

# The “Rose Garden”: Against Racism in Ethnomusicology

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I am Rom, I come from Romania, I live in Rome: what could I have done? CD-ROMs. On sale at the end of the concert. What shall I play now? *Romagna mia!*

(Marian Serban, a Romanian *lautar*, great *tsambal* player, during a concert in Bologna in 2008)

In 2004 *Ethnologia Balkanica, Journal for Southeast European Anthropology*, the international scientific journal of the International Association for Southeast European Anthropology, published an essay by the Romanian scholar Marin Marian-Bălașa (2004) entitled “Romany Music and Gypsy Criminality”. Marian-Bălașa’s argument are disconcerting on multiple levels, not to mention disrespectful: first, in relation to the expertise of ethnologists and ethnomusicologists who have dedicated their research to Gypsy culture, and second in relation to the Romany people, and Romanian Roma in particular, who he addresses in explicitly racist and discriminatory ways. A few years ago, I therefore decided to publish a commentary on his article, in Italian, for an international journal focused on Romance language studies (Staiti 2012).

Quite some time has passed since Marian-Bălașa’s essay was published, and a few years since my comments were made public. In Romania as in Europe, however, the situation has certainly not improved in terms of the integration, civil rights protection and valorization of Romanian Romany culture. Quite the opposite: problems of alterity and the social and cultural marginalization of Roma minority and immigrant groups have become more serious and acute in Europe and throughout the world. These years have seen a radicalization of policies and cultures of exclusion throughout the Western

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<sup>1</sup> In Italian: “Sono rom, vengo dalla Romania, vivo a Roma: cosa potevo fare? Dei cd-rom. Sono in vendita alla fine del concerto. Cosa vi suono adesso? *Romagna mia!*”.

world, with sweeping political and social changes driving people in Eastern Europe to migrate West while wars, oppression and misery have caused entire populations to seek refuge in Western Europe and North America – although many of these journeys have ended face to face with a border wall, or in accidental death along the path or in the Mediterranean sea. Just like the 1930s when Alan Lomax studied the music of black populations in the Mississippi river delta (Lomax 1994) today ethnomusicology has an important cultural and political role to play: that of giving voice to those who cannot speak out, of showing, on a tangible level, the importance of the cultural contribution of those who do not write or simply lack the means to be heard. Ethnomusicologists can play this role concretely through their everyday work of research, teaching and spreading knowledge. With respect, and without being rhetorical or magniloquent. It is precisely in light of this essential role that individuals like Marian-Bălașa who write publications so manifestly devoid of professional competence and disrespectful towards others' knowledge and culture ("western" sociologists and ethnologists as well as the Roma), who violate every ethical norm established for engaging with the Other, not be granted hospitality within our council. It is also crucial for the scientific community to respond, defending its own statute and expressing its position with the utmost of rigor. Even more so given that Marian-Bălașa's outbursts are in clear contradiction with the mission laid out on the home page of the website of ICTM, the largest ethnomusicological scientific community at the international level: "the International Council for Traditional Music acts as a bond among peoples of different cultures and thus contributes to the peace of humankind."<sup>2</sup>

It is this patent incompatibility between biased, discriminatory and racist positions and the statute, purposes and ethical norms that govern our scientific community that motivated me to widen and clarify my comments on Marian-Bălașa's text, adding a more extensive analysis and deepening my general perspectives in an effort to launch a reflective discussion that pertains to the whole international scientific community.

From the outset Marian-Bălașa explains that his intent is to focus on representations of the Romanian Roma which, in his view, are tinged with contrasting connotations: positive ones stemming from admiration for their musical skills, and negative ones deriving from the assumption that they are widely involved in criminal activities. Not only does the author not follow through on this stated goal, however, he goes on to embrace the most common and ignorant of prejudices regarding the Roma, displaying no understanding of the different Roma groups that are present in Romania nor of

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<sup>2</sup> This text, which I sent to the Executive Board of the International Council for Traditional Music, is part of a collective discussion that induced the ICTM to revise its Statute by adding a part pertaining to Ethical Issues, a sign of the significant importance of this issue in the contemporary context. On one hand, this importance stems from the new attention being granted to these aspects of our work, research and interactions between researchers and the people who enact the traditions under discussion. On the other hand, it derives from the resurgence or exacerbation of discriminatory and racist tendencies in today's societies.

their ethnic and social expressions or activities; he shows no intention whatsoever of distinguishing among groups or phenomena or of employing the basic tools of historical and ethnographic investigation. Indeed, the only elements of these fields of inquiry he uses are some terms and communication codes, together with some quotes from texts he cites in the footnotes to give a façade of pseudo-scientificness to a series of appallingly racist and nationalist statements. For those of us who actually study these things, the tone he uses is irritatingly rife with paternalistic and smug haughtiness, as the following passage demonstrates:

The issue of the European Roma is a problem, a predicament, and an aporia [...] Facts and prejudices still remain, and it is possible that the Roma aporetic problem has not been solved not only because of the politicians' lack of ability, but also because of the tendency of intellectuals deal with it using only soft, conformist overtones. (196)

And this one:

Many Western colleagues who have only received their education from the late 1980s onwards, and lack direct contact with the social and linguistic realities in Eastern Europe, ignore the fact that the term Gypsy is not only a historically prejudicial title, but is often employed by Roma themselves, thus covering an accurate, vernacular reality. (195n)

Marian-Bălașa observes that a "very consistent part of contemporary literature still uses 'Gypsy' instead of 'Rom/Roma/Romany'" (2004: 195n).<sup>3</sup> Surely, I sometimes happen to use the word "Gypsies" instead of "Roma" when I want to define a group broader than that of the Gypsy populations primarily based in Eastern Europe who self-define as "Roma": for example the Italian, French, Austrian and German Sinti are not Roma, nor are the Jitanos of the Iberian peninsula or the Irish Tinkers. I am also well aware that the use of the hypernym "Gypsy" is not appreciated by any of them, any more than the term "nigger" would be by African Americans, as it is perceived to have derogatory connotations stemming from its history and use. The Romanian, Montenegrin, Kosovar or Macedonian Roma in Italy often provide this or similar contradictory explanations: "we are not Gypsies, we are nomads: because we have a house and we don't go around like the Cergashi do".<sup>4</sup> In such discourse the euphemistic associations of "nomad" prevails over its real (and opposite meaning), that of "no fixed address." In some cases, Roma from different groups present in Eastern Europe may also define

<sup>3</sup> The first *World Romani Congress*, which took place in 1971 in the uk, officially chose the word "Rom" to identify the gypsy population. As a result the *International Gypsy Committee* (founded in 1965) was renamed the *Komiteto Lumniako Romano* (International Rom Committee). See Kenrick 1971. For a discussion of racist reactions in both Italy and abroad against the Roma people's right to self-name, see the contribution by Federico Falloppa in Aime 2016, in particular pp. 104-109.

<sup>4</sup> The name "Cergashi" identifies some Roma groups present in the Balkans, especially in Bosnia; in Romani though, "cerga" means "tent", therefore it can also translate as "those who live in tents", hence "nomads".

themselves as “Gypsy”: for example, when the need to underline the shared aspects of identity prevails over the need to distinguish among them, so strongly that drives the speaker to overlook the term’s derogatory connotation, or when it is used as a means of proudly reclaiming something others consider despicable (as with African Americans’ use of the word “nigger”): it is common to hear statements like “they [the Sinti, or the Cergashi, or members of any group other than one’s own] are Gypsy, we are Roma”, but in other contexts speakers might also say that “us [Romanian Roma, or Sinti, or Cergashi, or Kosovarian Askalija etc.] and them [those who belong to other groups], we are all Gypsy”.<sup>5</sup>

Marian-Bălașa takes no notice of these subtleties: he is interested rather in distinguishing the group to which he belongs (non-Gypsy Romanians) from the Roma, since – unfortunately, in his view – the word *Roma* and the word *Romanians* are unduly similar. The word *Rom* (and its plural *Roma*) derives from Sanskrit; it is used in the Romany dialects (spreading later to other languages and taken on by the scientific community, in English) and by many Gypsy groups to define themselves across a much wider area than the country of Romania, indicating furthermore a time before groups of Gypsies arrived in Romania where they were eventually enslaved.<sup>6</sup> In Marian-Bălașa’s view, however, the Roma should relinquish this endonym (as the others should renounce it, when referring to Gypsy groups that identify as Roma) in order to “emancipate” the word “Romanian” from this uncomfortable assonance.<sup>7</sup>

As one of the issues raised in this paper will be the roots of motives – even if they are prejudicial – behind the Romanians’ current hatred at being confused with “Roma” folks, as well as their desire to (re)emancipate the term “Romanian” in face of the growing international movement to generalise acceptance of “Romany/Romanes” as the terms used for Gypsy dialects. I will often use the unambiguous and confusion-free term “Gypsy”. (196-197)

<sup>5</sup> Regarding circumstantial identity and its complex articulations see, among others, Stewart 1995 (and in general Piasere 1995), Piasere 2004, and Staiti 2000.

<sup>6</sup> The bibliography on the history of the Roma, their migrations and presence in Romania and the bibliography regarding the history of the Romany dialects are too broad and varied to be reviewed here. Suffice to cite a few sources that comprise an introduction to the historical events: Fraser 1992, Crowe 1994 and Barany 2002 (already present in Marian-Bălașa’s bibliography); Marushiakova, Popov and Kenrick, 2001, Guy 2001; Kenrick 2007. Regarding language, see: Turner 1926; Matras 1997; Bakker and Mous 1998; Boretzky and Igla 1998; Halwachs and Menz 1999; Bakker 2000; Matras 2001; Bakker and Matras 2003.

<sup>7</sup> The Romans (or Italians, as descendants of the ancient Romans) could stake the same silly and inconsistent claims of historical legitimization to their own exclusive right to use a denomination and deny Romanians the right to call themselves such: to avoid, for example, any inappropriate confusion between the respectable ladies of the Italian capital and their domestic workers from the East. However, in keeping with the paradoxical logic behind these types of claim, it should be observed that the word “Rom”, which in most of the Gypsy dialects means “man” (while the plural form means “people”, “population”, “group”, “community”) might more properly belong to the Roma’s ancestors than anyone else: the Roma could in turn ask the inhabitants of Rome and Romanians to call themselves Latin, or perhaps Dacian, to avoid the risk of confusing identities that are too neatly and stuck-uppishly claimed. In general, the Roma instead prefer to cross the borders of denomination and categorization, engaging in wordplay with their usual pleasant lightness, as the phrase in the epigraph shows.

Marian-Bălașa asserts that there is unease surrounding these titles and attributes this unease *tout court* and without further specification to all non-Gypsy Romanians. In any case, he states,

This does not mean that I support the ethnocentrist, racial or nationalist positions adopted in Romania and elsewhere; on the contrary, I am attempting to mediate. (197)

Of course, today racist statements are nearly always preceded by a caveat claiming that, surely, they have nothing to do with racism. This *excusatio non petita* always precedes "ethnocentrist, racial [and] nationalist positions".<sup>8</sup> And it is not clear what kind of mediation he proposes, nor which groups of people or positions he would like to involve in mediation processes. He likewise fails to specify explain why such an operation would be necessary. Hence, the problem in his opinion concerns words and the risk of misunderstanding. In the Balkans, however, words and misunderstandings – what naming things, granting recognition and establishing group belonging entail in terms of legitimization and the right to occupy a given territory before and more than others – have given rise to endless disputes. These issues have been the stuff of wars, determining the destiny of entire populations, delimiting borders delineation and generating political legitimacy.<sup>9</sup> This is not the place to review the war between Greece and Turkey that ended in 1920 with the Treaty of Lausanne and consequent exchange of populations, determined on the basis of language and religion, nor to focus on Greece's continuing failure to recognize the Republic of Macedonia, once again due to a dispute over names, or the way the mythical, biased reconstruction of the history of the Ancient Illyrians has influenced more recent conflicts or, viceversa, how Serbia's move to deny schools in the province of Kosovo the right to teach Albanian constituted one of the triggers that set off the military campaign ending in 1999 with the intervention of international forces. The controversy regarding the use of the term *Rom* in Romania is animated by the most extreme of nationalist forces which end up fomenting tired clichés by continually giving voice to them. This controversy is founded on ideological and even aesthetic terrain nourished by a particularly fierce brand of racism and, during the conflicts mentioned above and other similar events in times of war or peace, the first victim of this racism has been the civil rights of Gypsy populations: the most flexible of all the populations living in these areas and the least inclined to construct rigid identity ideology: people who, on this particular level, might have a lot to teach others about peaceful coexistence. What is annoying about the Gypsies (I continue using this general definition because, in this regard, the considerations presented here apply to most of the different groups, even

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<sup>8</sup> Interesting considerations on the subject can be found in the contribution by Federico Faloppa in Aime 2016: 69-123 ("Per un linguaggio non razzista"). See also Faloppa 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Friedman 2008 provides an important contribution regarding the political history of linguistic ideologies in the Balkans.



FIGURE 1. A poster (in Italian) published online by the Romanian political organization “New Right”.

outside of the Balkans) seems to be precisely their extreme ductility, their unwillingness to definitively fall into rigidly determined categories and construct a monumentally solid identity-based representation of themselves: the real solidity of their manifold depictions lies instead in marginality itself. Or better, in the way they are able to make marginality an element of extreme cultural and social pertinence. In what we might define the aesthetics (and politics) of the “rose garden,” they thus become the most bothersome element: an element that disrupts the “garden” of all those who consider the place they live their native land, in opposition to and in spite of their neighbors. I have heard the expression “rose garden” used on various occasions during my time in the Balkans to refer to the speaker’s own country as an idyllic place.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For Judaism, Christianity and Islam this image is a metaphorical representation of paradise, the garden of Eden. *Cantico dei Cantici* contains references to the image of the rose, furthermore considered the scriptural archetype of the Virgin Mary (see Twomey 2008: 141-174, “The Rose Garden: Beauty and Purity”). In the Koran and Islamic literature in general the image of the garden is of great importance. I do not have the tools to investigate this subject in depth (it would fall outside of both my competence and the aims and scope of this essay), but I believe that the use of the expression “rose garden” developed especially in Sufi literature, starting from thirteenth century texts: in particular, *The Secret Rose Garden* by the Persian mystic and poet Sa’d ud Din Mahmud Shabistari (see Lederer 1920). It is possible that it afterwards became a common expression in the central areas of the Balkans, amongst people of all religions, through the spread of the Bosniac Sufi tradition.



FIGURE 2. Kosovo, 2007 (photo: N. Staiti).

Once I heard the phrase being used in a conversation with a *sheikh*, a guide of a Sufi brotherhood in Kosovo, after observing rituals for the end of *Ramadan*. I was telling him about when I had witnessed the same rituals several years before, performed by Kosovar Dervish Roma, in a nomad camp in Palermo. He told me that what I had seen in Italy could not have been defined a Sufi ritual as the Roma are not qualified to practice Sufism and live in ignorance. He repeatedly stated that the Roma constitute a serious problem for the people of Kosovo. Not in terms of security issues, nor economic or political ones, but in terms of image. Thousands of Kosovar Roma moved to Western Europe fleeing the war: as a result, Westerners came to view Kosovo as the land of the Roma, and its inhabitants as Gypsies. This is why it would be better for them all to disappear (during the war there were efforts to make them disappear, carried out systematically in some areas, like the Serbian militias operations against Albanian speaking populations): because their existence, he argued, ruins the image of Kosovo, which deserves to be recognized as a rose garden.

Kosovo (and the Balkans in general) is a fascinating and highly interesting place, but it is certainly not a garden, not of roses or any other flower. Though it is possible that the aesthetics of the garden or balcony flower pot (a very common sight in that area just as in Italy, especially the South) entail other viewpoints or interpretations which, as paradoxical as it might seem, are also relevant for understanding conflicts. I will try to explain myself better. In Kosovo as in other economically depressed areas, the desolate

landscape is sometimes dotted with buildings that have begun to crumble even before they are fully built, with exposed bricks and cement, rusty rebar sprouting from the ends of pillars and rags hanging on the walls or carelessly nailed wooden boards in the place of window fixtures. There are patches of trampled earth or mud scattered with scrap and bits of old cars next to a ravine where the inhabitants throw their rubbish, only to have it picked up and carried long distances by the wind and water later (this description does not necessarily apply to the homes of Roma people, it could hold true for people of any ethnicity, language and religion, especially in the countryside). An observer might imagine that the people living in such buildings have no care or aesthetic attention for the place. But then not only are the interiors usually clean and sparkling, it may also be that someone has hung an old pot or raggedly cut tin can on the ramshackle cement balcony that might have no railing besides a row of old rotten boards, and this container hosts bunches of lovingly grown flowers.

One might ask what use there is in wasting time, attention, water and possibly compost for something purely aesthetic when there is no care to spare for the rest of the surroundings. The fact is that the balcony is a part of the house, something that belongs to its owner, while everything around it is not. Even if it offends the eye or sense of smell, it does not matter: sight and smell are attuned exclusively to the things one owns, things that have significance: to the owner's eye, his or her house thus looks like a rose garden even if it stands in the middle of a dump. This attention is limited to places of exclusive significance and, of those, only places that are not too visible from the outside. The flower pot indicates the boundaries of one's territory. It does not even matter whether or not it is beautiful: as long as there are flowers, even a rusty can is enough to indicate care and aesthetical attention for one's possessions. It is the others who "mess up" and ruin the image of the "rose garden"; furthermore, when the "garden" in question is not property of a family but rather belongs (or at least is claimed to belong) to an extended family, an ethnic group, when it extends to a whole village, region or country, efforts to protect the garden can translate into defending one group's privileges against the rights of others. And the more others appear different (like the Roma who, basing their identity on flexibility, are the most different Others around, in Romania as elsewhere), the more they threaten to ruin your garden. As a matter of fact this sentiment appears ever more frequently in Italy as well: every interview about foreigners in this or that neighborhood in every city features good people, housewives, retirees, policeman or bus drivers who usually speak not of security and urban blight – problems which are often inexistent – but rather repeat in unison: "we are no longer masters in our own homes."<sup>11</sup> Language, passports or flower pots are sufficient to set the boundaries between those who have rights and those who do not.

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<sup>11</sup> "L'autoctonia diventa [...] una nuova interpretazione della razza, una declinazione basata sulla terra di nascita", Aime 2016 (Marco Aime, "Si dice *cultura*, si pensa *razza*"): 53. English translation: "Autochthonousness becomes [...] a new interpretation of race, a description based on geographical location at birth".

Just like the Kosovarian *sheikh* but with a more pernicious presumption of objectivity, Marian-Bălașa asserts that:

The difference between Gypsies and most of the other Romanian citizens migrating abroad, was that many a Gypsy turned toward delinquency and begging. This enraged public opinion in Western countries, especially since it was known that the refugees received government pensions. Even in countries where racism was practically absent, people turned to racism mainly in reaction to the behaviour of these immigrants, and this racism was often generalised over all Romanian passport bearers: In most Western countries, the image of Romania and Romanians became synonymous with that of begging and robbing Gypsies (the similarity Rom/Romany, Romania/Romanian also playing a very consistent role in generalising confusion and prejudice). Because of the new [!] name Roma (for Gypsies), the traditional "Beware of Gypsies!" became "Beware of Romanians!"<sup>12</sup> (198)

The above paragraph establishes casual connections in an outrageously and speciously illogical manner. According to Marian-Bălașa the difference between Roma and other Romanian citizens is that the Roma are mostly thieves and beggars. It was this fact, furthermore, that exasperated Western public opinion, even more so considering that "the refugees" (and it is highly unclear what they have to do with Romanians or Romanian Roma in particular) enjoy "government pensions."<sup>13</sup> Because of the Gypsies (and perhaps extra-eu asylum seekers in Germany), therefore, racism gained a foothold where it had been absent: surely one cannot blame non-Gypsy Romanian citizens (as he says, even when they set fire to Roma villages after suffering serious provocation, the pyres ought to be considered "passionate punishments").<sup>14</sup> Marian-Bălașa complains that assonance causes people in most of Western Europe to mix up Roma people (thieves

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<sup>12</sup> Not a single fact, statistical evaluation, scientific essay or police report is quoted to back up these apodictic statements about the Roma's greater inclination to criminal tendencies as compared other Romanian citizens. The only source is a passage from Pons 1995 which references asylum requests in Germany and mendacity. There is no mention of the existent literature on anti-Roma discrimination or violations of Roma people's rights in Romania (such as, for example, Amnesty International's annual reports on Romania: the 2015-2016 report can be found at <http://rapportoannuale.amnesty.it/sites/default/files/2016/Romania.pdf>).

<sup>13</sup> From footnote 7 (197n, which contains the citation Pons 1995: 70) we can deduce that the pension in question is among the public contributions offered in Germany by the *Länder* to the asylum seekers. It is obvious that Romanian Roma and asylum seekers are extremely different groups but Marian-Bălașa does not specify this, giving the impression that they are one and the same. More generally, throughout the essay – in his use of sources, incorporation of quotes and attempt to reconcile spiteful emic positions with a façade of scientific objectivity – the author inappropriately uses literature and established fact to construct an extremely partial interpretation of reality, attempting to conceal, however partially, his most scandalous positions behind the mask of objective neutrality.

<sup>14</sup> "[S]uch events were usually committed as passionate punishments in response to provocation and murders committed by Roma against Romanians" (Marian-Bălașa 2004: 210n). He continues by stating (*ibidem*) that violence against Gypsies is not exclusive to Romanians: it can be found in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic as well. This point is not made explicit, but the obvious conclusion is that, seeing as many people from different places in Eastern Europe engage in violence against the Roma, these acts are justified, being a consequence of the unacceptable and blameful alterity of the Gypsies themselves. The same thing, obviously, could be said of the persecution of Jewish people, which was even more widely diffused in space and time.

and beggars) and Romanians. It would be sufficient to create more order around these names, thus depriving Roma of the right to name themselves as they always have, because in the end the only houses being burnt down are those of Gypsies. After all, as he writes, the Gypsies are an underdeveloped population lacking in culture, customs and a concept of civilization:

Romanians wanted the Western world to recognise the Gypsy population as particular and distinct,<sup>15</sup> and as having perhaps unmodern concepts about life, culture and civilisation. (198)

Is this a neutral description of someone else's point of view or a sentiment widespread in Romania that is subjected to critical analysis through the lucid lens of an ethnologist? No, the author wholly embraces this perspective, unaware that the urge to distinguish himself from those near him and instead appear similar – in term of behavior, language and claims – to the “most civil Western” populations is a clear sign of provincialism.

The provincial ambition to adhere to what he considers a civil, modern and Western aesthetic and vision of the world probably helps to explain his revulsion for what he defines as “Gypsy palaces”:

One contradiction that arose was the fact that many Gypsies who made money abroad, sometimes through dishonest means, invested that money in to the construction of impressive mansions (the nowadays infamous “Gypsy palaces”), which were less for comfort than for vanity, and which had many unnecessary facilities. Until then, the general narrative went that Gypsies either immigrated because of racial discrimination – a tangible yet arguable story indeed – or because of sheer poverty – which was usually the case for majority. But issues such as the gathering of illegal wealth that was then wasted on vanity mansions, proved that the racial problem did not exist in just a few cases. (198)

In short: if these people build big, ugly houses it means that they made their money illegally, proving that there is no racial problem or, if there is, it is “in just a few cases.” The articulation of this logic is stupefying. Also, what confirms that the buildings he defines as “Gypsy palaces” are objectively “infamous”? And what does “infamous” actually mean? Ugly? These buildings have been studied by architectural historians and ethnologists, scholars who have recounted their function, social context, variations and

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<sup>15</sup> As Marian-Bălașa himself knows (see Marian-Bălașa 2004: 201), this ethnically-based “recognition” is obviously inadmissible: the Romanian Roma are Romanian citizens just like the Italian Sinti are Italian citizens, etc. Furthermore, the assertion that the Roma have “unmodern concepts about life, culture and civilisation” is curious: the author is perhaps unaware of the well-known tendency to hypermodernity characterizing the “life, culture and civilization” of Balkan Roma, widely investigated and described by authoritative literature (relative to the musical sphere, see for instance analyses of the Roma's role in Kosovarian traditions in Pettan 1992; Pettan 1996; Staiti 2000; and Staiti 2016: 80-89).



**FIGURE 3.** A boilermakers' house, Transylvania, by P. White, *Wild Transylvania* (<http://www.wildtransylvania.com/p/gypsy-culture.html>).

distribution throughout local areas, including from a historical perspective.<sup>16</sup> I do not believe that Marian-Bălașa's aesthetic judgement is important on a social or political level any more than mine is. However, I feel compelled to say that I find the houses in question to be beautiful: one of the few expressions of beauty in many towns and villages devastated first by Ceaucescu's functional approach to construction and then by the spread and consolidation of the "flower-pot aesthetic" according to which people have built what they wanted to and as they liked with no respect for the architectural tradition of the local place or attention for the surroundings. Compared to this environmental devastation, the houses of Roma boilermakers (because this is the real object here: a show manual ability by people who have traditionally worked with tin, copper, metal sheets and stove pipes; it is not about "Gypsy" houses in general, seeing as other Roma, including *lăutar* musician families, do not decorate their homes in this way) are a fantastic explosion, a joyous, cheerful "Gypsy" interpretation of the Hapsburg style

<sup>16</sup> Marian-Bălașa does not take these publications into account, he does not even mention them. See instead Gräf 2008, also for a bibliography.

through an ironic imitation of the Eighteenth century stately home. Steeples, pinnacles and domes, weather vanes and windows flourish, everything is useless and made of tin like a fairy castle in the illustrations of an Eighteenth century fable book (or its Disneyland interpretation), decorated with pendants, bells, hearts, arrows and frills of all kinds. All this is plainly and explicitly offered up to passers-by, breaking the gloomy monotony of the surrounding landscape.

Gypsies steal, the author claims. They might indeed, but they are not the only ones who do and, if they do steal, it is out of economic need. Furthermore, he notes that Gypsies' petty crime, even while making a great deal of work for the police, is not the main cause of Romania's poor economic conditions. Marian-Bălașa embraces a widespread tendency: to define Gypsies as thieves in their entirety, as a social category or ethnic group; if other individuals from different ethnic groups steal, in contrast, their behavior does not brand their entire group as criminals (although similar racist tendencies are beginning to take shape in Europe and elsewhere against immigrants as a whole but especially Muslim immigrants).

On the other hand, if Gypsies are not the only criminals, he is careful to underline that they do not have a monopoly on music, either; Romanians are also capable of playing:

In music, not only Gypsies are among the best virtuosi, and traditional musicality is not exclusively under their mastership, as some foreign colleagues wrongly inferred. (221)

In the final section of his essay, therefore, Marian-Bălașa softens the neat distinction between groups, probably in an effort to display objectivity and impartiality; here, he allows that the groups are actually relatively permeable: there is no perfect correspondence Roma/thieves/musicians vs. Romanians/good people/not musicians. Some non-Gypsy Romanians might be dishonest, and some of them can sing and play music. What is not mentioned anywhere in Marian-Bălașa's essay, however, is that some Gypsies are neither delinquents nor musicians; rather, he appears to consider these traits intrinsic to and characteristic of the Roma as a whole. If all Gypsies are ugly and nasty because they build horrible houses and are inclined to engage in crime, therefore, at the same time they are good and useful because they are skilled musicians (it is not clear if it is the general public or only the author that is able to identify and pick out *Lautars*, professional musicians, distinguishing them from other groups living in the area and recognizing the other activities each group traditionally performs: from what we can glean from the article itself, "Gypsies" are basically one big jumble).

Roma peoples' negative and positive qualities stem, according to Marian-Bălașa, from the same aptitude. Gypsies – like in Eighteenth century serial literature – have a sensual, erotic, lascivious and seductive bent. The author argues that even their language

is influenced by this inclination, causing some Romany words, expressions and sounds to make their way into Romanian literary language.

The Romanian literary language has lost its psychological accents, its violence, and its accompanying pleasures. Gypsy words and timbre bring these accents under the form of a phonic eroticism. This is why they exercise magnetism, find acceptance, establish roots, and multiply. Because the Gypsy spoken language is perceived as exotic and somehow lascivious, it exerts fascination, influencing the "autochthonous" Romanians to a surprising extent. (219)

For Marian-Bălașa the Roma musical style is equally lascivious and seductive, but he does not clarify which specific regions, instruments or repertoires supposedly display this trait. The generic description of the Roma style – a vague collation of clichés unworthy even of a provincial, Eighteenth-century folklorist – is presented as paralleling their social deviance, a characteristic which, according to the author, derives from the same aptitude:

geometry, calculation, instinctual measure, logical composition, constructivist precision, and clear regularity are not Gypsy features. And we will see, whenever one analyses the Romany musical style, totally opposing characteristic emerge (atavistic directness, spontaneity, indulgence, abandonment, sincerity, sentimentalism, plaintive themes, liberties, variability, free blending, free form, improvisation, irregularities, rendering passionate, "excessive" ornamentation and individualism), which represent the same adjectives used whenever one has to report on social and emotional imbalance, delinquency or criminality. (204)

Marian-Bălașa appears irresistibly attracted to generalizations and clichés. Hence Gypsy music from Romania to Spain all shares the same characteristics, simultaneously innocent and perverse:

the expression of Gypsy soul through music ("slow songs" in Central and Eastern Europe, and "cante jondo", which means *deep song*, in Spain) is plaintive and self-sympathetic, sorrowful and passionate, emphatic and improvisatory, touching and desperate [...] On the other hand [...] the music of Gypsies always inspire a sense of the romantic, and evokes an image of the purely free and enviable innocent soul. The liveness which characterises the Gypsy performing style is one of the means of identifying artistic Gypsiness, and this feature of their music represents perhaps the last significant memory and positive attribute bourn of facts that have evoked both romantic myths and fearful prejudices. (218-219)

The fact that Roma people's skill at music, criminal tendencies and sensuality all stem from the same aptitude is demonstrated by the terrible experiences of a young American man who the author accompanied to Clejani so that he might take violin lessons from the son of the head of an internationally famous musical group, "Taraf d'Haïdouks", that he had met while they were touring the United States. The identity of the young

American is concealed behind fake initials “for the sake of privacy”, but the author does not employ the same precautions for the Roma actors: their names, village, neighborhood of residence and band name are all specified. This is a very clear violation of the norms developed to safeguard the individuals a researcher encounters and refers to, norms that should constitute the ethical foundations of all ethnological investigation. In short, the story is as follows: the young American man, accompanied by Marian-Bălașa, is warmly greeted by the family of musicians, who play for him at length; he, for his part, promises to organize concerts for them in the United States. The next day, together with other musicians, they continue to play in his honor, inviting him to their house and hosting him generously. The violinist gives him a useful and satisfying music lesson. And yet it seems that the musicians, although pleased with his promises for the future, would appreciate cash compensation. This request is not explicitly expressed, but it nonetheless provokes embarrassment. To make matters worse, two girls from the family, “both under eighteen”, flirt with the foreigner by dancing for him (would it not be more appropriate to protect the anonymity of these two minors, excited and possibly beguiled by the presence of a young foreigner, who can easily be identified by anyone who knows the groups and family, as opposed to the naive tourist who has seen too many Tony Gatlif films and dreams of reliving them himself?) The American stays the night and, despite not being bothered in any way, the poor thing

tosses and turns all night long, making sure he keeps the blanket over his body, to avoid any attempt to compromise his innocence. Nothing untoward happens, but our young American does not sleep at all. (206-207)

Obviously these two wretches seek to “compromise his innocence” in order to force him to marry them, or worse, just as in an Eighteenth-century serial:

the young guest fears a rape tentative, a court suit or a forced marriage. (206)

It is not clear why the two girls or their family should be considered responsible for the foolishness of this particular American or his guide’s inability to understand, translate and provide him with direction. Besides, the young man’s fears were nothing more than fantasy: “nothing happens”. This does not matter, however. The Gypsies, as we know, are wholly responsible for the ideas that other people develop about them. Matters become even worse the following day: another lesson takes place in the same “sensually playful but terribly stressful atmosphere”, so the American decides to go back to Bucharest. The Roma family drives him there, but the car is not satisfactory (it is the same “dreadful car” that brought him there). Furthermore, they try to ask him for money “for all sort of expenditures and expenses”. And why ever not? As a matter of fact, however biased it may be, this account suggests that they organized him a party, took him everywhere by car, gave him various music lessons and provided him room and board for two days:

a request for compensation does not seem so very absurd or unfounded. Moreover, it is not clear to me why they should have been satisfied by vague promises regarding the organization of future concerts. The fact that the *Lautars* of Clejani (like other non-Gypsy rural communities of the same area) consider it rude to request money directly and therefore limit themselves to alluding to the matter indirectly does not even seem to cross Marian-Bălașa's mind. In this instance as in the rest of his text there is no attempt whatsoever to engage in a cultural interpretation of their behavior.

The two girls also accompany the American along his return journey, and

They play hard with senses and fears, tickling and innocently hugging and kissing him, as well as mocking and laughing at him, succeeding in making him feel sick. Upon arrival in town they request that he buys them things, such as shoes, earrings, and cheap bracelets, whilst continuing to embarrass and shame him. (207)

The description thus peaks in a grotesque crescendo to conclude in a black hole of nonsense, beyond any sense of the absurd:

His romantic musical adventure ends in a catastrophic climax. Consequently, ab enters the black hole of space and time. The unique source for his psychological survival is an equally palpable and dim spark at the end of the tunnel: his girlfriend in Florida, who is also a violinist, answers his telephone calls and emails, thus aiding his recuperation and assuring him that he will again accepted when returns from hell [*sic*]. (207)

At the end of the anecdote Marian-Bălașa enlarges his scope: not only are Gypsy girls who kiss young foreigners shameless sluts, the same is true of all musicians: for example, they go around during wedding celebrations asking guests for money (and are often treated with contempt and brutality). Expanding his scope still further, he notes that us Western "ethnographers" or "sociologists" have all been bothered at least once by beggars or vendors in a train restaurant car or at traffic lights, on the basis of which we can all sympathize with and share Romanians' hostility against the Roma.

This aspect is largely ignored by many Western ethnographers or sociologists, who approach their subject only from their perspective. They also make no connection between, on the one hand, the rural manifestation of bad feelings against Roma musicians and, on the other and, their own embarrassment and displeasure when, in a pub, Gypsy musicians approach them and expect to be generously tipped. (207-208)

Certainly, the author concedes, this tendency to beg and ask for money must be understood. Understood with the proper smug condescension: these violinist beggars, rendered thick-witted by their poverty and all the humiliation they suffer, are incapable of understanding that a regular job would be the best route to assimilation.

This example [i.e the incident of the young American] demonstrates how humiliation,

poverty and dependency have led the traditional fiddlers to the belief, that steady, continuous work will not provide the opportunities to generate wealth or change their status. (208)

Unfortunately, Roma musicians are characterized by an archaic mentality so resistant to any form of modernity that even economic prosperity is not a sufficient impetus for them to adhere to Marian-Bălașa's idea of civil society.

What does one do when, for example, after analysing another set of behaviour common and somehow typical to many Roma, we note that, in many cases, higher social and financial standards do not make such a great difference, and do not necessarily instill a shift toward another human paradigm, I mean towards a more modern mentality? Sometimes, the members of the Taraf of Haïdouks from Clejani, for instance, return home from tours abroad with several thousand dollars in each of their pockets, but only a few days later start complaining about lack of money again. Their houses in Clejani are purposely left unrenovated, like shabby huts, to make an impression on passers-by and in particular foreign visitors, so that they give them charity, and perhaps consider helping them by organising tours abroad. On those tours, the musicians will earn money [...]; and then they return home and share their gain with relatives and neighbours, pay back debts, spend or waste the money in numerous ways, or invest it in constructing huge mansions outside Clejani, in other villages, either for themselves or their close relatives. (208)

Marian-Bălașa's idea of modernity (and even "human paradigm") does not appear to be remotely influenced by any of the categories of thought developed in anthropological studies over the last century; rather, it seems to reflect a stereotyped, prudish representation of petit bourgeois lifestyles in a small town somewhere in the West. Marian-Bălașa does not even consider Clejani musicians' inclination to share money and possessions with their family members and friends a sign of generosity or something to admire. Despite recalling in a footnote (208-209:10) that "this habit represents a sign and way of manifesting Gypsy identity" and providing some relevant bibliographic references,<sup>17</sup> Marian-Bălașa does not even try to analyze this practice on an ethnographic level: it is simply reprehensible. Nor is he touched by doubts – doubts that even the minimum level of anthropological competence required by an ethnomusicologist would instill in anyone – that the pathways of modernity may not be linear or universal. Or that the Balkan Roma's contribution to the cultural systems in which they engage are widely characterized by a dynamic relationship combining resistance to change and highly modern traits. Indeed, this relationship has been extensively investigated in the ethnomusicological literature, with scholars actually focusing more on aspects of innovation than instances of conservation.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> He cites Williams 1996 and Stewart 1994 (which was later reworked and translated into Italian as Stewart 1995), which variously address the question of property and sharing among Roma groups in Hungary.

<sup>18</sup> There are multiple ethnomusicological publications addressing this topic, for instance Pettan 1992 and Staiti 2016: 86-89, referring to the case study of Kosovo.



FIGURE 4. Crespellano (Bologna), 2003. Wedding with Romanian *lautar* (photo: N. Staiti).

In the end, the fact is that the musicians are just like the criminals: all the money Gypsies earn, whether honestly or dishonestly, is scandalous because it ends up being used to build “huge mansions”. The author does not mention it, but there is the risk that the bath tubs of these luxurious homes, probably made of gold, are used to grow tomatoes. I come from the city of Messina, in Sicily, where even today there are shantytowns in the city center inhabited by people who lost their homes during the 1908 earthquake. According to local urban legend, even if shack dwellers were given houses they would treat them like shacks, thereby blaming them for their contiguity with much poorer populations. The same logic was used in Milan to talk about emigrants from Southern Italy and is now applied to Gypsies or other immigrants.

Poverty and cultural alterity are disturbing: if the poor must exist they should at least have the courtesy to be sober and clean, and not cause trouble. Not beg, not offend our eyes with inappropriate clothes or behaviors; they should live in small, decorous houses, enduring their state with dignity and silent courage, grateful for the lifestyles laid out for them by dominant classes and ethnic groups (who enjoy a monopoly on the right to spend money on ugly things and ostentatious luxury goods). This is what Marian-Bălașa’s text suggests, like a Dickens’ novel or, perhaps more appropriately (given the author’s comparison with African Americans), Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom*.

The essay also includes a description of a genre painting by Sándor Bihari (a Romanian painter from the second half of the Eighteenth century) that portrays a family of

Gypsy musicians standing before a magistrate, evidently disputing an alleged violation of some sort. He then goes on to briefly describe the film *Gadjo Dilo* by Tony Gatlif (described as “one of the best movies about Gypsies” [209] even though this is actually not a documentary but a light, exoticizing fictional film in line with the director’s other work) whose leading actress, a Gypsy, as Marian-Bălașa reminds us (2004:2011), was involved in a sexual-political scandal (another sign of Roma immorality). He then mentions the films by Emir Kusturica, that in his opinion are “masterpieces”, though they fail in having

played heavily with the ambiguities of criminality, and ambalming [*sic*] everything in music. (211)

Marian-Bălașa seems to expect that even fictional films dealing with issues that touch on Gypsies lay out rigorous critical positions: music is fine and good, but there should be no indulgence or ambiguity when speaking about criminal behavior! Following this logic, for example, we could argue that Chaplin’s film *The Kid* is not sufficiently clear in condemning the children who break the windows or even that Coppola’s *The Godfather* appears to offer a vindication of the Italian mafia... at this point perhaps it would be advisable to ban films – and, why not, novels, poems and paintings as well – that depict disrespectful, unlawful or immoral behavior. This already occurred in recent European history, for example in Nazi Germany, Russia under Stalin, Italy during Fascism and Albania under Enver Hoxha.

Furthermore, it is not apparent what the above-mentioned “vignettes” (as the author defines them) about Eighteenth-century genre painting and Gatlif and Kusturica’s film-making have to do with the issues addressed in the essay. Indeed, the ultimate aim of the publication seems to lie solely in demonstrating that Gypsy’s atavistic characteristics give rise to both their criminal proclivity and superior musicianship. The author apparently intends to analyze the role of the Roma in various artistic fields, not only music but also cinema and painting. The fact that the music he refers to is produced by Gypsies while the painting and the films he describes are the product of someone else’s view of Gypsies is not mentioned, nor does it not seem to concern him. In short, his intentions are purely ideological, limited to asserting certain claims, and not contaminated in the least by the methods and aims of ethnology.

In the final section of the essay, Marian-Bălașa proposes a parallel between the state of African-Americans in the United States and the Roma in Europe; after all, even “niggers”, as we know, are good at playing music, singing and dancing (and at being a bit criminal, as well). This pretext allows him to conclude with an ode to the universal values of music:

Indeed, as with the Afro-Americans, Gypsy music can provide a useful insight into the soul of the Roma people. Their musical parlance proves that there is a special and forceful

human value in Gypsiness; and that, despite the numerous arguments and prejudices used in self-defence, that value is universal, and therefore should not and cannot be suppressed. (223)

This brings me to the reasons why I consider it necessary to give a full account of such a stunning concentration of clichés, prejudice, ignorance, stupidity and vacant petulance. After all, worse things appear in the newspaper and on television; we hear more on the bus, at the pub or from the mouths of eminent political figures. And yet this essay has presumptions of scientific validity, having been published by an international journal, deemed acceptable by anonymous expert editors and approved by a Scientific Committee made up of ethnologists, sociologists and university professors working on behalf of a scientific Society. I purchased the issue that contains Marian-Bălașa's essay in a prestigious public location: the Ethnographic Museum of Bucharest.

I struggle to understand what induced a peer-reviewed international scientific journal to publish the essay by Marian-Bălașa. It is possible that the marginality of the Roma population and their 'light' approach to defining group identity, an approach which renders public representations of them difficult and problematic even when defending their own rights, might have contributed to the degree of attention the reviewers and Scientific Committee granted this potential publication, less than that which they would have paid to an article about another culture and population. It seems that, until I published my observations, the publication of Marian-Bălașa's essay never elicited any reaction. We are left to wonder: what would have happened if a scientific journal had published, for instance, an article in which an author claimed that the tendency of Yiddish music and language to absorb elements from other cultures derives from the same atavistic tendency that drove Jews to be beggars, fences and shylocks? An article in which concentration camps were defined as "passionate punishments"? It is clear that, although on a different scale, the implied logic would not be so different from that used by Marian-Bălașa and judged acceptable by *Ethnologia Balkanica*.

Today, there are laws and regulations against Holocaust deniers and those who assert that the Holocaust never happened. Too little too late, in the end these measures serve to reassure the collectivity by expressing a shared position of legitimate, collective and undisputable indignation, which also makes them very cheap and profitable. If the scientific community had rejected the first theories of race a century ago, more severely and unanimously than it actually did, maybe there would be less need today to issue regulations and laws for whitewashing the collective consciousness. In present-day Europe and America, racism – mass racism, not that of minor groups of extremists or isolated pseudo-intellectuals in search of fame – is no longer directed towards Jews.<sup>19</sup> Of course, especially in some parts of the United States African-Americans are still largely dis-

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<sup>19</sup> See the contribution by Federico Faloppa ("Per un linguaggio non razzista") in Aime 2016, especially at pp. 71-73.

criminated against and often socially disadvantaged, but the perception of diversity has changed a great deal compared to a few decades back; moreover, until recently even the President of the United States was black. In particular, however, mass racism has shifted away from its former genetic foundations. Today's scientific trends and developments make assertions of biological racial inferiority problematic, and the memory of Nazism is still too vivid for it to be replicated in the same way. Contemporary racism is instead articulated by asserting one group's civilization over another's barbarism,<sup>20</sup> barbarism that threatens the borders of our little home garden. Ethnology, however, teaches us to do exactly the opposite: there are certain things that should remain outside the sphere of ethnology (and that of all the sciences, natural and social). For everyone's safety and the safety of every garden, especially public ones, which represent the best and most painstakingly produced fruit of our civilization.

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<sup>20</sup> “Espulsa dall'ingresso principale, l'idea di razza è [...] rientrata dalla finestra, assumendo nomi e forme diverse [...]. A sostituire il paradigma biologico del pensiero razziale e razzista è subentrato un nuovo quadro di riferimento: quello culturale. La nostra, infatti, è un'epoca post-razziale (ma non post-razzista) caratterizzata però da nuove dinamiche di razzializzazione basate non solo sui vecchi cliché delle 'essenze' razziali [...] ma soprattutto sulla riconfigurazione delle relazioni parentali, dello status di cittadino e della dislocazione spaziale”. English Translation: “Cast out of the main door, the idea of race [...] came back in through the window, under different names and forms [...]. Substituting the biological paradigm of racist and racial thought, a new framework appeared: the cultural one. In fact, ours is a post-racial era (but not yet post-racist), characterized by new dynamics of racialization based not on the old cliché of racial “essences” [...] but first and foremost on the reconfiguration of relations within families, the status of citizens and spatial dislocation”. And again: “la storia ci dimostra che nella pratica non esistono due forme di razzismo (scientifico o culturale) distinte e separate. Quasi sempre ogni forma di razzismo è un mix, con diverso dosaggio delle due logiche. La separazione su base culturale è piuttosto di carattere differenzialista: si vuole prendere le distanze dall'*altro*, chiudersi nel proprio recinto”. English translation: “History demonstrates that, in practice, there are not two distinct and separate forms of racism (scientific or cultural). In nearly all cases, forms of racism are a mixture, with varying doses of the two logics. Instead, the distinction on the basis of culture is differentialist in character: people want to keep their distance from the other, enclosing themselves behind their own fences”. Aime 2016 (Marco Aime, “Si dice *cultura*, si pensa *razza*”): 46 and 61. See Aime 2016 for a wider discussion on the subject.

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