Roma Feminist Practice: An annotated interview with Giuvlipen theatre artists Arhanghela, Mihaela Drăgan, Nicoleta Ghiță, and Zita Moldovan

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Abstract: Giuvlipen is the first Roma feminist theater group and multidisciplinary collective in Romania, where the institution of Roma slavery lasted almost 500 years. The discussion among its two founding members (Mihaela Drăgan and Zita Moldovan) and two collaborators (Arhanghela and Nicoleta Ghiță) lays out the historical and present context of racism, persecution, and discrimination, as well as Giuvlipen's rationale for its Roma feminist approach inclusive of a variety of women. They explain how Giuvlipen employs an aesthetic of empathic dramaturgy, joyful music, and bold fashion as a tactic that reclaims their heritage to contest the present and reimagine the future. Giuvlipen's Roma feminist theatre references feminist, queer, and BIPOC standpoints and artistic practices, adapts these international critical discourses and practices to resonate with the Roma context, and pioneers a unique type of intersectional feminist art.

Keywords: intersectionality, feminism, Roma theatre, Roma feminism, Giuvlipen.

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Background to Roma feminist theatre

Wallachia and Moldavia, the two principalities that united in 1859 to form an initial territorial version of modern-day Romania,[1] enforced Roma slavery on the largest scale in Europe.[2] Hence, a discussion of contemporary Roma theatre cannot ignore the history of exploitation and racialization of Roma by the Romanian elites and state. Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă refer to the Roma population in Romania as an "internal colonial Other."[3] While the Romanian institution of slavery operated differently than plantation slavery imposed on distant colonies, it extracted labour and produced wealth just as successfully within the local context. Beginning with the fourteenth century, historical records show Wallachian and Moldavian princes and boyars gifting Roma slaves to Orthodox monasteries. Listed in official documents as the personal property of princely rulers, monasteries, or boyars, Roma slaves worked primarily as craftsmen, having skills that the Romanian agrarian population lacked. In one of the few extant Romanian studies, historian Viorel Achim recognizes that "slavery was an integral part of the social system of the Romanian principalities from their beginnings until the middle of the nineteenth century."[4] In the nineteenth

1. Transylvania joined Romania in 1918, following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian empire. While Roma were not enslaved in Transylvania under the rule of the empire, they were subjected to the aggressive policies of assimilation and erasure of Romani language and identity initiated by Austrian emperors Maria Theresa (1717-80) and Joseph II (1741-90).

2. Jacob Mikanowski writes that "in the Balkan and especially in the Romanian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, most Roma were enslaved." Jacob Mikanowski, *Goodbye Eastern Europe: An Intimate History of a Divided Land* (London: Oneworld, 2023), 141.

3. Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), 187.

4. Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History*, trans. Richard Davies (Budapest, New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 34.

century, the business of slavery led to notorious, large-scale slave markets in Bucharest, until slavery was abolished in 1856. After emancipation, many Roma found a living in rural and urban areas by continuing to practice traditional trades. Yet with growing industrialization and the replacement of artisanal goods with manufactured goods, the loss of income previously earned through crafts and small trading led to an economic and social decline.

Despite 500 years of slavery, the Holocaust, and attempts at assimilation in Transylvania during the Austro-Hungarian empire and, again, during the Romanian Communist regime,[5] even today the Roma barely feature in school textbooks, in economics, religion, literature, or art classes, unless making brief appearances as stereotypes. When Roma slavery is typically given a brief mention in Romanian history textbooks, it is referred to with the archaic, Slavonic name "robie" that students do not conceptualize as slavery. Unsurprisingly, Jacob Mikanowski calls Roma slavery "one of the most understudied subjects in all European history."[6]

Among the traditional occupations practiced by free and enslaved Roma, in Romania as well as in other European countries, feature prominently those related to the performing arts.[7] Local populations often hired Roma entertainers, including dancers, musicians, acrobats, and comedians, particularly during communal events and celebrations. Even today, Roma musicians invariably enliven Romanian weddings. Mihai Lukács notes that the popular theatre performers in pre-modern Romania, from court jesters to puppeteers, were Roma slaves.[8] Gabriel Ban begins his account of the history of institutionalized Roma theatre in modern Romania with the year 1933 that saw the founding of the General Association of Roma in Romania [Uniunea Generală a Romilor din România], shortly followed in 1934 by the first recorded event of a theatre show in Romani.[9] The viral infection of the Romanian public sphere with racist and eugenic discourses, the rise to power of a Fascist regime, quickly followed by the organized deportation of twenty-five thousand Roma to genocidal camps in Transnistria in the 1940s, cut short the late nineteenth-century to early twentieth-century Roma movements. Next, the Romanian Communist regime that came to power in the late 1940s foregrounded an anti-racist discourse, but in practice favoured assimilationism. Ban highlights the 1948 modification of the Law of Theatres, which decreed the institution of ethnic minority state theatres (like the Jewish Theatre in Bucharest and the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj) but left out any mention of a Roma State Theatre, even though the Roma represented the second largest minority. The Romanian state enforced the sidelining omission even though local Roma organizations lobbied for a public cultural institution following the USSR model of the Roma State Theatre in Moscow founded in 1931. Over the next forty years "no official documents mention Roma actors nor any Roma theatrical activity in Romania."[10] Fearing further marginalization, Roma artists did not openly declare their ethnic background. Starting with the 1990s, however, Roma artists began again to shape a Roma cultural movement. Following a similar trajectory as other Roma pioneers in the early 2000s, Zita Moldovan left her acting job in a Romanian national theatre to dedicate herself to artistic and activist projects with and for Roma communities. A strong, socially oriented Roma theatre movement coalesced over the past two decades outside mainstream Romanian theatre institutions around various projects and central figures like Mihaela Drăgan, Zita Moldovan, Alina Șerban, Ionuț Oprea, Mihai Lukács, Alexandru Fifea, and Andrei Șerban. In the 2010s, Drăgan and Lukács renewed their lobbying efforts for the institution of a Roma State Theatre. In a 2017 interview, Drăgan shared how the Romanian Minister of Culture told her that a Roma theatrical tradition does not exist in Romania.[11] To date, there is no publicly funded performance arts institution in Romania that supports the production and development of Roma theatre.

The discrimination against Roma cultural movements forms a mere chapter in the larger story of the systemic state abandonment, and even oppression, of Roma communities. In the history of organized pushback, the most underrepresented members of Roma communities have been women and other groups experiencing multiple

5. Daniel Iftene shows how the culture industry, represented in his analysis by Romanian cinema, supported the assimilation efforts by "presenting an idealized vision of a unified national identity that overshadowed the diverse ethnic realities of the country." Daniel Iftene, "National Minorities in the Contemporary Romanian Cinema: From Cheap Exotism to Self- Representation," *Transilvania*, no.9 (2024): 46.

6. Mikanowski, *Goodbye Eastern Europe*, 141.

7. German literary historian Klaus-Michael Bogdal lists as occupations performed by Roma across Europe the following: seasonal "harvest labour, ambulant trade in self-made wares, repair services such as mending kettles and sharpening knives, festive music and theatrical performances." In Klaus-Michael Bogdal, *Europe and the Roma: A History of Fascination and Fear*, trans. Jefferson Chase (London: Allen Lane, 2023), 248.

8. Ionuț Dulămiță, "Un teatru rom pentru România," *Scena9*, October 12, 2017, https://www.scena9.ro/article/un-teatru-rom-pentru-romania. All links accessed March 27, 2025.

9. Gabriel Ban, "O recuperare a istoriei teatrului rom din România," *Scena.ro*, February 13, 2022, https://revistascena.ro/arte/dosar-teatrul-rom-aici-acum/, 14.

10. Ban, "O recuperare," my translation, 15.

11. Dulămiță, "Un teatru rom pentru România."

layers of marginalization, such as sexual minorities and disabled Roma. Roma activism entered the European public and political scenes as early as the nineteenth century, yet it was typically spearheaded by men. Nicoleta Bițu writes how Roma women activists that mobilize communities and lobby for policies predominantly continue to do so under the shadow of anonymity and lack of recognition.[12] Bițu identifies the year 1998 as the beginning of a Romanian Roma feminism, trans-nationally connected from its very beginnings, occasioned by a first European conference of Roma women that established a network between activists and scholars.[13] Yet the first (and still only, as far as I know), statedly Roma feminist organization, E-Romnja, appeared in Romania only in 2012.

Given the shared past of racialization and enslavement still shaping the present, as well as the patriarchal impact both external and internal to Roma communities, Romanian Roma feminism openly declares its affinity with Brown and Black feminism and an intersectionalism attuned to the interplay between racism, sexism, homophobia, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism.[14] As such, Roma feminist discourse often clashes with the non-intersectional approaches taken by anti-racist Roma men and white Romanian feminists.[15] Like Bițu and other Roma feminists, Alexandra Oprea articulates a searing critique of a systemic obfuscation of issues pertaining to Roma women, such as "early marriage, lack of access to decent labour, healthcare, and education, and increased vulnerability to domestic violence," both in Roma and feminist movements in Romania.[16] Oprea explains this exclusion against the background of renewed European efforts to segregate Roma from majority white populations, "by pushing them back to Eastern Europe" from Western European countries, and relegating them to peripheral ghettoes in Eastern European towns, like those in Romania.[17] As a result of growing racism, there's a "rigidification of minority culture" as an entrenchment along conservative and patriarchal norms that perceives feminism as an outside threat.[18] Oprea sensitively explains (without condoning) why it is difficult for Roma women to take anti-patriarchal positions critical of Roma men, since the rhetoric of unity for "a nation without territory" is particularly strong "in the face of oppression by majority society."[19] Roma feminists "risk ostracism" when they address issues not pertinent to heterosexual, male Roma, issues perceived as "a ploy to divide the community and detract attention from the 'universal' problem of racism — as though racism is experienced by all members of the community in similar ways."[20] At the same time, the spectacular rise of the extreme right across the EU countries also impacted mainstream feminist discourse in Romania, which "sought to distance itself from 'multiculturalism' (read Roma) both of which have been attacked by the Right under the banner of opposing political correctness."[21] As such, "feminist discourse [in Romania] in fact serves only to advance the rights of privileged white women."[22]

As a white, almost femme, Romanian woman, I must be aware that I am in a "dangerous position of speaking for others whose circumstances [I don't] fully comprehend."[23] So I've reached out to four Roma artists that appeared in Giuvlipen theatre productions and centred their voices through an interview. Arhanghela is a multidisciplinary artist who acted in the show *Trauma Kink*. She is about to launch a multi-episode video series about drag culture in Romania. Mihaela Drăgan writes as well as directs many Giuvlipen plays, and often acts in them. Nicoleta Ghiță started her career as a singer-songwriter before acting in Giuvlipen productions. Ghiță and Drăgan perform as Kali and Niko G., a musical duo, and launched a feminist trap album in 2022. Zita Moldovan is an actress and fashion designer who makes many costumes for Giuvlipen projects. She is also well-known for hosting for thirteen years a TV program focused on Roma culture.

Founded in 2014 by Drăgan and Moldovan, Giuvlipen prides itself on being the first Roma feminist theatre group in Romania. In its ten years of existence, Giuvlipen produced thirteen theatre shows, along with other projects such as experimental films, TV documentaries, and interview series. Giuvlipen counteracts the racism,

12. Nicoleta Bițu, "Femeile rome si feminismul" ["Roma Women and Feminism"], *Perspective politice*, 5, 2, (2012), 135.
13. Bițu, "Femeile rome si feminismul," 140.
14. My main source of Roma feminist thought has been the online archive Romnja Feminist Library at https://romnjafeministlib.com/, a project co-founded by Aldessa Georgiana Lincan.
15. For a highly influential account of the marginalization of women of color (particularly queer ones) from social movements, see the collection in Cherrie L. Moraga and Gloria Anzaluda, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press [1981] 2002).
16. Alexandra Oprea, "Re-envisioning Social Justice from the Ground Up: Including the Experiences of Romani Women," *Essex Human Rights Review* 1, no. 1 (2004): 33.
17. Alexandra Oprea, "Romani Feminism in Reactionary Times," *Signs* 38, no. 1 (2012): 14.
18. Oprea, "Romani Feminism," 14.
19. Oprea, "Re-envisioning Social Justice," 33.
20. Oprea, "Re-envisioning Social Justice," 34-5.
21. Oprea, "Romani Feminism," 18.
22. Oprea, "Re-envisioning Social Justice," 35.
23. Oprea, "Re-envisioning Social Justice," 39.

misogynoir, homophobia, and transphobia of mainstream Romanian society with strong representations of Roma cis and trans, straight and queer women. Their work boldly confronts social issues within Romanian and Roma communities, from evictions and official policies of ghettoization to the practice of underage marriages. Giuvlipen mounts a resistance against past persecution and present discrimination that manifests through frank texts and performances of an elaborate visual, aural, and poetic beauty.

Below is an edited transcript of our conversations. I video-chatted with each interviewee separately and then compiled their responses, making appropriate selections approved by the Giuvlipen artists.

Interview

Giuvlipen shows present a diversity of feminine characters: queer and straight women, cis and trans women. In what way does Giuvlipen embody a Roma feminism similar to Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's idea of Black Femme-inism?[24] Conversely, what is your relationship to Romanian white feminism?

Mihaela: I resonate a lot with that idea of Black Femme-inism because Giuvlipen is an intersectional feminist group where the LGBTQIA+ aspect is important. The concept "feminism" didn't exist in the Romani language, so we invented it: "giuvlipen." "Giuvli" means "woman" and "pen" is the suffix typically added to designate abstract collective nouns. I don't have a strong connection with Romanian white feminism. Many tend to be a TERFs [*trans-exclusionary radical feminists*], often taking transphobic or sex-work-phobic positions. There's definitely also an ethnic dimension related to the fact that we are racialized women. We are more connected globally with other feminists of colour than to mainstream white Romanian feminists.

Arhanghela: That's what I found very cool about Giuvlipen, this femme spiderweb and how they practiced self-representation. I didn't think that something like this existed in Romania.

Zita: It was important for us to have a diversity of voices and not fix Roma feminism in one direction only. Feminism should talk about what it means to be a woman from all possible perspectives. If someone defines herself as a woman, that means she belongs with us. It doesn't seem to me that a feminism which inserts distance between women honours the spirit of feminism. That's a branch of white feminism that has the privilege to talk only about themselves.

It's amazing that you coined words like "giuvlipen." Are there any other words in Romani or Romanian that designate a feminist practice or challenge codes of femininity and masculinity?

Mihaela: I can't think of many terms. But I'm thinking now of Stela's wedding. She is a Roma lesbian on the butch side who married her femme girlfriend, also a Roma woman. Same-sex marriage is not legalized in Romania, but they had a proper Roma wedding with all the works, with guests, a wedding dress, and lăutari [*the Roma clan of professional musicians*]. I found it funny that when the lăutari made song dedications, they didn't know how to refer to Stela, and kept calling her "ginerică" [*the diminutive form of "groom"*]. Until she had enough of it and told them to stop [*laughter*]. For gay men there's the word "bulangiu" used by Romanians too, but it comes from Romani where "bulă" means "ass." There's currently a lot of reclamation of these pejorative words by the gay community. What's also interesting is that when Nicoleta and I perform, many people notice a butch-femme aesthetic at play, but appearances are deceiving. I'm a queer femme and she is a straight butch woman. It's just her style, that's how she feels good.

Nicoleta: I hung out a lot with boys since childhood. That's where I felt safer. Some people started to gossip about it at some point, imagining all sorts of sordid situations. But when they saw how much my friends respected me, their stereotypes got shaken a bit. They still look at me differently though. So people don't misunderstand our relationship, my friends refer to me as "our brother" rather than "our sister." At first this bothered me. I didn't want to be seen by them as a boy. But then they explained that they do it to clearly communicate to people that it's about a real brotherhood, without any romantic undertones.

Arhanghela: What comes to my mind is Naomi, a Roma trans woman and TV celebrity from around 2007-2008. She was very talented and cool, she sang superbly. They would invite her to TV shows and set her up to start fights. They'd mock her, asking her things like do you still have a wiener and stuff like that. Later, she disappeared, she wanted to cut all contacts with Romania. But her name, Naomi, became a slur for trans women: "you're a tranny,

24. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley defines a Black Femme-inist as "A Black-identified member of the LGBTQIA+ community who embodies resistive femininity," who "believes that the dismantling of misogynoir, femmephobia, and transmisogyny are necessary for Black freedom," who "can be cis or trans, binary or nonbinary, AFAB (assigned female at birth) or AMAB (assigned male at birth)," who "loves other Black femmes, erotically and politically." Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *The Color Pynk: Black Femme Art for Survival* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022), 5.

you're a Naomi." Then the queer community uses the appellative "fă," which is short for "fată" [*"girl" in Romanian*], but became somehow non-gendered, for everybody.

The issue of communal and reclaimed terminology leads me to the question of solidarity. Giuvlipen shows present a vision of necessary solidarity that is simultaneously difficult to achieve. In Sexodrom*, performers must compete to occupy the stage and tell their story.* Romacen *shows a group of Roma women from different European countries that band together online to hex and cyber-attack the capitalist patriarchy but disagree over what to do next. The two teenage Roma girls in* Viral on TikTok*—one a lighter-skinned, more critical of traditions, and the other a darker-skinned girl ready to marry a strict, religious Roma boy—have a friendship that is put to the test by their differences. In* Trauma Kink*, the racially and sexually diverse characters get together for a masterclass in BDSM and trauma and learn from each other, while also constantly throwing shade at each other. Why does Giuvlipen challenge feel-good, rainbow ideas of solidarity and what kind of solidarity does it propose instead?*

Zita: It's not easy to foster a space where a diversity of Roma women can tell their stories. All of us Roma women, regardless of our levels of education, carry a trauma that's hard to manage. But we didn't give up. As an actress, if you only talk about yourself on stage and turn yourself into a heroine it's good for the Roma community, because we need to see successful Roma, but only up to a point. It's not enough for people just to see that exceptional case, that person that fought hard and managed to succeed. It's not even true, because that person too got where they are because of the support from other people. We need to talk about the entire community and not focus on individualized cases. That battle in *Sexodrom* to get to the stage is exactly the reality of Roma actors that reach a mainstream stage only with great difficulty. Even though Mihaela and I are professional actresses, we struggled a lot until we received some recognition.
Mihaela: I'm more than concerned with solidarity, I'm obsessed by it. When we founded Giuvlipen we wanted to build a real collective, a real safe space, and discourage individualistic behaviours or the establishment of hierarchies. We failed many times before Giuvlipen to build a space where absolutely everyone could feel good. Being Roma, we have to struggle so much, and we each bring a whole baggage of trauma and rejections.
Arhanghela: Coming from struggle into solidarity doesn't happen by magic.
Mihaela: We don't just do artistic work. We must also perform emotional work and foster solidarity as a work in progress connected with a healing process. I'm looking to develop actual, concrete solidarity built through direct action and behaviours. If I say I'm in solidarity with transgender people, then I'm inviting in my group a transgender person, I try to offer them a platform to express themselves and their art. The women in *Romacen* do wrong by each other, but that was the plan of the white enemy: to divide us to the point that we hurt each other so much that we imagine a negotiation is impossible. I'm trying to find that answer, how can we renegotiate our relationships, how we can reunite as a community even if we've hurt each other so much.

I admire in your dramaturgy, Mihaela, how gentle you are with all your characters, how you try to understand where they're coming from. They hurt each other, but you treat them all with care. And you don't favour one type of character over the other, tending to expose the blind spots of each positioning while celebrating their strengths.

Mihaela: I never give too much space to one character, I always try to create an equilibrium, avoiding traditional distinctions between main and secondary characters. If a character is in the play, it's there to say something, not to serve as a subordinate to other characters within a structured power dynamic. Of course, there are power relationships in the narrative, but not in the dramaturgy.
Nicoleta: The way in which Miha writes wrestles with how reality actually is. She lays it all out, with the good and the bad. The characters I play connect with my own reality. In *Romacen*, I'm afraid of the dark, but I must use the dark and make it a part of myself if I want to be a powerful witch. This resonated with me because all my life I was afraid of loneliness. I'm the type of people-oriented person always wondering what others expect from me and how I can give it to them, to the point that often I forget who I am and what I want. When I rented my own apartment, I found out that loneliness is good for me sometimes. *Viral on TikTok* presents stories from my own neighbourhood, Ferentari, a ghetto-like part of Bucharest. I married when I was thirteen, but not with a Roma guy, with a Romanian from Moldova. I wanted to do it, even though my family didn't want me to marry so young and his family didn't approve of me being Roma. There were all sorts of conflicts from the start. I see myself and my sisters in *Viral on TikTok*. I see the neighbourhood's bullying and mistreatment of girls. But you find these stories not just in Roma communities. I used to blame the neighbourhood, thinking we lack education. There's some truth

to that, but I saw the same behaviour once I started traveling to foreign countries and other Romanian cities. These reactions connect to toxic masculinity and to how women internalize and propagate these ideas like a woman must be a woman, a man must be a man and they have the power, because God said this and that and so on.



Fig. 1 Arhanghela (centre) in *Trauma Kink*. The other performers, from left to right, are Kitty Rhea, Zita Moldovan, Răzvan Rotaru, and Mihaela Drăgan. Photo by Anastasia Atanasoska. Courtesy of Giuvlipen.

Yet despite dealing with heavy themes imbued with suffering, trauma, and oppression, I only saw powerful Roma characters in Giuvlipen shows. Sometimes, characters actively reject the audience's pity, saying things like "I am not a victim," like Arhanghela does in Trauma Kink*. Why is this move important to Giuvlipen and how do the characters find the strength to manifest humour, joy, and pleasure?*

Mihaela: It's a conscious choice. Being reduced to victims is dehumanizing. Of course, the victim identity sticks to us because of our history of persecution, but what is there to explore beyond this. The fact that we are still here—despite slavery and the Holocaust and all the attempts to make us disappear—is telling us that a big part of our story is resistance too. Part of the healing process is to think of ourselves as resilient. We are here in this world to enjoy our lives. To thrive, not just survive. Which is why I focus on the celebration of our identity, on pleasure, on joy through dance and music. There is a lot of joy in Roma culture. Being well as a racialized person is already a win, it's a form of resistance.
Zita: From the beginning we employed comedy while dealing with heavy topics. As a theatrical mechanism, humour helps us as actresses also to deal with the themes we breach, to manage trauma. The Romani language, like our culture, has been preserved through oral traditions. It's a culture of resistance.
Nicoleta: Audiences first look and see the problems and then you show them the strength. They see that these characters, as imperfect as they are, have power, or can find power. It's also power through vulnerability. It's an attitude, a sensibility, a courage to say things. Even as an actor, talking about some topics can pierce you through the bone. It was very hard for me, for example, to play the scene with Giovanna from *Viral on TikTok*, where I talk about how she was raped and then the rapist's family came to propose a wedding. I think of all the girls that got raped and what they went through. I had a friend too that was raped and like Giovanna in the play, she didn't want to talk to me anymore, she wouldn't come out of the house. In rehearsals, I kept crying during the scene. I rehearsed it a lot, I allowed myself to cry whenever it came over me, and after a while I found the strength to play the scene. I surprised myself with my own strength, with how I managed to play the scene well.
Arhanghela: Mihaela asked me how I want my character in *Trauma Kink* to appear. I told her that I don't want to talk again about how trans I am. I asked her not even to mention that I am Roma. I'm playing a white character. I was, fuck it, can't trans people just live without being reminded all the time what we have to go through? Not

that we shouldn't talk about it at all, but we can't let it take over our whole existence, we can't let it define us. I adore my monologue in *Trauma Kink*: "I don't want to be a victim, I don't want to portray trauma, I'm sick of talking about transphobia and discrimination." I said that to Mihaela, and she put it in my monologue. I wanted to act in a triumphant villainess role, not in the role of a victim.

Talking about pleasure and strength leads me next to questions regarding beauty. Giuvlipen shows are aesthetically lush, employing music, dance, and bold visuals. The Roma have a rich history of fashion and self-presentation connected to the idea of beauty as a method of resistance.[25] After emancipation, many of the thousands of propertyless Roma freed without any compensations flowed out of the Romanian principalities in search of a livelihood. There is a historical account of a group of Kalderash Roma staging a grand entrance in Warsaw in the 19th century looking fabulous: "The women wore golden earrings and necklaces made out of Austrian silver thalers, paired always [...] with something red: red kerchiefs, red dresses, red coral necklaces, and red ribbons woven into their braids. The men [...] wore special jackets ornamented with buttons of hammered silver, each the size of an egg."[26] I am moved by this historical anecdote imagining these recently freed people who used fashion to say "Here I am, see me, I am free." Today though, white Romanians tend to deride Roma aesthetics, blaming it for being too gaudy, loud, too colourful, too excessive. How do you reclaim Roma aesthetics? How do you use beauty to assert freedom? What are some of the "fashion metaphorics"[27] you employ in Giuvlipen projects?

Arhanghela: Welcome to my life! [*Laughter*] The practice of beauty is a more non-conflictual form of resistance. Not without its dangers, but basically, you're working on yourself. What can you do if you can't change the people around you? You work on yourself. I made myself into the superheroine I needed in my life. I created her for myself. And I embrace the excess, I love it. These earrings that are too big: fuck it, I love them, they're mine. Loving something unconditionally becomes a tool for empowerment. Although it's not my only source of inspiration, I draw on Roma aesthetics. I admired my aunts with their long, black hair, their jewellery, the care they took for how they presented themselves, their fashion choices that weren't ordinary, like the rhinestone blouses and the leopard print high heels. I like to be grand and maximalist, it's a love letter to myself, I'm giving my inner child what they missed. When you feel threatened in society, you have two options: becoming invisible or going full on. Yes, it's connected to freedom, to not having to obey anyone, to pampering oneself by piling jewellery, chains, a huge cross. There's an exuberance there, a joy.
Mihaela: Roma culture has a glorious aesthetic of excess—extra colour, patterns, jewellery, architecture, furniture, carpets. The Roma give importance to themselves in a world where they are not appreciated, where they are not valuable, so they literally put value on themselves. I like extravagance. I go for expressive forms, maximalism, a lot of performativity. Zita's bold designs complement Giuvlipen's overall work of occupying space. Roma aesthetic is an aesthetic that occupies the space. This is why it's so ridiculed by the majority. They feel that it's invasive.
Nicoleta: Roma were considered untouchables. Wearing gold, a precious metal, boosts pride. It boosts your self-confidence to be adorned with it. I feel like I have a superpower when I wear the clothes Zita makes for me.
Zita: There's a preconception that fashion belongs to the rich and that a disadvantaged culture cannot reach the fashion standards of Paris, Milan, and so on. But the big fashion houses, like Dolce&Gabbana and Cavalli, borrow elements from our culture. The problem is not that they borrow from us, but that they do not credit Roma culture, they don't mention it, they don't take a stand when Roma people are discriminated. So, then it's important that we, Roma, do fashion and say, hey, this belongs to us. I draw on traditional Roma culture but bring the clothes into the present day so people can wear them on the street. Precisely because I want our culture to gain visibility. Roma culture isn't just old, it's also alive and contemporary. I created some collections, like Loly, that can be worn by Roma and non-Roma alike. Non-Roma can wear Roma garments with dignity, respecting our culture, talking about our culture. You just can't slap on a long skirt and go to a festival. You can't dress as "gypsy" for Halloween. Our culture is not a costume. "Loly" in Romani means "red" and it signifies life, strength, and resistance. That's what defines Roma culture. We, Roma, didn't have fashion designers. I started creating Roma fashion without previous models from which to draw on. Same with Giuvlipen. There were no Roma theatres. We are pioneers. It's very hard to build something from scratch. We make an aesthetic theatre. We focus on costumes, scenography, makeup, music, dance—they all work together as a whole. Because we like beauty. All those traditional costumes were very luxurious too, very ornate. Even today, Roma like luxury, like having tons of jewellery, and embellished, sparkly clothes. A tumult

25. Christina Sharpe, "Beauty Is a Method," *e-flux,* 105 (December 2019), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/105/303916/beauty-is-a-method/, accessed 27 March 2025.
26. Mikanowski, *Goodbye Eastern Europe*, 143-4.
27. Tinsley, *The Color Pynk*, 14.

of luxury. The ornate architectural style, it's also a statement. Roma were a nomadic people, they'd set up tents and were often driven away from where they set up camps. Now, when we get to have our own land, we want to show that it's our land. We make the houses as big as we can and decorate them as much as possible, so they know we're here. Same with that anecdote about the entrance in Warsaw. It's about visibility. We are here, do you see us? Roma are usually invisible in European countries, they were made to be invisible and negligible. So then there was always this thing, hello, do you see us, we're dressed in red and other bold colours, we're wearing all our jewellery, this is our house, is big, it's seven stories high but we live in one room only. There's trauma there too.



Fig. 2 Nicoleta Ghiță wearing a design by Zita Moldovan. Video still by author from Episode 7, "No Respect for My Haters" of the video monologue series *Resistance is a Girl who Changes the World* that can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eA6MaD5NiBA. Courtesy of Giuvlipen.

How about the music that's always present in your shows? What role does it have? What does music mean to you?

Nicoleta: The story pushes people out of their comfort zones and the music brings them back to us.
Mihaela: The moment of music is a moment of relief, of processing what was heard. Sometimes I feel that a lot is being said and the audience needs a moment of relief to process. Or it's simply a moment of joy and pleasure.
Nicoleta: Music means a lot to me. My brother is a professional lăutar. He was very appreciated in the community and I started singing as a kid observing that and seeking attention for myself. Then I became very passionate about music and it helped me a lot because in the fifth grade I was dealing with depression and problems at school. I was attending a centre for alternative education. To draw in kids from the street, they offer a lot of activities and that's how I took theatre and music classes. The centre helped me sort myself out. When I was fourteen, the theatre instructor, Ionuț Oprea, told me, hey, you're a good writer, why are you singing other people's songs and not writing them yourself. I needed a lot of validation to gain some confidence. Because of the society we live in, it is hard for us to gain confidence in ourselves and our abilities. But I started to write my own songs and to perform publicly. Miha saw me perform, liked me, invited me to join Giuvlipen. I don't have a clearly defined musical style. I think a complex artist tries her hand at different genres. We did rap, trap, RnB. Since I didn't go to music school, my method is to pick a beat and then write according to what the beat allows me to do. I discovered that I do drill, RnB, trap, boom bap, and other styles in this hip-hop zone. I feel closest to manele [*contemporary pop music, similar to turbo folk, sung mostly by Roma artists*] and rap because of their narrative dimension, how they talk about people and their stories. I started with manele.
Mihaela: In our last play, the music we composed is Roma rap about our multiple identities, heavily influenced by our traditional music, characterized by folkloric beats, the violin, and Arabic-style Balkan beats. Rap is a genre that belongs to people of colour, it's a political music that became popular worldwide. Although my background is in the theatre, I recognize that music is a more accessible art form that can reach more people, whereas theatre is more elitist. Music has greater power.



Fig. 3 Zita Moldovan, Fatma Mohamed, and Mihaela Drăgan casting spells in *Romacen – The Age of the Witch*. Photo by Anastasia Atanasoska. Courtesy of Giuvlipen.

You're also reclaiming other aspects of Roma women's culture, such as fortune telling and witchcraft. Tell me about the "techno-witches."

Mihaela: Identifying with the witches is a political act in itself because of the long, racist history of their denigration. Roma witches continue to be ridiculed in mass media. People of colour didn't have other weapons. Witchcraft was a tool, a weapon fighting against tyranny. I reclaim witchcraft as part of our culture, this is a job that Roma women have done and do and we should not reject it simply because the gadje [*the white people*] told us that this is a negative practice. And the techno-witch is the symbol of Roma Futurism. She controls the technology, is in control of her destiny, and is leading the Roma towards a future free of oppression.
Zita: Roma witchcraft is an unrecognized job and craft that's stigmatized despite being a very old occupation. Big politicians and public figures go to have their fortunes told. Even Elena Ceaușescu had her own witch. But the job is stigmatized because it's practiced by Roma women.
Nicoleta: The techno-witches are the Roma women of the future. We are the future. It's a women-led revolution redefining the meaning of women and power. I want to defend all vulnerable people. In present-day Romania, the most vulnerable are Roma and LGBTQIA+ people. So I fight for all our rights.

What is the Romacen? Tell me about the world you dream of.

Mihaela: Romacen is a utopian and safe place where Roma women scientists invent ultra-technology to fight neo-fascist politics and achieve equality for humanity. I dream of a future where we have agency as Roma people. Where people of colour are in control. Because for too long, white people were in control and they failed us.
Arhanghela: The ideal world I always imagined was within me. It took a while to understand that, but the moment I acknowledged it was the moment I started living in it. My only dream would be to unite, to find and reconnect entirely with my soul gang.
Zita: We imagined this world of solidarity and penjalipen, where racism doesn't exist.
Nicoleta: "Penjalipen" means "sisterhood" and it's focused on solidarity and empathy. The Romacen is a world that doesn't judge women or tell us to shut up. I'd like us to have women in government with a feminist mindset, not with that toxic masculinity mentality. I dream of a revolution right here in Romania.



Fig. 4 Video still by author from the official music video of Niko G and Kali's "Cine face ură de rasă" ["Who commits race hatred"], available to watch on *YouTube* at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNAB4fYBvDo&t=9s. Courtesy of Giuvlipen.

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Roma feminist theatre in context

In the above interview, Giuvlipen artists demonstrate their application of feminist approaches both in their aesthetic choices as well as labour and production practices. As playwright, Drăgan avoids the patriarchal, dualistic dramaturgy that features heroes and villains. She replaces the hierarchical and individualistic model of secondary and primary characters with an arrangement of characters embedded in collectivities, taking care not to place any particular figure above others, either aesthetically or morally. Arhanghela reveals that Drăgan often writes the plays in consultation with the performers, aiming to honor their points of view. The feminist, and particularly BIPOC feminist agenda reveals itself in the collaborative working methods and the perpetually renewed efforts, as Drăgan says, to create "a real collective, a real safe space," despite repeated failures due to a legacy of trauma, hurt, and mistrust.

A particular Roma aesthetic peeks through in the tendency to breach the heaviest topics and ease their reception and collective processing with the help of comic relief, catchy music, and visual pleasure. Perhaps this reflects the historical legacy and know-how of operating as popular entertainers. Even though they employ music, Giuvlipen shows cannot be called musicals, as the song numbers intersperse with the dramatic scenes, often commenting on the action or contrasting with previous scenes. The songs operate changes in a show's tempo and atmosphere. Giuvlipen's use of musical numbers reminds of Bertolt Brecht's practice. In his turn, Brecht attributed such aspects of his aesthetics to Weimar popular culture and the variety shows of Munich's beerhalls. It remains unclear and unresearched to what extent German and European popular culture has been shaped by Sinti and Roma entertainers.

On a theoretical level, Giuvlipen's conception of aesthetics in relation to politics articulated in the interview brings to mind the writings of Black scholars like Saidiya Hartman or Paul Gilroy. Hartman's aesthetic-political position that beauty "is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence,"[28] expressing a "resolute, stubborn desire for an elsewhere and an otherwise,"[29] applies to many Roma practices, enlivened by "a tumult of luxury," as Moldovan memorably puts it. The profoundly non-utilitarian choices of bodily adornment when going hungry, wasting money on non-essentials, singing and dancing instead of working menial jobs belie classical liberal injunctions for moral citizenship. Drăgan echoes such aestheticization of political tactics when she says, "We are here in this world to enjoy our lives. To thrive, not just survive. Which is why I focus on the celebration of our identity, on pleasure, on joy through dance and music."

Paul Gilroy analyzed how Black political discourse has often, historically and presently, articulated itself through music and performance. Gilroy explained that in the context of slavery, which denied literacy and imprinted people

28. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), EPUB, Book 1, Ch. 2.
29. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, Book 1, Ch. 4.

with unsayable trauma, "art became the backbone of the slaves' political culture and of their cultural histories."[30] For Gilroy, "the mimetic, dramatic, and performative" tactics of this "politics of transfiguration"[31] merge the positive aspect of celebrating Black resilience through joy and aesthetic beauty with voicing "forms of yearning and mourning [...] and the remembrance of unspeakable terror."[32] Gilroy stresses the role of music and storytelling "in developing black struggle by communicating information, organizing consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity which are required for political agency."[33] Like Gilroy, Drăgan talks about rap as "political music" and as a political tactic employed by "the poor, exploited, and downpressed everywhere."[34] Ghiță also explains her mixing of manele and rap on the basis of "their [shared] narrative dimension, how they talk about people and their stories."

Ghiță and Drăgan's fusion of Roma and Black Atlantic music speak of Giuvlipen's standpoint of belonging to a BIPOC global movement, grounded in the local specificities of the Roma within the Romanian context. Giuvlipen's politics, which "is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about," connects to a Black discourse creatively merged with local practice and adapted to Romanian histories.[35] The bedrock of this rapprochement is a shared experience of slavery—the trauma of which originates the "unsayable claims to truth" and unspeakable experience expressed in artistic and performative political practices.[36] The major differences, as well as striking similarities, between the Western imperial practice of plantation slavery and the semi-peripheral Romanian institution of Roma slavery undergird Giuvlipen's positioning as racialized Roma artists within a dominant and oppressive white culture. Similarly, Aimé Césaire's conception of *négritude* reunited Black Africans and the Black Atlantic diaspora based on "a common experience of subjugation and enslavement."[37] Giuvlipen's affinity with Blackness stems primarily from this shared experience of slavery, rather than the historically shifting ideas of race based on skin color. Like Giuvlipen, I take Blackness and whiteness not as biological facts, but as historical constructs used to justify oppression. I find it important to stress the nature of this affinity, given that the Roma feminist movement is often sidelined not only in white, mainstream feminist discourse, but also in European BIPOC antiracism movements.[38]

Romanian slavery, centered on extracting artisanal labor, also sheds light on the history of Roma social organization in clans named after their labor specialization, such as the Kalderash, who served as blacksmiths. Drăgan's family hails from the clan of lăutari, or musicians, which for a long time was a profession reserved for Roma.[39] Like Gilroy's Black slaves and their descendants, the Roma also have a long tradition of surviving, materially and symbolically, through music-making. Although Drăgan believes that music has more reach and that the theatre currently operates as an elitist institution, her continued exploration of how sight and sound may combine with textual delivery resists the racist stereotype that Roma artistic gifts are limited to non-literate arts. In the dominant scientific and artistic repertoire of knowledge about the Roma, white specialists routinely marginalize and negate the ability of Roma to produce discursive knowledge about themselves.[40]

The centrality of the witch figure in Giuvlipen's repertoire constructs an articulate political critique through aesthetic means. For Drăgan, the witch is a promissory figure of Roma liberation. The figure is appealed to both symbolically, as a manifestation of feminine power, and in a historical materialist way, as a traditional craft performed by Roma women. The history of the profession charges the figure with its uncanny potentiality. During slavery and after, the vast majority of traditional Roma professions were performed by men, from metal work to horse-trading. As slaves, Roma women performed domestic labor as cooks, servants, or weavers. A Roma woman, either during the period of enslavement or after emancipation, had very few options that would liberate her from servitude and dependency to either white masters or male Roma. The one available option was fortune-telling, a traditional profession reserved for women. Ian Hancock explains the popularity of fortune-telling as a means of

30. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1993] 1999), 57.
31. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 38.
32. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 201.
33. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 36.
34. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 77.
35. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 37.
36. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 37.
37. Nick Nesbitt, *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Carribean Literature* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2003), 21.
38. See Oprea, "Re-envisioning Social Justice."
39. Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History*, 90.
40. Victoria Shmidt and Bernadette Nadya Jaworsky, *Historicizing Roma in Central Europe: Between Critical Whiteness and Epistemic Injustice* (London: Routledge 2021), 16.

subsistence by pointing out that it's a profession brought from India (where it's highly regarded), it ensures self-control over your work, it requires little and portable equipment (coming in handy where you're on the move), and it's a service that has always been in high demand from the non-Roma.[41] The power of the witch is thus hardly magical in the supernatural sense. Her power lies in her magical independence from wage labor, bosses, masters, and husbands. Romanian racists, both then and now, mock Roma fortune tellers while simultaneously urging the same women to get so-called real jobs. But can we "blame [these women] for their unwillingness to pretend that being conscripted to manual labor was opportunity, [...] for declining to be trained for servility?"[42]

Arhanghela, Mihaela Drăgan, Nicoleta Ghiță, and Zita Moldovan articulate a cogent, well-thought-through practice that stages key positions taken by a Roma feminist theatre. Their discourse and practice reference familiar feminist, queer, BIPOC standpoints and artistic practices, which they openly identify as sources of inspiration. At the same time, Giuvlipen is at the forefront of adapting these international critical discourses and practices to the local Romanian context and of fashioning a unique and distinct type of intersectional feminist art. The word "pioneer" popped up multiple times during the interview and my research on Roma cultural expressions. Roma feminist theatre is most certainly a force to be reckoned with on the European theatre scene.

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41. Ian Hancock, *We Are the Romani People* (Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002), 103.
42. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, Book 1, Ch. 5.