

WHEN BLOOD TIES CALL YOU

IDENTITY BUILDING STRATEGIES, LIFE STORY NARRATIVES IN A ROMANI DANCE GROUP

By

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Abstract

This paper analyses the identity building strategies used to secure the ethnic, racial, gender and class identities of a group of individuals, who participated in a Romani dance group in Budapest. The major focus of this research is on the identity forming patterns through performed sexuality and the struggle individuals encountered while defining themselves in the race, gender and class triangle. Through a theoretical perspective rooted in the narrative network approach, ethnographies of wannabes and cultural theory I deconstruct the life stories of individuals and offer explanations for the patterns of behaviour they followed to locate themselves both in the Romani and the non-Romani communities of Budapest. I conclude by conceptualizing this phenomenon as an example of urban wannabeism, an identity forming strategy that can provide a solution to the dilemma of perceived cultural vacuum and invisibility of whiteness, being more apparent in the phase of post-socialist transformations when several renegotiation processes of ethnic group definitions and belongings took place.

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Introduction

As I entered the two-story building of a Romani non-profit and watchdog organization in the seventh district of Budapest in the summer of 2007, I did not expect to find more than a dance teacher surrounded by a couple of students. My long-standing interest in the traditional folk dances of Vlach Romanis from the area of Nagyecsed (Balázs, 1995) first drew me to several concerts and cultural events. These events offered a good opportunity to both observe and participate in several dance classes that were open and free of charge to the wider public.

My future dance teacher whom I first saw at one of these events teaching a handful of young people turned out to be one of my key informants and a contact person to several other individuals active in Romani folk dancing. The classes we had in the library room of that tiny building, in a neighbourhood that was otherwise densely populated by Romanis, attracted a special group of students. These individuals differed in age and educational and social background. Most of them were in their late twenties, although the two Romani informants of mine were much older. Out of the ten members of the dance group who agreed to grant me interviews seven were female (including an instructor) and three were male, including a musician who played a central role, as he performed at a monthly Romani musical event that most of the interviewees enjoyed attending on a regular basis. All of them were either first or second-generation migrants from the Hungarian countryside whose families' decided to leave the rural areas in order to gain economic stability. In their most definitive early teenage years Hungary went through a significant change adapting from a soft dictatorship under constant Soviet supervision into a budding democracy.

This is the story of their struggle and search for an identity in the city of Budapest. The latter defines the whole narrative and the research I have done on various levels. As I went further and

further in discovering the variety of identity building strategies my informants followed, the recognition of how their story was characterized by a generation's urban experience struck me.

I did not want to forego facing underlying reasons that led me to identity studies and conducting this research, even though I was familiar with the complicated struggles many social scientists and anthropologists in particular faced and still face when they try to decode and understand their fascination with their fields. I knew that I have met and decided to share with these people who I am because they could help me to understand my background and my struggles for an identity in a framework significantly different from theirs, but still sharing a lot of common elements. As an adopted child who grew up in a family that was shaped by heterogeneous ethnic and religious roots - tormented by the 20th century's Eastern-European history of wars, persecutions and genocides - the need to search for and build a firm identity appeared to be a familiar struggle. The feeling of belonging but not belonging enough, the constant dependency on the judgment of others if you suffice to be "one of us" or your efforts are subject of ridicule did not require explanation. These were the settings of my childhood and teenage years; the settings that shaped me to become the person who I was when I entered the building in the 7th district where the dance rehearsal took place.

These common elements not only helped me to navigate in the field, and as I later realized led me to my topic, but also gave me a better chance to understand my informants' lives. In many situations where they expected me to remain distant and address them as the 'other' (Said, 1979) I could surprise them with my own personal experiences in a shared urban framework defining an identity both similar and different. Thus I could present myself as a curious outsider who was driven to the field by nothing more than simple curiosity and who could relate to personal struggles and insecurities through firsthand experiences. My role, as I will address later, was particularly defined by this duality.

This awareness of my personal role and identity often summoned the spirit of falling either into "irony or a more elitist approach by putting the whole world into quotation marks" (Clifford

1986:25). As Val Colic-Peisker, I also had to find the balance between recognizing my limitations and being paralyzed by them (2004).

I consider it fortunate that I became aware of the potential the dance group had as a field of research several months after my first class. Thus I attended dance classes for a long period without a serious interest in recording what I have experienced. At first, I was struck by the realization that the distinct group of people who attended the classes were not brought there by accident.

As my visits to the classes began to take such fearfully respected titles as ‘fieldwork’, I found refuge in Lila Abu-Lughod’s words which reminded me that “on a day when people are busy and you are alone...suffering from fever...or annoyed by a child poking fun at you, the question of whether this is the experience that carries such dignified labels as ‘research’ or the more scientific ‘data collection’ nags.” (1986:10). Her work on the Bedouins of Egypt not only helped understand my relations and role in the field but also significantly lessened my fears about creating a biased representation of a group by focusing - first unintentionally, later more consciously - on gender roles and representations of femininity in an ethnic framework.

Even so I consider my research rather more as a part of the ethnographic studies of identity representations and performance conducted in contemporary urban frameworks (Makdisi, 1997 ; Tajfel, 1981), than an example of gender studies or women’s studies (Burns, 1994 ; Whiteley, 2005) in particular. If this research should be located in the field of identity studies it is certainly not a classical ethnography of Romani communities, customs and traditions. The patterns of behaviour that show strong similarities between the identity forming strategies wannabes follow in several communities, such as one of the most identifiable parallel case the Puerto Rican wannabes in the United States (Wilkins, 2004) to the ones my interviewees follow(ed), and the almost identical responses (most often rejection) they got from Romanis while making a huge effort to fit in, qualifies this more as an urban wannabeism phenomenon, where Romani could be replaced by any other ethnic or religious identity that would offer the comforting feeling of

belonging (Wilkins, 2004). By wannabeism I refer to an existing cultural phenomenon addressed in several academic frameworks as an identity forming strategy (Wilkins 2008). This strategy is used by the members of the dominant group to provide a solution for the dilemma of perceived cultural vacuum and invisibility caused by the more fluid borders of the white majority identity (Wilkins, 2004). How and why this possible answer to a perceived absence of a firm identity is a “solution with significant social costs” (p. 188, Wilkins, 2008) is one of the core topics of this paper.

The form of rejection they had to face is similar to a contemporary example of ethnic identity struggle of Indian-Americans (Das Gupta, 1997) and second-generation Filipinas living in the United States (Espiritu, 2001). Wannabes in the narrative of these minority groups were perceived as members of the majority, who through their performance silently confirmed the cultural stereotypes about people of colour. How the Romani community secures the legitimacy of its own members’ identity claims and the authenticity of its cultural traditions through Romani women shows the almost the same patterns as the Filipino-American and the Indian-American community.

The phenomenon I try to describe here is deeply embedded in a specific time and space. The fact that it took place in the urban settings of Budapest and in the first decade of the 21st century locates it on the map of anthropology somewhere between the studies of communities of contemporary urban (Logan, 2002;Patel-Masselos, 2003 and ethnographies addressing the fluidity of ethnic and racial identity (Goldstein, 2003;Frankenberg, 1993).

To decode this complex phenomenon in the first chapter I will proceed with an analysis of the socio-historical surroundings of the nineties and early 2000s of Budapest with a special focus on the changes Romani identity as a politically structured narrative went through in those formative years of the country’s history. I will also address the similarities and differences between my case and the Jewish Renaissance as an example of the ethnic-cultural and religious revivals that took place in the past twenty years in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the second chapter I provide an in-depth analysis of the interviews from both a narrative-network and a classical life story theory point of view. I will address the patterns of identity representations and gender performance as these two topics significantly reoccurred in the interviews and constituted a core part of the interviewees' life stories. The role language played as a factor in the every day life of the dance group cannot be overestimated, hence the perspective on the interviews will focus on how discourse and meaning can play a major role in identity forming negotiations. The analysis will also note the similarities between the case of Romani and Puerto Rican wannabes (2004) and the similar rejection they encounter from the community members. The strategies followed by both wannabe groups to secure their identity through the performative tools of language, clothing and sexuality will also be addressed here.

In the third chapter the experiences of liminality (Tuner, 1995) and the processes of othering (Said, 1979) will be addressed along with mimesis and alterity (Taussig, 1993), as these theoretical tools provided the most support to the process of decoding the phenomenon. In Said's understanding the West constructed the "oriental other" to generate a hegemonic colonial setting in order to gain access to the economic resources of the East. Through the constructed perception of a sexualized image of the coloured female and male body the wannabes used the strategy of othering to gain access to an imagined stronger femininity and masculinity.

Experiencing the other happened through adopting elements of the tradition that were perceived as Romani and a strong effort made to assimilate into Romani society. This was replaced by an intense period of distancing Romani culture from the every day life of the informants, to deal with the disappointment they experienced because of the Romani community's suspicion and rejection towards wannabes. There was an apparent pattern of duality in the form of an assimilation and identification attempt (mimesis) followed by a 'repulsive turn', which had the intention to secure an identity in contrast to the previous strong relationship (alterity) with the Romani community. The response of the wannabes included an interpretation of their position as 'being an outsider' as a more solidified, reoccurring element of

their life story. They perceived themselves as the *liminal personae* of various communities, who acquired valuable knowledge about human societies because they had to observe communities without ever being allowed to be an accepted member of them.

I will also elaborate on the role of the mediators, the Romani individuals who either as dance teachers or musicians were bridging the otherwise strongly separate communities to each other. Their role was significant as interviewees as well, as they could offer a point of view that would have been absent from the mostly homogeneous wannabe narrative.

In the conclusion I close by conceptualizing my research as an example of urban wannabeism that is more noticeable during and after a transition phase, when a permanent social renegotiation process of group belonging takes place.

Methodology

“We all have the intention to share our story” (Beata, April 2010)¹

The information on which this thesis is based comes mostly from life story narratives, that were unfolded through in-depth interviews and participant observation I have completed over an eight month period from the autumn of 2009 until the late spring of the year 2011. I met eighty percent of my informants in a dance group organized for people who were interested in learning Vlach Romani dances of the traditional Nagyecsed style. The interviews I have conducted with ten individuals were varying in length but they all emerged from the same two questions I posed, namely: *How did you start in Romani dancing and why did you have any special interest in Romani culture?* These turned out to be inspiring and most of my informants did not really need follow up questions to continue the conversation. My goal was to intervene as little as possible to achieve a semi-structured interview situation where my interviewees can narrate their own life story without any outside interruption (Bernard, 1995).

In some cases, I even experienced how an interview can be an “interpersonal drama with a developing plot” (Pool, 1957:193) as my interviews were all life stories touching upon the highly sensitive issues of belonging (Kessel, 1983 ; Goldstein, 2003). One of the most threatening factors from an ethnographical analytical point was that the interviewees themselves always moved away from the classical story telling to an in-depth, sometimes almost psychoanalytical, investigation of their own experiences. One reason behind this strong need to “share our story”

¹ For an easier understanding and identification of the interviewees, from now on I will use the italicized forms of their names together with the year and month when the interviews were conducted.

(*Beata, May 2010*) was my interviewees' educational background. Out of the ten interviewees seven had graduate degrees and one of them did not acquire her diploma just because she decided to devote all of her energies to the dance group instead of submitting her thesis.

My first interview was tape-recorded but soon afterwards I decided to switch to hand-written notes, as they seemed to help me in structuring the received information. It obviously involved the threat of altering the interviews. However, I took this risk while paying special attention to record stories my interviewees shared with me.

The sample itself involved individuals who were active for at least a half a year in Romani dance groups or in two cases were teachers or musicians who played a significant role in the community of dancers. There is an obvious gender imbalance in the sample as seventy percent of the informants are women. This is not only a result of my actions, but first of all the special composition of the dance groups and the combination of social perceptive factors that results in the strict separation of the sexes and their accepted and recognized roles in Hungarian society, which obviously shapes the perception of dancing as a dominantly feminine leisure activity. These proportions do change in the cases of other folk dancing groups, such as Hungarian folk dancing, but Romani folk dance activities still tend to attract more female participants.

I have decided to use the “snowball” technique after all the possible respondents from the dance group were contacted and granted me interviews. This led in some cases to former members and semi-professional performers who were affiliated with one of the Romani dance groups in Budapest over the past nine years. My original intention was to involve as many people from the acquired sample of dancers as possible, but throughout the past six month a significant number of the potential interviewees resettled in other countries of the European Union mainly because of the economic crisis and the deficit that followed the crisis on the Hungarian labour market.

In the analysis I followed the methodological strategy offered by Peter S. Bearman and Katherine Stovel (2000) who modelled narratives as networks by differentiating reoccurring

patterns. I focused on the patterns of performing identity, sexuality, the processes of othering, the experiences of liminality and the roles of mediators in particular. I marked them in the text and compared the textual forms they occur in. I also tried to identify intertextuality, the recurrence of commonly shared elements in the interviews. As the interviewees knew each other they often did not just mention each other but also used what later turned out to be a set of shared linguistic forms and phrases to describe their experiences.

The combination of semi-structured interviews combined with the participant observation that consisted of a large number of informal interviews (Bernard, 1995) together with the narrative network analysis consists the methodological basis of this paper.

My informants were familiar with the fact that I am not Romani from the very beginning but in some situations they preferred to leave the question of my ethnic identity opened. In the dance classes an at least partial Romani identity appeared to be a compliment after a successful performance of a new step or sequence of movements. Thus my identity became a subject of ongoing negotiations as well but on a different, more casual level. Some of my informants took a while to understand my background and to secure a place for me on the basis of my ethnic and social background. The fact that through my adoptive mother I was related to the Jewish community in Hungary the wannabes found it appealing to understand my presence in the dance group as the curiosity and solidarity of a member of another minority group.

The need to affiliate me with an existing category in social imagination finally ended up in securing a position for me as someone who “feels comfortable in our community” (Shokeid, 1995 p. 6). This definition of my role in the microcosm of the dance group offered me the opportunity to develop personal relationships, to get closer to the every day life of my future interviews. At the same time it did not appeal as an identity wilfully altered for the sake of exploiting information for the sake of research. I felt that my research field is the framework I “had to be” at that time, without summoning the spirit of fatalism. I have learnt about myself and my identity through a framework that was distant enough to feel that the issues I encounter are

similar to mine but still not the same. Thus I could avoid feeling involved to an extent where that would have been emotionally more consuming, still maintaining a fruitful learning experience, a journey into the familiar yet at the same time unfamiliar, myself.

A synthesis of literature and theory

The basis of the theoretical foundation of this paper relies on Stuart Hall's theory of culture. Hall understands culture as a process of giving meaning to phenomena encountered in the social world (1997), with a strong focus on linguistic tools as the most important, first hand apparatus of providing interpretative frameworks for our experiences. To equip a phenomenon with meaning is the first step in the process of producing the chronicle of a perceived account of one's own past, the narrative of one's life story. Meaning in Hall's understanding is also "what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we 'belong'" (Hall, 1997 p.3). The interviews I conducted revealed remarkably detailed narrative structures that had their primary goal in securing a firm and definite meaning for past experiences and creating a consistent and continuous life story.

To conceptualize my case as an example of urban wannabeism, I have searched for parallel existing phenomena in academic literature. My intention was to find studies that addressed the struggle of individuals who try to satisfy the requirements of belonging to a group and who throughout this process experience disappointment and share their frustration with others who went through the same process. This challenge seemed to be insurmountable at the first sight as the case was too specific and rich in distinct elements. This made me question if there are any recorded cases of ethnography existing that can serve as a study for comparison.

A significant literature analyzing the narrative of second-generation migrant women of colour and white American women who wanted to identify with communities of colour, offered a theoretical framework and a stunningly similar account for this comparison. Both groups experienced their identity as being contested by the communities they wanted to belong to and by their kin as well. Wilkin's study of the Puerto Rican wannabes (2004), Das Gupta's (1997) and

Espiritu's analysis (2001) of the experience women of colour had in contemporary America were speaking about similar structures of race, class and gender. The feeling of in-betweenness, their frustration caused by the inability to satisfy the requirements of a "fantasmatic... cultural heritage" (Spivak, 1989, p. 279), together with the high importance gendered performances filled in their narrative powerfully connected the three ethnographies to my case.

On the other hand I had to differentiate between my case and a case of ethnic-religious revival that seemed to be more than appealing for comparison. The Jewish Renaissance and its anthropological accounts added to the better understanding of the social framework of the case and helped to map the dynamics of identity formation, but had to be addressed separately as it was rooted in distinct historical patterns. However the similarities with the identity securing strategies of individuals who wanted to identify themselves Jewish offered a point for a brief comparative analysis.

The concepts of Romani tradition I use are the ones defined in the ethnography of Michael Stewart (1997) that described the life of a Vlach Romani community in the Hungarian town of 'Harangos'. Stewart's work was necessary to incorporate as my informants referred to certain elements of Romani tradition to secure the authenticity of their identity, therefore their significance had to be addressed through the literature analyzing their own framework, the ethnographies of Romani communities. I also found the understanding of gender and identity in the Romani community observed and described by Stewart particularly useful as it perceived the gender dynamics and significant others as key components in the formation of the minority's identity. In Stewart's understanding identity in the Romani narrative "is constructed and constantly remade in the present in relations with significant others, not something inherited from the past"(Stewart, 1997 p. 28). This crucial role granted to significant others helped to unfold the relationships of the wannabes with their dance teachers and other Romani individuals who played a major role in forming and securing identities. To define identity I refer to Bearman's and Stovel's (2000) notion of a personal account of the self as an initiator in the social

reality that commences actions which are demonstrative of, and composed by, the identity that underlies it. This understanding is similar to Stewart's as it defines the identity formation process as an outcome of interactions between individuals.

To analyze the choices the wannabes made as parts of a more consistent pattern of behaviour I turned towards the duality of mimesis and alterity introduced by Taussig (1993). The efforts of the informants to identify and engage with Romani culture through the imitation of certain cultural symbols such as clothing and language usage, was later replaced by a strong endeavour to differentiate themselves from what they perceived as the 'other' at that point. They experienced themselves through the 'other' and identified themselves with it through performance, to finally realize their difference and later on to solidify an individual identity of a liminal personae (Turner, 1995), an infinite outsider whose role is to observe society from the outside.

This theoretical triangle of ethnographies of urban wannabeism and Romani communities interpreted through the lens of cultural imitation and differentiation aims to provide a better understanding of the wannabes experience, to address the "new forms of agency and identification that confuse historical temporalities...and traumatize tradition" (Bhabha 1992 p. 59)

1. Socio-historical framework

I decided to proceed with an analysis of the socio-historical settings of the post-socialist capital Budapest, alongside an analysis of the changes Romani identity as a narrative structure went through in those important years of Hungary's history, in order to frame the observed phenomenon of wannabeism in time and space. I will also point out the analogies and contrasts between Romani wannabeism, and the Jewish Renaissance, which is an academically well-researched parallel example of the ethnic-cultural and religious revivals of the post-socialist narrative.

1.1 The historical transformations of Romani identity embodiment

*"History...illuminates reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life"*²

It is necessary for the understanding of the struggle of the Romani wannabes in Budapest to put the phenomenon into the framework of space and time. Although this socio-historical outline will mark certain important points in the history of Romanis in Hungary, it would not be sufficient to talk only about the past and the present of Hungary's biggest minority group. The wannabes struggle is embedded in the post-socialist framework, in particular the significant migration waves from the countryside to the capital and the cultural-ethnic revival experienced after the change of the regime in 1990. Therefore, first I will provide a short summary of

² Marcus Tullius Cicero and Hubert Ashton Holden, *Pro Publio Sestio; oratio ad iudices. With introd. critical and explanatory notes and indexes by Hubert A. Holden (Latin Edition)* (Nabu Press, 2010), page 11.

Hungarian Romani history with a focus on the shifts in identity representation and perception of Romani embodiment through two symbolic practices of segregation: the “CS-lakás” housing program and forced bath. Later I will connect the above-mentioned shifts in identity representation with the changes that occurred in the life of the parents and grandparents of my interviewees.

Hungarian Romanis for a long time were excluded from socially recognized forms of cultural capital. Their music, culture and traditions, that vary from subgroup to subgroup was not counted as an integral part of Hungary’s heritage and only recent changes led to a more open approach towards the subaltern who could not speak before (Spivak, 1988). This exclusion from officially recognized forms of culture was apparent, parallel to a strong segregation in social space. Until the present many Hungarian rural and urban communities shared a significant pattern of racial segregation. This was meant to be changed when the notorious “CS-lakás”³ housing-program was started by the government during the socialist era. The program originally involved building row-houses for families in need and wanted to end the long history of Romani settlements at the edges of cities and villages. In most cases it led only to an even stronger segregation together with an alienation of the community members from each other (Ladányi-Szelényi, 2004). As in other European Romani settlement programs, the “Cs-lakások” planning process did not involve Romanis on a micro or macro level in the decision making at all (Gay Y Blasco, 1999). The significant difference was in the underlying idea that while Spanish officials who planned the structure of the new housing complexes in Gay Y Blasco’s case in Jarana tried to justify their decisions by stating that certain designs in space division were used to meet the need of the Romanis and therefore often used cultural stereotypes to underpin their standpoints (like space provided for social interaction, as it was perceived by the experts as essential to the life

³ The idea behind the program seems even more striking after looking at the meaning of the Hungarian title where “Cs” stands for “csökkentett komfortfokozatú” (lowered comfort level)

of the local Romanis) the Hungarian officials always focused on the beneficial cultural changes housing can lead to, as it will help the Romanis to conform to mainstream norms and culture.

One of the most striking practices that stigmatized Romanis was the practice of forced bath (Bernath-Polyak, 2001). These institutionalized events of racial segregation involved the separation of women and men from each other at the Romani settlements and in some cases even the Romanis who had already left the settlements to move into the village centre from their non-Romani neighbours. They were undressed, showered and disinfected with chemicals⁴. The practice not only demonstrated the power of local authorities over the Romani settlement, but showed a control over the Romani body and labelled it as something that should be necessarily cleaned from the “dirt of Gipsyness” (Bernath-Polyak, 2001). The prewar narrative of policies concerning Romanis were either openly racist and marginalizing or pretended that Romanis exist only in travelling communities in the area. In comparison to this, the post-war socialist narrative just silenced these prejudices with a paternalistic approach, but maintained the usage of active, harsh stereotypes.

One of the connections between Romanis and non-Romanis was the intention to move to urban areas. In the case of non-Romanis it was stimulated by the hardships of economic survival in the countryside, while Romanis also dreamt about the possibility of melting into mainstream society in the capital or bigger cities. This is one of the points where the stories of my interviewees and the second and third generation Romani migrant communities, who left the countryside hoping for a better life - connect to each other. While Romani families left in large numbers to start a life in the urban settings where they hoped to have equal chance, many of my interviewees family members moved to the capital to find a better-paying job or continue higher education at colleges or universities that started to accept students with lower economic and social status on a policy level. The decision to leave their homes often became a source of trauma

⁴ For a remarkable visual art adaptation of the forced baths it is worth watching the Hungarian director, Sándor Sára's movie *The Uproven Stone* (1969)

(*Laszlo*, January 2011, *Beata* December 2010) that still appears in the narratives of the individuals who agreed to give an interview. Even the ones who were already second-generation migrants from countryside, urban, and rural communities addressed the issues of alienation, loss of heritage, or silencing a past because of a feeling of inferiority apparent among first and second-generation intellectuals.

1.2. Cultural revivals and the claimed analogy with the Jewish revival in Central and Eastern Europe

The feeling of the absence of a more defining cultural framework that would tell what people should and should not do, or would define strict gender roles met with a growing enthusiasm for the Hungarian and ethnic minority folk cultures perceived as authentic in the 1980s and 1990s. The lost heritages were reclaimed even though in many cases they were not similar to the cultural practices of the grandparents of the individuals in question. One of the well-known and academically addressed cases of these revival movements is the renaissance of the Hungarian Jewish Community. Many of the second-generation Holocaust survivors found themselves with the feeling of absence of an identity (Szász, 2002) and as soon as the legal frameworks changed a surprisingly high number of new Jewish organizations started to function and successfully attracted members to join their activities (Papp, 2000). The number of young community members, especially the ones involved in youth movements, steadily rose and at the same time a significant number of non-Jews or Jews, whose Jewish status was questionable, also started to show interest in the activities of these newly found organizations and communities. Their efforts to participate in Jewish community life was often perceived as just as artificial or even opportunistic as in the case of the Romani wannabes. Their status was a question of ongoing negotiations and they found themselves at the crossroads of several questions such as “who is a Jew” or “what is authentic Judaism”.

The claim would appear justifiably in the case of Romani wannabes to make a direct comparison with the existing rich literature of Jewish revivals and individuals claiming a Jewish identity in Central and Eastern-Europe (Kessel, 2000). There are remarkable similarities between the narratives my interviewees used to structure their life stories and the ones told by individuals whose Jewish status was perceived by researchers as either questionable or self-created, even fictitious (Vincze, 2009). There is an existing difference especially in the social status of the Jewish and Romani wannabes in Hungary. As I will address it in the following chapters, Romani wannabes often justify their claims about their identity through their economic status. Living in a neighbourhood perceived as underclass with a significant Romani population can provide a basis for the claim for being a group member. The same in the case of the Jewish wannabeism cannot be said.

The long-standing stereotype of the economic success of the Jews and the existence of neighbourhoods regarded as “more Jewish” in Budapest, such as the inner part of the 7th district, or Újlipótváros, would not be sufficient for someone to claim a Jewish identity. Even if the individual would be perceived as a Jew by non-Jews in some cases, this would not be as sharply defined by social status, class and geographical location in the city (Duncan, 1990, Boyer 1994). In short: living in the 8th district, which is identified as a Romani neighbourhood, the “Chicago of Budapest” occupies a different, much stronger status in the imagination of the inhabitants if it comes to consequences in class and ethnicity than (Horvath, 2008; Wilson, 1993) living in certain areas of the 7th or the 13th district.

Thus the analogy between the two groups of individuals can be valid if it is limited to the dynamics of marginalization in the groups and the experiences of wannabes who suffer under those. If it crosses the borders of this discussion, namely how the minority group’s members reject the wannabes or the patterns of identity forming strategies the wannabes use, that also show some general similarities, because of the above-mentioned radically dissimilar perception of

the class and social status of the Jew the strategies how wannabes try to satisfy the expectations of members and outsiders in both groups differ starkly.

2. Analysis

Here I will continue with an in-depth analysis of the interviews through a narrative-network and a classical life story theory point of view. I will address the patterns of identity representations, and gender performance in detail inasmuch as these two topics tended to reappear in the life stories. My informants gave meaning to their experiences primarily through linguistic codes therefore the importance of language in identity forming negotiations is unavoidable. My analysis of language will focus on the role of discourse and meaning identity building strategies. The analysis will also include the discovered similarities with the case of the Puerto Rican wannabes (Wilkins, 2004) especially the strong rejection they encounter from the community members. The identity forming strategies followed by both wannabe groups to secure their identity through lingual tools, symbolic objects and performed sexuality will also be addressed here.

2.1. Narrative networks and life story analysis

“past, present, or anticipated future realities influence the personal interpretation of the meaning of life”⁵

After conducting the first interviews my expectations seemed to be confirmed: the life stories of members of the dance group showed remarkable similarities in their structure and the particular symbols used throughout the text. The new question was how to identify the patterns that reoccur and how to decode the reasons behind the fact that they reappear constantly.

⁵ Gabriele Rosenthal, “Reconstruction of Life Stories: Principles of Selection in Generating Stories For Narrative Biographical Interviews,” *The Narrative Study of Lives* (1993): 59-91.

I decided to use a model for narrative analysis that represents complex event sequences as networks (Bearman-Stovel, 2000). I believe that what Bearman and Stovel discovered in the cases of autobiographical accounts of becoming and being a Nazi in the pre-war era applies for my case as the two scholars found an observable difference between the narrative structures of developing and maintaining identities as Nazis. My interviewees also constructed their stories by separating it into two distinct parts: one addressing their journey that led them to the Romani folk dancing and their involvement in the group, while the second part was a story of distancing themselves from their former decisions to actively acquire an identity. Although this pattern of behaviour is distinctly different from the ones analyzed by Bearman and Stovel, the unmistakable contrast between the two parts offers an opportunity for fruitful comparison.

The two parts are usually separated by an event or sequence of events when disappointment rose with the Romani community's refusal to accept the individual as a member. As the first part is often narrated with keeping the question of identity and self-definition ambiguous, it always implies a masquerade, "an appearing that makes itself convincing as a being" (Butler: 1990, p. 47). After the breaking point the events that served as identity reaffirming actions appear to be sources of ridicule and reinterpreted as either elements of a past phase in search for an identity or as one of the male interviewees said "that brainwashed state of mind that people often have" (*Laszlo, January 2011*). The reaffirming actions such as clothing, behaviour or language that were formerly part of an identity performance (Butler, 1990) become borderlines for differentiation from the Romani community.

For several years I was always wearing the denim skirts and the big earrings. You know, just how everyone looked like in the dance group and the neighbourhood...the way I was speaking...I am not sure you would believe that you are talking to the same person if we would go back in time. I was talking like everyone else in the dance group. I limited my vocabulary...but when I realized that I will have to submit a thesis and there is a world outside I abandoned for a long time, I started to readapt to the requirements of my old life and circle of friends. That was the time also when I decided to quit the dance group.
(Zsanett, March 2010)

As a result, a constant revision of the narratives presented by my informants occurred throughout my research. These changes that were meant to maintain a cohesive structure resulted in remarkably constructed forms of life stories. The first part of the interviews that usually explained the journey that led the individual to Romani culture and dancing in particular were much more dense. They had to synthesize past events to one framework that would suggest the unconventional, serious interest in Romani culture. To achieve such a strong structural cohesiveness the particular events did not just appear after one another, but were interconnected and were often arranged around a central event that weaves otherwise unconnected particulars of the narrative into one flow. The central event was usually a mystical and unintended encounter with Romani culture.

Well I had a dream: a group of men dressed in white clothes were playing music and singing in a basement. This was not anything extraordinary, so I forgot it immediately when I woke up. The next day I saw Endre and his band playing in the basement of Szimpla, the pub that was more of an underground place at that time. They were all dressed in white and the smoke of cigarettes surrounded them.
(Zsanett, February 2011)

We were walking towards the 1st of May parade and suddenly there were they. A group of Romani men and women...colourful skirts and blouses. My mother always tried to avoid them but somehow we always ended up seeing them
(Eva Linda, January 2010)

In some cases early childhood experiences and unconfirmed (seemingly imaginary) Romani grandparents were the tools to claim a right for the unusually strong interest in the culture and traditions of the Romanis.

My father had darker skin, they never admitted it but I am sure that my grandfather was a Sinti Romani from Andorra. Everyone called my father the 'tent maker Bela'. There is a Vlach Romani tribe the cerhari tribe who make tents.
(Rebeka Marib 2010)
I was bullied in elementary school. The other kids were picking on me, because I had darker skin. They called me names like 'dirty Gypsy'...it was awful, I felt ashamed...then my mother decided to take me to violin lessons. I went to school with the violin and the kids saw me. There were the symbols, I had them on me: the skin colour and the violin.
(Eva Linda, February 2011)

After justifying the interest, the next step was usually to give an explanation for joining the dance group. In the case of the interviewees who were supposed to have Romani kin, usually this next step seemed to be a justified search for an identity that appeared to be much stronger in the late teenage years. Other interviewees who did not have a claim to have any Romani roots shifted here to explain the role of mediators, Romani individuals, often musicians or dancers, who they had met and appointed as mentors for their journey into Romani culture. In one of the most sophisticatedly structured cases, where the narrative reached an almost literary height, an invitation from one of the teachers of the dance group liberated the story from the feared accusation of pure wannabeism.

I was dancing there and at that time I was already aware of the fact that what I am doing is really similar to what Dina is doing who was a Romani girl from the countryside. I was dancing on my own and after the concert when I wanted to leave a man came to me and asked if I want to learn this dance. He was Zsombor whose wife Magdolna became my dance teacher.

(Zsanett, May 2011)

Romani friends or even partners could also offer a chance to develop a link to cultural activities and the community itself.

Shortly after I arrived to Budapest I moved to Andor. He had a lot of Romani friends who visited him from time to time and first I did not like them. I was the typical countryside girl with prejudices. Then I fell in love with Ervin and later on with another Romani guy. That changed a lot for sure. Through them I got connected to Romani culture in another way.

(Nelli, June 2010)

I had Romani friends and sometimes I stood up at parties held after baptisms or weddings and danced there as well. I had several Romani girlfriends as well.

(Laszlo, April 2011)

One of the striking differences between the interviewees was obviously gender based. The male interviewees showed patterns that were more structured and followed a strict timeline. They immediately tried to clarify their position as genuine outsiders, who developed an interest in dancing as a leisure activity. Individuals who otherwise during the courses showed not only a

fascination with Romani dances, but culture and the community as well, refused to address their own issues, their intimate struggles for an identity the requirements for which they could never perfectly satisfy. As I will talk about this phenomenon later I will not now go into an elaborate description of the underlying psychological-sociological factors that could possibly result in such a strong refusal to discuss their personal identity struggles.

The other group of patterns could be observed in the interviews conducted with a Romani dance teacher and a musician. As they were the ones who could secure the other interviewees' Romani identity in the first place, they did not have to address the questions of identity construction or could do it from a safe standpoint. However, when it came to their own life stories they shared the same ambiguities as the wannabes. They also had their own tutors, who where in most cases older relatives representing a connection to traditions perceived as more authentic. They also tried to follow a narrating pattern that would picture the decisions they took as logical and creating a coherent structure, a flow of events.

Romani culture in their interpretation obviously occupied a sacred position whereas the disillusioned wannabe interviewees, who could not secure a stable position for themselves in the Romani community, often addressed the huge gap between the expected behaviour that the strong Romani traditions suggest and the actual behaviour of Romani individuals they had met.

If I have to summarize my whole experience among the Romanis I have danced with I would say simply that nobody is really who they say they are. It is also true that I remained an outsider. It is still really funny how someone who presents himself as a Romani who follows the traditions strictly, in reality is cheating on his wife day after day. That was a great discovery for me, that no one—literally, no one—is who they say they are.
(*Beata, July 2010*)

From the beginning there were comments like do this that way, because it is more proper from a traditional Romani point of view. Do not wear this, or wear that instead. Do not act like this, or that...follow a more modest way. Well it was interesting to hear this from people who did not follow these rules in their own life.
(*Zsanett, February 2011*)

The strong defensive behaviour of the Romani informants, protecting the sacredness of culture and the position of the emblematic figures of the community, changed in some cases, especially after a certain time passed and they became more secure about sharing their doubts concerning their own community.

I do not want to deny it. There is a lot of hypocrisy in our community. People who say that they would never ever violate any of the rules or core values of Romani culture do it frequently and still preach about how important those are in front of everyone.

(Magdolna, March 2011)

2.2. Reoccurring patterns in life story narratives

From analyzing the different narrative patterns the individuals followed throughout structuring their life stories, now I will turn to two topics that reoccur, in particular: identity representations and gender performances. As I have defined previously, I understand identity in harmony with Bearman's and Kovel's definition (2000) as a subjective account of the self as an actor in the social reality that initiates events which are demonstrative of, and composed by, the identity that underlies it. Therefore the identity formation process should be understood as an outcome of interactions between individuals, where relationships between the actors are the main components of the identity formation. The levels and forms of interactions that shape the identity can vary from case to case. A confirmation or rejection of the performed identity can happen through comments made verbally or evaluating the performance through performing one's own identity.

There are several examples in the interviews for how identities are negotiated throughout interactions between the different actors especially Romani individuals who appear to be more significant (Stewart, 1997) in this narrative setting as they are regarded as the most authentic

confirmers of Romani identity. Remarks such as „úgy táncolsz mint egy cigány”⁶ (*Boglarka, January 2011*) or „úgy táncolsz mint a Baba néni”⁷ (*Zsanett, February 2011*) are not only serving the purpose of pure compliments but redefining the power structures and interpersonal relations on a regular basis. The desired aim to satisfy the Romani audience as a dancer, if succeeded meant an important first step for an authentic and legitimate position in the community. Remarkable dances were the most important forms of social capital that earned honour and respect for the wannabes (Bourdieu, 1987). These remarks that provided one of the most important basic reference points in the process of identity building for the participants of the dance classes were reappearing patterns in several interviews both with male and female interviewees.

Of course there were many cases when people standing around watching my dance asked me later on if I am at least partially Romani...and I do not want to lie: it warmed up my heart.
(*Beata, May 2010*)

When we were at a small village performing, an old Romani woman came to me and started to tell me something in Romanes. When I told her that I do not understand what she is saying she did not believe it. She thought that I am a Romani girl, no doubt.
(*Zsanett, January 2010*)

After I agreed to dance at the Christmas party with the kids, all of my co-workers thought that I am Romani. One of them even called me and asked if I would be willing to participate in a survey about Romani young people and their position on the Hungarian job market. When I told her that I am not Romani, she was obviously embarrassed. My dance was enough to convince them.
(*Boglarka, March 2011*)

Well if I stand up somewhere to dance and most of the people surrounding me are Romanis, they will ask me for sure later on if I am at least half or quarter Romani. Even if I say no they will insist on asking: are you sure? Are you sure? Of course it is good to hear when you are just at the beginning of learning a new choreography.
(*Laszlo, July 2010*)

⁶ “You dance like a Romani” (Hungarian)

⁷ “You dance like Aunt Baba” (Hungarian), Aunt Baba is an iconic figure of Vlach Romani folk dancing and singing in Hungary. She is often referred to as one of the few existing sources of authentic Romani culture

The influential power of the comment made by Romani significant others over the individual's identity and self-perception also depended on the person's status and the comparison he or she used. In case the one who made the comment was a recognized and respected member of the community the remark could be turned into the above-mentioned symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1987). This symbolic capital meant a prestige in the community of dancers and more attention granted by the teachers throughout the courses. The exchange of capital often meant a confirmation of femininity as well for female wannabes:

Magdolna taught us how to act as a woman, how to dress as a woman, and the Romani girls in the dance group obviously spent a lot of time commenting on each other's appearance. I always thought that they are really attractive, thus in case they told me that I look great, it gave me a bit of confidence for that day.

(Zsanett, May 2011)

Zsanett knew how to be a woman and she could even develop a friendship with the Romani women from the dance group...because this is a woman, a real woman in every sense. This was really important. When I first started to attend the classes I was just a little girl. Now that I am married Romanis take me more seriously than before...but I was afraid of them, especially the women because they are so feminine and strong. I wanted to be like them, to earn their respect as a woman.

(Boglarka, March 2011)

An interesting pattern of rural and urban differentiation appeared in securing the dancers' identity. In several cases the ones whose comments seemed more important in securing the identity came from the countryside or Transylvania as these two appeared as more authentic sources of Romani identity and culture.

I was just standing there waiting for a friend of mine and a Romani man came to me and started to play the guitar and sing all of a sudden...I danced...and a Romani woman who was old and obviously not from the capital with her long skirt and scarf joined us and started to snap her fingers. It was a great moment, that even an old Romani woman accepted my dance.

(Rebeka, August 2010)

I am like a queen in Transylvania. If I start to dance people always respond to it positively there...because there it is not a fight to be a Romani. You are just a Romani and that is it.

(Beata, June 2010)

The stories of these rites of passage (Turner, 1995), the events leading from one status to another, manifested themselves in strongly ritualistic, almost mythical settings. The image of a

Romani elderly woman who came to the capital for a music festival and accidentally saw one of the interviewees dancing or who approached a dancer after a performance initiating a discussion in Romani because she was convinced about his or her Romani ancestry, seemed to be more than a character who appeared there by chance and for sure did not happen to be in the life story by accident. Their role as ambassadors of the unknown, „secretive, enclosed community” (*Beata, January 2011*) of Romanis, was to include the outsider not just as a spectator motivated by simple curiosity but also to legitimize his or her dance as “ours”, as ethnic, as not a masquerade (Butler, 1990), an artificial imitation of a perceived image of the Romani, but a genuine performance.

Genuine was defined by the aforementioned significant others who had more control over the communities cultural capital. They gained this control through either their family members’ position who were traditional Vlach Romanis, or their past career as dancers and musicians. The wannabes were also aware of the fact that these respected members of the community had a much larger impact on their future position as dancers therefore they often dedicated their performance to the attention of the significant others.

Dance obviously could not suffice as the only tool to secure and identity for my interviewees. Clothing became another really important factor in performing Romani identity. The elements of more conservative dressing codes that are often perceived as Romani like long skirts and accessories with bright colours slowly but surely made it into the closet of the members of the dance group (*Beata, January 2011*)

This phenomenon did not only affect the women but made obvious changes in the attitudes of male interviewees towards clothing. The difference came out in the interviews, as opposed to the women, male interviewees (even ones who were enthusiastic purchasers of what they formerly perceived as Romani clothing) did not address the issue of performance through clothing. This refusal to discuss identity performance will be the subject of the next subchapter, just to indicate the differences between the male and female informants, while clothing is mentioned in all of the female narratives, none of the male interviewees referred to it in their life stories. This obvious difference can be simply understood as a conservative attitude towards gender roles, that would not allow men to address certain issues such as clothing and

beautification that are traditionally understood as being restricted to female interest. Still this significant absence of what is otherwise understood as a strong element in the other narratives is striking.

There is a possibility that the taboo of giving meaning and importance to an activity traditionally perceived as feminine is not only deriving from the fact that it does not fit the image of the strong and virile man but also because any doubts around personal identity are perceived as weakness, and weakness is essentially feminine (Butler, 1990). Male interviewees pictured the internalization of stereotypes as a process that either happened only or primarily to other people (*Laszlo, February 2010*) or did not even happen at all (*Gusztav, January 2011*). This suggests that any doubt over identity and belonging can be traced back to the weakness of the individual's personality. As I have mentioned before, Laszlo a male interviewee of mine who admitted that he had a short period at the beginning of his dance studies, when he was more opened to experiments with his identity and belonging called that phase as a "brainwashed state of mind that people often have" (*Laszlo, February 2010*). Even if this statement is perceived as obviously ironic and exaggerating it strongly separates and labels the experience as a result of immature and ignorant behaviour, therefore inferior.

This pattern of perceiving the past period of searching for an identity as a trap appeared in the narrative of the female interviewees as well although in their case it was either depicted as a practice of another female wannabe or openly addressed as a practice they followed but do not follow anymore.

They just try to hard, Eva Linda and her sister. I do not think that they are more than a subject of ridicule for Romanis.
(*Zsanett, July 2010*)

I wanted to fit in for sure, we all did these minor experiments with our identities...but later on I got over this period. It just took a long time for me to leave behind this strong desire to fit in.
(*Beata, February 2011*)

I do not really know what I have thought at that time...it was ridiculous. I wanted to be someone who I could not be...then I realized that I am not Romani and should not try to be one.

(Nelli, December 2010)

Two of the female interviewees even described a period of change when they slowly started to readapt non-Romani customs and secure their identity as non-Romanis through performative action. This performative action appeared in visible evidences as well such as significant change in clothing and language.

One of my interviewees Eva Linda who at the beginning of our acquaintance referred to her clothing, her skirt in particular as a motive inspired strongly by her claimed Romani roots and her strong cultural affiliation with them, was wearing trousers and a leather jacket after she returned from France for a short visit, where she worked as a nurse at a local hospital. This could be interpreted as a change in taste but since the skirt occupies an important place in Vlach Romani tradition as a symbol of modesty and femininity (Stewart, 1997) this transformation appears to be a choice of identity performance and group affiliation as well.

The symbols that were perceived as Romani are especially fascinating in the case of language usage. When wannabes referred to people who were “artificial Gypsies” (műcigány) they often mentioned how they try to imitate the Romanis’ accent. Zsanett who had one of the most structured narratives about her life story just vaguely addressed the changes that occurred throughout the nine years she has spent in the dance group concerning her lingual coding techniques. When I first met her, the vocabulary and structure she used was a bit theatrical performance of what can be understood as a standard lingua franca of the middle class of Budapest. This was obviously adapted and internalized as Zsanett grew up in a small village in the western part of the country. Still it became evident for me later through conducting interviews with other dancers that Zsanett had a period of few years when she was actively using the vocabulary and structure of what she and her peers perceived as Budapest Romani lingua. This language form that consists a few words of Romanes and a couple of other words from Hungarian slang basically differs from what a middle class Hungarian resident of Budapest uses

in an identifiable accent. The accent itself can be used as an identity marker not only because Romanis are using that too, but also because of the fact that this is one of the most definite and strong signs of “Romaniness” from both a majority (outsider) and minority (group member) point of view in the local framework.

How wannabes internalize these markers appears as offensive from the point of view of group members because they are silently legitimizing the accusations of an existing Romani lingual structure that is based on being poorly equipped in the number of words used and putting a stress on higher level of volume while performing the act of speaking even in one to one conversations. The disappointment of group members with the performance of the wannabes is not a unique phenomenon. Puerto Rican wannabes face the same rejection and suspicion when it comes to judging their lingual performance (Wilkins, 2008). In the case of the Puerto Rican wannabes it is a desperate effort made to speak Spanish without a strong English accent, whereas in the case of Romani wannabes a couple of Romani words used in casual conversations have the same role.

The rejection from the side of the desired communities is based not only on the suspicion and dissatisfaction with the wannabes performance that are often perceived as theatrical efforts to fit in and the fact that by “participating in behaviours associated with the urban poor and calling them Puerto Rican, the wannabes perpetuate negative stereotypes about people of colour” (Wilkins, 2008 p. 113) but it is also considerably nurtured by the idea that the wannabes are people with no identity. They are not only White American or White Hungarians who try to adapt certain dress codes, lingual structures and behaviours they associate with a group, but from the latter’s point of view their identity is actually non-existent.

The interviews conducted with Romani individuals, who as dance teachers and musicians functioned as mediators between Romanis and non-Romanis, mentioned several aspects of majority Hungarian culture as being either undeveloped or entirely absent. Magdolna (2011) whom I have met through my interviewees after several month of fieldwork is a well-known

figure of the Romani dancing scene. In her understanding one of the basic differences between Romani and non-Romani individuals is in behaviour and the accepted ways of interaction. What she described with using the word *patyiv* (respect) is a strictly understood conservative moral code that separates women from men prescribing significantly distinct roles and activities for the two groups. In Magdolna's perception of Hungarian culture, Hungarians appear not just as a group with a different culture but also as a group that in some cases does not have a culture at all. Zsanett also addressed this issue when she explained her fiancée's relatives attitude towards her as a Hungarian woman.

For them I was much better than a Romani girl from one of the other Romani groups. This is not surprising. I mean for them that would have been way much harder to accept. That means a person with another cultural background. Who comes with different customs, traditions and attitude. Whereas I as a Hungarian, I have no issues like that. I am like a blank paper, because I have no culture at all. (2011)

As an observer who tried to be clear from the beginning that he does not have any Romani roots, that his interest is not connected to the presence of any Romani culture in the home where he spent his childhood, I sometimes found myself in the position where I functioned as the “blank page” both for Romanis and wannabes. Former secured a position of cultural superiority through questioning the absence of morality in the (non-existing) culture of the majority where I belonged to according to their classification. The latter (at least at the beginning) regarded me as an individual who can function as a social space as well, on which their identities could be performed and their identities confirmed. The absence of my culture became a tool for others in the process of producing evidences for their own belonging to their groups.

These daily encounters with identity forming strategies, through symbolic action and interaction with significant others, revealed to me aspects of my own self forming practices that I have not been conscious about before (Greenberg-Witztum, 2001). Even though my journey was definitely not an odyssey in search for my Romani roots, as from the very beginning I was aware of the fact that my ancestry is non-Romani, I experienced the process of internalizing cultural symbols and performing for the sake of securing an identity in the group. I was not a simple

bystander. From the very beginning as I have mentioned already I had an important role in providing an opportunity for my interviewees to perform their identity to an individual who is perfect for that purpose as he is not experienced in Romani culture and dancing in particular as much as they are.

Later on as the silhouette of my role and personal identity in the group became more identifiable my position altered as well. From the curious outsider with a more ambiguous identity, I transformed into the *gadzho*, the non-Romani man. As a non-Romani whose identity was not a question dealt with in the first place, I thought that maybe I will be either a marginal or non-relevant person in the group, but it turned out to be the complete opposite. As I did not have to participate in certain performances that were directly securing Romani identity I could assist as audience or even more the significantly different “other” in relation to wannabes could define their identity. My otherness seemed to be the safest surface for negotiations as it often promised a more guaranteed success than the same attempts made in front of Romanis who had a secured position in the community therefore more willing to judge the wannabes.

2.3. Performing gender and sexuality in the dance group

“For me she was the essence of being a woman” (Zsanett, December 2010)

Performing femininity and masculinity remained the main issues of discussion throughout the entire time of my fieldwork and it was one of the core issues of the life story narratives as well. It appeared as a central issue because of various factors. The Vlach Romani community, often perceived as the authentic, most traditional Romani group has a strict code of adequate social performances on the basis of the gender duality of masculinity versus femininity (Stewart, 1997). Thus any performance that appeared with the definite aim of securing a Romani identity involved gender-based elements.

What Michael Stewart (1997) described in a particular Vlach Romani community in Hungary and their understanding of gender roles is similar to the unwritten moral code the dance group members liked to refer to, when questions such as how to behave properly came up. The male centred activities and relations that provided an image of communal affairs in Harangos (1997) manifest themselves in an overly masculinised, sometimes even caricature like imaging of male dominant behaviour. The male dancers had to prove not only their abilities in dancing but they had to qualify as strong, potent men who are able to secure a place for themselves in a dominantly macho, male chauvinistic framework. A remarkable network of mutual support helped the male dancers to secure this position in front of the wider Romani community and audiences. This network was built up by female Romani wannabes who accompanied their male counterparts to many of the events where not only dances but also identities were performed to the public. Here female wannabes provided a significant support by embodying the subordinate woman who is not just the attractive female company but who provides a social surface for confirming a contested male identity, the identity of the white male. This identity needed a special support as compared to Romani male identity its authenticity was questioned on a frequent basis.

Thus a support was needed to equalize the otherwise weaker white male and to bring to an equal level with Romani masculinity. The equalization could happen through comments praising the dancing skills of the male wannabes or offering them the possibility to dance with the female wannabes, which was an important and unique opportunity as Romani women usually did not like to dance with men who were not one of their close kin. Parallel to that female wannabes could always rely on their male counterparts in the process of identity formation and confirmation.

Often Romani female wannabes secured their position not through their male fellows but through Romani men who were willing to date them. This phenomenon was addressed by both Romani and wannabe women as one of the key factors that led to the special dynamics of the dance group (*Beata, January 2011; Nelli, June 2010; Rebeka, February 2011*). One of the dance

teachers, Magdolna (*January 2011*) mentioned the will to date Romani men as a significant source of motivation for non-Romani girls to join the dance group. Dating a Romani men seemed to be one of the most powerful tools to secure an identity. The existing gap in family stories and years of growing up in a Romani community could be replaced by the stories of the partner who in this case appeared not just as a significant other but a proof of belonging. Still this position requires “considerable effort invested into managing sexual reputation” (Wilkins, 2004 p. 118), in particular maintaining the madonna/whore image described by Wilkins (2004) that pictures the individual as overly feminine but also strictly modest at the same time.

The reactions of Romani women and the ones mapped by Wilkins in the Puerto Rican, by Das Gupta (1997) in the Indian and by Espiritu (2001) in the Filipino narrative are strikingly similar. While female wannabes sacrifice a lot of time and energy to secure a position for themselves in the minority group for the girls of colour the perception of the wannabes is significantly shaped by the fact that they are understood as the initiators of improper sexual behaviour (Wilkins, 2004). Romani males who decide to date wannabe girls tend to compensate for this behaviour by confirming the image of the sexually promiscuous white woman and the moral superiority of the Romani woman.

A Romani boy would never date a Hungarian girl seriously. Well they just do not like girls who give themselves immediately to anyone. For Romani men that woman is just not valuable anymore...and it is the sad fact: Hungarian girls are much easier and even if they satisfy the need of men when it is just about flirting, when it comes to a serious relationship or even marriage, Romani men will turn towards Romani women.
(Magdolna, March 2011)

The performance of gender roles especially the understanding of female modesty is one of the main signifying principles of ethnic identity in several minority frameworks. Moral superiority, which is a key element in the construction of Romani female sexuality, serves an unexpressed aim, to alleviate the feeling of inferiority enforced by the social structures of the majority. This forces women of colour to “bear the weight of signifying their communities’ ethnic identity” (Das Gupta, 1997 p. 572) and results in a pattern of behaviour that is overly sensitive towards any

masquerade that intends to imitate Romani women. Wannabe women who idolize women of colour as the essential icons of femininity invested tremendous energies to satisfy the numerous complex requirements of Romani womanhood. As ethnic background is not a factor that can be changed the stress was put on several other factors such as the already mentioned social performance through clothing, lingual tools and behaviour.

To label these efforts as “artificial Romaniness” (*műcigánykodás*) seemed to be an essential response to avoid the uncontrolled redistribution of social capital (Bourdieu, 1987). Namely the usage of networks that are normally controlled through kinship relations suddenly can be accessed by individuals who are not members of the sophisticated system of relations, therefore can cause instability in the exchange of goods and favours. The economic stability of Romani communities are highly dependant on the limited number of kin who can get access to the material and non-material goods owned by the community, which are redistributed through negotiations on a regular basis.

To exemplify one of the negotiations over a crucial subject of interests, the performances or concerts are opportunities to gain not only respect and honour (non-material) but economic profit as well. Several interviewees who first started as curious outsiders became semi-professional and professional dancers after a certain time. They often had to face heated debates of the community members about topics such as the priority of Romani performers over non-Romani ones in case performing opportunities would come up for the dance group (*Zsanett, February 2011; Beata, May 2010*). Surprisingly some of the interviewees did not only understand these processes of economic interdependency but addressed them as one of the main reasons why they could not assimilate into the Romani community totally (*Beata, January 2011*). The interdependency did not only manifest itself in economic relations and the distribution of profit in the community but also in defining the possible levels of kinship relations non-Romanis can reach. This was deeply rooted in the image of an authentic Romani family that has a social status

defined by the level of its endogamy and its female members' modesty, in particular strict monogamous behaviour.

These are elements of a larger effort for the invention of a “fantasmatic...cultural heritage” (Spivak, 1989, p. 279) that creates a feeling of belonging and solidifies the otherwise weak links of the above mentioned network of economic interdependency. Thus what is Romani in this case meant is “not automatically what is preserved but what is constructed as preserved” (Das Gupta, 1997, p. 580). The structures and symbols of Romaniness were constructed in relation to the idea of a historically continuous tradition that was organized around the notions of purity, motherhood, masculinity and family. This strong narrative of heritage offered, created and recreated the social space where my informants experienced their identities. Alienation, rejection and acceptance all derived from this narrative of culture and legacy. Wannabes in reaction to that always merged in a scale that varied from adopting elements from Romani culture and assimilating into the minority community, to an effort made to distance themselves and identify with the non-Romani majority.

3. Coming closer and developing a distance – the strategies of identification

In the third chapter I will continue the analysis of the experiences of my interviewees through several theoretical frameworks. Liminality (Turner, 1995) and the processes of othering (Said, 1979) will provide a framework to understand the wannabes position and the strategy they used to picture Romanis. Through the duality of mimesis and alterity (Taussig, 1993) I will elaborate on the changes the wannabes' positions went through in relation with the Romani community and Romani significant others in particular. To understand the role of the significant others I will connect the interviews conducted with a dance teacher and a musician the experiences I gained throughout the time of participant observation.

3.1. Liminality, othering, mimesis and alterity

“For me for the Romani world the most descriptive words are secretive, enclosed” (Beata, January 2011)

Whichever position wannabes tried to take on this scale of mimesis and alterity (Taussig, 1993) they always appeared as the liminal personae (Turner, 1995) of the group, the infinite other (Said, 1979) whose most legitimate role can be to serve as a point where community members could differentiate their identities from. This role especially its representation in attitudes in most cases pushed the wannabes towards redefining their affiliation towards the Romani community. The reaction of altering individual identity together with re-establishing the pre-existing definitions of group membership, was always preceded by an intensive period of mimesis

(Taussig, 1993) when the previously presented cultural symbols appeared as tools to secure an identity which was the “others” for most of the informants in their quondam life. The passionate period when every single detail of clothing, behaviour and language usage is a message sent out to the public about identity and belonging, was followed by an epoch of either strong intellectualistic critique of the previous experience or even an effort to re-affiliate with the formerly abandoned mainstream. In the case of Zsanett (*January 2011*) this meant a more frequent attendance of Hungarian folk dance houses, where identity plays a central role, as these activities are also events for exhibiting Hungarian national pride (Taylor, 2009). This re-defining process of what is familiar and what is “not ours but theirs” was a painful process for many of the wannabes. “It was hard to leave the skirt behind” as Beata said (*May 2010*), using one of the emblematic symbols of Romani womanhood to address her struggles with the period of transition many of them experienced. Zsanett who spent nine years first as a semi-professional later as a professional Romani folk dancer had to almost completely re-establish her social network as it was previously a dominantly Vlach Romani network because of her activities and her partner as well who was a Romani man. Wannabes who experienced this transition period in the dance group almost parallel to each other in time had to redefine their interpersonal relations as well. The formerly stable relations that were merely defined by the mutual exchange of information about Romani culture, concerts, compliments and identity confirmation suddenly had to adjust to a new reality where these familiar structures were either criticized or even rejected and despised. These changes did not only leave a social space undefined but created tensions between the individuals. Female wannabes addressed the issues of internal conflicts in the dance group several times throughout their life story narratives (*Rebeka, January 2011; Zsanett, March 2010*).

These conflicts obviously had their traces way before the disillusionment with the Romani community became more apparent for each of the individuals involved in the dance group. As the identity building processes often seemed to appear as competitions where one narrative can

be underpinned and confirmed on the cost of the other wannabes' position a significant amount of repressed anger came up to the surface when the shift from the Romani to the non-Romani affiliations was taken by the individuals. Zsanett (2011) and a friend of hers even developed a certain distance and suspicion towards each other as they experienced these shifts as the others failure to understand where she belongs to and how she should behave consequently.

The accusations concerning the other wannabe's weaknesses and incapability to recognize her adequate social role and the group affiliation created similar dynamics to the Puerto Rican wannabes' case observed by Wilkins (2004). The stories of white American girls who violated the silently accepted social norms of the 'wasp' (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) middle class with their non-conform behaviour resembled the white Hungarian wannabe's story who did not want to adjust to the social role which prescribed to them. Wannabes who first tried to compare each other's performance in social space according to the success of resembling the Romani role models started to criticize each other for not realizing it earlier that they tried to achieve a social position that is inadequate and ridiculous for them to strive for. The question that followed this period of conflicts can be seen as somewhat expected: if we are not Romanis and were never Romanis, who are we and maybe even more importantly who were we throughout the past few years when we were involved in the dance group?

Some of the wannabes internalized this experience as part of a self-discovery journey and compared it to the struggle what others usually experience in their teenage years. In these narratives the change from mimesis to alterity (Taussig, 1993) occurred as a natural event that was anticipated, mainly because being a searcher meant a self-discovery process for these informants, who claimed to have Romani roots.

It was good to know that I have Romani blood in me when I started to dance. It was something that attracted me and this was not by accident for sure...but later on I just put this whole issue to the right place in myself. It was important and defined me but as many other things like the films I like or the food I prefer to cook is just one element of who Rebeka is.
(Rebeka, July 2010)

Well you know when blood-ties call you just follow them. There is no explanation for that. It is just something that works like that and you have to accept it. Romanis will always have a special relation to their culture. But is it a problem? I do not think so. First it is a bit too much, you try to be everywhere if you are discovering their culture. Every concert, exhibition or event is important...but after a certain time you will understand that it is a part of you anyways. Like a teenager who has troubles with who he is but then he will be in peace with it finally.

(Boglarka, August 2010)

A different strategy was to narrate the life story in a broader historical framework with a significant awareness to the social changes Hungary went through from the beginning of the 1990s, the early years of the democratic change. In these narrative structures the individual struggles were rationalized through a comparison with other wannabe groups and the parallel cultural and religious renaissances that took place in Eastern Europe at that time. The enthusiasm of Jewish wannabes and individuals who just discovered their Jewish ancestry often served as a good example to prove that “we were not the only ones who were puzzled about our identities”(Zsanett, *January 2011*). Here the shift from mimesis to alterity (Taussig, 1993) was often more radical than in the previous cases and required a more sophisticated explanatory framework to avoid conflicts within the self. These highly structured accounts of personal experiences were necessary, as these informants could not provide evidence or at least a slight possibility to have a Romani relative. Thus the absence of the Romani kin was filled in with a “peer experience”, a national story of ethnic and religious revival.

The question of “who am I” was not limited to ethnic identity. As the connection between the performance of ethnicity and gender is one of the transparent patterns of the life stories that narrated the years spent actively involved in the dance group, the question tended to reappear after the disillusionment as well. For most of the female wannabes this turned out to be a violent iconoclasm where the female figures who were the essential embodiments of womanhood before became either questionable and ambivalent or even inferior and degraded (Zsanett, *January 2011*; Beata, *March 2010*). The alternative identities such as the most accessible “Hungarian folk dancer’s ” character included a similar at the same time significantly different understanding of

femininity. Zsanett (2011) exemplified this shift in femininity through the change in material symbols such as clothing and jewellery:

I wanted to find another way, another community where I can finally fit it completely. For a while I thought that the folk dancers will be that community for me. I thought that in case I will wear only brown and a long skirt with sandals, then I will be fine. Because they all look like that...but it does not work like that. I went home for a weekend and even though my parents were really happy that finally I don't wear a Romani scarf and earrings I felt depressed because this was not me either.

The alterity towards the perceived original Hungarian roots that would have meant the response to the previous deliberate imitation of Romaniness could not be successful because of various factors. The changes first required the foundation of a new network of friends and acquaintances, but given the short time period between the schism with the previous community and the start of establishing links with the new one, it could not work out both on a personal and on a higher macro-social level. On a personal level this period of liminality (Turner, 1995), that solidified as a more permanent in-between status, caused confusion and doubts. The wannabes who have lost their previous group affiliation and were unable to claim a membership in the new group were alienated from both circles. The internal tensions in the wannabes network isolated them from each other (Zsanett, January 2011; Rebeka, August 2010) thus the individuals felt even more vulnerable and marginal.

The patterns of alterity (Taussig, 1993) they followed after this personal crisis were pointing towards a more individualistic understanding of identity. The former disillusionment with the Romani community changed into a broader disappointment with any communal identity narrative. In Zsanett's and Beata's (2011) case a higher level of academic engagement and intellectualism took over the place of the former wannabe identity. This pattern was observable even in the cases of Rebeka and Eva Linda (2011) who claimed to have a Romani ancestry but also decided to define themselves as members of an urban alternative youth. This was more satisfying from the point of gender performance (Butler, 1990) as this alternative urban framework understood itself as a countermovement that criticized the conservative understandings of gender and praised the wannabes experience as a journey into the other's (Said,

1979) understanding of identity, community, sexuality and oppressed femininity. What previously formed the every day life of the wannabes now became a convertible capital (Bourdieu, 1987) of exotic and distinct experience of the ultimate other, the coloured male and female and their social and historical reality. The wannabe's became ambassadors of multiculturalism and understanding in several urban cosmopolitan intellectual frameworks.

The question appears to be legitimate if the wannabes turned out to be nothing else than examples for an effort by urban white middle class intellectuals to experience the other (Said, 1979) through mimesis of cultural symbols (Taussig, 1993). However the efforts to alter their identity in contrast to Romaniness did not end in identification with the majority's identity or any other available narratives. Instead of claiming another identity the solidified liminality (Turner, 1995) became the core feature of the personal identity of many wannabes (*Zsanett, January 2011; Beata, June 2010; Rebeka, February 2011; Eva Linda, April 2010*). This maintained liminal position served as a grounding for a new more intellectualized understanding of belonging that wanted to share its experience with the frustration of the capital's intellectual middle class.

This identity forming strategy could not lead to a breakthrough either, as the intellectual circles of Budapest are happened to be as dismissive as the Romani community. For the surprise of the wannabes the dynamics that led to their rejection were similar to the ones they encountered throughout the years they spent in the dance group. A new liminality (Turner, 1995) had to be fought, but this liminality was even more excruciating as it did not exclude the wannabes on the basis of their ethnicity but a more complex terminology that included class and different forms of social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1987). Thus most of the wannabes who became self-aware about their situation decided to address their liminal position as an internalized part of their personality and an element of their past, present and future. Zsanett and Beata (2011) both understood themselves as ultimate outsiders in their life stories. Beata even used this pattern in the explanation for why she started to develop an interest in Romani folk dancing:

In Transylvania traditionally the space of the Hungarian dance houses are divided into two: one is the front area, close to the musicians. That is the space where the Hungarians usually dance and the men are showing off with their special dance skills. At the back of the room there is always a corner, usually close to the entrance where the Romanis dance their own dances. I was always attracted to them, how they are at the margins...because I was also marginal and ambivalent for others throughout my whole life.

Zsanett (2011) shared the story of an internal struggle with her own sense of marginality as a woman that inspired her to redefine the core dynamics of her life story:

I realized that I was always in a struggle with my identity as a woman. I turned towards Romanis because I could see women there who were women without a doubt. Invested a lot of energy in their look and were women in every sense how they talked, walked and danced. I was searching for my femininity. I did not see myself as an attractive woman at all. I embraced my femininity among Romani women, but I also realized that I do not have to affiliate myself with any groups to be the person who I want to be. I want to be the Zsanett only, for everyone...and that is enough.

The liminality in the sense of national, ethnic and gender identity led these individuals to a remarkably unique set of strategies to secure a position and narrative for themselves in the contemporary social reality of Budapest. These strategies also appeared to be powerful forces that significantly altered the life story narratives of the individuals. In the life stories the most prominent roles were given to Romani characters who appeared as the granters of identity and in the case of dance teachers and musicians they were the mediators between the Romani world and the wannabes as well.

Thus after an analysis of the wannabe's life story narratives and strategies I feel that it is de rigueur to address their unique narratives and experiences about the wannabes and their every day life spent together in the dance group.

3.2. The role of mediators – Romani dance teachers and musicians

“There are those people, who can translate the culture for you” (Laszlo, January 2011)

The subject of the wannabes interest and admiration: the member of the community is mystical, “secretive” (Beata, January 2011) and “attractive” (Zsanett, January 2011;Evan Linda,

August 2010); but how does the subject of admiration perceive him or herself? Did he or she become aware of the wannabes struggle and desire to be a “subaltern” (Spivak, 1988)?

Two of the life stories were told by Romani individuals who played a major role in the identity forming process of wannabes. They witnessed the journey that first led these individuals closer to the Romani community then drew them away from those circles. Their reflections seemed to be essential in understanding the narrative of the Romani wannabes. My first Romani interviewee Magdolna (2011) who is a well-known and prestigious dance teacher with years and years of experience in Romani folk dancing drew up an elaborate picture of the dance group and showed a remarkable awareness of the issues her students had. She also knew that as a dominant female figure of the dance group she served as a role model for the wannabes not only in how to embody Romaniness but how to embody femininity too. Her narrative also involved a historical romanticization of Romani culture through the previously mentioned notion of *patyiv* (respect) that turned out to be a key element in securing the superiority of Romani femininity and modesty (Wilkins, 2004) in particular, over non-Romani immoral behaviour. She used the example of several students who were in short term relationship with Romani men as an illustration of the loss of heritage and system of norms in majority society. Although she also condemned Romani men who did not follow the otherwise widely advertised values of monogamy.

The value system and the roles she described were based on the classical Vlach Romani definitions of femininity and masculinity (Stewart, 1997). Despite the fact that according to her a significant effort was made to make it clear from the beginning that being a member of the dance group requires an adaption of a certain unwritten code of etiquette and norms from the student, a significant number of candidates came with the barely disguised intention to date Romanis. This curiosity towards the members of the opposite sex was “unfortunate, as Romani men do not want women who give themselves immediately” (Magdolna, February 2011). From Magdolna’s point of view Romani wannabes failed to understand that the strategy they followed to get closer

to the community was actually creating the opposite dynamic and alienated them as promiscuous outsiders who “do not follow the same traditions” (*Magdolna, February 2011*).

She exemplified her point, about non-Romanis and their failed efforts to try to blend in to Romani society, through the case of a non-Romani woman who married a well known musician from the community and unintentionally shocked her Romani relatives with changing her blouse in front of them. The taboo of the naked body (Stewart, 1997) shocked the relatives and made them draw the conclusion that “she just does not think the same way we do, she has a different mindset” (*Magdolna, February 2011*). Magdolna surprisingly did not address the cases of male wannabes at all in her life story. She focused on describing the relations between the female dancers and put a stress on the contrast between the Romani’s behaviour and the wannabes.

One of the iconic stories that served as an explanation for why she decided to become first a professional dancer and later an instructor was just as ritualistic, almost mythical in its settings as the stories told by the wannabes. Here, she as a young girl from Budapest experienced first hand, authentic Romani culture at the countryside through the dance of an elderly Vlach Romani woman. The event and its narrative is even more significant if we take into consideration that Magdolna is not a pure Vlach Romani but has Hungarian Romani (Romungro) ancestors as well. Romungros are often perceived as inferior to Vlach Romanis and accused of losing their traditions or even giving them up intentionally to assimilate into the majority Hungarian society (Stewart, 1997). Thus this pattern illustrates what many wannabes found disappointing: the fact that many of the Romanis involved in the folk dancing scene have more diverse ethnic background than they are willing to admit for the first time and still they refuse to accept non-Romanis as authentic dancers (*Beata, February 2011; Zsanett, January 2011, Boglarka, June 2010*).

Simon who was a musician and a well-known figure of several Romani youth organizations followed the same patterns the male wannabes did in their life stories. All of the controversial issues such as identity and belonging were avoided and his role as one of the main organizers of a monthly concert, which was really popular among the wannabes, was narrowed down to appear

as a source of entertainment and fun. Even the simplest ideas of a curiosity towards a possible cultural blending from the side of the non-Romanis seemed to be irrelevant for him. In his interpretation the most important reason for attending Romani cultural events was the relaxed and opened atmosphere the audience could experience there (*Simon, March 2011*).

The mediators who maintained lively connections towards both Romanis and non-Romanis seemed to struggle with the same questions as their wannabe counterparts. Throughout my fieldwork and the many informal conversations we had they were questioning their identity and belonging just as much as their students and admirers. What these individuals experienced and tried to pronounce in their life stories looked like as a part of a wider phenomenon, a more complex historical and social shift in narratives that left a space of frustration and opened questions behind. Thus the effect of the change of the regime and the ethnic and religious revivals that took place in the early nineties, discussed in the previous chapters, left both Romanis and non-Romanis with questions, doubts and a strong need to affiliate themselves with a distinct ethnic identity and urged them to secure a position in one of the groups perceived as authentic and strong in its cultural traditions.

Conclusion

The wannabes' struggle for an identity was apparent and powerful. Their efforts to become members of the Romani community manifested themselves in their narrative, which was a distinct urban experience a search for a stable point in the city's odyssey. The period of post-socialist transition revealed a tremendous need for a community that would offer the desired sense of belonging to the individuals. Romani identity was more appealing as it was more defined first by the strong prejudices of the majority, second by an of a strict cultural tradition, became a matter of interest for many individuals who wanted to find answers for the intimate questions: who am I and where do I belong?

To secure their identity, wannabes in the Romani community used sexuality and language as performative tools. This was a major investment in time and energy, as they had to familiarize themselves with a set of norms and expectations distinctly different from the patterns of behaviour and understandings of tradition which they were formerly *au fait* with. The dream of a more stable identity was too tempting. These efforts hastily fell victim of the community's rejection as they pictured a stereotypical image of coloured men's and women's behaviour, thus silently confirmed the existing prejudices concerning Romanis.

The wannabes experienced identification, marginalization and rejection. Their narrative is a representative description of the tensions existing in the class, ethnicity and gender triangle in Hungary. How they experienced the Romani community through mimetic performance and how they later decided to identify themselves in contrast with it turned out to be a personal strategy for many individuals to encounter the other and through the other, themselves.

While my case study includes only a limited sample of patterns of behaviour, the phenomenon of wannabeism described in this paper is universal. Where the absence of a firm identity generates a need for a stronger community affiliation, the hiatus of a narrative describing past, present and possible future is filled up with a more distinct group's story. This group is often a minority as the power of stereotypes and prejudices define its borders more sharply than the majority's, therefore they are offering a much stronger sense of community. Romani wannabes were constantly longing for what they perceived as a more solid identity. Their disappointment grew not only because they realized how it is impossible to become a community member, but also because they understood how Romani as an identity, is just as constructed as any other structures of belonging.

In this paper I analyzed these processes of identity negotiations in the contemporary Hungarian urban setting. Future research is needed, to investigate the identity formation strategies of other wannabe groups of Budapest, as the impressive variety of these groups alone calls for a comparative study of identities and narratives.

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