

Transnational Affiliations, Local Articulations: Consumption and Romani Publics in Bulgaria¹

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Introduction

Combating the entrenched position of Roma as Bulgaria's stigmatized underclass, Romani activists in Sofia seek to affiliate the Romani population with internationally recognized entities outside of the nation's borders: in particular, with the United States via African American movements (from the Civil Rights Movement of MLK to hip-hop), *and* with South Asia as an ostensible homeland for the European Romani diaspora. This paper examines how different transnational affiliations constitute—and are constituted by—the ways in which Romani activists align themselves in a global sphere, shifting affiliations among the Bulgarian state, the European Union, the United States, and India. By analyzing publics in terms of consumption, I examine how people forge affiliations vis-à-vis the consumption of certain “objects,” including political models/concepts (e.g., American Civil Rights) and media forms (e.g., Indian films, hip-hop music).

Publics and media, foundationally, have been studied in conjunction with each other, and we can look to Benedict Anderson's focus on the newspaper as an entrée point into thinking about transnational socialist and postsocialist processes (1983). Although the type of consumption to which I refer—that of hip-hop music, American models of civil rights, and Indian cinema—are not consumed in private, like the archetypal newspaper of Anderson's analysis, these cultural forms still function as mediating objects that are consumed in processes of public making and affiliation formation. People form ties with each other through their relationships—and awareness of their relationships—to mediating cultural “objects.”

This type of mediation becomes significant in studying postsocialist spaces, which have undergone tumultuous political and economic transitions. Examining such mediations can elucidate how changing economic and political processes map onto, and intersect with, transnational developments. Looking at Romani activists' consumption of certain objects, including film, music, and political models, allows us to better understand the ways in which transnational processes are part of everyday life in contemporary postsocialist Bulgaria. However, the transnational aspects of postsocialism(s) are not distinctly tied to a specific postsocialist moment or clearly bounded temporal transition (i.e., from socialism to capitalism), but are part of a broader historical trajectory. Transnational associations and practices are deeply entrenched in the historical contingencies in which they have developed and taken root. Thus, transnationalism is by no means a marker of the postsocialist period. Rather, it is a phenomenon

that can be useful for examining historical processes through a new lens, with multiple and diverse factors. By looking at postsocialism(s) in terms of transnationalism we, expectedly, re-historicize the period we have so problematically deemed “postsocialism” but *also* redefine and re-historicize “transnationalism” as well.

In this paper I focus on the ways in which cultural objects are consumed with two consequences: 1) *people relate to these objects*, whether they be film, music, or models of desegregation, in ways that can be used “to challenge existing social hierarchies” (Larkin 2008:195); and 2) *people relate to each other* through their individual relationships to—and consumption of—the same mediating objects (195). Through their connections to certain cultural objects and to other people vis-à-vis those objects, Romani activists forge transnational affiliations and agentively form new kinds of publics.

A brief history of Bulgaria/India relations

In the summer of 2008 I visited Ivana², a Romani activist who has been involved with education issues in Bulgaria for the past decade. During a Sunday afternoon visit, we ate lunch and then rested on the sofas in her living room and watched Bulgarian-language TV. Soon an image of a market came on the screen. Ivana remarked, “It’s an Asian market, like the ones in India.” I remembered that she had visited India a few years prior. When I asked her about the roots of her interest in India, she explained that during socialism Indian films were imported into Bulgaria because they were less expensive than “Western” movies and “were not made by the West.” She explained that during this period many Romani people named their children after characters in the Indian films. When I asked her why she thought this occurred, she explained:

The language was similar—I liked to hear it because the Indian language sounded like Roma language. I even learned that three words in one of the old Indian languages, Urdu, are the same as in the Roma language—cross, priest, and I forget the other one...besides the language also the practices were similar—marriage and philosophy of life. There are Roma all throughout Europe, from all castes—they showed the words and practices of all.

Ivana’s remarks align with those of many Romani activists in Bulgaria who look to India as the site of their diasporic roots, often drawing links between Romani and Sanskrit (and Hindi) in attempts to create a public, based on Indo-European linguistic affiliation.

However, India has an important role for non-Romani Bulgarians as well, in being one of the socialist allies in “The East” and a major exporter of films to Bulgaria during socialism. Given this contextual background, studying Bulgarian Romani activists’ affiliations with India can shed light on the relationship between the Bulgarian state and certain Romani populations. In this vein, looking to India provides a historical framework for Roma that functions not only to

categorize them as a “legitimate” diaspora, but also, more implicitly, ties the Roma to Bulgarian history, mass culture, and changing public spheres.

Connections between Bulgaria and India can be traced back to the 19th century. The account of Georgi Stoikov Rakovski (which was dedicated to Todor Zhivkov) written by Veselin Traikov, a prominent Bulgarian scholar and biographer, and the Indian scholar G. Mukerjee refers to the 19th century Bulgarian revolutionary hero as “a Great Son of Bulgaria and a Great Friend of India” (1987). Georgi Rakovski, one of Bulgaria’s most famous revolutionary heroes, founded the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee in 1869 and spent his life organizing resistance movements against the Ottoman rule.³ In Mukerjee’s introduction to the text, he claims that Rakovski “was the first Bulgarian to draw attention to the beauty of Samskrit [Sanskrit] literature and affinity between the old Bulgarian language and Samskrit [Sanskrit]” (1987:1-2). Rakovski spent time trying to discover “his distant kinsman in Hindustan,” drawing on “parallels in mythology, legend, folklore of ancient India and contemporary Bulgaria” to show that Bulgarians and Indians were of the same family (2). When Rakovski was only eighteen-years-old he claimed that “we must search for our ancient past in India and nowhere else” (5). It becomes clear that Rakovski understood India to be related through tradition, mythology and, most notably, language, to modern-day Bulgaria (5).

Interestingly, these articulations of ties between Bulgaria and India seem remarkably similar to claims made by Romani activists and scholars who emphasize India as the Romani homeland; both discourses focus on linguistic links to Sanskrit. According to many scholars of Romani language and culture, language does in fact provide the best evidence of the Indic origins of Roma. Analyses of the details of Romani migration are most clearly evidenced in changes of lexical items and grammar (Fraser 1992, Matras 2004). Hypotheses of Roma’s diasporic history based on language practice and change has “precedents in European philology,” which may explain why similar links between Bulgarian and Sanskrit (like Romanes and Sanskrit) were being made in the 19th century (Friedman 1984, Lemon 2000). Non-Romani philologists made links between language purity and cultural identity, and even took such measures as “puffing up” Romani vocabulary lists with Sanskrit or Hindi words or “replac[ing] lexical items having obscure Indic etymologies with words having better known ones” (Lemon 2000:98, Friedman 1984, Hubschmannova 1995). Romani links with India are both part of a certain type of Romani history, focusing on linguistic (and cultural) diasporic legitimacy, but are also part of a broader European linguistic phenomenon (Friedman 1984, Lemon 2000). Thus, we can interpret these connections between Roma and India as a means of legitimating Romani language and ethnicity as part of a valid Indic diaspora, but also as a way in which Roma become part of a wider European linguistic trend, of which they are just one *European* example.

This becomes even more clear when we look at similarities between the styles of the accounts of Bulgaria/India and Roma/India connections, which both draw on notions of Indian greatness. For example, Vania de Gila (Kochanowski), the Latvian Romani activist and scholar, writes:

So don't forget this socio-historical fact: even the lowest people had, at one period, their time of grandeur—a period of splendor. So had Doms. You see that even if we were Doms, our origin would still be India. That is why the declaration of 1977 by UNO that we have nothing in common with India—neither language, nor history, nor culture, is wrong and unjust!... If I say that Roma belong to the highest caste of India, that is not because we are proud or we are 'racists', but because it is the historical fact... (1995:25).

Here, the tone is similar to that used in accounts of Bulgaria's relationship to India; Rakovski considered Indian philosophy to be "the highest achievement of mankind" and "the cradle of enlightenment" (Mukerjee 1987:5). These Bulgarian/Indian and Romani/Indian relationships are not only based on linguistic or cultural evidence, but also on an aspirational relationship that is founded on conceptions of the great land of India, a place to which people desire to tie themselves. Thus, not only are Bulgarians and Roma reconfigured in such comparisons vis-à-vis a similar mediating "object" (i.e., India), but India itself becomes defined and redefined by its relationship to the groups that identify with it.

Bulgarian state socialism and India

Links with India were not only drawn in the 19th century but also in the 20th century, during socialism, as publics started to take on new forms in relation to the popularization and accessibility of certain types of cultural objects, including Indian films. In Girish Mishra's 1985 New Delhi-published account of Bulgarian/Indian relations, he claims that Bulgaria and India's close relationship has been proven through similarities in the languages of the two countries (although he doesn't state which languages), archaeological evidence, and similarities between Indian and Bulgarian folksongs. He even addresses the role of the Roma in making this link more pertinent, and claims: "It is said that hundreds of years ago gypsies travelled from India to Bulgaria and carried Indian music and folk dances" (1985:45). He explains that India/Bulgaria trade relations improved after the 1944 Socialist Revolution in Bulgaria and the 1947 Independence Movement in India. Due to these momentous historical shifts India became both an important source of material goods, like metal and spices, and a major exporter of media, including Hindi films, to socialist Bulgaria.

Echoing this historical reasoning, Bulgarian film scholar Dina Iordanova explains that Indian films played a prominent role in Bulgaria during her own childhood, much more than any American films or "Soviet war films" of the time (2006:126). Iordanova explains that many Bulgarians thought Indian films resonated with the Romani population because "these films' melodramatics, dragged-on plots and lavish music, dance and costumes were fully in line with what we thought was the Gypsy taste" (127). It becomes apparent that Indian films were popular among many Bulgarians, but may have had a particular and well-known appeal among Romani audiences as well. That said, it is important to note that the popularity of Indian films

during socialism was not specific to Bulgaria or Bulgarian Roma, but part of larger (transnational) socialist cultural and economic structures.

In socialist Romania, for example, Indian movies also gained a prominent position in popular culture, and in the decades following the fall of socialism became “inextricably linked with memories of communism” (Bradeanu and Thomas 2006:141). Media scholars Bradeanu and Thomas, highlighting the popularity of Indian movies with Romani populations, cite a Romanian newspaper that describes the 1980s visit of the Indian actor, Raj Kapoor, in Romania and states that, “he was ‘almost lynched by his coloured fans’” (143). Another newspaper quotes an “anonymous Rom” as saying, “‘we enjoy Indian films as they feature people who are dark-skinned like us and therefore closer to us’” (143). This media representation positions Roma as both part of a Romanian, socialist public—in which Hindi films are enthusiastically consumed—but also deeply different in citing how they “almost lynch” the Indian movie star. This popular-news account of Romani Indian film consumption posits the image of a public sphere in which Roma are a part but also marks the Roma as outsiders, uncivilized ‘Others’ who do not acclaim the Indian star but instead react to him violently.

By deeming Romani and Indian stars both “coloured,” these newspapers home in on one specific quality with which Roma may align with Indians: skin color. Instead of focusing on anything of more substance, these newspapers focus on skin color and violence, thereby using a potentially positive, integrative moment between Romanians and Roma as a sign of disjuncture; as close as Roma get to becoming part of a Romanian public, they will never really be part of it. Even if they watch the same movies, the Roma will “almost lynch” the movie star when face-to-face with him. This media discourse positions the Roma as the existential ‘Other,’ potentially near to, but inevitably outside of, the socialist public sphere.

Publics, counterpublics, and consumption

In his work on publics and counterpublics, Michael Warner claims that as long as the public sphere exists as a space of the unmarked (i.e., the white male), “disembodied” minoritized subjects manage to find their way into the public sphere by “carry[ing] their unrecuperated positivity into consumption” (2002:168). Whereas the public sphere doesn’t allow for differentiation, capitalism allows for an “endlessly differentiated subject” (168). Using the Bulgarian case, I focus on how identification with the contemporary public sphere, when intersected with consumption, is disrupted in potentially productive ways (183). According to Warner, a public is created through a type of mediation; a public becomes such by its relation to certain “objects.” He explains that “something becomes a public only through its availability for subjective identification” (175). Using Warner’s emphasis on identification (and hence also alienation) in the public sphere, I bring in Daniel Miller’s work on consumption to shed light on the ways in which consumption not only allows for a certain type of counterpublic re-embodiment, but also provides a framework through which groups, like the Roma, construct—and are constructed by—overlapping and changing publics.

Through their consumption of Indian films, Roma locate themselves in two overlapping, intersecting, and changing publics: that of an Indic diaspora and that of Bulgarian society. Daniel Miller claims that “consumption is a major factor in the potential return of culture to human values” (1987:192). Miller draws on Nancy Munn’s ethnographic account of Gawa fame, in which she explicates how canoes are materializations that facilitate externalization into the world. According to Munn, the canoe becomes both the vehicle for, and representation of, the movement of the body outwards, to other islands, and symbolically into a wider world (Munn 1986). Miller explains that material forms are connected to processes of both objectification and self-creation, processes of “externalization and sublation,” objectifying the self for the purposes of extension into the world (1987:62). As seen in the case of Romani associations with both an Indian homeland and a Bulgarian public vis-à-vis Indian films, this process consists of forging a “relationship between two societies, and not merely the internal workings of one” (62). In line with Miller who explains that appropriation “consists of the transmutation of goods, through consumption activities, into potentially inalienable culture” (215), I focus on the ways in which Romani people consume popular media—whether it be Indian films or African American culture—in ways that tie them to Bulgarian publics of mass consumption but also make this public culture inalienable and particular to Romani activism and social life.

Moving away from newspaper depictions of the relationship between Roma and Indian films, focusing instead on ethnographic examples from many Romani people’s points of view, it becomes evident that through their consumption of Hindi films, Roma *can* become part of a Bulgarian socialist public. In referencing these films, Bulgarian Romani activists evoke a history of Indian film consumption that draws on nostalgia for a socialist past. A great deal of writing about Roma locates their history in flash points, jumping from India to slavery to the Holocaust to postsocialist poverty. However, Roma are often missing in accounts of “socialist nostalgia”; instead Roma get tied to “antistate and antimodern nostalgia,” including nostalgia for India (Lemon 2000:42-43). These two tropes—of (1) socialist nostalgia (as discussed in many theories of postsocialism) and (2) Romani nostalgia for India—need to be reformulated because India, as evoked through socialist-era Hindi films, is already tied to socialism in many people’s imaginations. Therefore, when Romani activists nostalgically reference Indian films, they do so partly because of Romani/Indian links but also as a metonymic means of evoking nostalgia for socialism and a socialist public sphere.

These connections with India also resonated with the ways in which Romani Bulgarians referenced links with India through linguistic or bodily evidence. In 2003, I traveled with Ivana to visit her husband’s family in a large Romani ghetto on the outskirts of Sofia. We sat down to eat a small snack of salad and fried potatoes at her friend’s restaurant and listened to the music coming from the wedding in the adjacent catering hall. Suddenly, Ivana’s friend—with her baby on her lap—started laughing. I looked up from my plate and saw the baby, wrist adorned with

gold bracelets, twisting her arm in the air to the rhythm of the music. Ivana exclaimed: "See, she is Indian! It is in the blood! Look at her dancing. It is Indian dance." Ivana then drew attention to the mother and remarked on her facial features: "See, she is so beautiful, she looks Indian." Later, when we arrived back at Ivana's apartment in downtown Sofia, I noticed that she had a statue of the Hindu goddess, Kali, believed to be the "black" Romani goddess, on her mantle and she explained to me that many Romani activists in Bulgaria have such statues in their homes.

As many Roma referenced "Indianness," they often did so through appropriating materializations of it—in the statues of Hindu goddesses, movements of the body and physical features, as well as through ties to the land of India as a physical site for pan-Romani activist gatherings. Ivana evoked a romanticized and aesthetic notion of Indian beauty and dance, with the symbols of Indianness being *in* the blood and part *of* the body. As I inferred from Ivana's words, the Romani child who danced was a catalyst for Ivana to evoke the Indian heritage of the Roma. The child, not even able to talk yet, becomes a symbol of the "pure," "natural" connection between Roma and Indian roots. These connections are also taken up in institutionalized forms, such as Romani conferences in India, as well as in material consumable goods like the statues of Kali that adorn many Romani homes.

With this ethnographic and historical context in mind, and by knowing about Ivana's relationship to Indian cinema, her focus on the baby's dancing seems tied to the dancing she often watched in the Hindi films that she found so appealing. Her focus on the child's body is at once an assertion of naturalized, bodily connections between Roma and India as it also evokes Indian movies, music, and dancing. Ivana's focus on the visual aspect of the child's dancing resonates with her interest in the visuality of Indian culture. Although many Bulgarians understand the visual aspects of Indian films to be aesthetically exotic, they also regard them as intimately familiar. Similarly, Ivana describes the baby's dancing as both beautifully exotic but also firmly rooted in the Romani body. Just as Indian films under socialism (in East Europe) often served to maintain a certain order among communist subjects (with socially conservative plotlines) but also had the potential to be subversive, in evoking places far outside of East Europe's socialist borders, Romani consumption of Indian films in Bulgaria seems to have a similarly dual function (Bradeanu and Thomas 2006:143). The films show scenes that are pleasingly similar to Romani traditions and kinship rules, family relations, and language, but they also provide a means outside of the Bulgarian state with which both discriminated against and politically active Roma seek to affiliate.

This urge to seek ties outside of Bulgaria's borders must be understood against the background of the complicated relationship between Roma and the Bulgarian state. Following the socialist takeover of 1944, Roma temporarily became part of a Soviet model, in which they were considered an ethnic community within Bulgaria with equal rights and their own ethnic "national" identity (Marushiakova and Popov 1997:34-35). In this period, "Gypsies" were considered a nationality and a "Gypsy intelligentsia" was organized with help from the communist leadership. However, these Romani initiatives changed significantly in the 1950s when the socialist goal was the cultural effacement of minority groups and "complete

assimilation into the ‘Bulgarian socialist nation’” (35). Muslim Roma were forcibly renamed with Bulgarian names, replacing their Turkish-Arabic ones, and nomadic Roma were settled and forced to undertake permanent jobs, in the hope of turning them into full-fledged socialist citizens. Socialist leaders were worried that the Romani population might join the large Turkish, Muslim minority and “make it too big and dangerous” (37). Based in the fear that Roma were especially susceptible to “Western influence,” socialist officials tried “to create loyal supporters and instruments for communist ideology among Gypsies” (39).

Until the 1970s “Gypsies” were still called “minorities” in official documents, but in 1974 “they disappeared from all statistic data” and “euphemisms were usually used, such as ‘Bulgarian citizens of Gypsy origin,’ and the word minority was considered to be politically wrong” (Marushiakova and Popov 1997:40). Descriptions in local newspapers began to refer to the Roma as “swarthy citizens” and “children who cannot speak Bulgarian” (40). Under socialist assimilation practices, the Romani language was outlawed and some Romani activists were imprisoned for advocating its public usage. Language, thus, becomes an important way that Roma were both acknowledged and discriminated against, during socialism and up through the present day.

It is with this history in mind that we might interpret the ways in which some Romani activists I interviewed focused on linguistic links between Romani and Hindi in relation to the formation of publics. In a long conversation with Boyan (in 2003), a Romani activist with whom I worked and who had taken it upon himself to learn Romani language and history, he referenced the Sanskrit origins of Romani and drew attention to links with India. He explained:

After one thousand years the Roma had preserved the Indian roots of their language. The main words are of Sanskrit root. Roma language is without written memory and is oral communication. The language is Romanes...In English it is “man.” In Romanes it is “manush.” In Sanskrit it is “manu.” It is an Indo-European language; the Jewish language is not Indo-European.

I asked him: It [the “Jewish language”] is more like Arabic?

He replied: Yes, maybe. It is not a European language.

Addressing links between India and Roma often led to discussing the connections between Roma and their “Indo-European” language roots. In the above case such links become the substance for European, *not* Indian, identification. Thus, by linking Romanes to a history beyond socialist assimilation, Boyan legitimates Romanes as not only a “real” language of a certain diaspora but as a quintessentially *European* phenomenon. In a country that has consistently focused on its relation to the Orient, to the Turks, and the Ottoman Empire, a sense of authentically European roots holds a great deal of cultural capital — and it is this sense of a European public, based on relation to a specific kind of linguistic heritage, that Boyan invokes.

American democracy: From civil rights to hip-hop

In 2003, I first traveled to Bulgaria where I worked at a Romani educational desegregation organization, EDAG, which was founded and run by Mihail, Boyan, and Maria, three English-speaking, Romani activists in their mid-20s. The office of EDAG was minimally furnished. The only wall decoration was a poster of Martin Luther King, Jr. with the words *I Have a Dream* above his head. On my first day in the office, Mihail walked in and pointed to the poster of MLK and asked, “Oh do you know that guy? He’s my best friend!”

While I first believed, simply, that Mihail, Maria, and Boyan thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. as an inspiration for their own work, I soon realized that associations with blackness shifted, depending on context and how money was involved. When an American civil rights lawyer visited Sofia to talk about the situation of Roma vis-à-vis blacks in pre-Civil Rights America, many Romani organizations in the area were bothered by the amount of funding and attention given to this lawyer who clearly knew little about the Romani situation. The question of why he and his wife stayed at the ritziest hotel in Sofia and had a private limousine drive her and their grandson around while he conducted his tour puzzled many Romani activists, like Mihail, who wondered if the lawyer’s speaking engagements were merely a ploy for a free vacation. Mihail began calling the American attorney “my friend,” signaling the same register he used when first referring to MLK. Given his references to the lawyer’s extravagant accommodation and ignorance of the Romani situation, Mihail’s invocation of friendship seemed sarcastic, suggesting a more ambiguous relationship with both the American attorney and—through association—MLK. Although Mihail adopted Martin Luther King, Jr. as a figurative role model, putting his poster up on the wall, he was not as willing to accept the American model being hoisted onto the work that he was conducting from a grassroots level.

When it became clear that the visiting attorney’s role was to discuss the American situation of the 1950s and 60s as generically comparable to the current situation of Bulgarian Roma in 2003, many Romani activists deemed this type of modeling problematic. But, these problems were not addressed directly; instead, Maria and Mihail dealt with them through discourses of moralization revolving around the money spent on the attorney’s visit, claiming that the money could have been better allocated to Bulgarian grassroots organizations.

Underlying these references to the money spent on the American attorney’s trip is the idea that money indexes some kind of “corruption” of the activist sphere. Mihail and Maria implicitly create a moral code of activism—good activism should not be equated with making money and doing moral activist work should not include staying in fancy hotels or being chauffeured in a limousine. They believed that the activist sphere *should* not be about profit and in that specific sphere, influenced by international donors and American models, funding can easily become the basis for corruption. For Roma, who have historically been commodified—through tropes of the wandering Gypsy in canonized literature, in Disney movies, in popular fashion trends, commodification vis-à-vis the activist sphere is seen as a new instantiation of a

broader phenomenon. The American lawyer's visit placed Roma into the role of capital to be commodified and then corrupted for (personal) gain. This focus on money was not just ideological and moral but also practical. Since an American-based international organization was the primary donor for the lawyer's visit but also had partial control over EDAG's annual budget, Mihail, Maria, and Boyan interpreted the money spent on his visit as effectively diminishing their own organizational funding.

Integral to this moral framework of activism is the role of the United States and Western Europe as primary financial donors, contributing funds to Roma in Bulgaria in their efforts of postsocialist democratization. This involves a bundling process, in which ideological emphases on "Western" democracy are bundled together with the pragmatics of capitalism that come along with them. The donors that provide funding to the Bulgarian Romani NGO sector, a context that has never dealt with such a quick influx of funding, are simultaneously imposing ideals of moral, non-corrupt democracy on the NGO sphere. This leads to contradictions: on one hand, many Romani activists take up "democratic" ideals of purification—that activism should be ethically sound and solely altruistic. However, these same activists are also caught up in a newly-capitalizing system in which people, especially Roma, need jobs. Alas, the easiest place for many Roma to find employment in the new economic system is in this emerging, internationally-funded NGO sector. Thus, we see how democratization efforts and international funding bring with them contradictions between ideologies of pure activism and pragmatic capitalist-based needs for employment.

It is important to see that what is going on in Bulgaria with Romani activists is not specific to Romani activism, but part of a larger phenomenon regarding "newly-capitalizing" and "newly-democratizing" East European countries. Associations with African Americans are not particular to Roma but are being imposed by American funders as part of a variety of democratization projects. The fact that many of these initiatives target Roma tells just as much about the way the Bulgarian state has dealt with minorities, like Roma, in the past as it does about the particulars of Romani activism and public making.⁴ Thus, what emerges is both a story about Romani activism but also an insightful lens into the relationships between political and financial institutional entities—the United States, Western European donors, private funders—and newly democratizing East European states.

During this time, many Romani activists I knew were not just associating with American blacks in terms of political movements, but were also listening to hip-hop lyrics from American rappers. On slow days at EDAG I often spent time with Mihail, sitting around in the office. He would signal that work time was over when he'd turn on the office's boom-box CD player. He would play music for me, ranging from "traditional" Romani music, to Bulgarian pop music, to Bulgarian rap in an effort to expose me to music he assumed I hadn't heard before. Like many Romani youth, Mihail listened to Bulgarian rap music "for fun"—the lyrics of which typically only mentioned Roma through negative stereotypes—but when listening to American rap music, he listened seriously to the words as though they were meditations on his own life.

During one of our meetings, Mihail recalled some of the site-visits he had made to monitor the success of pilot educational desegregation projects throughout Bulgaria. He told me about the children who were part of the desegregation initiatives:

Their dreams told their level of segregation. Some say when you ask, ‘What will you be?’ they say, ‘Oh I will be a fireman’ or ‘Oh I will be doctor.’ This means they have been integrated in some way. The ones that are very segregated won’t say this. They will say, ‘I will drive a horse, like my father does.’ It’s like that song by Ice – what’s his name – Ice T, ‘I want to be a mother-fuckin’ hustler’ – see I must say something funny, this is very difficult. We need to laugh.

Mihail often articulated serious statements and then metadiscursively drew attention to his joking register in order to deal with what he termed “difficult” things to say; he did so by referencing African American rap music lyrics. This shifting of registers was common to our conversations about his relation to discrimination and the Gypsy “ghetto.” Serious talks often became opportunities for him to cite rap lyrics or ask me to teach him what he called American “ghetto” terms. He asked me what kind of slang black people used in America. I taught him how to greet friends, saying, “What up B?” He said, “Oh I know, B. It’s like brother - What up Bro?” He explained: “It’s like all black men are brothers—we are all brothers.” Invoking kinship with his “black brothers,” Mihail signals a connection beyond associating just with American “hipness”; he draws attention to a deeper comparison, rooted in a sense of fraternity.

When Mihail spoke about hip-hop he often referenced the “bling” of American rappers and the money of hip-hop stardom in conjunction with references to hip-hop’s allusions to racial discrimination, violence, and police profiling. He shifted seamlessly between talking about the serious issues of ghetto-ization and discrimination addressed in political American rap lyrics and the romanticized vision of “black America” he interpreted from commercialized hip-hop music. Unlike the money spent on the American lawyer’s visit, the money Mihail associated with hip-hop was not morally problematic but part of what he aspired to in American blackness. In the realm of music, economic gain and “sincere” discussions of discrimination were not mutually exclusive.

Again, we see Roma placing themselves as part of a larger public—one of blackness, rooted in African American experience as interpreted from media sources. However, these Romani activists also link themselves, in a Warnerian way, to those others who are also listening to American hip-hop music. Just as Warner focuses on the idea of publics as forming vis-à-vis a mediating object to which different people relate and through which they then relate to each other (as an abstract public), Roma are forming a public with those people in Europe, America, and elsewhere who also listen to hip-hop. However, I argue that Mihail’s consumption is notably different. Mihail uses consumable media as a means of articulating fraternity with another minority group, utilizing what is globally “hip” to reposition himself within both Bulgarian and global contexts. In a shift toward what Warner terms a “counterpublic,” his

consumption is a form of re-embodiment. Warner claims that the public sphere is not simply “corrupted by its articulation with consumption” but rather “sustains a counterpublicity that cuts against the self-contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere” (2002:183). Like the counterpublicity that Warner addresses, Romani consumption practices of hip-hop “retain their link to a body” by claiming “an imaginary uniqueness promised in commodities but canceled in the public sphere proper” (184). In such Romani practices of consumption, like Mihail’s, which focus on lyrics in ways that are not just about alienated consumption but entail a kind of singularization⁵ or Millerian appropriation, Roma associate with other, similar listeners, and African Americans on the bases of both political subjugation, ghetto-ization, discrimination *and* also economic aspiration.

Conclusions

Talking with Romani activists in Bulgaria elucidated an interesting point about publics that Warner doesn’t address: How it is that a public forms by agentive choice? Rather than taking for granted that certain mediating forces/objects exist to which people orient themselves and by which they form abstract relations with others, as Warner suggests, many Romani activists focus on the individual’s and group’s agency in forming affiliations. Even when they are relating to mediating objects, forming associations with an Indian homeland, a Bulgarian socialist public, or an American/African American public sphere, many Romani activists are well-aware and conscious of these practices of affiliation as well as their social and political implications.

For example, in the summer of 2008, I sat with Boyan at an outdoor café in Sofia and spoke about how our lives had changed in the five years since we had met in 2003. He was now a lawyer, working on business issues with a private firm and no longer involved with Romani activism. Theorizing about the situation of Roma in Bulgaria, he explained that Roma need a “real collective, a sense of being Roma.” I asked him how he thought that could happen. He explained that it would take a lot of time. Then we began speaking about India:

E: How important is India to a sense of Roma collectivity?

B: Not very important at all. We are European, not Indian.

E: But could it be important as a homeland, like Israel for the Jews?

B: Well it’s very different. The Roma were not Roma in India. They formed as a group once they reached Europe. The Jews always knew they had a homeland—it said so in the Bible but the Roma were not Roma until after they traveled and by then they were already in Europe. Also, India is third world. They could not want us. They have enough of their own problems. There are Indians all over the world—they do not have an interest in us. We cannot help them.

E: But do Roma have an interest in India?

B: Well once something changes, maybe. But they do not care about us—they have enough problems.

Boyan's claims to India resonated with those of Maria. One afternoon shortly after I arrived in Bulgaria that summer, Maria and I were sitting at her house drinking beer and eating walnuts from her in-laws' farm. As I explained my research project, telling her that I was looking at how Romani activists were affiliating both with African Americans and India, Maria shared her opinion:

Even if their roots came from India, Roma can't rely on India... They know they come from India but India is so broken with different castes. It [India] is so poor, I don't find it of much importance. We don't need to go into the past so much as we need to go into the future—these are different ways to cope with our lives.... Others try so hard but all they know is that we come from India... We need more—to know how exactly we came from there.

Boyan claims that India is not a homeland for Roma, and in doing so emphasizes Roma's deep-rooted ties to Europe, but also suggests that linking up with India is neither strategic nor practical. He explains that India has too many problems to care about Roma but when asked if Roma care about India he says that "well once something changes, maybe," implying that if India's conditions change perhaps ties between Roma and India would make more sense. Thus, creation and acknowledgement of a public(s) is not just about relating to certain mediating forms—like language, film, or history—but also about the desire to become a kind of "public" in the first place (and thus be linked to certain mediating objects). For Boyan, it must first be feasible and strategic in order for ties with India to be seriously pursued. Similarly, Maria claims that India is too poor to be of any use. Like Boyan, she also focuses on the pragmatics of India/Roma ties, pointing to the ambiguity of this link altogether.

Thus, it becomes clear that transnational associations are context-bound and pragmatically utilized. By looking at globalization in a socialist and postsocialist framework, we are better able to see the ways in which transnational resources have developed historically and, in response to changing political and social structures, used differently, with various purposes and shifting significance. Therefore, while consumption may play a role in public formation and affiliation making, it is a process deeply governed by individual and collective agency. Forming publics and affiliating with groups is often looked at as a process in which the final outcomes—the public being formed, the materials being consumed—are primary. However, these Bulgarian Romani examples illustrate quite the opposite; rather, the *processes* by which publics are formed are equally—or more—salient than the final results. By examining how discussions and practices of affiliation address the significance and use-value of different associations, as well as how metadiscourses about public-formations highlight conscious awareness of such processes,

we can see how publics are not just abstractly formed but agentively, strategically, and purposefully created, articulated, and embodied.

Notes

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²Please note that all names and identifying information have been changed, in order to maintain the anonymity of the people and groups with whom I work.

³Rakovski's relationship to Bulgaria was a complex one. He spent most of his life living outside Bulgaria and began organizing a resistance movement among Bulgarian emigrants in Romania.

⁴This is a topic of future work and unfortunately could not be explored in this paper.

⁵Here I refer to Igor Kopytoff's work on the way in which certain commodities can become singularized. He explains that we interpret "texts" in a "process of initial withdrawal from a given original social setting... commoditization, followed by increasing singularization (that is decommoditization) in the new setting, with the possibility of later recommoditization" (1986:65).

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