

## CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN RADU ALDULESCU'S NOVELS

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**Abstract:** *Drawing on contemporary theories of cultural hybridity, this article explores the phenomenology of interracial and interethnic rapports, family relationships, networks of relatives, acquaintances and workmates in the delineation of a hybrid, mixed subjectivity specific to Balkanism, considered here as a specific form of creole aesthetics. Taking into consideration three novels by Radu Aldulescu – “The Widow’s Lover” (1996), “The History of the Heroes of a Green and Refreshing Realm” (1997) and “The Prophets of Jerusalem” (2004) – my aim is to trace differences and continuities of the communist and postcommunist approaches to race and ethnicity. The roles of the relevant characters are put forward bearing in mind their different levels of consciousness, the socio-political contexts, the blend of autobiography and fiction and the center / margin rhetoric.*

**Keywords:** Romanian contemporary novel, race and ethnicity, Balkanism

Several Romanian literary critics have described Radu Aldulescu’s novels as writings of the *déclassé*, dealing with the underground, marginal and corrupted life, which is partially true. For years, his novels – all of them published beginning with 1993 – used to be considered only realistic, when in fact part of the “reality” described and implied is often psychological, trying to encompass aspects that usually tend to remain unspoken, out of the normative public discourse. Although Daniel Cristea-Enache (2007) suggested the reader should go beyond the label of the plebeian author previous critics assigned to Aldulescu, the writer himself challenges his readership by ironically adopting that very label in a polemic interview conducted by Horia Gârbea (2008), in which he challenges the meaning of reality: “I am a plebeian and a hopeless ragamuffin, slightly literate, who broke open the Romanian literature, especially to take the bread out of the real writers’ mouth”. At about the same time, Nicolae Manolescu (2008) included his work in his monumental *Critical History of Romanian Literature*, in an article which stresses the importance of moral periphery, signaling the sexual promiscuity and the presence of the foreigner as two post-1989 literary characteristics in Aldulescu’s narratives and in Romanian prose at large.

However, the critic failed to address any positive aesthetic or socio-cultural roles of such aspects and ends his presentation with an admonition aimed at the writer's personality, presumably a victim of his own qualities. In fact, such an attitude among Romanian established critics hides a problem related, first, to the amplitude of the contemporary literary canon among domestic writers and, second, to the Romanian contemporary intellectual elite's general disinterest in anything that deals with the role of literature in instrumenting effective cultural-social policies. "I feel inadequate," Aldulescu replied when asked by Doina Ioanid (2012) about being labelled as a writer of the marginal. "I just write literature and I think I do it well. But it is sad that we still work with a domestic literary canon, which is not related to the great literature. We have our own values and what beats all is that we export and promote them in the West. However, they do not correspond to the canon of great literature."

The aim of this article is to approach Aldulescu's chronicals as literary testimonies of cultural hybridity and socio-cultural transformation during and after communism in the context of EU integration and to propose new meanings of his so-called aesthetics of marginality associated with them. His renown cinematique technique and impression of emotional involvement in creating the destinies of his characters raise the question of awareness and morality over such processes. This is one of the reasons why, among the numerous novels published after 1989, Aldulescu's books constitute not simply mirrors of a changing society, but also a constant search for essential beauty in the human condition and strength to survive and feel freedom in the environment of the last three decades that has been hostile and confusing to many Eastern Europeans.

One aspect most often overlooked is that Aldulescu narrates stories of blurry interracial, interethnic and interclass bonds – often taken for granted in the intellectual environment, but which conceal elements of emotional tension, secrets revealed in the last instance, victims and criminals never tried for their deeds. An artist of detailed portraits, free indirect speech, social frescoes and vivid, meaningful dialogues, the author explores guilt, fear and despair, feelings which animate characters in search of a better life both during communism and after 1989. It is thought-provoking that in a cultural environment where the act of writing used to be seen as the appanage of the elite, a talented novelist who worked in factories and among day laborers (often of rural mixed racial origin, using slang and living from hand to mouth) is labelled as "exotic". In an interview taken by Andra Rotaru in 2010, the author declared: "I really consider my poverty a bonus, for which I will thank God forever" and "in spite of a few appearances, everything I have been through was

what I really wished”. Although Radu Aldulescu’s predisposition to narrate life in the margins of society follows a tradition of previously classicized writers<sup>1</sup>, the exoticism assigned to his novels necessitates a detailed discussion, because his characters are not exotic in the sense they are foreign, bizarre or ideal or they have alien customs. They seem rather unusual and unfamiliar because they do not live in the center of Bucharest, where many intellectuals of the capital used to live before 1989. In this context, we might ask how the component of distance, which the concept of exoticism entails, is performed and for what purposes.

While trying to understand critics’ perception especially of his first novels, the author places himself in their shoes. In a previously mentioned interview with Ioanid (2012), he reveals their rather static view regarding writers’ psycho-social involvement with the destinies of their subjects: “His characters are mere bloody interlopers we have never met. But he met them as he was there with them.’ Others may have seen them too, they may have been around them too, but they did not have enough time and disposition to get involved as writers,” declares the writer, mimicking the voice of a generic incorrigible literary critic, with a career started during the communist epoch. As in the case of the postcolonial subject, whose imitation of the colonizer is aimed at destabilizing the latter’s authority, such an attitude is not at all meaningless. As cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha showed (1994), mimicry has proved to be a powerful creative tool in authoritative regimes, because of its menacing force, aimed at unveiling their flaws and suggesting alternative discourses. In the same interview, Aldulescu gives a definition of what a novelist must do, which clearly shows an idealistic attitude of support regarding lower classes of the society, which not many contemporary Romanian writers have professed and which made critics compare him with J. J. Osborne and L. F. Céline:

A novelist must get involved and his involvement is complete, dangerous and difficult. It is as if you descended into an abyss, in order to find something, and you do not know if you can ever return. The next step is the total detachment of that world, in order to observe it as it is. It is similar to what a priest does, who becomes emotionally involved with the sins of those who confess, but

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<sup>1</sup> See the analysis focused on the novel of periphery made by Georgiana Sârbu (2009), with examples from *The Meadow of Love* (1933) by George Mihail Zamfirescu, *The Pit* (1957) by Eugen Barbu, *Zaheu the Blind* (1970) by Vasile Voiculescu, *The Widow’s Lover* (1996) by Radu Aldulescu etc. An initial doctoral thesis coordinated by Nicolae Manolescu, her book proposes a perspective that goes beyond stereotypes related to periphery, for a better understanding of marginal urban spaces.

eventually is able to detach himself when he asks them to give up that kind of life.

With a taste for the discourse of the carnivalesque, theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin, Aldulescu is a fine literary ventriloquist, who populates his novels with a host of individual voices, a rich sample of adapting the concepts of dialogic imagination and polyphonic narrative to the context of Romanian culture – especially the southern part – at the turn of the millenium. His subtle interracial, interethnic and interclass networks challenge the lag-and-lack stereotypes identified by Maria Todorova (2005) in connection with Balkanism, according to which “the main categories of analysis of the past are ones that pertain to emptiness: lack, absences, what is not, incompleteness, backwardness, catching up, failure, self-exclusion, negative consciousness, and so on”. His anti-heroes, indeed, experience most of these, but the narratives always suggest a purpose: to reveal insights into the substance of cultural hybridity and socio-political and economic transition in the region, with all the hubris that hybridity and change may involve, and to instrument marginality – or rather liminality – not as a category of backwardness but rather as one of cultural and literary production.

The exoticism identified by some critics in Aldulescu’s novels meets the conclusions of recent academic research studies on the Gypsy character in Romanian literature, whose authors show that the Romanian literary discourse has been significantly different than the Western one up to 1989<sup>2</sup>: while the West has produced two perspectives – marginal and exotic – on the Gypsy character, marginality in Romanian literature dominates the discourse, which announces a recent ideological influence of Western values. Although Aldulescu describes the racialization of marginality and social inferiority during communism, the germs of an opposite trend is obvious in many of his works. His literary discourse on the center / margin opposition has been in line with the efforts of Roma socio-political activism after 1989, even though the author has not made any public statement about it.

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<sup>2</sup> Suciú Pavel Cristian (2010) admits that while the Western range of Gypsy characters often includes idealized figures, associated with a masked disinterest in the real people, the characters in Romanian high literature and folklore are more realistic and constructed on the binary opposition familiar/strange. Laura Popescu (2010) explains the reticence about the Gypsy people as being based on the general reserve regarding strangers, specific to traditional communities.

The introduction of the category of Roma in the Romanian and EU public discourse as an elitist cultural trend has not only counterbalanced the assimilationist perspective specific to the communist policy, but also has encountered new furious postcommunist forms of racial public discourse. More precisely, two of the most heated contemporary debates, the presence of the Roma in the Romanian identity<sup>3</sup> and the conceptual relationships between Gypsy, Roma and Romanian have generated mixed standpoints, ranging from radical rejection to enthusiastic embrace<sup>4</sup>. In the context of these debates, Aldulescu's postcommunist novels draw on the pre-1989 cultural memory, in order to expose and explore the pros and cons of the communist assimilationist policy and to avoid simple binary oppositions and unilateral views. His characters embody various merges of class, ethnicity and race, which go beyond mere descriptions of skin color and physical appearance. In general, the author documents one positive facet of balkanization: its similarity to creolization, theorized by several cultural theorists in the second part of the twentieth century<sup>5</sup>. Aldulescu's novels allow a reassessment of Balkanism as a specific form of memory and a continuous regional literary tradition, in which the ethnic, racial, class and linguistic hybridity is significantly profiled under the umbrella of humanism.

Since many of Aldulescu's novels include characters of Gypsy origin, this essay outlines the role of their intercultural bonds in the economy of the narrative and in staging otherness in the context of communist and postcommunist cultural hybridity. My concern is related to how mixed subjectivities are tackled in terms of race and ethnicity in three of his novels: *The Widow's Lover* (2006/1996), *The History of the Heroes of a Green and Refreshing Realm* (1997) and *The Prophets of Jerusalem* (2012/2004)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> After 1989, the Romanian Gypsy elite replaced the usual ethnonym with Roma, which has had the support of international institutions and is endowed with transnational belonging. There are however, incongruences between traditional Roma and urbanized Roma, which make it difficult to articulate a common cultural ground.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the debate, see the collection of essays (plus an interview) entitled *Roma or Gypsy*, edited by István Horváth and Lucian Nastasă (2012).

<sup>5</sup> See works by H. K. Bhabha, R. J. Young, E. K. Brathwaite, Stuart Hall, G. C. Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa or Edouard Glissant.

<sup>6</sup> The titles of and the fragments selected from Radu Aldulescu's novels into English were translated by the author of this article.

Contemporary Romanian cultural theorists admit that the significance of race and ethnicity was rather silenced during communism, because they were not considered useful categories for the indiscriminate party policies<sup>7</sup>, while after 1989, racial and ethnic discrimination increased in parallel with the activity of anti-racism campaigns. Aldulescu's novels capture the ensuing dynamism generated by the post-1989 greater expression of race and ethnic differences, especially on individual level and less on the level of group or community. If not many characters are described as being aware of them and able to reflect upon their meaning, the narrative voice often illustrates their conflict, confluence and cultural significance.

*The Widow's Lover* is a picaresque fresco of the 1970's and 1980's Bucharest, in which the destinies of numerous characters of mixed race and ethnicity intersect, in order to weave a socio-psychological tapestry of the two decades, in a neighborhood called after a street name: "that Gipsydom" of Dudești Road.

The main character, Dumitru Cafanu, the son of a well-established communist nomenklaturist and a teacher of French language, knowingly adopts the role of the black sheep in the family and chooses to live among the déclassé. Dumitru's physiognomic description is at least ambiguous, as it just suggests he might have Gypsy blood: "The hairs of a one-week beard were invading his olive face, with wide cheekbones and the transparent and phosphorescent look of a flummoxed cat, lost on the track of an illusory prey. The sun of this summer got tired striping his thatch of dishevelled and dirty black hair." When discussing his family tree with his mother, she tells him that her maternal family were of Greek origin, while her paternal family were German, but nothing is mentioned about his father's family tree, which may explain why his nomenklaturist father grows cold when his children become adults. He neither helps them to advance within the system nor he supports them with money when they plan to emigrate. Moreover, the main character distinguishes between their family and the other "proletarian families and especially families of Gypsy street sweepers" in Dudești area, but mocks at his father's high position in the political hierarchy, a "subsubminister", which emphasizes his subalternity in the system. Hence, the implication that his father might have been of Gypsy origin, but he and his family are too ashamed to put it bluntly, which is more evident in Aldulescu's subsequent novels. Although the main character is not identified as a Gypsy, there is a leitmotif

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<sup>7</sup> See Monica Bottez and al (2011) and István Horváth and Lucian Nastasă (2012).

throughout the novel, which speaks about the effort to fight against unspoken and unchronicled assimilation: “Time goes by, watch it coming, watch it going by, it’s black-skinned black-skinned black-skinned,” says the omniscient narrative voice.

Dumitru considers marginality and his dog’s life as his gift and his destiny. Always guarded by God’s will, many of his adventures into the slums of human condition are described as harrowing but enlightening experiences. He acts as a resonant psychological instrument to convey otherness, be it human, grotesque or divine. The positive part of his destiny of individual failure on the background of collective decay is the awareness of alterity and the constant filming of a consciousness under construction, with all its ups and downs.

His early love for a blonde woman, nicknamed Colivăreasa, who has had several husbands and lovers, proves Aldulescu’s concern with how one lives otherness. Her usual black clothes symbolize both mourning and desire. On the one hand, the Romanian title of the novel, *Amantul colivăresei*, is richer in meaning than the French title, *L’Amant de la Veuve*, or my proposal, *The Widow’s Lover*. “Colivă” or “koliva” is boiled wheat, a ritual food used liturgically in the Eastern Orthodox Church to commemorate the dead. This nameless blonde woman’s nickname is an extension of Colivaru, the nickname of Terente Vasile, one of her husbands, an old cantor who dies soon after he brings her to Bucharest and marry her. “Colivar” is a synonym of a church beggar who specifically wants to eat “colivă” because he is hungry. On the other hand, her black clothes are a symbol of chaste love and desire: “She gave him a cake once and later he bought her a black blouse, which she did not want to accept, because this gift would have sanctified their guilty bond.”

With these explanations in mind, the feminization of the nickname signals the feminization of begging, which is rather a type of begging for love, protection and understanding than mere begging for money or food.

When after several years of rambling life Dumitru returns home, his mother, the teacher of French, informs him that Colivăreasa’s first child, a young woman called Dorina, was born out of a mysterious bond, somewhere in a rural area, and was placed in an orphanage when Colivăreasa came to Bucharest. Soon after, Dorina was adopted by a Greek woman, who has made everything not to let her daughter know about her true origin. In terms of physical appearance, Dorina is initially depicted ambiguously: “The color of her complexion is like rye bread. She has a lot of black hair, almost blue, so that you might think she dyed it, but no, she

didn't, she is a real and good-looking brunette, resembling an Indian woman of the right sort from the films with Winnetou." These references to Native Americans might cast an exotic light on the subject, but obliterates her true nature. Dumitru later muses that "she's not a Gypsy, because of the shape of her mouth and her straight nose", remembers "her mother is Greek, as she came from Greece as a refugee, with a group of illegal communists" and concludes she is a "swarthy Greek", while they spend an afternoon together on the beach. Eventually, he finds out from his mother that Dorina does not have Greek blood because she was adopted, a secret which blows his mind, as he used to be in love with Colivăreasa. Moreover, Dorina is in love with him, at the moment when mother and son speak about her. What is surprising and thought-provoking is that there is no definite clue about Dorina's real father and, as Colivăreasa is blonde, the father of her only child could not have been otherwise than dark-skinned, which adds a new layer to the meaning of who the lover mentioned in the title is. Throughout all this net of relationships, the discourse on sexuality has the role to heighten the mystery of an unspeakable bond, which Romanian critics have completely neglected in their reviews. Dumitru's attachment to the blonde woman and to her daughter may be a mode of impossible attachment to Dorina's unknown, absent father. Aldulescu's deconstruction of masculine Gypsiness matches the ideas of contemporary socio-political Roma activist Nicolae Gheorghe, interviewed in Horváth and Nastasă (2012), where he discusses his own identity as a meeting point of Gypsy, Romanian and Roma belongings: "It has been easier to say in English, 'I am a Gypsy', than to say it in Romanian, 'sunt țigan'."<sup>8</sup> If Dumitru's father or Dorina's father had been real people living nowadays, they would probably identify with Nicolae Gheorghe's difficulties in defining his own subjectivity and public performative approach to overcome them.

With this interpretation in mind, the concept of exoticism gains new meaning: it has been internalized as an unusual complex of distances between father and son, between different generations and mentalities, between people of Gypsy origin with different social statuses and even between forms of identification and denomination. A key aspect in the organization of the narrative is that most of the stories take place far from Bucharest or at its periphery, but the moment when Dorina's father identity is suggested – not even mentioned – is staged in one of the most

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<sup>8</sup> In the same interview with sociologist Iuliu Rostaș, Roma activist Nicolae Gheorghe remembers being asked in his youth by a stranger "Why are you a Gypsy?", a question that has marked all his life.

important hotels in the center of Bucharest: Lido. Dumitru's interest in what is absent, excluded, unknown can be equated with the author's endeavour to reconstruct an unchronicled past that might be relevant for the present, in which multiculturalism is a desideratum that should not only celebrate diversity in its fixity, but also be prepared to adopt new hybrids. Georgiana Sârbu (2009) interprets Aldulescu's presence of the periphery in the city as "another contamination of the center", which might be a reductive view since it perpetuates the perception of otherness as being dirty, infectious. Of course, laughter can be contaminating, but the general tonality of Aldulescu's novels is only partially humorous. The main character rather answers back to the center that he strategically left, which is transformed in an act of writing back in *The History of the Heroes...* For the moment, he muses over the avatars of his own identity: "a delicate and very sensitive mechanism and yet able to cope with vicissitudes of all sorts, something that could resemble more or less anything else, without being something else". The focus on such a deconstructive, fluid form of identity is perhaps one of the essential features of the cultural hybridity specific to Romania, as a Latin country in the Balkans. Dumitru's emigrated brother uses a pejorative metaphor for it: "For how long are you going to slosh in that mud?" The metaphor of the mud, which may equal lack of clarity, confusion or obscurity, but also for black race, mixture, natural environment or healing, is taken over in his later novels to denote the belief in a malleable subjectivity.

In *The History of the Heroes of a Green and Refreshing Realm* (1997), the articulation of masculinity with race, ethnicity and class evolves around three men's attempt to fraudulently cross the Western border, in order to reach "the green and refreshing realm", a leitmotif whose meaning changes from page to page to be a reference to death, then to any foreign country where life is better, to America as a paradise virtually easily to get to, but practically just a dream, to an abstract location and to Romania after the Revolution of 1989. A previous reference to the leitmotif exists in *The Widow's Lover*, in a scene about Norica, a girl from the country side whom Dumitru is about to marry, whose voice is "like a murmur that can take him to a shore full of silence and greenery, where there is no pain nor sorrow", an initial meaning related to synchretism and imagination.

The narrator Aurel Golea, his cousin Laur Trandafir and their co-worker Andrei Ilieş grow dissatisfied with their low-paid jobs in the yard of Old Victor's depot of construction materials and plan to emigrate. Interesting for this discussion on race and ethnicity is the rapport between Aurel and his cousin Laur and their different levels of consciousness regarding their social condition. The narrator's youngest aunt was married

to Gilbert Trandafir the Great, a Gypsy man from the rural area of Caracal, and Laur is their son. After Gilbert's relatives stabbed his wife's brother for unknown reasons, they divorced and later she gave his name to her pitch black tomcat, in order to treasure the memory of her first marriage. Laur finds shelter in Old Victor's yard, where "Laur's always had sure housing, as if he keeps him for breeding because he is black and handsome". When the narrator explains to a local policeman who Laur is, Aurel defends him so that he should not be fined for not having a Bucharest stamp on his identity papers, necessary in the communist era: "He is a very very unhappy child, major. His mom and dad haven't been together ever since he was born. Before he grew up a little, they kept throwing him to each other and drove him away into the world and now he works where he can."

Without any help from their parents – Aurel's are already dead – and without any help from the state, the two cousins try to make a living by working here and there. However, their quasi-homeless status hardly helps them better their life in any way, because Old Victor, their master, exploits them for his own dishonest business. Although Old Victor has dark skin too, he is rather racist in relation to his subordinates, which indicates a form of involuntary self-hatred<sup>9</sup>. The narrative abounds in double-coded speech and Aurel even calls his cousin Laur "a half-blooded trotter", who "used to throw bouquets at his master, tickling his vanity, repeating slogans such as 'death for Gypsies and thieves' or 'heil Hitler,' but on the other hand did not think of him as being better than his stupid wife". Laur himself understands his wretched and helpless condition when he concludes: "He said he didn't need any thieves or Gypsies in his yard, but he needs thieves and Gypsies to do his job". He decides to leave to the seaside where he can earn some money selling mud and food on the beach. Before Laur returns from the seaside, Aurel finds out about his love affair with Viorel, Old Victor's son, a slender play boy with "a very light complexion in comparison with his parents", who calls Laur "my mulatto little prince". When Laur reappears, Aurel and Andrei are about to leave the place, after selling a great amount of stolen cement to make money needed to cross the Western border and after finding Old Victor killed in his office by an unknown murderer. Asked if he brought any money from the seaside, in order to pay for his own crossing of the border, Laur does not have a satisfactory answer: "He's laughing to himself, with that pout of

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<sup>9</sup> Old Victor seems to suffer from what Kiossev (1999) identified as a form of "self-colonization", specific to individuals who "import alien values and civilizational models by themselves and [...] lovingly colonize their own authenticity through these foreign models" (114).

a swarthy little monkey, blinking frequently, while watching his time, both shy and defiant. He is like a stupid girl.” When they leave Old Victor’s yard, Laur’s proposal is “to set fire to the place, to give him a lesson about dealing with the thieves and the barbarians and the Gypsies”, which actually does not happen.

When comparing his experience with those of his cousin Laur, Aurel makes a parallel between rural Gypsies and urban Gypsies, the latter being rather more of mixed origin than those from the country side, due to the class factor, more active in urban areas, and to clan factor, more present in rural areas. Old Victor’s yard and Aurel’s small room at the basement of a block of flats are part of what the narrator calls “an underground city”, an allusion to *Notes from Underground* by F. M. Dostoevsky. Still, apart from working as a boiler fireman, a cauldron repairer, a well builder, a welder or a mud seller, Aurel is an aspiring writer, who unsuccessfully tries to publish one of his numerous manuscripts with the Calends Publishing House before 1989, where a certain Mr. Restoiu and a certain Mrs. Bruescu make his life a hell. Their names are not without resonance: their French roots, *rester* and *brouiller*, are a metonymy for the censorship of the late 1980s, when the first half of the story is set.

After the three men fail to cross the border, due to the 1989 Revolution that interrupts their illegal journey, Aurel returns to Bucharest, where he takes the pulse of the people’s opinion about the events. Among other things he hears in the Bucharest North railway station that the recently killed couple, Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena, are considered “bastards and bloody Gypsies who made a mock of the people for so long and they fucked it up as they wished”. No matter how much Ceaușescu and his regime wished to help lower classes, the overall socio-cultural policies failed to cater for most segments of society, at least in the 1980s. No sooner had the communist regime been pulled down than people began to assign Gypsiness all possible evils that communist may have involved, a symptom accentuated in the 1990s. Engrossed in the historical context of “this topsy-turvy revolution”, Aldulescu explores the effects of confusion upon peoples’ lives through Aurel’s consciousness:

I have always been fascinated by people’s faces. Their imperceptible transformation from one second to another and the irreversible flow along ages have often produced painful arousal to my sight and thinking. I gradually got to perceive these aspects as if they were temptations already containing their wrath. Wherever I go, people turn their life into misery and fatality, everyone wears their own misfortune on their face, recreating and transmitting it to others on

long distances. Boredom, pain, bad luck, distress, disgust and fear of death, all pulsate on faces in an infinity of masks and under the aura of cataclysms, frustration and vanity, which manage to fascinate me, to please me to the point of palsy.

With the help of a certain Mrs. Plumbeanu, the new director at the Calends Publishing House, Aurel manages to publish his novels after the fall of the communist regime. Her family name is another hint at the publishing restrictions of the 1990s, suggested by the French word *plomb*. The circumstances of his debut reflect the fact that Aldulescu's novels were not published before 1989 because they were too radical in displaying some samples of naked, tedious truth, while after the 1989 they did not sell well due to lack of efficient cultural strategies. However, the narrator is convinced of "the force of the printed word, about which that 7-ton bronze beast said is more fearful than any other weapon or army", an ironic allusion to Lenin's statue located in front of the Free Press Square for many years after 1989. Disgusted with his family life in the city (he becomes a father), Aurel wishes to meet his cousin Laur again, whom he finds selling mud on the beach. The narrator reflects once more on his role among the people he chooses to be and whose lives he is able to transfer to the literary text:

People I barely knew were drawing near from the southern part of the beach. On their shoulders or heads they were carrying carton boxes with bananas and oranges, biscuits and peanut bags, pans with all kinds of cakes and baskets of bagels, buckets of peaches and boiled corn. Now they had everything you wanted. They were blacker and more haggard than I had ever knew them before. For six summers the sun has rummaged their look, emaciating them, but they go on ploughing the beach up and down tirelessly, calling the names of the goods they carry in their boxes, baskets and buckets, so many goods I was dying to have but I would not have dared to. God, how long have I kept myself away from them? How long have I wandered through that dirty history, guzzling Ortansa's broth and Gabriel's pap, banking on worms like Restoiu or madam Plumbeanu? After all, who am I looking for on this beach?"

The narrator's presence on the shore, a location where earth and water meet and where mud is formed by nature, sold by Gypsies and bought by the others, is a representation that magnifies marginal experiences to expose their intricacies rather than using them as oppressive conceptual tools.

In *The Prophets of Jerusalem*, the focus moves from national boundaries to a transnational context, from remote rural areas to cosmopolitan urban life. The novel is a complex mutual confession of two men of mixed race. One is Jerusalem, a blonde Gypsy boy from the country side, who is trafficked into prostitution in Germany and then in France, where he is eventually hired by a French marquis, Frédéric Toulouse Lautrec. The other is Doru, a jobless blasé from Bucharest, who apparently does not know his place on earth, but who can stand for part of the confused consciousness of the contemporary Eastern European man, lured by the revolutionary spirit of the last decade of the twentieth century. Doru and Jerusalem are relatives, since Doru's wife is Jerusalem's mother's cousin – two Gypsy women are their link. The tragedy is that Jerusalem is sold into prostitution by Doru's half brother, Edi. Hence the guilt and the shame, the sources of the story. Their mutual confession is a pretext to frame a critique of the discourse on corruption and transition, doubled by a discourse of picturesque tenderness, which reveals further moral aspects of cultural hybridity.

Who are the prophets mentioned in the title? Considering the Hebrew meaning of the name Jerusalem as the “abode of peace” and the conceptual intersection of place and person in Aldulescu's view, the prophets are all subjectivities that contribute to the idea of Jerusalem. As far as race and ethnicity associated with the name are concerned, the narrative is rife with conflictual references due to their mixed substance. As soon as the traffickers arrive in the West, they find out that their Western clients need “fair aurolacs”, which speaks about the commodification of a hybrid, fair race, coming from poor areas of Romania, untouched by the omniscience and prejudice of civilization and ready to sell, when forced, the only thing they possess: their bodies. What is so valuable about their bodies and why is it worth to localize their subjectivities?

The boy called Jerusalem is the perfect “fresh fair stuff”. He is “blonde, glowing, of a shameless beauty and with a provocative insolence throbbing amply in his blue eyes”. He comes from a needy Romanian rural family, without electricity at home: his father is a Gypsy blonde, drunk most of the time and mad about Jesus, whom he identifies with; his mother is a spoon-maker by birth; his brother and sister are called Pilat and Golgota.

Confronted with his own lack of identity while still being in the West, he returns to Romania, where he does not wish to meet his real family again. He is caught in the huge gap created by the lifestyle

differences and mentalities: “What I did to my father was that I didn’t like that kind of life and he didn’t know about it.” Being able to let themselves adopted, in any conditions, by any adults who can cater for their basic needs, Jerusalem and the other children become themselves adults ahead of their time. Eventually, after long days of begging in Paris, the boys realize their position in the society they were thrown into: “They got fed up with this baboonery, they were not children anymore, but they had to face the music.” Forced by material and social circumstances to remain in France, they have to live on the nightmare, up to the point that the very notion of childhood is emptied of any meaning. In his later confession to Doru, Jerusalem admits:

I don’t have children and I am not going to have any as I want to keep my craziness only to myself. I don’t want to give it to my children as my parents did. That’s a good choice, but no matter how bad our parents have been... I’ve got lots of parents, uncle Dorel, I told you. I’ve been the child of all crazy people in the world...

While living in Frédéric’s house, Jerusalem begins to comprehend his own value, a fact which he later mentions to Doru:

...he stopped in the middle of a sonata to ask me if it was true that I didn’t have a birth certificate, if that was usual in those forests where I had been born... How could he have believed that? He was ashamed but of course he said he didn’t believe it, but he couldn’t have avoided it... I told him he shouldn’t have let himself be fooled, but to insist, to ask for my birth certificate if he had paid so much.

Jerusalem’s laic confessor, uncle Doru, is the illegitimate son of a working class woman from Văcărești Avenue, whom he calls “a maker of children”, emigrated nobody knows where, and a local politician, successful after the 1989. By the end of the 1980s, Văcărești Avenue used to be a modest neighborhood, where many Jews and Gypsies lived in old houses, about whose demolition Aldulescu wrote in *The Widow’s Lover*. Although his mother had Gypsy blood, Doru does not want to have anything to do with his wife Magdalena’s rural Gypsy relatives, which reveals his awareness of class difference. While married with Magdalena, he has a stormy love affair with a revolutionary quasi-educated woman, Viviana, a fact that epitomizes the confusing aftermath of the 1989. When, after a while, he returns to Magdalena, he is announced he will become a father, which contributes to his sense of masculinity.

Differently than Doru, his elder brother Edi fraudulently crosses the Western geographical border of the country to become a car thief in

Germany. Although he feels like “a foreigner, a metic, a paria”, he is ready to exploit his “viking ninja look”. Edi is a mongrel too, as many other characters in Aldulescu’s novel are, but he is convinced he can pass for a white German. He considers himself looking like “an original German, tall and blonde, a citizen of Great Germany” . Not only his physical appearance fits the stereotype, but also his behavior in front of the children he is trafficking: “His large cleavage of his bath wrap showed the bulging bones of his clavicles and his curved hairless chest, of a whiteness as cold as his glance, which seemed to envelop them, taking them into possession, pitilessly consuming them in its frozen entrails.” He believes so much in his fake German identity that he does not feel like visiting Romania after 1989 and considers the children coming from his own country as being money making machines. His role proves that passing for another national is not enough to pass for a good citizen.

In Germany, Edi comes across Vali Burhuși, whom he first met in a Bucharest jail. Burhuși is a Gypsy who had been imprisoned for singing at weddings and parties without any papers, but, in fact, for not paying the right local officials, in order to be allowed to do it. He is co-opted by Edi to steal and deal cars. In terms of skin color, he is nicknamed a “potbellied cricket” , a derogatory allusion to his singing skills. In their partnership, Edi is the boss, while Burhuși travels to Bucharest to deal stolen cars with Petrică Oprescu, a local *bișnițar*<sup>10</sup>, who is their link to a local rural area, as he is the godfather of Magdalena’s relatives. A mongrel living at the outskirts of Bucharest for about fifty years, where he owns a motor service station, Oprescu differentiates between his own educated children and his child servants, whom he selects from the country side and sells to Burhuși. Caught in the illegal networks of capitalism, they exploit inexperienced individuals of their own ethnicity as Old Victor did in *The History of the Heroes*.

In comparison with other novels, Aldulescu offers a prominent portrait of a Gypsy woman, with a relevant role in building mixed-race masculine identity and in positively bridging the gap between the rural and the urban. When the well-off Oprescu visits his poor godson living in the country side, he is considered as being one who has made it in the city. On this occasion, the author describes two Gypsy sisters by employing an exotic association: “Lina and Magdalena were drinking his words with their half-shut eyes, reaching their temples. They were looking like Korean

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<sup>10</sup> Although *bișnițar* (someone who does business) and *bișniță* (a lucrative activity) are adaptations of the English *businessman* and *business*, their meanings involve speculative and even illegal business in the Romanian socio-economic context.

women with copper complexion, spoon-makers by birth.” Although Oprescu and the two sisters are almost the same folk from a racial and ethnic point of view, they enjoy different social and economic statuses, as Magdalena is a worker while her sister is a peasant. In comparison with the narrator’s neutral, but exoticizing voice regarding Magdalena’s physical appearance, she is also described as “a scandal, a Gypsy fatty” by Doru’s revolutionary lover, when the Gypsy woman tries to win back her husband, which she manages in the end. Using the stream of consciousness, the author offers remarkable insights into her relationship with her own self and with other women of her condition.

In contrast to all this network of mixed race characters, the Romanian German Marta, who becomes Edi’s partner in the business of children trafficking, embodies the young feminine emigrated racist, materialist and shameless. However, no matter her supposed superior position as a domineering young woman and perverse surrogate mother, the children she is trafficking consider her “a scarecrow pulled down by the wind”, after they use their collective physical strength to challenge her fake authority. The Gypsy Magdalena, who is Marta’s antagonist in the economy of the novel from an ethno-racial point of view, gives birth to Mirel, whose “complexion was as olive as Magdalena’s, and he had the same half-open black eyes and shy smile.” The boy makes Doru proud and his existence eventually convinces him to visit Magdalena’s Gypsy relatives living in the country side. Thus, the meanings of interracial and interethnic bonds, motherhood, pregnancy and childhood are reassessed, in order to blaze a trail of a balkanic aesthetic similar to creolization, in spite of the painful histories buried in its foundation. The apparently peculiar sexualized transnational factor may be meant to draw attention to the inefficiency of an ethnic community based only on kinship, premodern values and patriarchal hierarchy.

Through its fluid subjectivities, the novel also represents a critique of both nationalism and transnationalism in the context of the EU integration. The relationship between the young Jerusalem and the French decrepit marquis is staged as grotesque encounter. The French marquis is eventually killed with a knife by Jerusalem, as the boy killed a sheep for guests at home, in his drunken father’s yard. The narrative speaks about inadequate archaic national values and their incapacity to explain contemporary social, cultural and psychological processes. Behind the story, one can grasp a subtle intertextuality with the ballad *Miorița*, markedly distorted in the new transnational context. An important text of the Romanian folklore, translated in French in the nineteenth century, the ballad is now projected from another perspective, from that of the killer.

This is a position which speaks differently than the usual discourse according to which Romanians are peaceful when facing death, as the Moldavian shepherd, a folkloric projection of Jesus. With his fifth novel, Radu Aldulescu tackles the question of authority and of its crisis outside national boundaries as well as the father figure, fatherhood and masculinity. Who is Jerusalem's father? Nojiță, his biological father? Edi, his trafficker, whom he calls "father"? Frédéric, the foreigner who helps him suddenly understand his own identity? The author, who created the subject matter of the story? Or God, who helps him survive, but cannot prevent him from dramatically rejecting all his previous fathers? Or perhaps the contemporary readership, who, as the author suggests, may not be only Romanian?

In an article on the theme of survival, Radu Aldulescu (2013) mocks at his condition of an intellectual, saying that, unlike others, he obtained his PhD in survival only after assuming the statute of a postcommunist writer. In the same vein as his character Dumitru Cafanu, Aldulescu admits that in his youth felt "the brand of falsity, both nebulous and pregnant", which later was accompanied by "a kind of diffuse revolt mixed with a desire to get away". Just as one of his characters, he worked in factories such as Policolor, among jail birds, and in a printing house, where revolution found him in 1989. The mixture of reality and fiction in his novels is then aimed at mirroring a constant personal struggle of (re)positioning in the context of two different socio-political regimes: communist and postcommunist. The departure from the monopoly of the communist ideology regarding race and ethnicity allowed individual and group identity formation during the period of transition to democracy. Just as the introduction of the ethnonym Roma in the 1990s was considered by socio-political activists an attempt to promote the dignity of a population, Aldulescu's novels explore the condition of being a Gypsy in-between established forms or fixed categories of class, ethnicity and race, insisting more on the aesthetics of every day life and plurality of individual experience in the two regimes, drawing on rural and urban folklore, humor, hybridity and other heterogeneous forms of resistance in the face of poverty and misfortune. His novels also trace the continuity of experience and map the idea of a plural ethnic community, in which skin color is just one superficial form of identification, but still an important one. The adoption of marginal, liminal or limbo roles is strategic in the sense that his personages perform psychological and social forms of attachment and distancing, in order to adapt themselves to the environment and to simultaneously exercise their freedom. Last but not least, they may constitute possible answers, first, to the question "Why are you a Gypsy?", an interpellation similar to those introduced in the Western

Europe by Franz Fanon (“Look, a nigger!”) and by Louis Althusser (“Hey, you there!”) and, second, to those cultural theorists who might think that hybridity during communist Romania happened only on the level of ideology and not on the ethnic, racial and class level as well.

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