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Manele, symbolic geography and music cosmopolitanism in Romania

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Abstract

Manele has become the most successful Romanian music genre to emerge after 1989. Combining Southern Balkan, Turkish and Middle Eastern sounds, but also Euro-American pop and hip-hop influences and sung by mainly Roma musicians, *manele* are a symbol of the transition to democracy, with its re-examination of social and cultural values and its refashioning of national identities and ethnic hierarchies. This article investigates whether this hybrid musical genre has the potential to connect the Roma to a larger transnational network and, in so doing, offer the Roma a path towards fairer representation and equality and the opportunity for new cosmopolitan engagements. This, I argue, would benefit an ethnic minority for whom more traditional paths towards empowerment seem to remain closed. To this end, I explore media and public debates and conduct analyses of *manele* music and video clips to show how the genre challenges both Eurocentrism and localism and could be seen as a sign of democratization and an opportunity for those culturally and ethnically marginalized to force their way out of a subaltern position.

Keywords: *manele*; turbo-folk; Romania; Roma; cosmopolitanism, democratization

Introduction

Manele (singular *manea*) has become the most successful Romanian music genre to emerge after the fall of communism. Written and sung by primarily male musicians of Roma origin, *manele* combine traditional folk music (*muzică populară*) with

Gypsy rhythms (*muzică țigănească*) and 'Oriental' influences (*muzică orientală*), similar but still distinct from other forms of *turbo-folk* in the Balkans. *Manele* thus sit at the crossroads between past and present (the folklore of the state socialism system and current *etno* pop, a mix of folklore, disco and electronic instruments), and between several global influences, mainly Southern Balkan, Turkish and Middle Eastern, but also western, through their appropriation of western pop music and even American hip-hop (the last one evident in the music videos primarily). In other words, *manele* could be viewed as 'a meta-genre, a sort of musical "love child" fathered by globalization' (Feraru 2010: 101).

Initially underground and marginal, and thus reflecting the status of the Roma minority in Romania, *manele* have moved centre stage, partly due to their phenomenal commercial success, and partly because they reflect the new competing symbolic geographies and the new identities emerging after the dismantling of state socialism. *Manele* are seen to replicate the ambiguities of the transition process, which entailed a re-examination of social and cultural values. Though devoid of overt political messages, they have elicited controversy involving nationalists, traditionalists, Europeanists, modernizers, racists and human rights activists, to mention but a few constituencies, all debating the place *manele* should have in the new Romanian cultural patrimony. In this context, one of the more important questions this article raises is whether *manele* have the potential to connect the Roma to a larger transnational network and in so doing, offer the Roma a path towards fairer representation and equality. A secondary question would concern *manele*'s more recent move into the cultural mainstream through the appropriation and adaptation of various musical influences, as well as the shift towards more universal themes, away from those unique to the Romanian post-communist transition, which could result in new cosmopolitan engagements. This, I argue, would benefit an ethnic minority for whom more traditional paths towards empowerment seem to remain closed.

In order to investigate *manele*'s potential to bring emancipation for the Roma and forge a cosmopolitan outlook through music, I have explored academic, media and public debates, and conducted content analysis of ten video clips of recent *manele* songs, looking for the main themes covered by the lyrics, as well as the main visual elements which can give us a snapshot of the way the genre is currently evolving. Citing a local musician, Korzenszky describes *manele* as 'music from the East, image from America' (Korzenszky 2015: 47) and therefore one of the aims was to ascertain whether there was indeed a disconnection between the lyrics, traditionally about money, sex and enemies (Giurchescu and Rădulescu 2016: 31) and therefore specific to the Romanian context, and the images, inspired by the look and dance moves of classic MTV music videos or, more recently, American hip hop. The assumption was that local and global elements would be in ten-

sion and thus reflect the ambiguities and the shifting nature of this music genre. The content analysis was inspired by similar research conducted by Baxter *et al.* (1985) on MTV music videos, Qing *et al.* (2010) on the mix of local and global elements in major televised events, and Song and Lee (2012), who observed the way cosmopolitanism and cultural hybridity are expressed in magazine advertising.

I used the *Alege Muzica* (Choose the Music) website and selected the last ten *manele* songs added on the day (chosen in an aleatory way in June 2017). This website contains a huge amount of songs, 210 on the three pages I downloaded (out of a total of 88 pages dedicated to *manele*), with more added every day. As I had no control over the selection, the 'choice' being aleatory, all songs included in the sample belong to male singers, which reflects the dominance of male musicians in the genre, though women do feature to a certain extent and increasingly so. As the sample is small, the analysis can only indicate certain trends, in a genre that is constantly evolving and changing, even at a more rapid pace recently, as some *manele* specialists have pointed out (Rădulescu 2016). The analysis reveals that although *manele* do little to challenge the *status quo* of the Roma minority as a whole, there is cosmopolitan potential in the shift from local specificity to universality and hybridity.

Manele: social, cultural and political symbolic geographies

The Roma have had a continuous presence in Romania since the fourteenth century. Initially in collective slavery, they were emancipated in the nineteenth century (Achim 2004). Although written out of official history, interest in Roma communities has endured at the level of popular narratives, mostly linked to the more 'picturesque' aspects of their lives (Achim 2004: 2). All the while, their marginality has been perpetuated (Achim 2004: 6). Although the majority's collective imagination sees them as a homogeneous group, the Roma living in Romania are comprised of diverse groups or *neamuri* (clans), traditionally practising specific trades, some speaking a dialect of Romany, but many having Romanian or Hungarian as their first language, and being of different religions (Achim 2004: 212). In the absence of written records and a written history (see Fonseca 1996) almost a third have lost the knowledge of their original clan and now identify as Roma or Romanian/Hungarian (Achim 2004: 212).

The whole community amounts to approximately 500,000–800,000 people, according to various official figures, although unofficially 1,500,000 seems a more likely number (Achim 2004: 213). Traditionally isolated, fragmented and lacking a collective voice, after the end of state socialism Roma groups have acquired new leaderships eager to use distinctiveness and solidarity to make new social and

ethnic claims (Achim 2004: 215). Recognized as a 'national minority', the Roma have now parliamentary representation, guaranteed by the new democratic constitution. A continuous process of renegotiation between tradition and modernity is ongoing, with group solidarity being challenged by both internal and external forces. In this shifting landscape, music has remained for the Roma a constant form of escapism, an opportunity for identity expression, and also a professional opportunity for an ethnic minority that has suffered from systemic lack of education, chronic de-skilling and the absence of work opportunities in all other industries apart from music.

The hybridity of Roma urban music is well documented. As far back as 1984 Garfias commented on its fusion of Gypsy playing styles, the Turkish *makam*'s melodic quality, the western European harmonic system and Romanian folk sources (Garfias 1984: 86) characterizing *musică lăutărească* (music of the *lăutars*, the Roma musicians playing in a *taraf* or band). Although this composite urban music starts to emerge as a clearly circumscribed, yet largely underground, sub-genre in the 1980s, it was after 1989 that *manele* became a fully-fledged musical phenomenon and a box office success. They have managed to retain their Turkish roots going back centuries and the 'sensuous quality' of Turkish and Greek popular songs (Garfias 1984: 91) but now combine pan-Balkan pop music, local folk music and Euro-American influences (Giurchescu and Rădulescu 2016: 4). *Manele* have thus successfully appropriated and adapted South Slavic, Turkish and Middle Eastern sounds on the one hand, but also elements of European and American rock, disco, jazz, hip-hop and rap on the other (Beissinger 2005: 43). Paradoxically, *manele* could be considered to have a long history, but they are at the same time a recent synthesis and phenomenon (Stoichiță and de la Bretèque 2012: 326). Although it is generally believed that it is younger people with a low to medium level of education who enjoy this genre, their audiences are too big to encompass only this demographic and in fact include people with a wide range of backgrounds, mostly urban but also rural, men and women, young and old. Many are Romanian, *manele* being the main cultural tie symbolically bonding together majority and minority.

Since the 1990s, *manele*, like *turbo-folk* (the Serbian version, which is used as a general label for the genre) or *chalga* (in Bulgaria), have become indicators of the paradoxes of post-communist democratization processes (Statelova 2005; Buchanan 2006) and their study can bring us closer to understanding the role of music in political transitions (Buchanan 2006), particularly in expressing, but also re-crafting, new political ideologies. Already, *manele* hybridity could be seen as a first step in forging cosmopolitan engagements, where the 'other' is consistently placed on an equal footing. However, this emancipatory process is not without its challenges and detractors.

Re-nationalizing attempts (Brubaker 1995), typical to Eastern European nation-states after 1989, have determined fierce debates between Europeanists and traditionalists, publics in Romania and diasporic publics, elites and others, on what is 'national' culture and what constitutes 'good music' (Trandafoiu 2013). Mass media, and especially television, used to be the primary space where 'national' music was traditionally articulated and where various music genres from classical to pop and folklore negotiated their place within 'the hierarchy' (Udrea 2014: 36). Post-1989 liberalization has meant that many debates transferred initially to the pages of newspapers and then online (Trandafoiu 2013), where a lot of the 'new music' is promoted, circulated and consumed. This has meant that while the Romanian public broadcaster *TVR* (Romanian Television) continues to promote 'traditional' folklore as part of its obsession with authenticity (artificially reconstructed during socialism and now re-enacted), most musicians and publics have either migrated online (YouTube, new online commercial radio stations) or towards the new music-specific television stations such as *Etno*, *Favorit* and *Hora*, which broadcast *muzică populară*, a glamorized and modernized version of folklore (Udrea 2014: 45), but also *Taraf* and *Mynele TV*, which broadcast exclusively *manele.* This symbolic migration has challenged traditional hierarchies and has forced the re-examination of what constitutes 'national' culture, with the result that traditionally ignored or marginalized groups like the Roma can now make claims to be included into the new symbolic national landscape.

Widely performed and avidly consumed, *manele* nonetheless continue to endure stinging criticism and significant elite backlash (Levy 2002; Beissinger *et al.* 2016). The main concerns seem to be related to (lack of) 'authenticity' and (lack of) taste. Both these concepts are highly fluid and ultimately irrelevant to the actual music, its circulation, consumption and commercial success. While heated debates may carry on at the level of national cultural institutions, national media and the national music industry, large audiences still continue to enjoy *manele*, now a staple at parties, weddings and other social occasions. Voiculescu's fieldwork in Bucharest, for example, reveals that *manele* can no longer be circumscribed by the class, status or ethnicity of their creators or consumers and that 'anti-manelism' is better viewed as a media construction and a political discourse (2005: 270). Therefore such debates are highly relevant from an ideological viewpoint, with musical taste and quality crucial in understanding the refashioning of national and ethnic identities in post-communist Romania.

It is a reality that the genre has been dominated by musicians of Roma origin. Somewhat surprisingly, Feraru (2010) found no evidence of racism in the views of the educated Romanians he interviewed as part of his fieldwork into the way *manele* are perceived and received. In other words, the low cultural value accred-

ited to *manele* was not motivated by anti-Roma attitudes. However, as researchers we have to remain cautious about such claims. As professionals, with a fair level of education and knowledge about public debates, the interviewees would have been possibly aware of eventual accusations of racism and therefore preferred to focus on issues of perceived quality and taste. Other researchers have found that *manele* are viewed as 'a genre contaminated by ethnic associations, consumerism and unleashed capitalism' (Udrea 2014: 44). Such elitist and nationalistic reactions against *manele* (see Voiculescu 2005; Szeman 2013; Haliliuc 2015, among others), but also Bulgarian *chalga* (Levy 2002; Statelova 2005; Buchanan 2006), are not uncommon. Crucially, and thus proving their ideological intention, such debates remain constant while the music evolves, expands and democratizes. The unremitting associations between the music and the Roma, and between kitsch and lack of education, attempt to compromise *manele* promoters and supporters and capitalize on widespread anti-Roma sentiments, but no longer reflect rapidly changing realities.

A poignant example of symbolic exclusion is the attempt to preclude *manele* type songs from ever representing Romania in the (semi)finals of the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), as evidenced by national selection competitions in recent years (Szeman 2013). This is motivated by the attempt to restrict the definition of 'national' culture and music in order to protect Romania's pro-European cultural aspirations and its desire to belong to the larger Latin (Western European) family, rather than the Balkan one. Szeman recounts the failure of *manele*'s biggest star, Florin Salam, to qualify for the ESC in 2010 due to the 'racialized hierarchies of music genres' (Szeman 2013: 126). As Szeman rightly observes, while the Roma are highly visible as '*țigani*' (Gypsies), they remain invisible as citizens (Szeman 2013: 128) and are habitually placed symbolically outside national culture and the national imaginary, even when it comes to music, where the contribution of the Roma is informally acknowledged, but not officially recognized.

The exclusion of *manele* from national culture is also affected by the common yet erroneous association between Romanians and Roma by particularly western audiences. The Romanian majority usually retaliates by engaging in a process of collective forgetting and erasing the role of the Roma as contributors to national culture, while at an industry level, the appropriation of Roma music by non-Romani musicians and promoters has deprived Roma musicians of appropriate recognition (Silverman 2013). This sensitivity was apparent in the media reactions to another (actual) Romanian ESC entry in 2012. Mandinga's song 'Zaleilah', penned by former *etno* pop boyband member and lately *manele* singer and producer Costi Ioniță, was a fusion between Balkan brass and Latin American sounds, complete with Cuban musicians and Latin moves. Initially the song was viewed

positively. One of the main national newspapers, *Jurnal*, wrote in an article on 22 May 2012 that according to critical reviews, the song 'has the potential to become a hit not only in Europe, but worldwide, because the lyrics talk about love, a universal theme liked by everybody'. However, after finishing in twelfth place and therefore performing lower than expectations predicted, critics and public turned against the band and the national selection process. An online article posted on the popular ProTV station was entitled 'Mandinga at Eurovision 2012: The Chronicle of an Expected Disaster' (27 May 2012). Although the article focused mainly on political voting by various national electorates and the poor performance of the vocalist, out of the sixty or so comments posted by readers, about a fifth contained some form of negative reference to *manele*, such as: 'who thought we could conquer Europe with a *manea*?' (Vali); 'this is not a Eurovision song!!!!!! once more proof of how *manelistic* we are !!!!!' (Angi); 'the Romanian song is just a Latino *manea* of low quality' (Dadu); 'the song was an amalgam from other nations, without any sense, with no link to Romania' (Elodia); 'in Spanish, mixed with *manea,* did they think this would represent Romanians?' (ade); 'you can't go to Eurovision with a *manea* and expect to win' (sdhshgs); 'Latino Gypsification, beach music...how did it occur to you to send something like this to Eurovision? And we still have to be patriotic about it?' (andda); 'even Salam [Florin Salam, the most famous *manele* singer] could have sung that better' (danutzz).

Figure 1: Mandinga performing for Romania in the final of the Eurovision Song Contest 2012. The performance contained a mix of musical influences and instruments, old and new, designed specifically for the show. Source: Zimbio.com

Such comments attempted to extirpate the perceived foreignness of the music, with its borrowings from 'outside' but also from internal 'others', from the cultural national body. This stratagem becomes a form of nationalizing through symbolic purification. Paradoxically, these views may belong to the same people who sway happily to a *manea* tune at a wedding or tap their foot on the pavement when they hear it at the market. However, when it comes to representing Romanianness in a western European context, hybridity is seen as dangerous and too Balkan, hence negative.

Two conflicting identity approaches can be seen at work here: the symbolic elision of ethnic multiplicity by the nation-state and its associated national culture and the more inclusive approach to identity by Roma groups and especially Roma musicians. National elites continue to apply cultural marginalization and enforced alienation to a music phenomenon that is interpreted as threatening because of its shift from the margins into the mainstream, and continue to reproduce the historic stigmatization and marginalization of the Roma minority in Romania (Achim 2004). In contrast, Roma *manele* musicians show openness towards collaborations with ethnic Romanian musicians (such as Costi Ioniță, formerly a member of the *etno* pop boyband Valahia, now a successful *manele* writer, singer and producer), as well as inclusivity in their appropriation and adaptation of global sounds, instruments and music technologies.

While the cosmopolitan potential of *manele* is occasionally recognized because of the music's perceived hybridity, some critics point to the genre's 'use' of women and the problematic content of the lyrics. So, although Balkan hybridity could be seen as positive and even European to a certain extent, misogynism and hypercapitalist attitudes invalidate any Europeanist claims. Hipper (2010: 303), for example, argues that the values and principles embodied by *manele* sit in contrast with European Union values and therefore *manele* propose counter-norms, alternative 'ways of doing things' and their own elites, who challenge democratic elites. For Hipper *manele* represent a dangerous form of anti-establishment protest, which reduces the chances of successful implementation of EU-sanctioned democratic norms (2010: 305). Although Hipper is right to observe that the relationship between *manele* musicians and *interlopi* (Mafia-like bosses in the underground economy), evident in the system of dedications at parties as well as some *manele* lyrics, normalize unorthodox methods of getting ahead, it is debatable whether the more outrageous declarations, claims and spectacles offered by *manele* pose a real threat to democratic values in the long term. *Manele* lyrics do make a clear distinction between law-abiding characters and thieves and more recent ones reference the jail sentences 'bosses' have received lately. By mentioning the corrupt system and the unlawful means by which success can be achieved in the specific

transition context, *manele* have been providing a necessary social and political commentary. They have reflected rather than refracted the social reality. *Manele* thus 'express underground identity concerns, as well as social or more personal themes such as justice, equality, corruption, power and domination, fate and predestination' (Dragoman *et al.* 2013: 262).

These are important themes of the post-socialist transition, concerning citizens from the entire ex-Soviet bloc and especially the newly emerging 'underclass'. The transition has made many victims among those left behind by globalization and neo-liberal policies, a generation of relatively young people, not well educated or professionally skilled, who are the result of state socialism internal migration from villages to the urban high rises on the edge of cities. Their post-socialist experiences are not dissimilar to those of the Roma. They share the same symbolic rejection and marginalization, as well as the common experience of 'the system' and the need to 'defeat' it or at least 'cheat' it. In their case marginality may be spatial and economic, rather than ethnic, but the outcomes are the same: poverty and the dream of striking big, as well as a distrust of the state or 'the system'.

Another major criticism concerns the way women are underrepresented among *manele* singers and are sexualized and objectified in video clips (Giurchescu and Rădulescu 2016: 34). These claims are true, although female *manele* vocalists have been rising to prominence in recent years and have given more visibility to a larger variety of female representations, a trend that is likely to continue (Giurchescu and Rădulescu 2016: 35). However, one has to be cautious about this tendency. Many *maneliste* (female *manele* singers) are ethnically Romanian, not Roma, which means that specific Roma female voices and perspectives remain absent.

Further criticism is caused by the 'capitalism on steroids' traditionally displayed by *manele* video clips and lyrics. As Silverman in line with others observes, this allows the genre's critics to vilify Roma musicians for not contributing to the national cultural project and allying themselves with globalization forces (Silverman 2014: 196). It seems that until recently *manele* have been reflecting the impact of capitalism on public imagination and the refashioning of the value system after the dismantling of state socialism, but may now be moving out of that phase of conspicuous consumption and accumulation. The transition may not be over, but its more acute phase has ended, and *manele* are moving on. Furthermore, as the national imaginary seems impenetrable and unlikely even today to include the Roma, it is only natural that Roma musicians are looking outside, in an attempt to connect to other symbolic geographies via appropriation and adaptation.

At the moment, this path has not had a significant impact on the fortunes of the Roma community as a whole, or indeed all *manele* musicians (Tipurita 2016).

One has to acknowledge that despite commercial success, the social, economic and political status of the Roma has not changed (Silverman 2014: 197). As a community, they remain marginalized. Social mobility is individually, not collectively, achieved. Even when there is social mobility and capital accumulation, there may be no improvement in the way Roma ethnicity is perceived. National symbolic geographies and collective imaginings are not malleable enough yet to permit it.

Manele: potential cosmopolitan engagements with the 'other'

After the dismantling of state socialism, the Balkans were offered the chance of 'a new, far more western, and indeed global sense of identity', apparent in the modifications that have marked 'traditional' music and dance (Beissinger 2005: 43). 'Gypsy music', for example, through its incarnation as 'world music' and under the guidance of promoters and DJs from the field of electronic and dance music, now has the potential to create 'a Balkan cosmopolitanism, an alternative version of modernity, in tension with other forms of Western cosmopolitanism' (Szeman 2009: 99). *Etno* pop is another example of 'emergent Balkan cosmopolitanism' where the Ottoman legacy, socialism and new visions of modernity have created 'layers of cosmopolitanism' (Buchanan 2007: 260), discernible within the music. Cosmopolitanism is an ambiguous term that resists clear definition, but for both Szeman and Buchanan it seems to imply a sense of openness, a willingness to adapt to current trends and the ability to transcend locality. According to Szeman, 'the inclusion of genres like *manele* and traditional music from the Balkans in the Western club scene has blurred clear-cut distinctions between Western and local audiences' (2009: 112). Techno DJs like Shantel, whom Szeman discusses at length, break down 'the barrier of what is/what is not for the West, offering the Balkans as a whole and Balkan/Romanian Orientalist fantasies as exotic destinations' (Szeman 2009: 114). However, this may also cause some anxieties (as seen below) with regards to the reproduction of colonialism, despite initial cosmopolitan intentions.

Following Martin Stokes and Thomas Turino, Donna Buchanan's earlier work (2006), on Bulgarian music's role in nation-building during communism and immediately after, discusses cosmopolitanism as a translocal manifestation of musicians' lives. For her, as for Stokes and Turino, cosmopolitanism means the internalization of world trends that are not perceived as strange or foreign anymore, as they are adapted and imbued with local meanings and values (Buchanan 2006: 43). One could argue that musicians are, by the nature of their trade, cosmopolitan. Music appropriation and adaptation would naturally lead to what Beck called 'latent' or 'unconscious' cosmopolitanism (2006: 19). The difficulty is

to elicit in others a 'cosmopolitan outlook', an 'openness towards divergent cultural experiences' and a willingness to engage with the 'other' on an equal footing (Hannerz 1990: 239), which is the very definition of cosmopolitanism.

At first sight, the Balkans could be seen as the ideal place for such friendly encounters; however history tells us that this is not always so. While the hybridity of the Balkans has always held the potential for cosmopolitan exchanges, this opportunity is often missed. The liminality produced by the lack of symbolic boundaries and the shifting of real ones creates negative feelings (Haliliuc 2015: 294) towards what the Balkans represent. Balkanism, as a form of Orientalism, was imported and internalized by local elites. As a result, the Balkan stigma has been part of the nationalist rhetoric since the nineteenth century, set against the theme of Romanian exceptionalism. Often associated with both exoticism and backwardness, the Balkans have also been imagined as a bridge or a crossroads (Todorova 2000: 34). However, because the crossroads is an in-between space, a space of transition, it can often be viewed negatively. It not only spells precarity, but also relies on the acceptance of an East–West dichotomy (Todorova 2000: 98).

The tension between the cosmopolitan potential and the fear caused by hybridity and diversity is evident in the way *manele* are equally loved and hated. Voiculescu's fieldwork with musicians and producers, for example, reveals the opportunity for 'increasing social solidarity' (2005: 262). This is possible because

> *manele* have become not only a *regional* musical label but also a *global* discourse as a result of (a) the incorporation of post-socialist everyday experiences (flexible accumulation, international migration, the stories of success of the 'new rich' etc.), and (b) the appropriation of new sounds, music genres, fashionable patterns of dressing, etc. in *manele* (Voiculescu 2005: 264, emphasis original).

As Voiculescu points out, Roma music has always been a bridge between the Roma and the non-Roma, but the assimilation of global music trends has accelerated this tendency after the failure of state socialism (2005: 265). This is an opportunity for the Roma to continue to use the music strategically, to not only renegotiate their own economic condition and social identity, but also to negotiate between ethnic groups.

In spite of this, in some views, *manele* have divided more than they have united. Dragoman *et al.* point out that because *manele* express social concerns and therefore focus on mistrust and disengagement, it is unlikely that they might cause the consolidation of the public sphere (Dragoman *et al.* 2012: 127). Although this seems to be confirmed by the elitist reactions to *manele* discussed above, there is evidence of coming together too. *Manele* have united diverse groups of people around music sung in the same language (always Romanian) and reflecting the same social experience, such as the contradictions of the transition, with its new

freedoms encumbered by the acute lack of resources, and new economic based hierarchies, experienced by the majority of people in Romania.

As already mentioned and in line with moral concerns raised by cosmopolitanism theory (see Calhoun 2002), the way *manele* are promoted could be seen as potentially reproducing colonialism and Orientalism. Although she is aware of the cosmopolitan opportunities that the post-1989 opening towards the world represents, Szeman, for example, questions (artificial) Gypsification, the tendency to re-enact Balkanism and orientalize the Balkans from within, processes that might result in the (symbolic) erasure of the Roma (Szeman 2009: 100). As Szeman rightly observes, the term 'Gypsy music' is quickly becoming a generic term encompassing any type of music from the Balkan area (Szeman 2009: 112). To use Milica Bakić-Hayden's term, which Szeman appropriates, this results in a case of 'nesting orientalisms' (in Szeman 2009: 109), emerging from the Roma and their promoters, coupled with 'bohemian appropriation' and 'projective identification' with the Roma by western musicians (Szeman 2009: 113).

It would be difficult to argue against such accusations of commodification and the reproduction of colonial imaginaries. However, one could also argue that the commercial success of *manele* allows at least some Roma musicians to become more visible and acquire the symbolic capital necessary to fight exclusion. This newly obtained agency might be based on an underlying financial transaction, but by embracing neoliberalism the Roma also obtain the means to, paradoxically, fight the injustices brought about by neoliberalism.

Another criticism levied at the way music can transcend locality is based on the perceived differences between *manele, chalga* and *turbo-folk.* Although emerging from similar experiences, they remain different stylistically (Silverman 2014: 195). *Manele* are also set apart from the point of view of the gender (mainly male) and ethnicity (mainly Roma) of the lead singer (Beissinger 2016: 114), in comparison to *chalga* and *turbo-folk*, which are more diverse (though *chalga* still retains clear Romani roots according to Buchanan 2006: 116). As Silverman also points out, they each fulfil a specific ideological role in their own locality and are 'even nationalist in nature' (Silverman 2014: 195). Although this has been true, at least until recently, there are other phenomena which offset their localism.

First of all, frequent migrations and circulations have encouraged the process of cosmopolitanization. During state socialism, migration was mainly internal, from rural to urban areas. This facilitated, however, the hybridization process observed by Garfias (1984). After 1989, emigration to Western Europe, but also to places like Turkey and the Southern Balkans, exposed the Roma to new styles and musics, an exposure magnified by the availability of western media upon their return to Romania. As Voiculescu points out in her analysis of *manele* lyrics, migrating tem-

porarily can become a strategy for success, but it also highlights the 'bi-focalism' of 'living in two different worlds', one of sacrifice and one of consumption (Voiculescu 2005: 272). This in-betweenness can cultivate cosmopolitan engagements. In relation to western media, Beissinger notices, during her decade-long observation of *manele*, the way MTV-style pop videos have influenced the look, performance and dance associated with *manele* (Beissinger 2016: 113). Lately, *manele* have taken advantage of the online world, which has become the primary distribution conduit and has encouraged new covers of old *manel*e, widespread music recycling and further hybridization. Collaborations between musicians within the Balkan area are now a common occurrence. For example, the collaboration between *chalga* singer Andrea (Teodorova) and *manele* producer Costi Ioniță has been particularly fruitful and longstanding. The proof that *manele* can engender cosmopolitan connections lies in such collaborations, but also in the adaptation of western musical elements, the use of the latest technical equipment and expert dissemination via the Internet. *Manele* may be an expression of the local, but equally, they represent the universal (Giurchescu and Rădulescu 2016: 39) and can become a symbol of glocalization (Giurchescu and Rădulescu 2016: 40).

Manele now

The content analysis of ten recent *manele* selected from *Alege Muzica* (Choose the Music) website has yielded interesting observations. The sample contained the following *manele* songs: Sorinel Pustiu, 'Eu port stelele lui tata' (I wear/have my father's stars); Costel Biju, 'Sunt major și fac ce vreau' (I'm of age and do what I like); Marian Prințu, 'Bagă dans' (Dance now); Ionuț Manelistu, 'Fac dușmanii 2-3 lei' (My enemies make 2-3 lei); Mihăiță Piticu, 'Muzică orientală' (Oriental music); Tavi de la Negrești, 'Fără tine' (Without you); Marcel Varodi, 'Pentru tine' (For you); Nicolae Guță, 'Ti-as da ochii mei' (I would give you my eyes); Nicolae Guță, 'Imi respect maxim femeia' (I respect my woman to the max); Adrian de la Severin and Costel Biju, 'Pe balans' (Balance up).

All artists are male, so the themes represented in these songs provide a specific perspective. The lyrics are simplistic, usually dealing with one main theme, and the refrain is sung almost obsessively during the standard length of three minutes. There is little story-telling or narrative, with one exception—Guță's 'Ti-as da ochii mei' (I would give you my eyes), which follows a couple's journey through Venice. The rest of the video clips showcase the singer, who is usually displayed among women, family or other band members.

The visuals therefore tend to be static and repetitive. About half are filmed in the studio and seem to be cheaply shot, having weak production values in terms of *mise-en-scène*, extras, number of cameras and types of shots, as well as editing

and sound quality. Half include musicians playing a mixture of instruments, old (lutes, violins, accordions) and new (synthesizers); a third of the sample displays a party—hip-hop style—that may include family and friends and six out of the ten songs include women twerking provocatively.

However, the once popular visuals of riches, referencing pecuniary success, only appear in one video clip, Sorinel Pustiu's 'Eu port stelele lui tata' (I wear/have my father's stars). It has all the once popular elements of the big house with the imposing gates and the swimming pool, the luxury car, gold jewellery and expensive alcohol. As it is about family and lineage, which can induce respect according to the lyrics, sexily clad women are absent, the video clip featuring instead family members, including the artist's own son.

Figure 2: Sorinel Pustiu, 'Eu port stelele lui tata' (I wear/have my father's stars) showcases the singer's achievements for his family. Source: YouTube official video

The main theme referenced again and again is that of respect and 'value', which features in half of the sample. It signifies having high standing within the community and being appreciated for certain characteristics and principles, which are not elaborated on. Singing about the beauty of the lady and her arts of seduction still features in four out of the ten songs. The old theme of envy of the enemies features in three out of the ten songs. The same amount reference true love for one woman. There seems to be a clear shift from the once popular theme of enemies and money to that of love and value/respect.

In contrast with the *manele* of the last decade, most of the video clips comprise just one woman (the chosen one) and not many, as it used to be the case. There

seems to be a shift from pure hedonism to commitment, evident in both the lyrics and the images. Having said that, at least one is very stereotypical in its portrayal of partying with many girls and drinking with abandonment, no matter what the cost: Biju's 'Sunt major și fac ce vreau' (I'm of age and do what I like).

Figure 3: Costel Biju, 'Sunt major și fac ce vreau' (I'm of age and do what I like). Source: YouTube official video

Luxury brands, such as the Mercedes car or the Chanel emblazoned top, still make the occasional appearance, but feature much less. The evident signs of capitalism are nothing new and the affordability of brands has spread, so there is less emphasis on these obvious badges of success. The big house, gold jewellery, expensive drink (champagne, whisky, liqueurs), gold-sprayed furniture, shiny suits, which were a staple ten years ago, are now a rare appearance (with the exception of Sorin Pustiu's 'I wear/have my father's stars').

Another important change is the more evident influence of pop, which could signal a move towards the mainstream. Tavi de la Negrești's 'Fără tine' (Without you) and Marcel Varodi's 'Pentru tine' (For you) are pop and pop-folk songs respectively. Marian Prințu's 'Bagă dans' (Dance now) clearly references hip-hop in the gestures and dance moves.

Most video clips transcend their assumed locality and symbolically represent a search or an attempt to find a place in the world. Their hybridity is evident in the mix of instruments (traditional but also synthesizers), musicians of different ethnicities (Roma, Romanian, Hungarian) and diverse settings: the Black Sea port of Constanța in Tavi's 'Without you', the Transylvanian town of Cluj-Napoca in Varodi's 'For you' and Venice in Guță's 'I would give you my eyes'. They indicate a new

trend of representing the local in the global and the attempt to connect different geographies.

One song in particular deliberately references all the hotspots of globalization. Adrian de la Severin's 'Pe balans' (Balance up) contains the following lyrics: 'do it Greek style, I pay for her, she is the best, like she's from the Emirates. I dance like India, vibrate like America, you move like Brazil, keep going...'. The lyrics may not make much sense, but they indirectly speak of the links between various cultural spaces and music or dance traditions.

Overall, the lyrics are more universal than expected, away from the specificities of the transition process, and the video clips less western and generally lacking a polished MTV look. However, the influence of hip-hop on costume, make-up, hand gestures and dance moves is evident. Overall, the sample indicates a thematic and visual style shift. Eliciting the envy of enemies by displaying the symbols of capitalism seems to be less important, as are the transition specific themes of cheating the system or using unorthodox methods to make money. Instead, the focus is on more universal themes such as respect, love and family. Visually, gone are the gold chains and the imposing cars and the more natural look is in, representing more 'normal' spaces, such as a beach or a city street.

Conclusion

The article attempted to investigate *manele*'s potential to bring emancipation for the Roma and forge a cosmopolitan outlook through music. The findings are provisional, due to the small music sample and the hybridity and liquidity of this music genre, which encompasses numerous, sometimes contradictory, expressions. However, we can conclude that taken as a genre, *manele* do seem to challenge both Eurocentrism and localism and have the potential to be seen as a sign of democratization, where the culturally and ethnically marginalized are asking for recognition (Giurchescu and Rădulescu 2016: 38).

Manele are also an interesting example of the blurring of the dividing line between art and life, where the realities of one historical moment are clearly represented in the music and where the music leads to the reconsideration of actual social and cultural hierarchies. *Manele* have offered the Roma a voice and an opportunity to become part of new cosmopolitan engagements within a new transnational space defined by encounters with others beyond national borders and outside endless debates about national tradition and authenticity. If transnationalism is about intercultural interconnectedness, then *manele* are its classic example: a genre forged by transborder engagements belonging to a hybrid community, whose 'mash-up' musical approach has forged new cosmopolitan links. In the future, further attempts to disentangle *manele* from Romanian culture in the

same way the Roma have often been excluded from society can create instruments for agency and the seeds of counter-culture. Through *manele* the Roma attempt to challenge the *status quo* and force their way out of a position of marginality.

Manele are changing, as evidenced by the analysis of the music sample: shifts are occurring from television to online, from traditional to electronic instruments, from specific to universal themes, from Turkish sounds to more global and composite appropriations. Slower changes are happening in relation to gender and ethnic representation, but they are still a sign of the genre slowly democratizing. Consequently, this contribution can only provide a momentary snapshot of the inherent potentialities of this music for fairer cultural hierarchies, social mobility, cultural expression, ethnic claims and cosmopolitan interactions.

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