

# **Diasporic Roma Students: Performing Ethnic Identity.**

## **Sense of Displacement and In-between-ness**

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Submitted to Central European University

Department of Gender Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

Gender and Women Studies

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Budapest, Hungary

2013



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## Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of Roma discourse on the CEU Roma students in order to see whether the students develop a sense of displacement and in-between-ness in the CEU diasporic space. I also intended to find out if the discourse can reproduce Roma discrimination based on the lack of authenticity of the Roma students. In addition, it was interesting to look at the ways in which the so called Roma ‘traditions’ are being negotiated by the students, even those traditions that are discriminatory and oppressive towards some Roma people, especially towards Roma women. Interviews have been conducted with some of the CEU Roma students.

The findings of the research show the hard and difficult process that some of the students went through during the course of accepting and coming out as Roma. The research also shows the discrimination that is reinforced by Roma against Roma, but this time towards those who ‘lack Roma authenticity’. Nevertheless, the programs and the Roma discourse have also been criticized by some of the students, for either segregating them at CEU, or for ignoring the real problems that Roma people face with, and instead focusing on building Roma pride and authentic ethnic identity.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude and appreciations to my main supervisor, Allaine Cerwonka, who has helped me figuring out the trajectory that I want to take in my research and who has always encouraged me and been very supportive and positive about the work I have done. I would like to offer my special thanks to my second supervisor, Irene Perez, for being kind and supportive and for giving me very useful feedback. Without their guidance I would not make it so far.

I am particularly grateful for the interviewees for accepting to be part of my research. My special thanks are extended to my beautiful family for their huge support in pursuing my dreams and aspirations. I also want to acknowledge all my friends, community, and the CEU/Budapest collective who offered their advices and their support.

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## Introduction

I believe that feeling the need to prove an authentic ethnic identity grows stronger in a diasporic space, where one's self identity is being questioned, unclear to the others, and it develops the desire to prove the subject position as an ethnic. The problem with this is that it reinforces the stereotype that all Roma are the same or should be the same and creates Roma people as a homogenous group in which all should look, act, behave and be alike. It does not leave too much place for difference. It also does not consider that 'identity is always plural and in process' (Brah, 1996, p:197) which means that we cannot focus on only one aspect of our identity and define it as the prior and only identity that matters because that would mean to ignore or to disregard those other identities that bring meaning to ourselves. This can be the reason why a Roma person in a diasporic space can develop the feeling of in-between-ness and a sense of displacement because there is an internal battle that starts to grow inside the person, a battle that is produced by the mismatch of the person's identities – gender, national, ethnic – and the focus on only one identity (in this case the ethnic one). It cannot be ignored the matter that national discourse and cultural context has in the development of someone's subjectivity and identity and it is important to keep in mind that Roma people come from different countries with different histories and experiences that had and is still influencing the way they perceive themselves as part of an ethnic group and also the way they perform their ethnic identity. The countries and the communities from where the CEU students come from also influence the way they feel towards the image of Roma and towards the action of 'coming out' or 'being openly' Roma and their association with the ethnic minority.

Before going into more depth on the structure of my paper and the analysis that has been conducted, it is important to mention my connection with the topic and the reason that drove me to conduct this research. During the 2010-2011 academic year, I was one of the

fifteen students that were enrolled in the Roma Access Program at CEU. Becoming a part of the CEU community, and at the same time the Roma community from Budapest, I experienced what it means to be a student at CEU in a program that addresses only Roma. It also made me more aware of the importance that is being given to the discourse on Roma identity and how the identity should be performed in a certain way, having in mind that we, the students, come from different countries, with different cultural backgrounds, and how this aspect was negotiated in order to have common grounds based on our ethnic identity that connected us. I come from a non-traditional Roma family<sup>1</sup> and I felt comfortable and gain the confidence to 'come out' as a Roma to my non-Roma friends after I went to university, although those who live in the same village with me knew that I come from a Roma family, but the subject has always been avoided. Therefore my personal experience was not matching with the discourse that was being used in the Roma community that I became part of at CEU and felt as if we were expected to be 'more Roma' than we are. Our Roma identity became quantified in our new Roma community and this was generated not only by the Roma activists but also by some of my colleagues and reinforced discourses in regards to 'real' and 'not real' Roma. It was not enough to show interest in Roma issues and desire to become a Roma/human rights activist, but had to show prideness for being Roma.

### *Significance of the topic*

Many times I have encountered the discourses of Roma activists referring to the authenticity of other Roma persons and how important it is to be defined and to appear as a 'real' Roma. This encounter raises questions on Roma identity and how it is build, but it also ignores the multiplicity of identities that people have and fails to take into consideration the

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<sup>1</sup> My parents do not speak the Romani language and none of my closest relatives. It is not expected from me or my sister to be virgins when we marry and we do not practice early or arranged marriages. On the contrary, my parents have supported me and my siblings to continue our studies and we were given the right to make our own decisions in life.

intersection of class, gender, and national identity, factors that influence the construction of the ethnic identity and the association with an ethnic group.

What I intend to analyze through my research is how the hybridity of a Roma diasporic group builds up on the ethnic identity of the members of the group and how (if that is the case) it develops a sense of in-between-ness and displacement for the Roma students from CEU.

It is relevant to analyze how ethnic identity is being constructed and renegotiated in a diasporic group because it brings a new approach to previous researches and to Roma studies by focusing on those Roma that usually are not being seen as representative of the Roma community: they are not poor, not uneducated, not ‘Gypsized’. It can also be seen as a way to renegotiate the inclusive-ness and acceptance as Roma of those who do not fit into the stereotype of what it means to be Roma or Gypsy. This research also brings a feminist approach by looking at how the gender roles are being performed and how, with the purpose of preserving the Roma ‘traditions’, it reproduces patriarchal and oppressive attitudes towards Roma women and how this is challenged and negotiated in a diasporic space.

### *Methodology*

The research methods used for this paper are interviews conducted with current students that are enrolled in the Roma Graduated Preparatory Program and Roma English Language Program at Central European University-Budapest. A more brief description about the two programs is developed in Chapter 2. In the 2012-2013 academic year, seventeen students have been accepted in the Roma Graduated Preparatory Program, and eighteen in the Roma English Language Program. Given the fact that not all of them were interested to give an interview for this research, I have managed to interview nine students, four females and



five males. Out of the four females, three of them come from Romania and one from Moldova. For the sake of privacy of the interviewees, I will give them code-names in order to make distinctions between their answers: *Laura*, *Diana*, *Mihaela*, and *Anca*. Out of the five males interviewed, two of them are from Hungary, one from Serbia, and two from Romania. The code-names used in this research for the males are: *Attila*, *Tamas*, *Predrag*, *Bogdan*, and *Mihai*. Along with the interviews conducted with students I will also bring into discussion some of the information that I managed to obtain as a form of participatory observation, either from other students that are currently enrolled in the above-mentioned two programs or from other people that are at a certain level involved with the programs and, as a way to protect their privacy, I will not mention their relationship with the programs.

The academic backgrounds that the students have are in: Sociology, Economics, European Studies, Journalism, Cultural and Anthropology, Management and Governance, and Social Assistance. Three of the interviewed students are enrolled in the Roma English Language Program, while the other six are in the Roma Graduate Preparatory Program. Out of the six students, two of them have been enrolled in the previous year in the Roma English Language Program.

### *Structure of the paper*

In this first chapter, concepts such as hybridity, diaspora [space, community], in-between-ness, displacement, and identity will be explained in order to show the ways in which they are being used throughout the length of the paper. Chapter 2 focuses on the topic of segregation in education of Roma children/pupils/students and how it is being reproduced with the Roma students from CEU, in the name of empowerment and ‘integration’. It also gives a brief insight on how the topic of Roma identity is ‘institutionalized’ in the two

programs that address Roma students. The aspect of negotiating the Roma identity and how the students perform it will be touched upon in chapter 3, along with the negotiation and the perception of gender roles in the Roma community, not only the community from CEU, but also extended to the communities from where the students come from. Chapter 4 focuses on how students perceive the Roma identity discourse, how they negotiate it and the compromises that they make in order to 'integrate' in the community where they are in. Chapter 4 will also bring into discussion whether the feeling of displacement and in-betweenness has been developed among the students, along with the within group discrimination practice. Finally, conclusions of the research will be drawn in Chapter 5.

In order to explain how Roma identity is constructed and perceived in our days, with a focus on Roma students from Central European University, one needs to first show the importance of concepts such as hybridity and diaspora and their determinacy in the emergence of an ethnic identity, as it is the case of the Roma identity. This chapter focuses on the fluidity of identities which is determined by the hybrid aspect of the formation of 'nations' and links it to the discourse on Roma identity which tends to be presented as static and pre-given. The purpose of this chapter is to engage the theory on hybridity and diaspora with that on Roma identity in order to show how the later has the tendency to be produced as static and through this process it tends to exclude those who do not fit into the fixed Roma category.

## Chapter 1: Negotiating hybridity in a hegemonic discourse on Roma identity

### *1.1. Hybridity and in-between-ness*

The concept of hybridity has suffered a shift from the ‘biological domain of miscegenation to the cultural field of power’ given by the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha (Marwan M. Kraidy, 2005. p: 46). The new approach puts an emphasis on cultural hybridity and brings into attention the mixture that is at the roots of the nation building. Acknowledging that all cultures are hybrid makes it easier to recognize and to accept the idea that identities are also hybrid which challenges the misperception that identities are static and pre given. Homi Bhabha (1994) articulates the idea that not looking at class and gender identities as singular identities has enriched the ‘awareness of the subject positions of race, gender generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world’ (p: 1). This gave access to new ways of perceiving class and gender identities not only from one angle of the categorization, but by increasing the number of characteristics that are relevant for one’s identity, an identity that contains multiple identities.

Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (1997) argue in favor of dynamics of identifications and suggest that we should abandon any static view of identity because of the multiple experiences of the self which projects multiple identities of the self (p: 64). That is to say, identity is a complex and very flexible characteristic of one’s person and it should be considered to be a mix of multiple identities at the same time, without them necessarily being in conflict with each other.

In order to explain her lack of knowledge of Chinese language, Ien Ang (2001) describes the pressure, as an ethnic minority, to assimilate and to erase the traces that lead to

one's ethnic background. This leads to the loss of the language, dress, food and other signifiers that can be related to your home country (p: 27).

The desire for assimilation, as Ien Ang argues, does not come only from those who are part of the majority group, but also from some of the members who are part of the minority group as a wish and a way of fitting in, rather than a means of standing out, although this desire to assimilate 'is often at the same time contradicted by an incompatibility or refusal to adjust and adopt' (p: 28). This is one of the explanations why diasporic people get to lose some parts of what is considered to be relevant for their ethnic identity.

The purpose of the autobiographic tales that the author uses in the chapter 'On Not Speaking Chinese: Diasporic Identification and Postmodern Ethnicity' is to describe the difficulty of constructing the position from where she can speak as an overseas Chinese and 'therefore the indeterminacy of Chineseness as a signifier for identity' (p: 24). Therefore she describes her one-day visit in China as a pilgrimage that she 'had' to do because she felt that it was imposed on her to have a connection with the 'homeland China' (p: 21).

The tourist guide in Ang's visit considered to be appropriate to speak 'as a Chinese' for the Westerners tourists by being critical towards China and its government, criticism that was intended for the Western tourists (p: 22). At the same time, the guide's self-representation was to the homogenous group 'Chinese' by using expressions such as: 'We Chinese' or 'Here in China we...'. This one-day visit in China and the experience with the guide gave Ang a feeling of in-between-ness due to the presupposed harsh judgment of her fellow travelers toward China, judgments that she thinks, as an overseas Chinese-and therefore as her association with the image of Chineseness- would be passed on her. At the same time she felt anger for the way in which China tries to attract tourists and the way it chooses to present itself and she describes it to represent 'backwardness, unwordliness and naïve' (p: 23).

Ien Ang's in-between-ness situated-ness is given by her alienation with China and the presupposition that China characterizes her, even as an overseas Chinese. She projects her alienation towards the other non-Chinese tourists and even though she did not grow up in China, she knows – most likely through personal experience – that it is expected from her 'to be' and 'act' Chinese. Her unacknowledged Chinese alienation and association by the guide shows that her recognition as Chinese is being denied by the 'real' Chinese people and this has been a disappointment for Ang. As much as she felt that her identity is closer to the Chinese one, it is not enough if her identity as Chinese is not being recognized by other Chinese people and that is because she is an overseas Chinese.

Her Westerner attitude and identification is proven when her judgment of China's self-representation is done through her Western eyes. The 'backwardness' that she sees in China is a construction based on the unmentioned comparison with the Western society where she grew up in and based on one-day interaction with China. That is to say, Ang feels in-between two cultures, in-between identities and she cannot completely give herself to one of them, as much as she cannot associate herself fully with both without using criticism. In this case, although Ang is an overseas Chinese that accepts her Chinese ethnicity, she is still describing China from a Westerner position without explicitly acknowledging it. This subject position that she chooses is a powerful one and it is shown, through her comparison China-West, that 'power is exercised in discourse' (Mohanty, 1998: 336).

Ang underlines the fact that there is a double standard of what it means to be Chinese and how being an overseas Chinese situates you as either 'too Chinese' or 'not Chinese enough'. The image of the homeland is constructed through the use of desire, attachment and collective memory, but at the same time Chineseness has to be define and understood as a category that is always changing, reshaping, renegotiating, and rearticulating its meanings, both inside and outside China (p:25)

The hybridity of the author – she was born in Indonesia, her ancestors are from China and she grew up in Holland – gives her a feeling of in-between-ness because she is at the same time part of the two cultures, the Chinese and the Dutch/European, but she feels that she does not belong to none of them. She describes the expectations that others have from her because she looks Asian and the ambivalence that she gets when she cannot fulfill these expectations. This is one of the reasons why she does the political act of apologizing for not speaking Chinese and for having a hybrid identity.

Ang's work portrays the experiences that she has as an overseas Chinese and how the hybridity of her identity influences the way she perceives herself in relation to the others and the difficulty of having to choose one ethnic identity that would define who she is. The relevance of her work in this research is that she describes the framework in which the Roma students from CEU find themselves as: part of a minority group in their countries of origin, not having a direct contact with their 'homeland' India, not speaking [some of them] the Romani language, and having to justify who they are because they are in the position of the 'Other' – the outsiders/migrants. The CEU students might share the same feeling and experiences, especially those who are 'visibly' Roma but who do not speak Romanes or do not come from a Roma community. Her work is important in this research because she claims her Chinese identity, even though she does not fulfill the expectations or express the characteristics that are considered to be essential to Chineseness, and the Roma students<sup>2</sup> should be given the opportunity to do the same, instead of trying to 'become' Roma in order to fit the diaspora community.

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<sup>2</sup> I refer here at the Roma students from CEU, but there are situations outside of CEU in which Roma people find themselves in the same position of having to be a certain type of Roma and they should also have the possibility to choose to be Roma in the way they understand it.

## 1.2. *Diaspora*

The meaning of the word ‘diaspora’, according to the Webster’s Dictionary, is dispersion from but also about settling down, basing roots somewhere else (brah, 1996. p:181). As avtar brah argues, it is also about desiring a ‘home’ that can be different from a ‘homeland’ and the ‘home’ can suggest a place of safety as much as a place of terror. The concept also challenges the discourses of fixed origins. That is to say that is not about the place one comes from but rather the action of migrating per se and the attachment that a person has with a place, which does not have to be the ‘homeland’ of the person.

The concept of diaspora cannot be referred to without the mention and reference to the concept of ‘border’ which avtar brah addresses as an ‘analytical category’ (p: 180). These two concepts of border and diaspora indicate the dis/location and dis/placement that arise from people’s experiences (p: 180). The border is not just a geographically delimitation, but also a psychic one by determining who has the right to be in and who has to be kept out, who are the ‘native’ and who are the ‘others’, who are wanted and who are undesired (p: 198).

A meaningful approach that brah brings to postcolonial studies is that of a ‘diaspora space’ that is constituted not only by those who have migrated and their descendents, but also by those who are considered to be originally of the place, the indigenous people (p: 209). For brah a diasporic space is a mixture of the migrants and the settled ones as both in the position of native and diasporic individuals. This challenges the dualism oppositions of native versus migrant and by doing so it challenges the power dimensions between the two. A diaspora space is ‘the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes’ (p: 208). It allows for the dynamics of different subject positions, from different backgrounds, with multiple histories, and

transnational identities and where boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested (p: 209).

A diaspora community is grounded on the construction of the binary oppositions of 'we' and 'them' or 'the others' and this gives the image of a collective and homogenous 'we'. The way Brah conceptualizes and describes 'contemporary migrancy', and, therefore, the construction of diasporic communities, is by taking into account the economic, political and cultural dimensions and their importance (p: 186). The construction of an imagined community in this sense is a negotiation and a way to claim space and create agency for those who are underrepresented and to put in the category of minority in opposition to majority, a binary opposition that represents a power relation dynamics of the majority over the minority.

The CEU Roma students can be considered as part of a diaspora group because they become part of an imagined community with a shared common identity (Roma), even though they come from different countries, with different cultural practices, not all of them speak Romanes, and have different understanding of what Roma is. Their Roma identity is what brings them together and unites them, not only at CEU, but in larger contexts as well. The CEU Roma diaspora group builds a separation between the Roma and non-Roma and determines who has the right to be in (the Roma) and who should be kept out (the non-Roma). What is not common to look at is the filtration of the Roma members of the diaspora community that is being done from inside of the group. The core base of filtration is the hegemonic Roma discourse and can produce dislocation or displacement of those who do not reach the expectations.

### *1.3. Identity*

Robert J.C. Young (1995) describes the representation of Englishness in literature and its perception as a fixed identity which can be seen as the result of a continuous contestation



of what it means to be English. This lead to an overrepresentation of Englishness as a way to hide the desire for the other (p: 2). The perception and the representation of identity as a fixed one is the result of situations of ‘instability and disruption, of conflict and change’ (p: 4). In the case of Roma identity and the discourse on what or how Roma identity should be represented and performed, the fluidity of identity is being neglected or considered not to be part of it. The Roma identity is considered to be fixed and stable which makes it hard to allow differences or changes within the Romani people. The mere fact that the Roma identity is being seen as something fixed gives the possibility for categorization of Roma and the division of who is and who is not a ‘real’ Roma.

A useful source on identity and oppression is Tommie Shelby’s (2002) article “Foundations of Black Solidarity: Collective Identity or Common Oppression?” where he argues that a common black identity is less likely to contribute to a black solidarity, but rather would reinforce some hierarchical categories within the minority group. He considers that it is not necessary to present the same ethnic or cultural identity (i.e. collective black identity) in order to be part of a minority group and to develop a ‘black ’solidarity, but rather to share the same racial inequalities, discrimination and marginalization that the minority group has been targeted by. His support for a ‘common oppression theory’ in opposition to the ‘collective black identity’ is very important and helpful to prevent discrimination that targets members of a minority group by other members of the same minority group, discrimination that is based on the ‘lack of authenticity’. The proposal that Shelby offers for the use of a common oppression over a collective identity suggests that is not the identity that matters that much but how the identity is being perceived and how the opposite position from the norm results in oppression, discrimination and marginalization of the minority group. This shows that the discrimination targets not only blacks, Latinos, Roma, Women and so forth, but any group that is being defined in opposition to the majority group (‘the norm’) of a society.

Shelby's work provides an alternative for a hegemonic identity discourse that tends to be used in the process of building and representing minority groups and points out the importance that the 'common oppression theory' has in order to avoid discrimination of those who are already members of a 'vulnerable' group, and instead to be more inclusive with those who define themselves to be part of any ethnic/minority category but who do not present specific characteristics of that particular group.

#### *1.4. Building Roma identity*

Wim Willems (1997) supports the argument that not all Roma, either self-declared or perceived by the others as Roma, belong to a Roma community, speak the Romani language, have certain customs that are known as representative to the Roma culture, have a specific way of life, or a sense of belonging to a [Roma] 'nation' (p: 6).

According to Mariet Meester (Willems, 1997: 7), only the intellectuals have the motive to create an ethnicity, which she finds to be without foundation. The construction of an ethnic identity is a way in which the [Roma] intellectuals try to define themselves and justify their position as intellectuals. It is also important to consider the role that governments have in the process of categorizing and distinguishing a certain type of people by dividing them into categories, a division that is being produced as the result of the governments' policies that target these people. The process reproduces the tendency of categorization, labeling, and people's inclination to self-categorization and the urge to choose to which group they belong to (Willems, 1997: 8). Looking at Roma as a fixed category with specific characteristics has been the problem that most Roma scholars had made and this led to the failure to introduce and to accept change as part of the historical background of Roma studies (Willems: 10). This attitude has influenced the process of codification of Roma as a

homogenous group with the traits of the group such as language, origin and way of life (Willems: 11). The same attitude of defining and presenting Roma as a homogenous group is still popular among some Roma NGOs and activists. This is somehow a process of returning to the same type of categorization that used to define Roma in the past, when societies were in the process of formation and were trying to separate Roma from the others by putting an emphasis on the place of origin of Roma<sup>3</sup>, who has or had a certain life style and who speaks or spoke their own language. This return could be the result of some form of Roma integration in the European societies in which they have lived for centuries and a way to maintain a clear difference between Roma and non-Roma, by building a distinguish image of Roma as an ethnic/minority group.

Nevertheless, the Romani ‘culture’ as such, according to Will Guy (2001: 5), is not unique or static and has been, *and still is*, influenced by other communities in which Roma have lived for centuries (emphasis added)

Always immersed in other cultures, Romani life has been characterized by ongoing adjustment and adaptation to a changing environment.

(Mirga and Gheorghe 1997: 12, in Guy, 2001: 5)

This approach takes into account the fact that Roma minority, although with distinct characteristics that differentiated them from the others and in the process of integrating in the European countries that they have migrated to, had also merged some of their characteristics such as culture or language with the local ones. It would be unfair to state that there is no Roma ‘uniqueness’ but at the same time it would be unrealistic to believe that the Roma integration took place without exchanging or even losing some of their customs, traditions, and even language.

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<sup>3</sup> It has been a long debate about Roma migrating either from India or Egypt and the confusion around this debate is still present in some societies.

Attitudes that targeted Roma – structural inequalities, marginalized, patronized, exploited, stripped of language, culture, dignity (Nicholas Saul, Susan Tebbutt, 2004: 32) – from the beginning of their migration in Europe influences the current Romani discourse that focuses on history and ethnic identity by trying to (re)build what has been destroyed during centuries of oppression.

Ian Hancock explains the connection between the literature written on Roma and the general perception about Roma and how the former influences the latter. The Roma image has been produced based on their migration to Europe, from where the negative image of the Romani people was brought to life (David Crowe, John Kolsti, 1991). Having no country of their own and facing the difficulties of surviving while, at the same time, laws against them were being passed, the Romani people had to find ways to deal with this situation. That is how stereotypes such as thieves, dirty, or fortune tellers became part of the Roma image due to different survival methods that Roma had to adopt (David Crowe, John Kolsti, 1991: 5).

The mystery that surrounds them – not knowing exactly when they arrived in Europe and their country of origin – gives further space for different theories that try to explain who they are, but it also situates them in a very vulnerable position of becoming subjects of discrimination, exploitation, used as scapegoats, or even stripped of their cultural background. The lack of agency makes them the perfect target to become ‘subjects’ of mystification which justifies violence towards them. During the Roma migration in Europe, descriptions such as thieves, fortune tellers, and other mystified characteristics became embedded in their image and influenced the way they were perceived by the others. At the same time it cannot be neglected the fact that, as outsiders and new comers, they had to find different strategies and ways to survive and so stealing, fortune telling and other means of subsistence had become part of their lives. Although these practices were part of the process of settling in which were practiced almost five or six centuries ago, the same image about

Roma as criminals and society's pariahs is still embedded in people's minds (Dimitrina Petrova, 2003).

According to some Romani scholars (Hancock 2002, Petrova 2003) the myths that surround the Roma image such as the misconception of Roma's unwillingness to integrate or their attitudes towards education and the denial of their children to education, are stereotypes that help to maintain the gap between Roma and non-Roma and to justify the mistreatment, discrimination, and the oppression that targets Roma. The problem is that the Roma presence in Europe has been mostly documented (at least until the 20<sup>th</sup> century) by the non-Roma, documentation that has produced a perception of the Romani people as the 'Other' through the lenses of the non-Roma. Susan Tebbutt and Nicholas Saul (2004) argue that Roma most frequently are playing a role exactly because they are being presented and represented by outsiders with a knowledge that might be supported through extensive fieldwork but which lacks the inside perspective (p: 4). Also, one should not ignore the long history of deportation, enslavement, genocide, and other forms of discrimination that targeted Roma for centuries and which helped to increase the socio-economic and political gap between the Roma and non-Roma in Europe.

All the myths that surround Roma as not having a place/country of origin, a language, history, and therefore being denied as an ethnic group (Petrova, 2004: 140), reinforce the urge of Roma today to claim for recognition as an ethnic group, with their own history in Europe (mostly characterized by oppression), and a language, even though not all Roma still speak it. (1996) Only recently have the Roma rights discourse become more present in the European context with the goal to deconstruct the 'Gypsy myth' (Petrova, 2004: 142). On the other hand, the emphasis that Roma come from India can be seen as a way of legitimizing the discourse that promotes Roma to go back to India, their place of origin (Hancock, 2002: 78). The same argument was used by one of the students that were

interviewed for this research. The student suggested that, if he would have to define ‘who Roma are’, for sure he would not talk about ‘our anthem, the flag, or that we come from India’ because this would only justify some people’s attitudes towards Roma that claim Roma do not belong to Europe and that they should go back from where they came from (India). The concept of ‘home’ or a place of belonging can bring many times a sense of confusion among Roma ethnics who have lived most of their lives without knowing exactly their place of origin. Having to explained where we come from in order to justify where we are can develop a sense of dislocation because that shows that ‘we’ are not seen as belonging to the place where we are at, while at the same time ‘we’ do not have any experience with our ‘place of origin’.

The use of the Romani language as an important differentiation between Roma and non-Roma has been a very significant characteristic in defining Roma as an ethnic group and classifying them as different from other Europeans (Nicholas Saul, Susan Tebbutt, 2004: 54). Romani language can also connect people with a certain community and give them the feeling of belonging to that community (Kumarina Silva, 2009: p: 702). Given the negative image that surrounded Roma soon after their arrival in Europe, the Romani language was banned in many European countries. This has led to the lost of the language for many Roma ethnics, an effect that impacted many generations. Not speaking the Roma language, but declaring yourself as Roma, allows those who still speak it to question your authenticity as Roma and therefore to categorize you as not Roma or ‘not Roma enough’. The importance that is being given to the language and ‘the Roma traditions’ shows that not everyone who consider herself/himself to be Roma is accepted in the ‘Roma community’ and that the Roma identity has to be performed in a certain way. In many cases and for many Roma communities, NGOs, and activists, it is not enough to declare yourself as Roma, but you also need to gain recognition from other ‘authentic’ Romani people. The classification of who is

and who is not Roma will be determined by those who make the classification which can be, at a certain extent, influenced by the same stereotypes that non-Roma have about Roma as poor, demonstrating signs of a 'Roma lifestyle', so on and so forth (Marton Rovid, 2011: 8).

### *1.5. In-between identities*

Kumarini Silva (2009), describes the challenge and confusion that some over-seas Asians might go through given by the fact that, for generations, they have never got to experience living in what is considered to be their 'place of origin', their 'homeland'. One of the students interviewed for her research who works at a large corporation in Canada described how he would like to go and visit India, but at the same time he feels as an outsider and he is aware that his appearance can tell that he has a different cultural background (p: 698).

It is interesting how, although Roma scholars support the theory that Roma migrated to Europe from India, a discourse that has become popular in our days among other Roma – not only from a scholarly perspective – there is still a clear distinction of Roma as Roma or Gypsy, instead of calling ourselves Indians. Nevertheless, regardless of how we choose to call ourselves, the name has to be present in order to make the distinction between 'us' and 'them', between the non-white and white people. Looking different from the others and being perceived and treated as if you do not belong to 'us' – the white nation – legitimizes the need of those who associate themselves and who are perceived as being Roma to claim recognition as an ethnic person. The fact that we, Roma, create this sense of belonging to a place such as India which for most of us is very much out there, un-reached and un-reachable, could be interpreted as a counter-act to our denial of belonging to the countries where we were born and where generations before us have been subjects to slavery, the Holocaust, deportations,

segregations, assimilations, and currently 'integration'. Based on this analysis, it could be said that the Roma people are trying to build what Brah describes to be a 'diaspora community' which would make it easier for Roma to have the sense of belonging to a place even though they are seen as outsiders and in many cases even asked to 'go back from where they came from' (although the place/country where they are at is the only place they know as their 'home').

Nicolae Gheorghe (1997) emphasizes the fact that gaining recognition as an ethnic group has been a long and hard process for Roma people. In 1992, some delegates of the Commission on Human Rights have thought that "Roma are not a minority or a people" (Acton, 1997: 155). It is not surprising then that Roma are still seen as the pariah of society and that they are being told to go back to where they came from and this makes it easier to be targeted as the 'outsiders' who do not belong because they do not have a 'fatherland' to back them up (Gheorghe in Acton, 1997: 155). In order to claim agency and rights as an ethnic group, Roma are in the process of what Gheorghe calls it: 'nation building' (Acton, 1997:157) which means building a political identity as being Roma. Those who have the tools to do that are those who work with political institutions: the educated Roma, which are considered to have lost some of their characteristics as Roma in their process of integration. The authenticity and legitimacy as 'true Gypsies' of these educated Roma is being questioned because they no longer live in the 'traditional' conditions that has defined Roma for so long (157). This shows, once again, that the discourse surrounding the Roma image and Roma identity is still being reproduced based on the general stereotypes of what it means to be Roma: poor, uneducated, un-integrated, and coming from the ghetto.

What is the problem with this intense and overly-emphasized discourse that is given to the Roma identity as a unique and static identity, with the intention to combat racism towards Roma and the anti-Gypsism that is still very present in our days? It ignores the



hybridity of the Roma ethnicity [and any other ethnicity], a ‘nation’ that was build through the process of migrating and dispersing all over Europe. Not acknowledging the fluidity and the hybrid aspect that an ethnic identity has, in this case the Roma identity, eases the denial as belonging to the Roma minority of those who do not present the ‘fixed characteristics’ of the minority group. This attitude leads to divisions and hierarchies among the members of the minority group and can have discriminatory tendencies by Roma against other Roma. Being discriminated inside of the group, based on the way Roma identity is being performed and perceived, has been the case of one female Roma student. The subject will be further described in Chapter 4.

The Roma identity discourse also tends to ignore other issues that are being built under the umbrella of Roma culture or Roma traditions, issues such us gender inequality. The aspect of gender inequality that is being reproduced as a way to maintain the Roma ‘culture’ will be developed more in Chapter 3 and is based on the students’ answers during the interviews. The discourse on who is and who is not Roma enough is not only produced by the programs, NGOs and other Roma organizations, but also by the students themselves. This perspective will be further developed in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 2: Reproducing segregation in the name of empowerment

As I have mentioned in the first chapter, this chapter will focus on the issue of segregation of Roma in education and the ways in which segregation is being institutionalized. It also brings into discussion the experiences that the interviewed students had had before coming to CEU and how, for some of them, the feeling of being segregated is still present in the international and inclusive place that CEU promotes.

There are still uncertainties regarding the Roma migration in Europe due to a precarious historical documentation that mentions their presence. This lack of knowledge has also been influenced by the mystery that surrounds the Roma image and which for centuries has been and still is in the process of constructing itself. An important aspect that influences the image of the Roma minority is the continuous debate regarding their name and the confusion created among both the non-Roma and Roma people. Although it is still very common to be called ‘Gypsies’ (in most of the European countries), the term ‘Roma’ has become recognized in the last decades as the politically correct way to address the members of the Roma ethnic group (Petrova, 2003: 111).

It has been documented that Romani people have migrated to Europe at the end of the thirteen century (Hancock, 2002) and they have been subject to racism and discrimination through practices such as slavery, deportations, being victims of the Holocaust, through forced sterilization, segregation and so forth. The bad treatment that targeted them had had a negative influence on their housing, health care, education, and employment. Given the treatment they have been exposed to throughout history, the Roma minority group remains

one of the biggest<sup>4</sup> and most vulnerable ethnic groups in Europe. This is why European governments and institutions focus on improving their socio-economic problems by adopting laws and projects that addresses Roma inclusion, desegregation and elimination of discrimination of any kind.

### *2.1. Segregation of Roma children in education*

A very serious problem that Roma communities face is 'illiteracy and the extreme shortage of highly educated Roma' (Shuringa, 2005. p: 17). One explanation for this would be Roma children's segregation in education, a segregation that can have different forms, but which faces the obstacle of not being able to be proven in many of the countries given the fact that the states do not collect 'comprehensive and accurate data on Roma education'<sup>5</sup> (ERRC, 2004). Jack Greenberg (2010) describes three major forms of segregation against Roma children in education and the way in which segregation is being performed.

#### *Types of segregation*

The first type of segregation is practiced in some areas or cities where there are separate schools for Roma and non-Roma and the separation is being kept through restrictions by local practices or tacit understanding (Greenberg, 2010. p: 935). In 2000-2001 in Bulgaria, according to the national census, approximately 70% of the Romani students attended schools that were located in Romani neighborhoods, in which the participation of Romani students in these schools was 100% (ERRC, 2004. p:22). This type of segregation is

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<sup>4</sup> There is still a big gap between the official and unofficial numbers of Roma in Europe, but they are estimated to be around twelve million Roma in Europe (Gheorghe, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> According to the research conducted by European Roma Rights Center in five European countries (Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Czech Republic), data disaggregated by ethnicity is not systematically collected in any of the countries. In the situations where data are being collected, there is also the question of accuracy of it, given the incompatibility between the official numbers of Roma in these countries and the unofficial ones, where the unofficial numbers overcome the official ones.

also known as the ‘process of ghettoization’ of public schools and is influenced by the residential segregation of cities and towns. The residential segregation is characterized by a [geographical] division between Roma and non-Roma, in which Roma get to live in ghettos on the margin of the cities or towns. This separation between Roma and non-Roma gives the authorities the possibility to also divide the Roma children from the non-Roma children by building separate building in the Roma ghettos, respectively the non-Roma areas. Because of these conditions, the schools that are located nearest the Roma ghettos turn out to be, in many cases, attended completely by Roma children, also known as the ‘Gypsy Schools’ (European Roma Rights Center, 2004. p:69).

There are cases of Roma families that succeed to enroll their children in the non-Roma schools, but these actions are followed by what is known as ‘white flight’ and once again segregation occurs because the non-Roma children move to other schools where there are no Roma pupils (Greenberg, 2010. p: 936).

The second major type of segregation that targets Romani children is ‘special’ or remedial schools. Romani children get to these types of schools after they have been diagnosed by the school officials as having ‘light mental retardation’ (Greenberg, 2010. p: 936), a diagnose that ignores some children’s language problems given the fact that they come from families where their first language is Romani language. In most of the cases, although the entire Romani child population is smaller than the non-Roma population, the data collected by the governments and NGOs show that the percentage of Roma in special schools is much higher than the non-Roma. Many Romani parents are aware of the fact that their children do not belong to these special schools, but they make a compromise for the free meals and clothing that their children receive in the special schools, benefits that are not available in the standard schools (Greenberg, p: 936). The problem with the special schools is that they do not offer education of an equal standard as compared to the regular schools

(ERRC, 2004. p: 34) and they have no reason why they would reduce their pupils' number by recommending children for reintegration in the mainstream schools. On the other hand, many Roma parents are resistant to the idea of integrating their children in "special" schools into mainstream schools because of the treatment that their children might receive from the non-Roma children, either because of their ethnicity or because they come from special schools (ERRC, p:35).

'Intra-school' or 'within-school' segregation is the third major type of segregation that Romani children suffer. This is characterized by dividing separate classes in the same school based on the children's ethnic identity. Also, Romani children end up in the special education classrooms, separation that is usually legitimized based on the poor academic results of the children (Greenberg, p: 936). European Roma Rights Center's research in some Romanian schools showed that one of the reasons for within-school segregation is the non-Roma parents' pressure on the schools' authorities to keep their children in separated classes. The non-Roma parents threaten otherwise to transfer their children to different schools if their children will have to study in the same classes with the Romani children (ERRC, 2004. p: 55). The schools' representatives argued that they cannot afford to lose the non-Roma children because they represent an important percent in their schools and a significant withdrawal of the pupils would mean a significant loss of funding for the schools. In addition, a huge withdrawal of the non-Roma children would make the schools all-Roma schools (ERRC, p: 57). On the other hand, Roma parents also complain about the segregation of their children within the school, but the school representatives do not consider their complaints.

A form of segregation that includes both within-school and remedial school segregation is the creation of remedial special classes within regular schools. The classes address children with developmental disabilities who attend public schools. In practice, most of the children who attend these classes are the schools' Roma children (European Roma

Rights Center, 2004. p: 55). In order for the children to be transferred into the remedial special classes, they have to be tested and to receive parental consent. European Roma Rights Center's research show that most of the time the testing is not being applied, nor parental consent given (ERRC, 2004. p: 55). Even when the school receives the parental consent there are still doubts around the procedure that has been used in order to receive the parents' signatures. In some cases, the schools' authorities have asked the Roma children to bring to their parents the forms needed in order for the children to be transferred to the special classes of the schools. ERRC has tracked some of these parents and discovered that the parents were not aware of the type of documents they have signed and confirmed that no school representative has explained to them the purpose of the special classes or how these classes are structured (ERRC: 55)

As I have mentioned so far, the segregation that Roma children face is mostly the result of discrimination practiced by public administrations or non-Roma people towards Roma. On the other hand, one should not ignore the segregation that results from Roma parents' fear that their children might lose their ethnic identity if they attend school with non-Roma children. Preserving ethnic identity can be a reason for [some] Roma parents to keep or to send their children to segregated schools. This fear is given by the fact that many times the Roma integration has been done most of the time by assimilating Roma, instead of giving them the possibility to maintain their language and culture.

Poverty can be a major reason why Roma families would accept and perpetuate some forms of segregation of their children. Given the fact that there are cases of Roma communities that live in poor conditions, sending their children to school and managing to keep them enrolled can be a challenge. That is why in most of the cases, Roma children drop out school because their parents cannot afford to pay for their school materials, fees, cloths, and even food. An alternative that is not very preferable is to send their children to special

schools and even though most of the parents are aware that their children do not belong in these schools, they still send them here because of the free meals, free school materials, housing (for residential institutions), but also because the parents feel that their children are safer here and that they are in a place where they are not constantly exposed to discrimination by teachers or other students ( McDonald, Kovacs, Fenyes, 2001).

## *2.2. Roma students' experience before CEU*

Most of the interviewed students from the CEU Roma programs have had the experience of receiving different treatment in schools because they were [perceived as] Roma. Attila recalls how he was called 'dirty Gypsy' in school and that made him confused about his Roma identity because that was not the image that he received from his family about his ethnic identity. Because of the new image that has been constructed for him around Roma/Gipsy he felt the need to reconsider whether or not to be open about his ethnic identity. Even more, he was encouraged by one of his professors to drop out of school, but that only determined him even more to continue his education.

When I was 16 years old I told to myself that I can't continue my studies because I don't want to have all this difficulties just to have a diploma and my teacher encouraged me to stop so that was a really good motivation. I said, OK I will continue and I will get at least one diploma but maybe even more. At the university it was fine, it was good.

Predrag explains how he did not feel discriminated in the town he grew up in because most of the population was Roma, but that he felt treated differently when he had to move to another city to continue his secondary school; here the situation was different. Roma were

seen in a negative way and he would hear bad things from his colleagues addressed at Roma, but Predrag was told that he is different, that he is not like ‘them’[like the other Roma].

Anca said that she had been discriminated since her first year of studies. She was studying in a segregated class where all of the pupils were Roma, in a village with a high number of Roma families. It was a shock for her when she had to move to a different city for her secondary school because she was the only Roma girl amongst 500 students. She felt that she had to prove to the others that even though she did not have the same opportunities as the others, she could be as good as them and could achieve good results in her studies.

Because all the time I was hearing bad things about Roma, I wanted to show them it’s not true and during my studies I’ve done my best to be at the same intellectual level with the others, and even though I didn’t have the cloths, I didn’t have the make-up or the material situation, I tried to show them that mental and intellectual we are the same, doesn’t matter how we look like and where we are coming from.

Diana had problems admitting her Roma identity during her studies until she went to university. She felt ashamed that she is Roma because of the image that is constructed around the Roma minority. This is the reason why she hid her Roma identity until the day when her mother came to school for a parents meeting and her professor saw that her mother is Roma. After the parents meeting, her professor asked the female Roma student to stand up and told her (in front of all her classmates) that she did not expect her to be Roma<sup>6</sup>. The information shocked her colleagues and she felt compelled to lie and to say that only her mother is Roma, but her father is not. It was a long process of ‘finding’ who she is and accepting her Roma identity.

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<sup>6</sup> The student described her professor’s reaction as a disappointment to find out that she is Roma, as if she did something wrong or that she should feel guilty for letting them believe and to perceive her as a non-Roma.



I wasn't discriminated until the moment I was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and my mother came to school for a parents meeting and I remember a tragic moment: the teacher comes into the class and says: 'Diana, you remain up. I am so sorry, but I didn't know that you come from a Roma family'. All of my class mates were just shocked and they were telling me: 'wow, you come from a Roma family? That is not possible'. And feeling a huge shame inside of me I was saying: 'only my mom is Thiganca<sup>7</sup>, my dad is Romanian.

What is interesting about the teacher's reaction when finding out that the student's mother is Roma and therefore that she (the student) is also Roma, is the way in which she felt that the student's [ethnic] identity has to be visible and known for and by the others. Not 'coming out' as a Roma is being perceived by the teacher and her colleagues that 'the Roma student' betrayed them and pretended to be something that she is not, and that is one of them, a non-Roma. Roma people have to live with a constant pressure of having to decide whether or not they will tell their friends, class mates, professors, or partners about their ethnic identity. This pressure can produce for some Roma the feeling of fear, while for the others the feeling of being proud to be Roma. Either way, the emphasis that is put on the visibility on someone's ethnic [Roma] identity shows the impact that the knowledge about it has on people's perception about those who belong to a certain ethnic minority. In addition, the teacher's reaction made the Roma student feel ashamed with who she is and with the fact that everyone knew now that her mother is Roma and it added to the insecurity that she had already about her ethnic identity. It has also made her feel that she has to justify and explain herself why she had decided to hide this aspect about her identity, information that seems to

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<sup>7</sup> The closest translation for 'Thiganca' would be Gypsy woman.

be very important for the others in their process of building perceptions and opinions about the person next to them.

The teacher's and students' reaction only points out once again how being Roma is perceived in a negative way and how the Roma people have to be 'honest' about their ethnic identity in order for the non-Roma to decide whether or not they want to interact with them, knowing that they are Roma. This is challenging for the Romani people because it only emphasizes the fact that being Roma, which is only one aspect of someone's identity[ies], is the most important aspect in who they are and it builds up on the attention and the importance that is being given to what it means to be Roma.

When asked if she always felt comfortable stating her Roma identity, Anca answered yes and that her family taught her that if she denies her identity and tries to lie about it, in the end people will find out who she really is and it would be worse for her to try to fool people instead of being honest about who she is. Once again, one can observe the importance that is being given to the visibility of the Roma identity<sup>8</sup> in order not to confuse or mislead the non-Roma.

Mihai's case – who comes from a mixed family – is different because during his childhood he did not feel discriminated or received a different treatment until he became a Roma activist during college. He also admits that he was ashamed until the age of 9 for being Roma. When he decided to be openly Roma and to become a Roma activist, he felt rejected not only by the non-Roma, but also by the Roma because he was not perceived (based on his appearance) as a Roma. He explains that it was a long process getting to win the trust of the Roma community members and getting to be perceived as one of them. He faced discrimination not only for being Roma, but also for not 'looking Roma enough'.

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<sup>8</sup> I refer here at the Roma students from CEU based on the interviews, but the findings and their personal experiences cannot be viewed only under the umbrella of 'the CEU Roma students experience' as a particular aspect separated from other experiences of other Roma.

**Mihai:** For me is a different scenario. I didn't have any problems when I was a child, but when I was in the second year of college and I started to be a Roma activist, I engaged in one Roma NGO. Then I started to feel something unusual for me. Some sort of discrimination from both sides. When I went to different conferences, everybody was asking 'What is this gadjo<sup>9</sup> doing here?', because I'm not like the traditional Roma. I don't know which the traditional, typical Roma is, but as you can see I'm blond. Everywhere I go and I meet Roma people, first time when they see me they are not that sure that I am Roma and if I tell to non-Roma people that I am Roma they don't see me very good sometimes. But if I talk to Roma people and I say I'm Roma, they don't accept me: 'You are not Roma'. Is funny.

The importance that is given to the fair, clear, and honest access that non-Roma have to have about who is or who is not Roma, shows how important it is for non-Roma people to be able to determine who is Roma and to be able to decide, based on this information, whether or not they trust 'the Roma' that they know as a member of their acquaintances or friends. On the other hand, Roma are aware of how their ethnic identity shapes people's perceptions about them (even though it might not be accurate most of the time) and they feel compelled to state their ethnic identity because for some people the ethnic identity is a determinant for a person's behavior and personality and, in this case, all Roma are being seen as a homogenized and essentialized group, leaving no place for difference or diversity.

As it can be seen from the interviews with Roma students from CEU, they have been subjects to discrimination and it has been part of their realities before coming to CEU. The way they are perceived, judged, and treated is through the lenses of society's understanding of what Roma is or should be, without giving them the chance to prove who they are.

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<sup>9</sup> Gadjo, in Romani language, means non-Roma

Although they have managed to overcome segregation and mistreatment of their non-Roma colleagues, professors, and school authorities, the problematic and negative influence that this behavior has and the disempowering dimension that is being perpetuated among others who come from similar positions and contexts cannot be ignored.

### *2.3. Affirmative action at Central European University*

Along with international laws that prohibit racial segregation, Central and Eastern European countries have adopted measures that aim to reduce the socio-economic discrepancies between Roma and non-Roma, discrepancies that are the result of racial segregation and discrimination. One of these measures is under the form of affirmative action, a measure that has been implemented also by the Central European University (CEU) in Hungary since 2004 when the Roma Access Program (currently under the name of the Roma Graduate Preparation Program-RGPP) has been implemented. The program helps Roma students to progress in their academic and professional careers. ‘The long-term goal is to prepare young, outstanding Roma students to conduct local and international academic and advocacy work and to serve as role models and leaders for the Roma community overall’<sup>10</sup>. The RGPP is a nine-month program, organized in three semesters, that offers English language classes and tutoring in one of the fields: Political Sciences, International Relations, Gender Studies, Human Rights, Sociology and Anthropology, and Public Policy. It also gives the students the possibility to audit master’s level classes at CEU so that they can get more familiar with the CEU environment and learn what it means to be part of the university as an MA student. Nearly 100 students have graduated the program since it started in 2004 and over 50 per cent have been accepted in MA and Ph.D. programs, not only at CEU but also in other internationally recognized universities.

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<sup>10</sup> According to their website: <https://rap.ceu.hu/about-us>

Starting with 2011, CEU is hosting a second program that is addressed to Roma students, the Roma English Language Program (RELP). RELP ‘is a nine-month preparatory course for talented Roma youth to improve their English skills to enter the workforce in positions that will make a difference to their home communities’<sup>11</sup>. Students from both programs, RGPP and RELP, receive full scholarships that cover travel, tuition, housing, health insurance, living expenses, and study materials.

#### 2.4. ‘On Being Roma in Central and Eastern Europe’ seminar

The achievements seminar has been recently implemented in the curricula of the two programs and touches upon topics such as: *Roma identity*, *The Politics of Aid and Intervention*, *Roma History and Writing Roma History*, *Romani Language and Linguistics*, *History and Identity from the ‘bottom up’*, and *Governing Roma*<sup>12</sup>.

As it can be seen, each seminar has a different topic which involves different approaches to what Roma represents. The purpose is to create the environment where students can discuss what Roma identity is, what is/are the process/es in which the Roma identity/identities have been constructed by different actors at certain times or scales, and how coherent these identities are. The attention that is being given to Roma people, mostly in Central and Eastern Europe, and the projects that address the development of Roma communities is also discussed by the students by looking into depth at some of these projects. The Roma students are asked to present the possibilities and limitations that these developmental projects pose for the [Roma] community work and activism. On the topic of Roma history and writing Roma history, the information ranges from migration to the

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<sup>11</sup> <https://rap.ceu.hu/>

<sup>12</sup> These are the seminar titles that can be found on the <http://e-learning.ceu.hu/course/view.php?id=1489> webpage where the Roma students have access to and where they can also find the description of the approach that each seminar has and the materials that they have to prepare for each session.

Holocaust to socialism and collapse of socialism, by emphasizing at the same time the difficulty in writing Roma history and how the knowledge is being produced about Roma identity and culture through the emphasis of certain histories and certain ideas about history. The aim of the *History and Identity from the 'bottom up'* seminar is to discuss how, in the process of building an ethnic identity, such as the Roma identity, other perspectives or identities, such as gender and class, have been left out and to look at the ways in which these identities can be integrated into the ethnic construction process.

While some of the students find the achievements seminar a good opportunity to meet other Roma activists and experts that are well known, other students did not share the same thoughts. Some of the interviewees expressed their opinion about the activities that they have in the Roma programs, which are related to the topic of Roma identity, and have suggested that they find the achievements seminar irrelevant and unnecessary for them because they feel that they are being told how to act and what to expect in life based on their actions and given the fact that they are Roma. Some of them have said that they know who they are and where they come from and that they have had the experience of being and living as a Roma before coming to CEU and no 'Roma expert' is in the position to tell them who they are, what they do, how they live, or even how they feel as Roma. For [some of] the students, their lived experiences are enough to know who they are and what makes them Roma.

When I asked how she feels about the achievements seminar, Anca, an RGPP student, said:

For me is OK but sometimes they are too much because I don't agree when one teacher from England comes and speaks about my identity and how I'm behaving at home. He doesn't know, he is just reading and he thinks he knows everything how the Roma feels and who the Roma people are and he is just coming to speak in this fancy language and saying that he is an expert. But I am already Roma, I've been through

this, I know who I am and how one stranger can come to teach me what Roma means?

Sometimes is annoying.

A similar response was given by one of the students in the RELP program, Mihaela, who stated:

We had the achievements seminar about identity and personally I didn't like it at all.

The moderator's arguments left me cold. Nobody can come and talk to us about identity. I am a traditional Thiganca<sup>13</sup>, I ate in 'shatra'<sup>14</sup> and nobody can come and tell me that I am not Thiganca. There is no book that can give me the image that I experienced and that I can still experience, if I want to, of living as a Roma.

## 2.5. *Being Roma at CEU*

One of the reasons for the existence of affirmative action is to reduce the gap that has been created between Roma and non-Roma based on racism and the mistreatment and discrimination that targets Roma. That is why programs like Roma Graduate Preparation Program and Roma English Language Program have been conceptualized, and that is to promote equality and diversity in higher education for racial or ethnic groups that are subject to discrimination. What the programs probably would not want to promote is the racial/ethnic segregation of the Roma students since segregation is such a marked aspect of discrimination against the Roma people.

Nevertheless, some of the students interviewed for this study stated that they feel segregated at CEU because of the way the programs are conceptualized. When asked whether

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<sup>13</sup> Gypsy woman.

<sup>14</sup> Roma community.

it is easy for her to socialize with other students from CEU who are not part of the RGPP or RELP programs, Laura's (RGPP student) answer was:

This is another question which is really difficult for me, I would say, because I feel that this program is too segregated...to much. We, all of us, are living in one floor, two programs, we are every time together, we are speaking about Roma issues...we are not trying to integrate Roma, we are trying to be more segregated. In the same time, we are speaking about Roma integration in Europe...but where? Not here at all. We are listening to Roma music when we have our meetings or something...it's just too much. It's not what we can go after finishing the program, after finishing the university. What we can do? We don't know anything about the outside world and how people actually interact.

As Laura describes it, there is too much emphasis on their ethnic identity and she finds it ironic how they [Roma students] gather to discuss the issues that Roma people face with and to look for solutions on how to integrate them in society, when they are also being segregated. She also does not like the fact that they have to 'be Roma' all the time when they meet [the music they listen to, their discussions, and what they do is about Roma]. She expected more than that when she decided to come to study in an international university. Somehow she did not expect that her ethnic identity will reflect that much in her presence at CEU.

Predrag is a student in the RELP program and he expressed the same opinion. He explained that he feels segregated because of the way the program is being conceptualized and he thinks it is harder for Roma students to interact with other students from CEU. He feels that the program that he is in is a segregated program, but he sees it as a positive segregation. On the other hand, he thinks that affirmative action is needed because Roma did



not grow up or did not have the same conditions as the non-Roma. He does not like that he feels segregated in the program, but he still sees the importance of the program and the benefits of it. He thinks it will still take many years [“around 50”] until Roma will reach a point when this kind of measures will not be needed anymore, but until the change will happen he said that we have to accept the effects of affirmative action, which are not always positive.

Even though not all students have expressed this opinion about the programs, one should not neglect the two students’ perceptions and sense of segregation in the Roma programs at CEU. In the name of Roma empowerment and integration, one has to consider the fact that the programs tend to perpetuate the exact practices that led to the existence of affirmative action and that is educational segregation based on their ethnic identity. On the other hand, all the benefits that the programs offer to its students, benefits that are being appreciated by the students themselves, cannot be neglected, but different ways to implement the affirmative action should be considered. The segregation that is being produced at CEU is not only with the Roma students. The concept in which the students are being placed in the dormitory, and that is putting the students from one department on the same floor, has the tendency to keep the students separated based on their studies’ interests. This division makes it harder for CEU students to interact with other CEU students from different departments, having in mind that the practice is, generally, to attend classes from the department that you are enrolled in.

The fact that some Roma express the feeling of being segregated in the RELP and RGPP programs could be related to the self-awareness that is more developed in their case, given the fact that their presence at CEU is firstly related to their ethnic background. In order to apply for RGPP and RELP one has to be Roma, ethnicity that has to be recognized by one of the Roma NGOs from the country of origin of the applicant. After being accepted in the

programs, students are constantly reminded about their ethnicity and how important it is to change people's perceptions about Roma by being themselves good examples. They attend an achievement seminar, which is part of their programs, in order to reflect on what it means to be Roma and to strengthen their Roma identity. It is no surprising then that they feel segregated when they have to live and interact again with the same [Roma] people that they get to see daily in classes and school-related activities. For some students, the emphasis that is given to their ethnic identity is too much and they would like to have the opportunity to have an alternative in terms of their social life, their interests outside of classes and the activities that they want to get involved with. One might say that the students are not being forced or obliged to get involved in all the extra-curricula activities that are being organized, either by the Roma students themselves or by other Roma organizations or representatives. Although that is true, it is still not that easy to decide to be less visible or less active in an environment where your presence, as a Roma ethnic, is very much emphasized and romanticized. Students are being told that their presence and their actions at CEU can change people's perception and provide 'good examples' of what it means to be Roma. With this type of responsibility it is not easy for the students to decide not to get involved in different ['Roma'] activities or not to show an interest on Roma issues and a desire to be[come] a Roma activist.

When asked if they feel a pressure from the programs 'to be Roma', all of the interviewees said that they do not feel a pressure to be a certain type of Roma, although they are aware of the way in which the programs are conceptualized so that they bring into attention their ethnic identity and how the programs try to build the sentiment of Roma pride among the Roma students. With the purpose to create a positive image around the Roma identity, the CEU programs – RGPP and RELP – require that Roma students are visible and active in the CEU space. The students are encouraged to participate in certain activities that

would give an insight to the other CEU students about who the Roma students are, where they come from, and what or who they represent, so that their visibility as ‘good examples’ of educated Roma would change the general negative perception about Roma. This shows once again the importance that is given to the visibility of Roma and reinforces the idea that Roma, wherever they are, have to justify their actions, how they got where they are, and what are their intentions. It also shows that the Roma identity does not belong only to those who consider themselves to be Roma, but it has to be shared, negotiated, justified, or judged with or by the others.

The gaze of the ‘Other’ (the non-Roma) influences the way Roma people perceive themselves and is an important ingredient added to the identity that Roma people build for and about themselves. This could also be the reason why Roma people feel that they have to explain who they are [as Roma] and that is an aspect in the process of building their ethnic identity that cannot be ignored. If other identities such as gender, class or nationality are somehow, in some cases, easier to be determined by the gaze of the ‘Other’, the Roma identity is not always that easy and simple to be determined. Because of the image that Roma [read as Gypsy] have in most of the European societies and cultures – an image that has roots in the history of Roma migration from India to Europe – it is very hard for many Roma to feel comfortable and safe to be ‘openly’ Roma. It also brings a feeling of shame and guilt because of those who have constructed a negative image about the aspect of what it means to be Roma, an image that has been influenced not only by the behavior of Roma, but also influenced by the attributes that were given to them such as scapegoats, mystified, or romanticized. It becomes embedded in them that they have to justify themselves for being Roma and explain what it means for them to be Roma and this process reproduces once again the general perception of Roma as lazy, thieves, untrustworthy or dishonest, dirty, exotic and other stereotypes that are not only in the non-Roma people’s minds but in the Roma people’s

minds as well. The stereotypes are being reproduced because the image that the Roma students at CEU are trying to produce about themselves as Roma models is in opposition with the general, stereotypical and negative image that is known about the Roma. What is interesting is the way in which the ‘good examples’ are promoted in opposition with the general, negative image that Roma have but without naming or bringing into attention those negative stereotypes that have been embedded in the Roma image for centuries.

It is also important to mention how, in the name of the collective representation and improvement of the image of Roma, the ‘individual’ is being neglected. In most of the Central and Eastern European countries from where the students come from, being Roma is nothing to be proud about or even to feel safe to state that you are Roma. Anti-Gypsism, instead of vanishing, is becoming stronger and more embedded in people’s minds and attitudes and can influence the way in which Roma feel comfortable or safe to declare their ethnic identity, not to mention to present attitudes of pride. As it was the case for some of the interviewed students, at early ages they felt shame or guilt to be Roma, although it was still not very clear for them what that meant. It can be a very long and hard process to get to accept an ethnic identity that is considered to be one of the worst minority groups in Europe and even a harder process to be proud or comfortable with an emphasized visibility in a small community, such as CEU.

## Chapter 3: The normalization of Roma identity

The focus of this chapter will be on the way in which students define their identity as Roma and how they negotiate their identity in a diaspora place. The traditions or the customs that are being considered to represent Roma were discussed by some of the students and it will be shown how, for some of them, these customs maintain the Roma identity, while for others the same customs are seen to be unnecessary and dangerous because they keep Roma segregated or poor. It will also be discussed how the customs are being gender based and how, keeping the 'Roma traditions' means to keep a patriarchal system where girls are being 'sold' or 'bought' and their sexuality policed.

The students have used different discourses: one discourse to explain themselves as Roma, based on the family they come from, but also a different discourse to explain Roma as a diaspora group, or one 'nation'. From the following quotes it will be more clear the distinctions that they make and how sometimes the students are having troubles to give a clear, general, or universal definition of what being Roma means because they also do not know and they acknowledge the differences that exist among Roma ethnics while at the same time they are reproducing the hegemonic discourse of Roma as a homogenous group.

### *3.1. Students defining their own identity*

I asked the students to define the families that they come from in order to be able to see how the identity as a Roma person is being shaped by the environment that they grew up

in. Based on their answers, it can be observed that there are similarities in the way Roma identity and Roma family is perceived and what they understand to be Roma.

**Laura:** I am coming from a really traditional family but which is somehow integrated cos all the members of my family have education and some of them work in the labor field or I don't know how to call it. Somebody is working just for themselves and because of particular things, but in the same time we speak the language, we respect all strict traditions and...yes. For everybody is different what means to be Roma and I don't want to say to everybody: this is the rule. No. In my case, the most important of being Roma is to respect the family members and their views for example and to the elder family members, give them more respect. If my grandfather thinks that I have to be in his house in a long skirt, not to see my nothing (my feet, arms) then of course is correct.

**Diana:** I come from a traditional family that speaks Romani. We keep all the traditions, but at the same time we are opened to new things. We are in contact with the majority population, we are integrated in the society, but at the same time we didn't loose our tradition.

Both respondents use the description of 'traditional Roma family' by emphasizing what that means: speaking Romani language and keeping the 'traditions', while at the same time underlying the fact that their families are 'integrated' and that they have a good relationship with the non-Roma. They are expressing the importance that 'traditions' have in maintaining their identity as Roma, traditions that define them and separate them from the others, but how these traditions are not and should not stop them to be also part of the majority group of the society where they live in. The traditions that they usually mentioned

refer to the dress code for both women and men and practices related to marriage. The subject of customs and how they negotiate these customs will be further developed in a different section.

If for Diana and Laura, who come from ‘traditional’ families, the emphasis was on the fact that their families are integrated, the case is different for the students whose family background is not clearly framed as ‘traditional’ – they do not speak the language, they did not grow up in Roma communities, they do not keep the dressing code – but seems to be more hybrid.

**Attila:** I am coming from a musician Roma family. As I remember from my childhood, we never used a term to describe ourselves, we didn’t even know about it. So, we are musicians. We don’t speak the Romani language unfortunately because for many generations before it was banned in Hungary, but we still have many Romani words which we still use it and they have an important role in the traditional Hungarian Roma music.

Here, Attila justifies why he and his family have lost the Romani language, but although this is an unfortunate lost, they still managed to ‘save’ some of these words which are being passed to the next generation through the Hungarian Roma music that they perform, and it can be understood that this is how his family performs their Roma identity.

When the ‘purity’ of their [Roma] identity could be questioned, the students feel the need to explain why, even though they come from a mixed family, they do not speak the language, and they do not keep other ‘Roma traditions’, they still feel that they belong to the Roma community or that they have a strong Roma identity, just like any other Roma whose identity is not questioned. This is the example of Mihai, who is half Roma, half Romanian

and although, based on his description, he comes from an ‘integrated’ family, he chooses to describe himself more Roma than non-Roma.

**Mihai:** I am a special case, I come from a mixed family, my family is non-Roma and my mother is Roma, but I grew up mostly with my relatives from my mother side. They are not so very traditional Roma family, from a city environment. Yes, they speak Romanes, but we don’t keep all the traditions. They are pretty integrated, I wouldn’t say assimilated because we still speak the language. I come from a mixed family but I consider myself more Roma than non-Roma.

Even though for most of them it was more or less clear how their Roma identity is being shaped by the family that they come from, and that they associate their ethnic [Roma] identity to certain characteristics and customs, there are still uncertainties that can be raised in what exactly defines a Roma family as a ‘traditional Roma family’.

**Predrag:** I grew up in a Roma village family who work in agriculture. I grew up in Roma community, village community. I don’t know what it means traditional Roma family, how you call it. What does it mean ‘traditional’? Yes, my family is Roma, my relatives are Roma and I am proud of that of course, but I cannot say that I know what traditional Roma is.

In Predrag’s case, it is not clear if to be a traditional Roma is enough to come from a Roma family. He raises the question of what traditional Roma is in order to emphasize the fact that the understanding of ‘traditional’ is very subjective and can have different meanings for different people.

All of the interviewed students tried to give a definition of them as Roma by relating their identity to the sense of belonging to the families or the communities that they come



from. In the process of defining their families or the communities that they come from, most of them brought aspects such as language and other practices that they consider to be characteristic to the Roma culture and, although not all of them still keep these practices or speak the language, they still define themselves to be Roma. In the case of Laura and Diana who come from what they call ‘traditional’ families, it is clear that they give a big importance to keeping the customs and preserving the language in order to preserve the Roma identity, while at the same time it is important for them to be an integrated Roma. On the other hand, in Mihai’s and Attila’s case, the mere fact that they do not speak the language and do not keep the [Roma] customs – therefore they are more integrated than other Roma – puts them in the position of having to justify their hybrid identity and it also makes them to have a stronger discourse of belonging to the Roma identity, despite their ethnic or cultural hybridity.

### *3.2. Hegemonic discourse on Roma identity, while accepting differences within the group*

In order to point out the differences that exist in a group which has the tendency to define itself as a homogenous group, I will further bring into dialog the ways in which the interviewed students perceive and define the Roma minority. It can be observed, based on the students’ answers, that there are different discourses that they use in order to define who they are, as Roma and what Roma identity means for them, and the discourses that they use depends on the contexts that they take into account.

If it was more or less easy for them to describe or to define the families that they come from, it was not the case when asked how they would describe Roma, as a minority group, or even themselves.

This question of how they would define Roma and how they see themselves as Roma managed to produce a conflict of ideas among Attila and Laura, who were interviewed together.

**Attila:** I find it a bit strange that we are supposed to learn what Roma means...I don't know, because we are coming from Roma families but we all have different understanding on Romani identity...so I find it really useful because I can compare my values and thoughts with others but at the same time it's a bit difficult because for example [...] it's always a question what we want to represent: the poor situation of the majority of Roma or we want to represent our situation as successful Roma that study and so on. I don't like this second thing because I don't really feel that I have a reason to celebrate myself because it was my choice...I come here, I really like this program, it's a good opportunity, but I'm not better at all than other Roma who didn't choose the same. So I don't think it's a good idea to represent ourselves as a strong, successful nation because we are not.

Attila has difficulties in choosing the type of image he would present about Roma and this shows the influence that the Roma discourse[s] has on the way Roma define their identity, but also how Roma people are being perceived by non-Roma. In his struggle of choosing the proper description of the Roma image, Attila expresses his concerns for the Roma discourse which reinforces the 'authenticity' of Roma people as having a place of origin (India) with their specific language and customs.

**Attila:** Of course I would mention our current situation. Most of the Roma live in really poor situation, and so on, they don't have jobs in Hungary for example but I'm pretty sure it's similar in other countries as well the unemployment rate is nine times bigger among the Roma and so on, but if I start explaining these

things than I suggest that being Roma means excluded and poor and so on and I don't really like it because, I mean if I was a lawyer and I was rich I would be still Roma so it<sup>15</sup> doesn't really define us.

**Laura:** I would say absolutely the opposite. I don't think that there has to be a difference between Romas and Hungarians in Hungary because they are all citizens of the same country. But the thing is that the Hungarians see the things different, not we (Roma). They are having this radical character that they don't like dark skin and black eyes and I don't know what. So they see this difference. I wouldn't say there is a difference because Roma in Hungary are really assimilated. They are more Europeans or more citizens of Hungary than Moldavians Roma are citizens of Moldova.

The discussion of what it means to be Roma and how Roma are perceived by the non-Roma generated contradictions between the two students. Laura considers that reinforcing a separation discourse from the non-Roma would only put Roma in an unequal position and would legitimize discriminatory attitudes towards Roma. On the other hand, Attila suggests that acknowledging the differences between Roma and non-Roma does not mean that Roma also have to be treated differently from the non-Roma. From their dialogue different topics are brought into discussion. First of all, it is clear that, for Attila, it is difficult to have a clear definition of Roma minority because there are different characteristics and images that need to be taken into account when describing how Roma are, but at the same time each discourse that is being used can be harmful. He puts into conflict the two main discourses that define or that are being used to characterize Roma: a) the poor, uneducated or b) the successful, educated Roma. For him, there is no correct way to describe Roma, because the first one would put all the Roma in one group as poor and uneducated, while the second one

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<sup>15</sup> He refers to poverty and exclusion

would create hierarchies among Roma because the ‘successful, educated’ Roma would be seen as better than the poor, uneducated one. Secondly, he also does not agree with representing Roma as a ‘strong nation’ that comes from India and has its own flag, anthem, and language. For him this discourse will give the non-Roma the entitlement to ask Roma to go back to India. From Attila’s discourse it is clear that he associates himself with both Hungarians and Roma by using statements such as: ‘we, the Hungarians’ and ‘we, as European Romas’ and this sense of belonging to both identities – Hungarian and Roma – show the multiplicity of his identity. At the same time he also separates himself from both the Roma and Hungarian identities and by doing so he expresses a sense of in-between-ness in regards to the identities that shape his life and his views about who he is and how he negotiates the group that he belongs to. Jasinskia-Lahti, Liebkind and Solheim (2009) suggest that “in many naturally existing ethnic groups, dual or multiple cultural identities typically coexist, encompassing both an identification with one’s ethnic group or culture of origin (ethnic identity) and an identification with the larger society (national identity). These identities do not necessarily conflict with each other” (p: 108). Attila was not the only student who identified himself with both Roma and the larger society that he comes from. These situations will be further exemplified.

On the other hand, Laura makes a distinction between Hungarian Roma and Moldavian Roma, by categorizing the latter as less integrated than the former and by doing so she classifies Roma, based on their nationality, as more or less Roma. She expresses the believe that Roma should not separate themselves from the majority and that they should not distinguish themselves from the others based on the differences that exist between Roma and non-Roma because this type of representation would give Roma less rights in society than the others.

It seems to be an ongoing desire to justify and explain the image of ‘different’ that Roma has among non-Roma, difference that is part of the construction of Roma as an ethnic group and which separates them from the others. If these differences would not be emphasized as much as they are now, could be that the Roma identity would get lost. On the other hand, these differences had had and still have a big impact on the way in which Roma are being treated by the non-Roma by being targets of racial discrimination, subjects of segregation, deportations, genocide, and so forth. This could explain the difficulty that the two students have in trying to have a common understanding and a common definition of what distinguishes Roma from the non-Roma.

The students go back and forth in associating themselves to Roma identity and expressing a sense of belonging to Roma as a homogenous group, while at the same time acknowledging the differences that exist among the Roma people. If earlier Laura was expressing the opinion that Roma should not be seen different from the non-Roma, in the quote below it can be seen how she is trying to dis-identify herself from the general image that non-Roma have about Roma and to show that not all Roma are the same.

**Laura:** Of course there are situations when you are in some groups of people and they say Roma this and Roma that, and it’s not a good feeling but I never hidden even if nobody didn’t know in the group because at the beginning I don’t like to shout ‘Hi I’m Roma’. So they didn’t know and started talking during the lectures and usually I’m getting really angry and I’m speaking about that, I never shut up. That is a bad situation when I’m in that moment because I’m alone and I’m fighting and I’m like: look at me, I’m clean and I study with you and everybody are looking at you like you are stupid, you know? But I would felt worst if I wouldn’t say anything, I would felt ashamed in front of myself.

Although she does not associate herself with the type of Roma that influences how the non-Roma perceive the Roma, she still feels that her Roma identity is threatened by this image and that she has a moral duty to show that not all Roma are the same [read dirty and uneducated]. She feels that she has a moral duty to herself to prove that the image that prevails among Roma distorts the reality and she is one of those examples of Roma who are educated and at the same level with her classmates.

When it came to describe what being Roma means, most of them had the tendency of describing the Roma identity and being Roma as belonging to a homogenous group, with similar values, traditions, language, and a common oppression. When asked if there were moments when they could not associate themselves with other Roma people, the acknowledgment of differences among Roma was stronger than before and the students expressed the feeling of disidentification from other Roma, but not because they were Roma, but because of the way they think or act.

**Attila:** It's really difficult to give just one description for Roma, you know? I don't think it's a problem if I don't identify with somebody from the Roma community but it's like, it's natural. I mean, we are different and I don't think it's a problem, but yes of course it happened.

**Laura:** Yes, of course not just one time, because we all come from different countries and we understand different what it means to be Roma. For me for example, let's say the Macedonian Roma is not the same for me and of course they are Roma, but they are different. For me it's more close to this, I don't know, Moldavians, Romanians, and Ukrainians, which are more traditional.

For Laura, again the understanding of 'traditional' influences the way she perceives other Roma, but her understanding of 'traditional Roma' is influenced by the context that she is

coming from and she compares different Roma groups, from different countries, based on the knowledge that she gain from her personal experience.

**Mihaela:** In my life I understood one thing very well: we, the Roma, share at the same time feelings, impressions, opinions, but at the same time we have different interests. It is different. You can meet some people that you can communicate with and others that you can't.

**Bogdan:** Yes, I met Roma that I couldn't associate myself with. We are different from each other. Some are more traditional than others and like Mihaela said, some have different interests and views about life. It is normal. In the end, even though the Roma community has something that keeps it together, it is still pretty diverse.

**Mihai:** Sometimes I had the opportunity to be among Roma people who have a lot of different opinions than I do, about certain things, about life, about education and the importance of education and of course I don't identify with those people but not because they are Roma, but because the way they see life and certain issues. I mean, this happens to everyone, this is not a matter of identity or ethnicity, it's just a matter of the way you think. Your friends are those kind of people who you share your opinion with and have a lot of things in common with you. If you have nothing in common with him or her is hard to make some connections no matter he or she is Roma.

It is interesting to observe the strong sense of belonging to the Roma minority group that the students express in the process of defining what Roma symbolizes, while at the same time having to accept the idea that not all Roma are the same. At a first look it might seem that the students are contradicting themselves through the discourses that they have, but this

is because their identities are not as fixed as they might want to present. Belonging to a minority group which still has a strong negative image in Europe, would makes sense, as a Roma person, to put emphasize on what keeps Roma unite and what makes Roma to be a strong trans-national 'nation'. When you do not have a country of origin, a 'homeland', and when you are seen as the 'outsider', then the claim for recognition and acceptance can be produced through a romanticized discourse that highlights the common goals and characteristics of the members of the group, ignoring the differences. This is the case of the students that were interviewed, who presented different views of Roma, depending of their stands and of what they want to present. If, in the process of defining the Roma as a group, the students focused on commonalities, the case was different when asked where they fit among other Roma and if there were cases where they could not associate themselves with other Roma.

### *3.3. Negotiating the [Roma] customs*

In the process of defining what Roma means for them, most of the students have mentioned the 'traditions' or the customs as representative for the Roma culture. For some of them, it was even raised the question of what is more appropriate to use: traditions, costumes, or practices, showing that the way the language is being used influences the perception of what it means to be Roma and how Roma should be 'performed' through these customs or traditions. Few students have a strong understanding of the customs/traditions that are representative to the Roma culture and for them these customs symbolize the preservation of Roma identity. On the other hand, other students acknowledged that the families that they come from are not 'traditional' and even tough the use of language and customs has got lost among many Roma families, they still expressed a strong feeling of belonging to the Roma



identity. This section will present some of the customs that were brought into discussion by the students, what they think about them, and how they negotiate these practices, not only in their families/communities, but also at CEU.

**Anca:** To describe my family, we have really strong values of culture and language. I learned Romanian at school and I can say about my family that they still hope that our culture and values will not disappear.[...] I speak my language, but here I can't keep my tradition to have my long skirt, to have my respect for the men, to keep my head down, to not speak rude, to behave like a lady. Here everybody is free, everybody can do everything, but when I'm going back to my community, I'm part of them[...] Of course I agree with these traditions because this keeps us unite. If we loose our traditions, we loose our identity.

Anca is aware of the fact that in the environment where she is now, she cannot keep the traditions that are valued in the community where she comes from. Although she says that keeping these customs is what keeps the Roma identity alive, she also acknowledges that she does not always keep them and that depends of where she is and with whom she is. Because of this, I asked her if she feels that she is loosing her identity, having in mind that she is not keeping these traditions at CEU. Her answer underlines once again that the sense of community and the sense of belonging to the Roma community is what gives meaning to these practices that are being valued as Roma customs and being in a position where you are integrated in a larger group, it is not the best approach to bring the attention on you by practicing these customs.

**Anca:** I don't feel (that I am loosing my Roma identity). I know who I am. In Roma community the man has the respect and he is the patriarch and you should show respect to the elder person, but here we are all young and we express

ourselves how we express ourselves and we know who we are and we respect each other. But when we are with foreign students we try to be at their level, not to show our strange rules how they think about Roma.

Laura also describes why she is not wearing the same dressing code as she does when she is with her family, but she emphasizes the fact that she does agree with the 'rules' that address the way in which women and men are supposed to dress. For her, dressing in a certain way, according to the group she is with, is a way to show respect for that particular group, while also a desire to fit in the group through the performance of the symbols of the group.

**Laura:** Like I said before, I don't like to be the white sheep among the blacks if you understand what I mean. I don't like to be too much divided or emphasized in the group. Of course I will respect each group's rules. If I'm at home I will dress like that, but if I'm here I will dress like this and not because I have to and I don't know what, but this is normal for me. It's not compulsory. This is another respect for the group.

For both Anca and Laura, it is very important to fit in, not only in the Roma communities where they come from, but also in the non-Roma society where they live now. Based on their attitudes and expressed desires, the two students express what Ien Ang (2001) argues to be the desire of assimilation which is expressed not only by the majority group towards the minority group, but by the members of the minority group itself (p: 28).

**Predrag:** Activities? I know some cases that real...How can I say, not real Roma cos that is so silly...but some Roma that grew up and they have no touch with

traditions, or language and customs, but they are saying about themselves that they are Roma and they like the Roma path and they like to call themselves Roma even though they don't know the traditions. About my family...yes, I speak the Romani language and my family also, but I think we have the traditions of the surroundings or the environment where we grew up. Those were our traditions ...

For Predrag is very important to point out that the 'traditions' that are considered to belong to Roma culture are very much influenced by the surroundings where Roma live, which implies the co-existence with the non-Roma and the exchange that takes place between Roma and non-Roma in terms of the activities that they practice. The fact that he uses 'real Roma' to describe those Roma who have lost what is considered to be the Roma characteristics (language, traditions, and customs) but whose identity could be questioned precisely because of the loss, shows the fact that the distinction between 'real Roma' and 'not enough Roma' is still present and these attributes that are given to the Roma identity influence the way Roma people are categorized. From Predrag, it is not important what kind of customs you have and he thinks that whoever considers her/himself Roma, should be accepted as Roma, without being questioned the fact that the person does not speak the Romani language or does not practice certain type of customs.

### *3.4. Preserving the Roma identity or ignoring the patriarchal system?*

From the interviews, the most common practices that were mentioned by the students, besides the dressing code, regarded marriage and the importance that is given to the virginity of girls when they marry. This topic of marriage and virginity was given more attention during the group interview with Mihaela, Diana, and Bogdan, where Mihaela and Diana, who

come from traditional families, supported the importance of virginity before marriage, while Bogdan considered it as an exaggerated practice.

**Diana:** [...] I agree with them until a certain point. There are some traditions that are not good but some traditions keep us away from stupidity and I agree with them. For example with the marriages. If the girl wants to keep herself virgin for the marriage is not necessarily an obligation but if the girl lives in the community and wants to have a marriage than she is the one who will keep herself 'clean' and if it wouldn't be like this than she would probably end up like the other girls from the majority who at the age of 11 or 12 have an abortion.

Although Diana is trying to say that being a virgin before marriage, in her community, it is not something that is being imposed on girls and that the girls have the chance to decide whether they want to keep themselves 'clean' or not, it is very clear that the alternatives are not many. First of all, it is implied that the girls do not really have too many options: you either want to be in the community and marry in the community – and that would mean you have to be a virgin before marriage – or you do not want to be a virgin anymore (at the age of 11 or 12) – and that would mean you will end up having an abortion – and probably will also have to leave the community because you will bring shame to your family. Secondly, it is interesting that the age of marriage is not being questioned at all in this case, but it is given importance to the prevention of abortion by keeping the girls virgins before they marry. So, in this case, preventing unwanted pregnancy is by having early arranged marriages, while the girls are still virgins.

**Mihaela:** About the communities, I don't want to talk too much because we also have bad things happening. One thing has to be understood: if you want to change something, you have to be aware that some things will get lost. If you want to

remain the same, keeping the tradition, than nothing is going to change (in terms of 'improving' Roma situation) and I don't think we can afford right now to remain at the stage that we are at. My experience with the Roma communities proved that where you have poor communities, and I am sorry to say this, the tradition doesn't function the way we imagine it does. Traditions are 'respected' in the rich communities, where Thiganu<sup>16</sup> has the money and can afford to sell and buy girls...OK, it's a way of saying... to pay and buy their daughter's in law. Indeed, even in my family, my uncles have girls...now, things have changed a bit and now you don't ask money for the girl, but you make sure you give a car, a house, or half a bucket of gold as present. Things have changed, even if we want to admit it or not. But the tradition will disappear soon if we don't make sure to keep only what is good. Only what is good.

At first, Mihaela starts by saying that where Roma are now still needs to be improved and in order to do that, Roma have to accept the fact that they have to give up some of the 'traditions' that keep them behind. Girls being sold and bought does not seem to be a problem for her because it is an old practice, but the process of selling and buying girls among Roma families, according to her, function 'the best' in the rich Roma communities and even though this practice of paying for the girls has a new form now, it still symbolizes the same thing. I asked Mihaela what are the traditions that she consider to be good and necessary to be kept by Roma and her answer was:

**Mihaela:** The virginity aspect is very good. It only depends on each girl what they want or wish for. If that girl doesn't want to be a virgin anymore, fine than she would take her things and go and there is no problem. This virginity is good until

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<sup>16</sup> Gypsy man.

a certain moment. Everyone should be left to decide for themselves. For example, I wouldn't like for my brother to marry a non-virgin.

**Is your brother a virgin?**

**Mihaela:** I don't know, I didn't ask him that.

**Diana:** Guys are not obliged to be.

**Mihaela:** Now, I know about you that you study gender studies and it is normal for you to have this attitude. I know that I am his sister and if my brother doesn't marry a virgin girl I will tell him from the beginning that I will disown him and no property will be on his name. Period.

**Diana:** It is some kind of respect in the community if the girl is virgin. It is a value. I don't know how to say, but you are seen in a special way and if your girl is not a virgin anymore than people will start gossiping about it. This still exists in the community, either poor or rich, and if we speak about more modern communities, they still keep this. There are some traditions and if they don't keep them people will start talk bad about you.

Mihaela tries to have an egalitarian and equal rights discourse by saying that every girl is free to do whatever she wants, but this freedom has consequences and that means that the girls who 'choose' not to be virgins anymore (before they marry or they are sold/bought for marriage) have to leave the community. In other words, if you do not obey to the rules, than you will be expelled from the community, and that is the freedom of choice that the girls have. Mihaela continues to contradict herself by saying that everyone should be left to decide for themselves, while expressing her preference regarding the 'type' of girl her brother should marry: a virgin. Her preference for the virginity of a potential wife for her brother is

emphasized by the strong claim of what would be the consequences if her brother would not marry a virgin, while no importance is being given to whether her brother is virgin or not.

Diana felt the need to intervene and to explain why it is important, as a female Roma, to be virgin before you marry and this time she does not refer to preventing the girls from unwanted pregnancies, but to the real aspect: the image of the family. The virginity of a girl is a value for the family and how the family is perceived and seen in the community. If she is not a virgin anymore, then she is a shame for the family and a reason for the community to gossip about the family.

Because of the intensity of the discussion based on the topic of marriage and virginity, Bogdan wished to give his opinion on the topic in order to point out that he does not agree with this practice because it tends to ignore the compatibility between the two who are being married by their families.

**Bogdan:** From my point of view, I find it pretty exaggerated. I mean, I wouldn't give importance to this aspect: virginity. In the community that I come from this practice still exists. The parents meet and they marry their children but it is not being taken into account the incompatibility that could be between the youngsters and what happens then? It is interesting, no?

Bogdan is not the only student who expressed his disagreement with regards to these practices that are still being considered representative to the Roma culture. From the way they presented themselves, those who do not agree with these practices are those who do not come from traditional Roma families.

**Mihai:** I don't speak the language and I am not a very traditional type of guy. I think there are some important traditions, but sometimes in poor communities, some customs – I don't want to call them traditions – are those that keep the Roma

in poorness. I don't know, they don't allow girls to go to school. About early marriages, they say it is traditional. I don't agree with that, I think they are just circumstances that are keeping the Roma where they are now and the only way to improve their situations is by getting rid of these stupid traditions.

If Mihai is not afraid to call these traditions of marrying their children at an early age or not allowing their girls to go to school to be stupid, Predrag tries to maintain a moderate criticism. As in the case of Mihaela, Predrag mentions the 'selling' aspect of the arranged marriages and just like Mihaela, he tries to find a softer word to describe the marriages in the traditional Roma communities. Predrag also mentions how the girls' sexuality is being policed by not allowing them to go to school after the age of 12-13 years old, while in the case of boys is 15 years old. According to Mihai, these practices maintain not only a negative image of Roma, but also keep them poor and uneducated. For Predrag, these practices still exist because people are afraid to speak up, but he is optimist that people will be more courageous in trying to change the traditions because, for him, that is not what defines you as Roma.

As I have tried to show, based on the answers of the students, the 'traditional' practices are being used as an excuse to defend and maintain a patriarchal system among the Roma communities in which women are being subjects to oppression, their bodies regulated by the community, and the power to decide over their lives or bodies controlled. As Wani Tombe Lako argues (2004) the domination and oppression of women by men via patriarchal ideology transgresses culture and gender inequality and will continue to exist with or without respect to some particular cultural traditions. Nevertheless, these cultural traditions (e.g. caste system, control of reproduction, clitorrectomy) continue to subjugate women and these traditions are 'contrary to the inherent dignity of the human person (woman)'(p: 12). The recognition of women's oppression under the excuse of protecting cultural practices is very



important in the area of the protection of human rights, and in particular in reducing the patriarchal systems that are oppressing women regardless of culture, nation, race/ethnicity, age, religion.

There are challenges when it comes to define what and who Roma are and trying to find the commonalities that unites Roma as one 'nation' and although the students put emphasis on them, clearly there are differences that are also acknowledged. Meanwhile, the students show the process that they go through in trying to redefine their identity as Roma and negotiating its traditionalism aspect but which does not affect their sense of belonging to the Roma identity. This proves that being Roma goes beyond the practices, being part of a community, speaking the language and so forth, but has deeper implications which give the students the possibility to define their own understanding of their [Roma] identity.

## Chapter 4: From theory to practice: The lived Roma identity

The focus of this chapter will be on the way in which the students build their Roma identity, what are the factors that help in building a Roma pride, what is the importance of the CEU programs in emphasizing and strengthening the Roma identity, but also how the students got to accept their Roma identity previous to the CEU programs. The chapter also provides described moments in which the interviewed students presented a feeling of displacement and a sense of in-between identities and that is to show how the Roma discourse has an influence on their sense of belonging to the diasporic Roma community from CEU. The idea of the chapter is also to emphasize the within discrimination that can be generated by the Roma hegemonic discourse, through the use of participatory observation.

As I presented in the previous chapter, all of the interviewed students expressed a sense of belonging to the Roma identity, while at the same time acknowledging that there are differences among Roma although the Roma discourse, including their own, emphasizes the commonalities among Roma with the purpose to build a ‘strong Roma nation’, to claim visibility, and to empower the ethnic group.

### *4.1. Accepting the Roma identity*

Although it seems that the students have a strong feeling of belonging to the Roma identity, that was not always the case for some of the students and they have described moments in their lives when they were either ashamed to say that they are Roma, confused about the image of Roma that they would receive outside of their families, or even denying their Roma heritage.

**Attila:** Yes. In primary school it was quite common among the teachers and also among the students to call Roma, actually Gypsy as dirty, poor and so on and I felt really uncomfortable because I didn't really know how I could describe myself because in our family it was not a question that we were Roma and that we are Roma but in the schools I got other definitions which were much negative. So in this case, should I say that I am Hungarian or that I am Gypsy which is define in a very different way by the ethnic Hungarians? So it was really difficult. Many times I didn't really wanna say anything about it. In my family I really enjoyed but it was like natural to describe ourselves as Roma, but it wasn't good and I didn't really like the situation.

The perception of the others of what it means to be Roma influenced the way Attila started to perceive himself and developed problems in expressing his Roma identity to the non-Roma because of the negative image that surrounds the Roma ethnics. He explains a sense of in-between-ness when having to define who he is and choosing the identity that he presents to the others because the image of Roma that he received from his family was different from the image that non-Roma have about Roma. According to his experience, it can be seen that it is not always easy to come out and to be visibly Roma among the non-Roma and that created a conflict between his identities as Hungarian and Roma resulting with the difficulty to accept his Roma identity.

**Diana:** I come from a traditional family and only few colleagues, very close to me, knew that I am Roma. I remember at school I had another classmate, Roma as well, and I used to tell him all the time: don't speak to me in Romani because the other class mates will hear that I am Thiganca<sup>17</sup> and I don't want them to

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<sup>17</sup> Gypsy girl

know. I had this attitude in high school also. I had problems finding myself. I couldn't accept my self and used to tell to myself all the time: why did I have to be born in a Roma family? I don't know why, I can't really understand why I used to think that way. But I used to hear a lot of bad words coming from Romanians about Roma and maybe that is why I used to hide it so that I wouldn't be discriminated. Only when I reached university I managed to find myself. I used to read psychology books to help finding who I am, and when I went to university I managed to present myself to the other colleagues and to tell them that I come from a Roma family and it was such a beautiful moment for me and I was proud of myself. But only then, at the age of 20.

For Diana, the feeling of denying her Roma identity was stronger than in the case of other students and it can be seen the struggle that she went through in the process of accepting who she is and the family that she comes from. Most of her life, she rejected the fact that she is Roma and tried to hide it from her classmates, friends, and professors. She describes the hard and long process of getting to accept that she was born in a Roma family and that she is also Roma. Her experience shows the impact that society's perceptions about Roma have on the way in which Roma people negotiate their identity and get to accept it. Her example, just like in the case of Attila and many others like them, show that one is not just born proud to be Roma and for many it can be a long process of accepting the fact that you are put in the category of 'different' which most of the time has a negative connotation.

A similar situation of having difficulties to accept the Roma identity was Mihai's case who admits that he was surrounded by people who would discriminate Roma, without knowing that he is also Roma, and he was ashamed to state his ethnic background.

**Mihai:** When I was a little child, around 7-8-9 years old, I was ashamed to say that I am Roma. I had only non-Roma friends and I see the way they discriminated Roma and it was OK for me, I wanted to be one of them, not to be discriminated against. But after I grew up, especially in high school, I saw that this is not the case, this is who I am and I should not lie about this, I should just accept it and try to give like a good example. Of course, when I went to college and I started to see Roma activists, I strengthen this identity and I became proud of being Roma and to show a good example to the non-Roma who discriminate Roma.

It took Mihai some time to get to accept his Roma identity and to develop the feeling that he should not be ashamed for being Roma but instead to show a good example to the others that Roma can be ‘as good’ as any other person. He also describes a sense of disassociation from his Roma identity by trying to build up a relationship with the non-Roma children, relationship that would ensure a sense of belonging to the majority population.

**Predrag:** That is interesting. I grew up in that community where I didn’t have a problem during my first years of school. I had that superior, not only I but all my friends and the people who grew up in that community, they had the view of themselves like superior...they are Roma so they are superior because really it’s like that, in my town we are superior than non-Roma [...]so I didn’t have the problems about myself that I am Roma. When I went to high school I saw people a little bit different than I am. That is normal for everybody if you see some person and you compare yourself and you put yourself in the same situation with someone which is not a good example, you have a little bit the feeling...But after that I started to work in NGO and I recognized that I need to be more proud because I am Roma and I am educated, and I know some things maybe more

maybe less than someone else and I started to be proud and started to be, if I could say...nationalist about my nation because in some cases, non-Roma affect on the life of the Roma and put them in that position where they are now and they are...I don't want to say guilty but they are responsible for the Roma position. And because of that, that gives me some kind of energy or I don't know...it makes me react in some situations very extreme and to protect the Roma identity.

Predrag's case is different because he grew up in a Roma village which, according to him, is 'more developed' than the villages surrounding it. Because of that, he grew up with the feeling that they [the Roma from his village] have better conditions than the others and many times the non-Roma from the neighboring villages would come to his village for different services (mobile phones, internet and so forth). This environment where he grew up developed a sense of superiority for him and people from his village and this superiority has been connected to their Roma identity. It was a surprise for him having to go outside of his village and to see the negative image that Roma have among the non-Roma. In that moment he had difficulties to express his Roma identity because he did not want to be put in the same category as the other Roma that were representative in the new environment where he was. It was a shift from being proud to be Roma to be ashamed to say that he is Roma because he would be compared with the poor and uneducated Roma. Starting to work with a Roma NGO gave him back the Roma pride and the awareness that, if some Roma do come from poor communities and are uneducated, the non-Roma have a big contribution for their situatedness and the negative image that represent them.

#### *4.2. Displacement and in-between identities*

Some of the students express the idea that being Roma is not the only identity that they have and, according to the situations, other identities could be more important than the Roma

identity. Nevertheless, the programs do manage to emphasize their Roma identity through the activities that they have and they are aware of the fact that the main reason that connects all of them at CEU is their Roma ethnicity.

Tamas: I'm very much convinced that other identities are just as important as your Roma identity. Before I came here, I was teaching English and when I was with the students I saw that being Roma is not that much important to them and to me because I have to be there as a teacher and when I was working as a nurse, before the college, I had the same feeling when I was with my patients, like: OK I am here to help, I'm here to work, to get a salary. My other identity at that time, when I was in that situation was much more important. You don't have to declare yourself as a Roma when you are working with people. You have to put more emphasis on these situations when other identities are important: when you are a teacher, you are a man...so yeah, that was the situation.

Anca: I am feeling here that I am Roma and that they have some expectations from me when we are doing this seminar and we have debates, we show to the others how other Roma are. But I don't feel Roma when I am outside and nobody knows who I am.

Both Tamas and Anca point out that in certain contexts, being Roma is not the first or the most feeling and sense of belonging that they can have. There are situations in which being Roma is not the first thing that goes through their minds and it also does not affect directly the situations that they are involved in.

It is important to show their lived experiences in regards to the multiple identities that the students have and how they negotiate the identities that represent them the most, based on the situations that they face, in order to understand why a hegemonic discourse on Roma identity

is not always necessary or representative for the Roma. The representation of Roma identity as static and with clear, defined characteristics would only make separations between Roma and legitimizes the exclusion of some Roma who do not present to have these Roma 'characteristics'. As Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (1997) suggests, there are multiple experiences of the self which projects multiple identities of the self and therefore we should abandon any static view of identity (p: 64). Furthermore, as Wim Willems (1997) argues, not all Roma belong to a community, speak the language, present a specific way of life or a sense of belonging to a Roma 'nation'(p: 6) and that can also be observed from the described students' experiences.

The process of categorizing Roma as 'real' or 'not real' Roma was also part of some of the students' discourses when trying to define what being Roma means for them.

**Predrag:** How I know, this program is for the Roma people or people who say about themselves that they are Roma and Roma is their identity. But I don't feel so much pressure and I think that my colleagues don't feel too much pressure because we cannot really define what Roma is. In the beginning of the program, we had few cases of few expressions that somebody told: 'you are Roma, you are not Roma', but later we've noticed: to be Roma, is something very undefined and you cannot define what is to be Roma or what is not Roma and we had different sides and situations in which students here are growing up and we are developing here in that way. I think that now, when we learned that Roma cannot really be defined, is about how you feel and what you think about yourself. I think that we don't have that problem.

Predrag acknowledges that there were situations at the beginning of the program when some students' identities were questioned because they were being judged with a pre-given understanding of what it means to be Roma, without being taken into account that they



[students] come from different countries and they all have different experiences. Based on his statement, the experience of meeting Roma from different countries, with different background and experiences, made him and the other students from the programs, accept the idea that the Roma identity is very complex and hard to be set in a frame.

Diana and Bogdan express situations in which their national identity is prior to their Roma identity and that shows once again the complexities that Roma identity has and how being Roma is not always the first and only identity for a Roma person.

**Diana:** Two weeks ago I was at the airport and I saw someone's ID and that he is from Romania and first thing that crossed my mind was: he is Romanian like me. I didn't think that he is Roma like me, but Romanian. I think that it depends on the situation which makes you Romanian.

**Bogdan:** I agree with Diana in this case and I will give an example. If the Romanian national football team plays against another national team, even if the other national team has, I don't know, 5-7 Roma ethnics in the team, I really don't care. I support Romania.

It is important to acknowledge the role that national identity has for minority groups because the country of origin creates a sense of belonging to a wider nation. Although the Roma discourse tends to focus on the differences that exist between Roma and the others, differences that legitimizes the separation of Roma as a specific ethnic group, the 'homeland' of each diasporic Roma has an impact role on how Roma relate to each other and perceive themselves. From Bogdan's discourse one can understand that his sense of belonging to the Romanian nation is stronger than the connection that he could have with other Roma from other countries.

Tamas also describes a sense of in-between identity when having to describe the family that he comes from. For him is hard to describe or to categorize his family as only Roma or only Hungarian because both identities are part of his realities as well as for his family's lived experiences.

**Tamas:** I think this is the hardest question to define your family because, you know, my parents mainly lived in the socialist era of this country and at that time there was a huge pressure to abandon your tradition because that was the way for this community to integrate in the broader society. So I wouldn't say that my family is quite traditional. In some aspects we felt that we are Roma and we really didn't have our traditions, but we felt that we belong together and the broader society is not something that we belong to, but we belong to our family. We didn't really have the sense that we belong to the Roma community but we felt that we are Roma because my parents don't speak the language, don't keep the traditions...to find yourself, especially for me and the people I know, is to find your identity. So my family was not really part of the Roma and not really part of Hungarian society...it felt like in-between [...] we are both Roma and Hungarians or Roma and Romanians. I think that should be a natural feeling to be Hungarian and Roma at the same time. If you go to America there are different identities: you are American and you are black. I never felt that there is a conflict between the two. Yes, before I came and I had the interview I was asked if I am Roma or Hungarian and I said that I am the two because I was born here, this is my country and my home, but on the other hand I can't deny that I came from a minority, I came from a Roma family. I have to say that I am Roma which is true, but I am also Hungarian.

When asked to choose whether he is Hungarian or Roma, Tamas chose both because both identities represent who he is, but he does admit that specific circumstances can make you feel more Roma, more Hungarian, more man or woman, and so forth. He also declared that to find your identity is a process that can be done by the person who is searching for his/her identity and no one else can come and help you do that, not even the community that you come from. He also expressed the disagreement that he has in regards to the Roma discourse and how finding your Roma identity is not necessarily the solution to solve the Roma issues.

**Tamas:** I don't want to say that I don't love my people, because I love them so much, but as you mentioned, the discourse, the framework in which we are discussed I felt absolutely outside because I have never really agreed on this discourse as far as I can remember because, you know, some people talk about Roma issues like something that can be solved just by finding your Roma identity but that's not the case. We need much more than that. So no, I really don't like this discourse or I never liked.

Tamas has strong standpoints in regards to the Roma discourse that he had the chance to engage with through different personal experiences. He declared that he does not feel represented by the Roma discourse because of the way Roma identity is being addressed, which has the tendency to represent the Roma identity as trans-national, universal, fixed, with specific characteristics such as language and customs.

Some of the students have also expressed a feeling of displacement in regards to where they are now and although they feel that they belong to a Roma community at CEU, the place that they can call 'home' is where their families and their communities are because that is where they feel the most integrated and accepted. At the same time they are aware of the fact that the path they chose in their lives differentiates them from the rest of their community

members and that situates them as the 'outsiders'. Again, this sense of belonging to a community while at the same time a sense of displacement is developed shows once again the in-between-ness situatedness that the students might have developed, even before CEU.

**Anca:** If I go back to my community I know I cannot change anything because they have strong values, the strong culture, and for me being there would be like a foreigner because they already denied me like a girl who left the tradition, a girl who is not part of them anymore and for them I am just like 'gadje'<sup>18</sup>.

**Laura:** Not (to have a responsibility to go back to her community). You know, it was different...how to say? I took another way, I don't have the same path as Roma workers took or taken. I took, I don't know, another way, it doesn't matter, and for me to go back now is difficult (laughs) it would be difficult to have a communication.

**Attila:** Unfortunately I have to agree with Laura because I think the same... I mean, as a Roma I have many plans of course which are connected to Roma issues, but I don't think I really have to do something in my community. Is really difficult to define what my community is, because in my town for example there are no musician Roma and we identify ourselves with musician Roma and they live in other places in Hungary so it is difficult. The other problem is that every time when the question comes up if we have a responsibility for our community, I don't really understand what we should do. Like, to go and convince people to go and study? I don't want to convince them. I mean, is my choice and I can share my experiences if they are curious, I don't know. And I don't want to convince

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<sup>18</sup> Gadje, in Romani language means non-Roma.

them not to marry when they are 16 years old. Maybe they would have a good life.

I don't really know so I can't understand this.

Anca, Laura, and Attila were not the only students who expressed a feeling of not belonging completely to their communities because of the choices they took in their lives, the education that they have, and how they live their lives which are different from the members of their communities. Going back to their communities would make them feel as the outsiders, as the gadje, because they have lost the connection with the community members and they have changed their behavior. As it has been mentioned in Chapter 3, students do agree that there are certain customs or traditions which are considered to be characteristic to the Roma identity and not owning them legitimizes the Roma community to deny your membership. Interestingly, the students are not the only ones who are being denied by their communities if they do not fulfill certain expectations, but they are also in the position of choosing the members of their diasporic community.

Although the students presented a positive image of how the program connects different Roma from different countries and how, through this connection they develop a feeling of belonging to a wider Roma community, I was also able to receive additional information from different sources. I was able to find out that one of the female [Roma] students was not located on the same floor of the dormitory with the rest of her classmates and that influenced the way her classmates treated her. Because she was living on a different floor from the rest of her classmates and therefore the dormitory space gave her a different context to socialize with the other CEU students, she was spending less time with her classmates. A separation between her and the other Roma students was building up because she was not interacting with the rest of the group as much as she would have if she was to live on the same floor with them. The separation has been perceived as being more intense by her classmates because her

social interaction with non-Roma CEU students has been considered to be a form of denying her [Roma] community. The sense of denial of the group justified some of her classmates to follow her in the dormitory and by doing so the female students felt traumatized. The female student felt compelled to ask the dormitory administrator to move her on the same floor with her classmates in order to avoid being policed by them.

This case is a clear example of how important and influential the Roma discourse is in regards to the relationships that are building inside of the community and how it develops discrimination that targets Roma which is practiced by other Roma from the same community. For the female, the expectations that were put on her, regarding the way she performed her Roma identity, was a huge pressure that came from her colleagues and in this case it could be said that her diaspora community and her sense of belonging was more a feeling of terror and fear.

#### *4.3. The influence of the CEU programs on the students' [Roma] identity*

It is relevant to see the process that the students went through in finding or accepting their Roma identity in order to analyze the influence that the two programs from CEU have on the way in which they negotiate or build up their ethnic identity as part of a diaspora [minority] group.

The students have expressed the programs' importance in regards to their understanding of what it means to be Roma in other countries and what are the feelings and experiences that they share with different Roma from different countries or communities. Most of them find the programs to be useful in building a Roma diaspora by sharing the knowledge and the experiences that they gain throughout their lives.

**Attila:** Well, it was a really good motivation for me that we are Roma from different countries because I was really interested and I am really interested in differences or common things among Roma communities all over the world. I mean, not only as an anthropologist but also as a Roma, and it was really interesting to experience how others, I mean other Roma, feel or think about Romani culture or Romani language and so on. It was really interesting to compare our opinions.

Being in a program that addresses Roma ethnics gives Attila the feeling that he gets to know more about what it means to be Roma through the lens of other Roma. Getting to know the commonalities or differences among diasporic Roma can reinforce the feeling of belonging to a certain group which is constructed in opposition to the others precisely on the bases of their shared characteristics.

Mihai has a similar perception about the program as Attila's. He sees the programs as a nice opportunity to get to meet and learn about different Roma from different countries and to see how they experience their Roma identity. On the other hand, he does not believe that the program has changed the way he perceives his Roma identity because he already had a strong feeling of pride in being Roma before coming to CEU.

Mihaela emphasizes once again the reality of being Roma and how nothing can change the way you perceive your Roma identity, not even the CEU programs. In her discourse she produces the categorization of 'real Roma' in opposition to 'not enough Roma' and by doing so she acknowledges that there are people who call themselves Roma but who do not fit certain standards to be called and considered as such. Even though she does not articulate that, it could be considered that those who are still not 'real Roma' could become one by attending the RGPP and RELP programs at CEU. On the other hand she suggests that

a Roma discourse, or in this case the programs' emphasis on the Roma identity, cannot have an impact or meaning for those who know who they really are. For her, a 'real' Roma knows who he/she is, where he/she is coming from and what his/her path, as a Roma, should be. Her statement could also be seen as rejecting the impact that the programs could have on the students' Roma identity and how these integration strategies cannot erase the identity of the 'real' Roma.

**Mihaela:** If you are real Roma nothing can change you. You can't feel different than being Roma. To be Roma is in your blood, is part of your structure [...] I don't think this CEU can change the Roma. Only from a professional point of view.

Mihaela is not the only one who mentions the classification of 'real' and 'not real' Roma. Predrag describes how he witnessed situations when someone's Roma identity has been questioned and that used to make him angry because he does not agree with classifying Roma based on certain characteristics. He thinks that the program helped him to be more pragmatic and to accept the fact that each person has the right to self-identification and self-representation and that should not be questioned.

For students like Laura and Tamas, the programs give them the feeling of security and belonging to a diaspora group that shares not only a similar type of oppression and discrimination but also the desire to fight together against the discrimination that targets Roma.

**Laura:** You feel somehow more safe and ensured that you are not alone and you can fight together.

**Tamas:** I feel that the main benefit that I gain from this program was that I feel a little bit stronger and I got to know that people have the same problems that I have



and made me a little bit stronger because I have some people that I can belong to and is a nice feeling.

The aim of Roma Graduate Preparation Program is to provide English language classes, academic writing courses, and personalized tutoring in a discipline of their choice with the purpose to prepare the students enter international English – language postgraduate studies in social sciences at top universities. Roma English Language Program is a “preparatory course for talented Roma youth to improve their English skills to enter the workforce in positions that will make a difference to their home communities”<sup>19</sup>. In the programs’ description there is nowhere mentioned the goal to build a Roma identity or Roma pride for the enrolled students. Nevertheless the students describe the importance given to the Roma discourse with the purpose to construct a positive image and to build a strong Roma diaspora/nation. Although the students did not expect for their Roma identity to be that much questioned or emphasized, it was no surprise that it did because they are aware of the fact that the programs target Roma students and therefore their ethnic identity is the first aspect that makes them eligible for the programs or not.

Some of the students were more critical than others in regards to the programs’ structure and pointed out that being at CEU, as Roma students, already legitimizes their ethnic identity and they do not need to perform or to learn more how they should be or what is it that makes them Roma. The students are exposed in the CEU space as Roma and they are told that they have to present a positive and good image of Roma. It is also part of their programs to attend achievements seminar where they are being presented other Roma models, they discuss about Roma policies, or Roma situation in Europe, Roma history and so forth, and this can provoke a division between ‘real’ and not ‘enough Roma’ among some of

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<sup>19</sup> Description of the programs on the CEU website: <https://rap.ceu.hu/>

the students. It can also make some students question their own identity if they realize that they do not fit in the categorization of Roma based on the Roma identity hegemonic discourse and that can produce a sense of in-between-ness and displacement.

The Roma identity hegemonic discourse and the importance that it receives in the CEU space can be problematic for the students, considering their background and the process they went through in accepting their Roma identity. It can be a hard and long process, as the students described, to develop a sense of belonging to an identity which has negative connotations at a large scale. Being exposed to a discourse that defines Roma identity as static and with specific characteristics can produce the feeling of rejection or not taken into account among those who do not fit the characteristics. The Roma identity hegemonic discourse can also produce discrimination of Roma by other Roma because they do not perform the type of Roma identity that is expected from them to perform, as it was the case of the female student who has been policed by her classmates because she was not spending 'enough' time with her 'own Roma' fellows.

## Conclusions

‘Being’ Roma has been a problem for centuries since Roma migrated in Europe, migration that generated different means of oppression, segregation, and discrimination against the Roma people. The historical context has generated also different ways of assimilation or ‘integration’ of Roma in the European societies and that led, in many cases, to the lost of some Roma ‘characteristics’ (language, customs, ways of dressing).

Gaining recognition as a minority group and therefore having the right ‘to be’ Roma has given the possibility and opened the platform for the Roma people to demand visibility and to claim back what has been taken away from them. The process of demanding recognition and equal rights triggered a mainstream discourse on Roma identity that is still very much present among the Roma activists, political actors, and NGOs.

The purpose of this research has been to analyze how the Roma discourse influences the way in which the CEU [Roma] students perceive and perform their ethnic Roma identity, but also to see how they engage with the diasporic CEU space, while being part of a diasporic ethnic group [the Roma diaspora at CEU]. The research’ intention has been to see if the students develop a sense of displacement and in-between-ness, having in mind that the students come from different European countries, and therefore having different backgrounds, and become part of a diaspora group where they have to negotiate their Roma identity in order to fit the homogenous group that represents and unites them at CEU. I also wanted to see how the students negotiate their identity in response to the mainstream Roma discourse and how critical they are [or not] regarding some ‘traditions’ or customs that are considered to define the Roma identity. Some of these customs are being reinforced by the hegemonic discourse and have the tendency to treat unequal some members of the Roma

community, especially by the ones that are seen as belonging to the ‘traditional Roma communities’.

One of the hypotheses was that the hegemonic discourse that aims to ‘build’ a homogenous Roma ‘nation’ in general, and a community in particular in the context of CEU, has the tendency to divide the Roma people in sub-categories of ‘real’ and ‘not enough’ Roma. By generating this division, some members of the Roma [imagined] community will be subjects to discrimination because they would not perform the type of ‘Roma’ that is expected from them and by doing so, the multiplicity and fluidity of identities that one has is being ignored.

In order to be able to see the impact that the Roma discourse has on the enrolled [Roma] students in terms of how they build, perceive and perform their Roma identity, interviews have been conducted with some of the current students from both Roma Access Programs from CEU. The idea has been to engage the scholarly written literature on hybridity, diaspora, in-between-ness, and identity and how the formation of diasporic communities as a homogenous group fails to take into account the fluidity and multiplicity of identity[es]. The purpose of the interviews was to analyze the students’ shared experiences and to see the influence that a hegemonic discourse has on the formation and perception of their Roma identity as individuals, but also as members of a Roma community.

Based on the conducted research it can be said that some of the interviewed students expressed a strong sense of displacement and a feeling of in-between-ness on the one hand because of the programs’ emphasis on Roma identity and the students’ engagement with the new space, and on the other hand because of their lived experiences prior to their arrival at CEU. Some of the students have expressed the difficulties and challenges that they went through in the process of finding or accepting their Roma identity before coming to CEU.

The exposure that they are subjected to at CEU to be visible and active Roma ‘role models’ has been seen, by some of the students, to be too much emphasis on their ethnic identity.

The [Roma] identity emphasis has made some of the students to feel segregated at CEU and that is because the students associate their separation in the dormitory from the others with their Roma identity. The feeling of being segregated has also been related to the activities that they get involved with, either during classes or in their free time. This shows once again how embedded the Roma discourse is in the CEU diasporic Roma community.

The Roma hegemonic discourse also produces separations among Roma by dividing them into ‘real’ and ‘not enough’ Roma and this discourse was also present during the interviews. The students not only used the categorization of ‘real’ Roma in their discourses, but they have also ‘policed’ those who appeared to reject the Roma community.

The ‘Roma’ customs and the way in which the students negotiate them were also brought into discussion during the interviews and for some of the students they are relevant and define who Roma are, while for the others it was hard to associate discriminatory or oppressive practices to the Roma identity and culture. Virginity and arranged marriages were some of the customs mentioned by the students, customs that are considered to be representative and important in the Roma community, as it was the case among some of the interviewed female students, while the male students were the ones to question and to disagree with these customs. The patriarchal system that is legitimized in the Roma communities as a way to preserve the Roma identity is also legitimized among those who have left the community and therefore feel guilty for ‘abandoning’ their people. Supporting an oppressive system that targets specific members of the community is a way to show their sense of belonging to their [abandoned] community, along with negotiating the power structures of the community in order to gain certain ‘advantages’ inside of the family institution. One of the critiques of the Roma discourse that was brought during the interviews

was that finding the Roma identity and building up a Roma pride will not bring a social change for the Roma people or would not empower them.

The purpose of the research was to give voice to the students who receive visibility and are positioned as Roma role-models for the non-Roma in the CEU space, while at the same time are being targeted by the Roma discourse, and to see how the discourse and their positionality influences the way they negotiate their identity. The research is relevant in the gender studies area because the Roma discourse focuses only on ethnicity and lacks to take into account the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, nationality, and even class and the impact that other identities of a person have in the ethnic identity formation process. This study has bridged an inexplicable gap between literatures about identity among bi-cultural, diasporic populations in an era of globalization and scholarly literature about Roma which seem to stay within history and sociology literatures without engaging in productive dialogue with the very relevant theories about globalization and neo-Marxist theories about identity construction.

I consider that the emphasis on the ethnic identity should be used, as Ien Ang suggests, as a political act in order to gain recognition and representation in different social, economic, and political structures, rather than reproducing hierarchies within the ethnic group which would further lead to other forms of discrimination against the Roma ethnic people, but this time from within the Roma community. Furthermore, a good way to emphasize the ethnic identity, without excluding those who lack some ‘characteristics’, would be Tommie Shelby’s approach of a ‘common oppression theory’ which focuses on a shared discrimination, marginalization and racial inequalities that the group members have been targeted by.

Although the research has reached its aims and the findings are relevant in terms of how the programs can improve their structures in order to create a more welcoming space for

the Roma students, the limitations of it have to be considered as well. Unfortunately, not all the enrolled Roma students in the RGPP and RELP programs could be interviewed<sup>20</sup> and therefore the research does not give voice to all the enrolled Roma students from CEU. Therefore, the intention of this research is not to generalize the findings as representatives for all the students attending the two programs. Also it has to be mentioned that the programs' coordinators, CEU staff members, and other Roma representatives who support the Roma discourse are not given a position or voice in the conducted research and therefore the research is partial. Nevertheless, this can be a start point for future researches that will help to understand better the importance of the existence of programs such as RGPP and RELP, why we need a hegemonic Roma discourse, what are the effects of the discourse and how it could develop in a form that would be more inclusive and less harmful for those Roma who do not fit into the category of 'real' Roma.

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<sup>20</sup> The process of interviewing the students was based on contacting all the enrolled students via email and depended on whoever was willing to offer an interview.

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### *Website links*

<http://rap.ceu.hu/>

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