaela's exclamation of love as a form of resistance that exists in a context of heteronormative patriarchy within which Roma queer subjects also live. Heteronormative patriarchy, as a social structure, overlaps and is enforced equally in minoritarian and majoritarian societies. Mihaela's vagina love monologue is an act of resistance that is set in a context of several narratives of forced sterilization being brought up on stage.<sup>[2]</sup> This statement is revolutionary because love for one's vagina, in this case, is an act of solidarity from one Romani queer person to all Romani women identified persons or persons identifying as having and loving vaginas. It is an unapologetic act of resistance that overcomes shame, the only emotional response to both forced sterilizations and vagina love.

The mutual construction of gender, race, and class becomes clear in the aforementioned scene when Mihaela and Simonida talk about period shame, specifically through the lens of poverty. Mihaela starts by stating that she was ashamed and terrified by her first period, as it was like a "massacre," yet poverty informed her experience as well: "... we were so poor that we couldn't afford pads. They were too expensive. I had to use cotton balls and put it in my underwear. It was so uncomfortable, I had to walk like this." She then jokingly imitates a walk with her legs half spread to simulate the discomfort of having to use cotton balls. Simonida on the other hand could not even afford cotton balls: "I also made my own pads out of toilet paper. One day it fell out of my panties in the middle of sports class. I was so embarrassed." Class and race intersect in a way that informs their experiences of being women, one of whom was growing up in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the other one as a Yugoslav refugee child in Austria. Their ethnicity and the fact that there was a lack of access to resources prevented them from having sanitary pads or tampons. It is not because they come from a culture that does not understand what tampons are, but because their parents were pushed to the margins of the society, making a threadbare living, unemployed or denied access to employment. Simonida had to work part-time to contribute to the household. She says, "I was ashamed that we had to work as children. All the other kids could play after school, but we had to go help our parents. They were the caretakers of three buildings." While child labour is unimaginable and was so when Simonida and Sandra were growing up in Austria, they had to work instead of play like majoritarian children did. It is important to state that neither of the actresses said that their parents forced them to work, but that their working-class background and ethnicity meant they had to contribute to the household if they were to survive. This traumatic experience of shame (Simonida) and fear (Mihaela) becomes an immense power in this play, as references to menstruation, in a feminist tradition, is used to inform the strength of the flow of the revolution, just as it informed the *écriture féminine* or women's writing as defined by French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous in her article "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976).

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2 While forced sterilizations of Romani women and men are not the focus of the paper, acknowledging this historic trauma is important. The context of sterilization and history are specific to each country. Further research can be obtained on the website of the European Roma Rights Centre ([www.errc.org](http://www.errc.org)) and on the Swedish government website for the Swedish context: <https://www.government.se/contentassets/eab06c1ac82b476586f928931cfc8238/the-dark-unknown-history---white-paper-on-abuses-and-rights-violations-against-roma-in-the-20th-century-ds-20148>.

Before I shift towards the gay experience, I would like to reflect on an important standpoint as a writer, academic, and activist. This analysis is grounded in the acknowledgment of the differences in experience that lesbian and gay Romani men have, and in the privileges that come with my positionality as a cis-gender, white-passing gay Romani man. This play, together with years of being in queer communities in different national contexts, confirms that Romni lesbians and trans\* persons survive more discrimination and deprivation than gay Romani men. This is because men benefit from patriarchy. Women-identified persons suffer a more complex struggle and have more at stake politically and personally when claiming spaces publicly, hence they have a greater responsibility and a harder burden on their shoulders.<sup>[3]</sup> While, as we will see in the paragraphs ahead, Lindy is negotiating spaces for the articulation of his struggle, women-identified actors share testimonies about being responsible for the internal struggle within Romani movements. Women-identified persons are held accountable for the success of the political struggle and supporting the well-being of communities that they are in. For example, Mihaela refers to the fact that she was asked by her aunt and family members not to talk about her love for vaginas or other vaginas and her menstruation. I believe this request was made in order to preserve the well-being of the communities and to not bring shame and break taboos, not to muddy the waters, and keep the focus on the race struggle. At the same time, she is expected to participate in the race struggle, address the issues of violence against women, forced sterilizations and early marriages, which seem more acceptable. These forms of violence against Romni across Europe play a role in heteronormative familial relations from which majoritarian heterosexual Romani communities benefit. My intention is not to undermine the importance of addressing violence against women, early marriages, or forced sterilization but rather argue that violence against sexual minorities should be treated as equally acute. The positionality of a Romni today reveals that they are, to some extent, expected to be the keeper of family values. There seems to still be an expectation to preserve the symbolism of the female body as a pure entity. That is why the preservation of its innocence is still a battlefield. However, most of these expectations are deconstructed, broken, and rearticulated in such a way that, even if the actress decides to take on the role, will be self-defined. I argue that when viewing these narratives, we take a critical perspective, from a point of subversion, rather than a point of reproduction.

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3 This term (women-identified persons) is used for inclusion purposes and to avoid gender binaries. My understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality are embedded in queer and trans studies. For more, see Judith Butler (2004) and Susan Stryker (1994).

What *Roma Armee* makes clear is that shame is not a source of weakness. Lindy, a Swedish traveller, who identifies as gay, Roma, and vegetarian also works through shame. He (Szodruch 2017, 11) starts with:

I am Lindy.  
 I'm a Man  
 I'm Swedish  
 and I'm gay.  
 I'm gay because  
 I like men.  
 I like to fuck them.  
 It's a sexual thing.  
 I'm a practicing gay.  
 Very much a practicing gay.  
 I'm proud to be gay,  
 but it's complicated.  
 To be gay,  
 I'm openly gay but not always.  
 I don't show my boyfriend love openly  
 although I consider myself to be totally open  
 I don't want to be a statement all the time.  
 I don't enjoy coming out all the time  
 but if I don't tell people I'm gay  
 like the first thing I do,  
 It becomes strange  
 because when it comes out,  
 they have the feeling I have betrayed them.

Through his self-identification process in the opening scene, the multiple positionalities and their negotiation become apparent. For him, it is never only about being either Roma or a gay man. It is having to live with the fear of rejection, being safe, and also about how *Gadje* society in Sweden impacted his life and shaped his fears and strengths. Daniel Baker, a curator, practicing artist, and scholar of Romani Gypsy origins, addresses the ambiguities of (non)belonging in his thesis *The Queer Gypsy*. Baker (2015, 89–90) states that those Romani men who were out as gay experienced detachment or exclusion from families and communities, while those who were not were deprived of the benefits that being openly gay brings. The research was conducted in 2002, but despite the time difference it still reflects lives of some Romani gay men today. Baker (2015, 90) also identifies a lack of visibility which as a result: "... suggests that the reported lack of mirroring throughout life has led to a fragmented sense of self – a lack of internal vocabulary with which to construct an inclusive self that enables one to see oneself reflected in others." Lindy (Szodruch 2017, 11), creates a vocabulary for himself by claiming pride, yet feels discomfort doing so: "To be gay is filled with a lot of self-hatred. I'm openly gay but not always..." He (*ibid.*) further states that: "I'm not openly gay because I am afraid to be rejected, I want to be loved and accepted, I want to belong. And sometimes I am not openly gay because I am afraid of my own security." Being a Romani-identified gay person means not only being



Roma and having to live in a world of preconceptions by majoritarian cultures but also living in fear of familial and societal rejection.

This produces a feeling of not belonging anywhere. Lindy's monologue reflects a strategic coming out that negotiates the preservation of belonging, safety, and security rather than a lack of visibility out of shame or cultural difference. Lindy's fear of a double ostracization represents a fear many Romani gays live with. Lots of Romani gay men are rejected by the majoritarian white heteronormative and queer society and fear rejection within their own communities. In my own experience, during a lot of interactions, both online on apps like Grindr or on live dates, I have experienced various forms of rejection based on ethnicity, religion, sexual expression, or migration status. In Sweden particularly, I have received hate messages from Swedish gay neighbours on Grindr, been called a "Passport Slut," and told that I should stop abusing the Swedish social benefit system even though I am employed and not exploiting anything. In a live encounter with a Chinese gay man whose migration status is the same as mine, I was told that "Gypsies are thieves and don't want to work, why do you study their culture when they don't have any?" These experiences, in dialogue with Baker and Lindy, confirm the complexity of the nuances that some gay Romani men have to live with on a regular basis. This experience makes some gay Romani men still choose the places and times when we proudly come out and claim our right to the spaces we occupy. Drawing on Baker's conceptual articulation of passing, I argue that Lindy deepens the understanding of negotiating practices in expressing the authentic self, not only within the Romani communities to whom he belongs, but also to the majoritarian society that claims to be liberated, open, free, and accepting.

A Romani gay man often occupies two positionalities in the white gay male's imagination. First, he is a victim of the naturalized and essentialized homophobic violence of Romani culture. I do not claim that homophobia is not part of Romani communities, I claim that homophobia is part of every culture, since heteronormative patriarchy is still the norm. What is nuanced is its articulation. I argue that a misconceptualised and essentialized homophobic representation in pop culture, sexual cultures, and academic texts in connection with Romani communities does not hold ground. What this play shows is that gay Romani men are exposed to both majoritarian and the Romani community's homophobic violence, while struggling with racism. To think that all gay Romani men lie and live multiple lives, having sex with men in secret because it is a reflection of a culture in general and sexual culture specifically, is both *Antiziganist* and homophobic. This means that strategies of passing need to be viewed in a different light than previously conceptualized and discussed. The process of forming a self and of articulating queerness is a long process of negotiation contextualized over time rather than a singular moment in it.

The second common depiction is the oversexualized Romani macho. In my master's thesis entitled *Articulations and Negotiations of Roma Masculinities: An Intersectional Analysis of Ethnicity, Sexuality, Gender and Class at the Roma Access Programs* (Heljic 2016), one of the interviewees, Hugo, a gay Romani man, addressed connections between oversexualization and estrangement: "Sometimes I feel different in the Roma community, and sometimes I feel different in the gay community. ... I felt like an exotic animal or a toy." (2016, 46). Hugo supported this claim by showing me a picture that was taken of him posing next to a large piece of meat in a freezer, in a butcher's shop. This feeling of being a piece of meat is a result of the interaction between some majoritarian and minoritarian gay subjects. The metaphor of meat



reflects the space that gay Romanies have in some white gay men's imaginations. The gay Romani man lives a "straight life," is hypermasculine (beefy), and serves as a sex toy to fulfil white gay men's desires. This projected image constructs a generalization that gay Romani men are only useful for the production of pleasure. I say production, as the gay Romani man here is objectified as a consumable good rather than being seen as a subject who constructs his own identity or subjectivity. Lindy shows us that he is aware of all these discourses when choosing to self-envision. His resistance strategy is a disidentification that Muñoz (1999, 4) sees as a strategy to negotiate phobic majoritarian formations of subjectivities that are built on a fantasy of normative citizenship. Puar (2007) takes a step further defining normative citizenship as being constructed in regard to whiteness, and in recent decades also appropriating white homonormativity. Lindy is aware of his positionality in the social hierarchy. Ye, he articulates the affective consequence that these choices bring each time they are made.

In conclusion, I would argue that the contribution of Lindy's performance to knowledge production and queer studies is a clear articulation of resistance narratives and strategies against misrepresentation. His performance also teaches that the process of self-envisioning is a process of healing. Although wounded by dominant histories, he dances and sings, so healing the paralysing positions that he has learned to occupy, while shattering the moulds that were created for him. I see every dance move as an unlearning of predispositions and imposed representations at the level of the body, while reclaiming a space to exist and love just as we are. Each verse of his song is an undoing of the mind and thought structures that taught us that we and our bodies can only exist to entertain and please the white (gay) male subject or, on the contrary, be the boundary from which he will distance himself and rise up in all his mighty subjectivity.

### 3. Theatre of Healing

*Even when I felt therapy was not helping, I did not lose my conviction that there was health to be found, that healing could come from understanding the past and connecting it to the present.*

– bell hooks (2009, 17)

Articulating a queer and feminist Romani revolution is an emotionally and physically challenging task. Multiple forms of violence and limited access to psychological support, healthcare, housing, a living wage, and community support exhaust its revolutionaries. Fighting for equity and dignity leaves traces on the bodies and minds of each revolutionary. What *Roma Armee* revolutionaries do, however, is create a space of belonging that enables dialogue and healing. Therefore, I believe that the play has the potential to be an important contribution to multi-generational, multi-sited, cross-temporal healing. I argue that *Roma Armee* initiates a healing process through artistic practices.

Art spaces and the theatre, specifically, have a potential to articulate new decolonial strategies. These strategies are shared in conversations among queer Romanies after the curtain falls. The healing potential, as bell hooks (2009) states, lies in returning to core values and the belief that learning from history and connecting it to futurity forge different spaces of belonging. *Roma Armee* reflects on history from a decolonial perspective, rearticulating narratives of injustices that Roma need to hear and have mirrored. I argue that the play represents a subversive journey that reworks vulnerability, heals self-victimization, and

opens up a different space of becoming and belonging, by reworking accumulated historic anger, shame, and pride. Every act is a new stage in the process of healing. It is a self-empowering process of reclaiming language and inner voice. Intergenerational wounds are healed by accepting the consequences of injustice and rewriting histories in a way that Roma themselves find fitting. *Roma Armee* teaches us power and the lesson of being one's own saviour and accepting every part of the journey towards that. Every character gives birth to a reworked meaning and a self-envisioning, one that has been self-ascribed and taken pride in. This theatrical performative practice, I believe, is healing because it triggers a complex set of effects, both in actor and audience, whether one is Roma or not. It is healing because it was silenced and taboo, and opening the stage to this process of forging one's own subjectivity is, and was, an important political issue for Romani queers. It is healing because it does not claim to be universal, yet it is a roadmap to a different future, one that shows how glorious the revolution can be when we decide to blur the lines imposed to separate us, and produce tools that unite us.

I would like to close this analysis with an invitation to see the play in the light of a tradition of a theatre of revolution. The above acts of resistances are part of a tradition that was defined by African-American playwright and poet Amiri Baraka in a public speech in 1965, later published under the title "The Revolutionary Theater." In his speech (1965, 1–2) he addresses the importance of letting the anger out and the importance of anger as a decolonizing strategy in theatre. He defines the revolutionary theatre as one that must expose; it must attack and accuse everything that can be attacked and accused. It is both shaped by the world that surrounds it and shapes the world around it; it is enmeshed in the social and gives the victims of normalized quotidian violence a confirmation of their precarity, while guiding them to a place of strength. *Roma Armee* is a play that does not skip any stages. In my analysis I argue that it starts from anger, it acknowledges the internalization of the majoritarian gaze, it works through the pain and the suffering, it brings to the fore prior unspoken or unthinkable topics, and dares to envision a future and a self that has not been dreamt of before. It carves spaces of pride in one's sexuality, class background, race, age, gender expression, and affective baggage, and creates spaces for belonging in a time when hate is increasingly becoming the norm.

## Conclusion

In this article I discuss the revolutionary potential of *Roma Armee* and the epistemic and ontological shifts that this play contributes to when it comes to writing Romani queer subjectivities. In this collective endeavour, academics, activists, and artists join a struggle for liberation, through a set of artistic practices that include decolonial narrative strategies, visual decolonization via scenography and costume design, and performance. I analyse anger and its articulations. I conclude that anger is a decolonial strategy that clarifies the visions of Romani revolutionaries in the play, helping carve futurities in which different self-envisioning is presented. The self-envisioned representations challenge hegemonic *Antiziganist* moulds of subjectivity and open spaces for imagining different articulations of Roma-ness and queerness. By reflecting on the play, through an intersectional lens while analysing the script and conducting a multi-sited ethnography, I argue that *Roma Armee* shifts the decolonial process of knowledge production towards solidarity and community building. This is achieved by reflecting and situating oppression against Romani populations into the canon of anti-racist and anti-colonial feminist genealogy. The narrated,

lived experiences performed through personal stories indicate the existence of a history of contextual differences of oppression in European Union member states and also underline similarities in structural approaches to the oppression of Roma across Europe. The queer and feminist practices reflected in the play paint a complex picture of multiple positionalities with which many Romani queers can identify. In addition, I argue that an intersectional critique of the movements, both majoritarian feminist and queer ones, as well as Romani movements across Europe, is a way to deepen understandings of oppression. Romani queer and feminist art and cultural production has the unique potential to create new bonds and spaces of belonging, in solidarity with global minoritarian subjectivities. It is a play that has a healing impact on Romani queers at a time when violence is normalized, and lives rendered unliveable.

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