

## **When Lyrics Cross Borders: Glocalization and Pop Cosmopolitanism Through the Lenses of *Nefiu* and *Străzile***

### **Global Bangers: The Fusion of Cultures**

“Rap music is the only form of vital music introduced since punk rock” affirms Kurt Cobain, on the rap music genre, which often carries the struggles and pain of its origin and culture. While it is profoundly shaped by global influences, it was born in the United States of America. This research paper contextualizes the interplay between American and Romanian rap through the fusion of both influences in the media context of glocalization and pop cosmopolitanism exemplified by *Străzile* (B.U.G. Mafia 2010, track 1) and *Nefiu* (Ian, Azteca, 2019), Romanian rap songs that shaped two generations. This paper aims to analyze the songs previously mentioned in the context of their lyrics which define the nation’s identity. Furthermore, this paper will draw a parallel between the music videos and templates of 2010s American rap music videos from iconic American artists, balancing the local roots with global truths.

Glocalization or global localization “blends the global with the local”, especially when it comes to global genres (Crane 2002, 17). The rap genre, as it originated in the USA, follows the concept by heart as all genres that developed in the West are later “adapted to local conditions and carry messages about [the] local cultures” (Straubhaar 1997, 288). In what concerns the chosen songs within this genre, both were profoundly influenced by iconic American rappers. As the songs follow the template of the global American rap genre, “the role of legitimacy in stimulating or recognizing innovation” becomes crucial (Tai 2023, 2).

Since rap was born in New York in the 1970s having at its basis the expression of marginalized communities upon the social or political system of a place, it became a part of the local culture where it was manifested (Miller 2004). It escalated from “subcultural to broader usage” becoming mainstream and entering popular culture by appearing in nonmusical contexts such as “high school sports teams, [and] television ads” (Miller 2004). Considering the Romanian rap scene as a whole, it was born as a consequence of “the transcultural flows of popular culture [that inspired] new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency” creating a new concept, of pop cosmopolitanism (Orozco, Hilliard 2004, 117). The latterly mentioned concept blends with glocalization within the Romanian rap scene and the two songs whilst it balances local authenticity with global appeal, allowing artists to create their own identity within the music landscape while still being successful for more than just their local listeners.

### **Harmonizing the Hood: Comparing Two Landscapes**

*Străzile* and *Nefiu* represent two of the most famous rap songs from the Romanian culture, with *Străzile* having over 90 million views on YouTube, carrying the youth’s legacy that still resonates with the song’s message. Nonetheless, *Nefiu* was a hit in 2019, having over 25 million views and being a turning point in Ian and Azteca’s career, the rappers who collaborated on this project. The songs were a huge success for the local rap scene, and even though they are a part of the same genre, their lyrics convey different meanings, following the American template in

this global music landscape. *Străzile* follows the template of the early 2010s in terms of lyrics, whereas *Nefiu* follows the late 2010s.

Robertson and Krossa affirm that “this blend of the local and the glocal can be a cause of cultural complexity, hybridity, layering and fusion” (2012, 129) which portrays the influence of American rap in both, exemplifying how “audiences often prefer local imitations of American culture to American culture itself” (Crane 2002, 17). Although *Străzile* focuses on the political aspect of Romania, *Nefiu* is oriented toward money, and women, both copy-pasting the trending American rap songs, remaining “heavily influenced by American media industries” (Crane 2002, 18). This influence is noticed in the lyrics and beats that the songs hold which emphasize “the combination of familiarity and difference [that] increase transnational media’s global reach and appeal” (Lee 2017). Therefore, the Romanian rap scene became successful as a result of its American influence and its unique characteristics that relate to its origin.

*Străzile* by B.U.G. Mafia presents the political and social issues encountered at that time in Romania, a state that went back to a democratic regime less than 35 years ago. Moreover, it emphasizes the united nation which is represented by ‘the streets’, a metaphor that represents their home, Bucharest, the capital city of Romania. The lyrics shame the political corruption and the police whilst highlighting Bucharest's union and its ‘coolness’: “You haven’t seen such coolness in Las Vegas”. The lyrics “The next candidate to the throne makes space / Between walls of concrete / You can only count on yourself” suggest the poor political system they are trying to fight as a marginalized community. ‘The streets’ stay united even at bad times, an idea suggested in the end, as they sing about the police coming but stand together against it.

At the same time, a similar message is emphasized in *Who Will Survive America* (West 2010, track 13) which, as an American hit, offers a global perspective, conveying a sense of unity, just as B.U.G. Mafia does for the local audience that relates to it. As the title suggests, Kanye conveys the inequality marginalized groups go through in the USA and how will they survive in a racist and unequal environment. Compared to *Străzile*, Kanye’s song has a straightforward attitude towards the issues America puts marginalized communities through, as it names America a ‘bastard’ and “the illegitimate daughter”. Similar messages are suggested in Eminem’s song *W.T.P.* (2010, track 7) which approaches, as a white rapper, the racism in the USA. The lyric “Now whether you’re Black, white or purple, if you’re misunderstood” argues that no matter your skin color you are misunderstood. Thus, the political and social aspects were a recurrent theme in the early 2010s for the rap industry as it helped marginalized groups express themselves towards the country’s system mingling “cultural traditions and social values” (Crane 2002, 18).

Nonetheless, *Nefiu* deflects from the social and political ideas and emphasizes different motifs: the celebration of money, power, and women. Besides its themes, the beats and lyrics resemble the American template of the late 2010s, which gradually made its way into Romania’s rap scene. Durham and Kellner (2005, 305) affirm that the “American cultural product is being not only maintained but extended to new locales” which is what Ian and Azteca do with A\$AP Rocky’s album, *AT. LONG. LAST. A\$AP* (2015). The song debuts with an underground style similar to A\$AP Rocky’s songs, *Electric Body* (2015, track 8) and *Better Things* (2015, track 14). Based on the misogynistic lyrics in *Nefiu* where Azteca mentions four ‘bagaboante’, Romanian slang for ‘girls’ to the materialistic ones “I am going to get some bling-

bling”, the hit aligns closely to the American rap product. Moreover, both suggest through metaphors their place in this field: “I entered this industry through the window” and “Eddy and I do not smoke up, we make the rap going”. In the latter lyric, their brotherhood is evoked when Ian calls Azteca by his real name, emphasizing their friendship as a duo.

The similarities between the lyrics of *Nefiu* and *Monster* (West 2010, track 6) are undeniable as the lyrics “The bets, livin’ or dead, hands down” and “Bought the chain that always gives me back pain” evoke themes of money and power. Money represents a recurrent theme in the late 2010s rap arena which blends with the sense of being neglected in a society. Their humble backgrounds create the need to display this opulent lifestyle achieved after hard work and dedication by expressing their pain through music. Ian and Azteca suggest their poor beginning by mentioning they used to eat biscuits with milk on the street. As a result, their listeners may relate to the lyrics, creating “a sense of belonging which eases identity work for the fans” (Lee 2017).

As Lee argues, “cultural and linguistic differences may complicate the process of consuming and understanding transnational media but they may also serve as significant motivations for transnational media consumption among local viewers” (2017). Thus, the nature of the topics approached in Romanian and American rap culture are similar and relatable to a global audience, despite the cultural and linguistic differences that challenge the audience.

### **Through The Lenses: Aesthetic Encounters**

The visual elements of rap music transcended borders, connecting audiences across the globe while adapting their culture to the Western template. Durham and Kellner argue that “American practice provides (...) the basic model” which later contributed to the interplay and fusion of numerous cultures that blended their own with the ‘basic’ but successful American model (2005, XXV). *Străzile* and *Nefiu*’s music videos are no exception as they re-use some of the most common characteristics from the 2010s American template. From mise-en-scene to costumes, and cinematography, the visual elements of the American music videos have contributed to the creation of the local Romanian rap scene that offers closure to an entire nation.

*Străzile*’s music video resembles older visuals that iconic rappers used in 2009-2010 such as Kanye West and Eminem, emblematic figures for American rap both in terms of lyrics, as noticed previously, and in terms of visuals. The stills present a medium shot of the singer breaking the fourth wall, emphasizing the connection it has with the viewer (*Figure 1*, *Figure 2* & *Figure 3*). Hence, the message is better transmitted to the audience, even if the language is not understood as it makes the artist look imposing and serious. In *Figure 2*, Eminem’s movement even points at the camera to highlight the theme.



*Figure 1.*



*Figure 2.*



*Figure 3.*

The presence of building shots throughout the music videos has the purpose of an establishing shot whilst portraying the love-hate relationship with the city, depending on the direction of the song. In Kanye's video of *Homecoming* (2009, track 12), his love for the city and its people is portrayed. Meanwhile, in *Străzile* it conveys patriotism but antipathy for the people that rule it, filled with corrupted politicians (*Figure 4 & Figure 5*). Crane (2002, 17) affirms that in some cases, using elements from another culture's identity on other local roots "eliminates the country of origin" which happens with Bucharest and Chicago as the scenery and colors within the shot are in contrast.

The interesting choice of composition in these stills portrays the nostalgia versus the chaos represented by the cultural differences and the message of the songs. The black and white still of the skyscrapers from downtown Chicago portray Kanye's view over the city: a nostalgic one, but welcoming. The choice of color, black and white might be perceived as a memory of the city that reminds him of his youth whereas the colorful shaking image of Bucharest looks chaotic and almost blinding because of the car lights. The contrast between the two emphasizes America's print on the music video adapted to Romania's culture and indifference towards its people. In this way, cultural knowledge is expanding and morphing into the local culture inspiring and creating new outcomes (Jenkins 2006, 104).

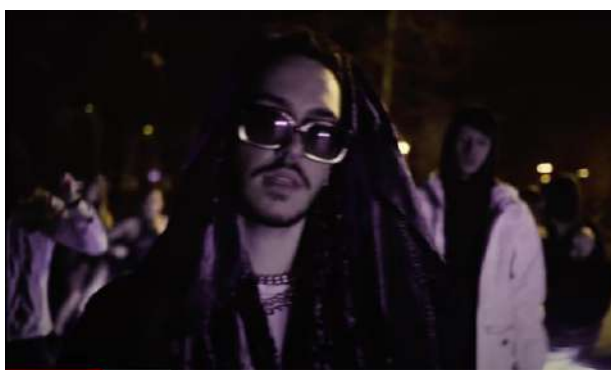


*Figure 4.*



*Figure 5*

When it comes to mise-en-scene, the costumes for *Nefiu* and *No Love* (Eminem, Lil Wayne 2010, track 9) resemble the posh aesthetic. As mentioned previously, money was a recurrent theme in late 2010s rap. If the visuals and message are relevant for the early 2010s, nowadays the artist's appeal gets the spotlight. As observed in *Figure 6* and *Figure 7*, Azteca and Lil Wayne wear sunglasses in the dark, a choice that might suggest their wealth and sense of style whilst highlighting their mysteriousness. Furthermore, their hairstyle is similar, with both of them having dreads which conveys the American “cultural influence, perspectives and lifestyles” of the West to the East (Lee 2017). The interesting aspect of Azteca's choice of dressing is the influence of American culture, which expands the local audience's perspective on styling. Lee (2017) affirms that by “expanding [the audience's] cultural views and knowledge” a “greater respect for cultural diversity” is born. The physical resemblances between the two rappers create a different view of the American culture from a local perspective.



*Figure 6.*



*Figure 7.*

The aesthetics of the music videos suggest the blend of the two cultures' identities, but mostly the impact American culture had on the Romanian one. The “American resonance of popular culture” has impacted Romanian culture in all matters of rap, as it resembles the visuals perfectly. Although similar elements create a global scene that crosses “cultural and linguistic differences” (Lee 2017), the basis of the aesthetic suggests a different message, imprinting the song with its own culture, even if at first glance they resemble each other.

## **The Morphing of Two Cultures?**

The rap industry is constantly developing as a music genre and numerous cultures will keep expiring from the American culture as it represents its place of birth. The several elements, both musical and visual that correspond with smaller rap scenes will keep inspiring from the one ruling the industry, USA. However, “in the process of diffusion, the “American” model has been generalized and adapted (...) for commercial media”, affirm Durham and Kellner about the American influence (2005, 693). In the case of music, the local audience is predisposed to enjoying the local rap as it reflects the Romanian state at the time being. Moreover, it might be said it overcomes the American template as it emphasizes the local issues and struggles of the Romanian people with which they relate. Therefore, even though American rap might have been considered better or ‘mainstream’, the community would plead for their local, less-known one to which they would relate and support.

To conclude, Romanian rap has gone through numerous phases just as American rap did. Lee (2017) argues that “it involves rediscovery, reinterpretation, and critical awareness of fans’ local culture and media”, suggesting that it is not the appeal of the song but what it conveys to the larger one compared to the local one.

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