

Romanian Immigrant Travel Routes to America

Mihaela Mudure

Babes-Bolyai University
Cluj, Romania

This paper will analyze comparatively the immigrant travel routes as they appear in the work of two new voices in American literature. More precisely, we shall focus on Domnica Radulescu and her first novel *Train to Trieste* and on Alta Ifland's collection of short stories *Elegy for a Fabulous Land*. Both writers were born in Romania and were confronted with totalitarianism and its impositions upon individual identity. For many years escape was the main target of their personal identity politics.

We shall analyze the ways in which travel and mobility have shaped the identities of these two writers as well as their different artistic strategies in order to counteract the oppressive dominant images of nationhoods. Domnica Radulescu prefers the existential thriller, Alta Ifland finds her voice in short stories that often become poems in prose. These preferences point to an inclination and to the very deep structure of these writers' artistic personality.

The definition-and-redefinition of Romanian identities by Domnica Radulescu and Alta Ifland leads to the creation of a very specific discourse of displacement where roots challenge routes and impose routes. Rerouted, sometimes derouted, the main characters in these texts offer interesting samples of re-contextualization for the contemporary Romanian and American identities.

Domnica Radulescu was born in Romania and came to the United States in 1983. She holds a Ph.D. in French and Italian Literature from the University of Chicago and currently she is a Professor of Romance Languages and Chair of the Women's Studies program at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. She has written and edited books and scholarly articles on European and Eastern European literature, and has also worked as a theater director for two decades. Radulescu directed plays by Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Fernando Arrabal, and Jean Tardieu. She has been awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. In 2008 she was a Fulbright grantee at the Theater Department of

Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, Romania. Her latest book is *Black Sea Twilight*. She is a writer aware of the secrets and the mechanisms of her own craft; she is a writer able to look at herself in a scholarly mirror. Among her published scholarly works mention must be made of *Andre Malraux: The "Farfelu" As Expression of the Feminine and the Erotic* (1994); *Realms of Exile: Nomadism, Diasporas and Eastern European Voices* (2002); *Sisters of Medea: The Tragic Heroine Across Cultures* (2002); *The Theater of Teaching and the Lessons of Theater* (2005); *Feminist Activism in Academia* (2010).

In 2008 Domnica Radulescu's first novel, *Train to Trieste*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf. The same year, 2008, this novel was translated by Oana Durican into Romanian at Polirom Publishing House. The main character, the author, and the text itself return to their native Romania. This movement is one of the most important tests both for the author - an existential test about the solidity of her new roots - and a confrontational test for the book when read by the people who actually lived under the Communist dictatorship. Routes and movements are extremely important for the main character, for the author, and for the book. *Train to Trieste* is actually made up of two movements, both externally oriented: a movement out of Romania and a movement out of an American marriage towards an independent existence in the New World. However, regardless of how independent this new existence might be, the final check up is still with the homeland, with the land of one's first routes. Derouted, rerouted, the main character, the author, and the book cannot escape from the fascination of Ceausescu's Romania and any achievement is regarded only in connection with it. It is the parameter of all parameters.

In the summer of 1977, the seventeen-year-old Mona Maria Manoliu fell in love with Mihai, a mysterious, green-eyed boy who lived in Brasov, the romantic mountain city where she used to spend her summers. She could think of nothing, and no one, else. The two youngsters lived their love affair intensely and one would wonder how on earth the main female fear of the time does not appear in the text¹. Miraculously, Mona Manoliu did not get pregnant. Still, life under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu was difficult. Hunger, paranoia, and fear infected everyone. Everybody was thinking of just one movement: getting out of the country, trying to live a better life somewhere else. This frantic desire of movement was counterbalanced by the slow rhythm of the long lines everyone had

¹ Between 1966 and 1989 Romania had one of the most severe anti-abortion policies in the world. Both the pregnant women and the doctors or nurses facilitating abortion went to prison if they were caught. There were no contraceptive means. The pill and the condom were practically impossible to find. For years, Romanian women lived with the anxiety: will it come or will it not come? They were thinking of their periods. Thousands of women died because of illegal abortions. They are considered the unacknowledged victims of Romanian communism.

to stand in if they wanted to buy food. The result of these two contradictory movements was a neurosis that seized the whole nation. The description of the people standing in line to get anything was the materialization of the never-to-be-fulfilled desire induced by the utopian ideology which the Communist regime relied on. “The last people in line generally look demoralized: there won’t be anything left on the shelf, they know, by the time their turn comes. They will leave with their empty bags and try to find other line throughout the city, where they might have the chance of being the first in a line for butter or sardines or toilet paper. The running joke is that Romanian don’t need toilet paper any longer because they have nothing to shit” (7).

Considerations about the history and the not-yet-acknowledged colonial implications of Romania’s historical birth² oblige the reader to jump into the past. Also they are a wonderful occasion to see Mona’s independent thinking. Usually the Roman conquest is regarded very highly in Romanian intellectual milieus, its colonial-before-colonialism implications being completely disregarded. This is not true for Mona. “I don’t like the Romans, how they invaded and killed the Dacians and how they stole all of their words and left them with only fourteen³” (29), declares the main female character. This colonial beginning led to contemporary attitudes Romanians cannot get rid of. They swear “at the Americans who split and divided zones of influence with the Russians after the war” (32) and feel equally disempowered when the Russians, the new colonizers who invaded the country after World War II, “cut people’s hands off to get the watches from their wrists” (39).

The author succeeds in recreating a time, the final years of the Romanian Communist regime (1985-1989), when freedom was defined by the possibility to get food easily. When making a comparison between the Romanian sixties and the end of the eighties, characters make blatant comparisons. “This is the happy time in our country, when you find even dates and bananas and red caviar in the stores without standing in line...” (41). Oppression increases gradually. In the eighties the fictional Romanians can’t own typewriters any longer - an artistic exaggeration meant to hyperbolize a reality that was atrocious enough. In fact, Romanians had to declare that they owned typewriters to the police and give a sample of the machine writing. The idea of the authorities at the time was total surveillance and prevention of the slightest critique of the regime. The author is able to create very powerful images. She is keen on giving the reader the sense of a horrendous panopticum, i.e. being under surveillance even in the most intimate moments of existence. Every

² The Romanian ethnicity appeared as the result of the expansion of the Roman Empire in the 1st and 2nd century A.D.

³ According to Romanian linguists only 14 words from the Dacian language survived in Romanian .

time Mona and Mihai make love, the girl catches glimpses of the enormous portraits of Marx, Engels and Lenin “spying... on us from the building across the street” (47).

One day, Mona sees Mihai wearing the black leather jacket which was the garb preferred by the secret police. Could he be one of them? The novel is spiced with a very unconvincing story, for a Romanian reader, about a possible underground movement which Mona’s father joined. But again, atmosphere is better caught than details. Neurosis increases. Mona’s father thinks they are capable of anything. The secret police people are caricaturized and the author fails to render the awful reality: their much more banal and also more frightening power over people’s lives. Domnica Radulescu is much more successful and convincing in rendering the horror of the Communist regime by an inward movement toward a pre-natal stage. Monica’s rejection of the actual reality of the eighties is rendered by her longing for a black hole of the beginnings, a site where the reader can no longer feel the overwhelming power of the regime over its victims. “I am dreaming about the black hole in Romanian history that my aunt always talks about” – this is after 271, the withdrawal of the Roman troops south of the Danube. “That place of nonhistory, dark and mysterious like a womb, where I could curl up like a fetus and forget everything and float in the warm gelatinous waters of oblivion, waiting” (118).

Slowly, insidiously, life became more and more unbearable. Mona realized that she had to leave Romania. The author creates a very unconvincing escape. Apparently, the policeman who checked the passports upon crossing the border was so distracted that he forgot to ask Mona about her passport. That such an oppressive regime as Ceausescu’s could have such dumb and stupid guards at its borders is beyond belief, no matter how much the Romanian reader might want to suspend his belief. Realistic details are not exactly Domnica Radulescu’s speciality. What she is really good at is rendering the anxiety of having one’s roots cut off, one’s past left behind at the mercy of history and good luck. “I feel like sleeping. I don’t understand why I decided to leave. I know that now that I’ve started, I have to somehow see it through, to keep going until I reach my destination. But what is my destination? There are still some many kilometers, so many checkpoints and chasms ahead of me, until I can start over, until I can begin my new journey” (153). Only the metaphor can render the truth of Mona’s condition and the truth of the author’s condition in the new country. Significantly, freedom is seen by Radulescu as “a wild creature with disheveled hair” (157). The absence of rules is taken for lack of rules by the main character whose instinct for freedom was suppressed mercilessly for years.

Mona's travel routes took her first to Italy, in Trieste where she was the babysitter of a family. The Italian city that has itself a very troubled history, having passed from one country to another several times, was the best location for Mona's dislocation. Space helped in breeding her new self. After a certain stage in this new formative space, Mona got to Chicago, the town of Ron and Gladys, a religious couple who had sponsored her coming to the New World from the Communist nightmare. In the big American metropolis Mona tried to get (to) her true freedom. She abandoned the religious couple and made her own way into the world and society. Her new route led to a gender modification. She had to abandon her Romanian constructed femininity for a masculine-like ego, an almost hermaphrodite construct that was supposed to help her cross boundaries and adapt, adopt. "I adopt the self-assurance and nonchalance of a man, an American man. I experiment with this new American me: boyish, shaggy haired, irreverent, and careless" (206). It is symptomatic that during this cross gender operation, Mihai, her lover whom she left without saying good-bye, "is all squished up at the very bottom of the package" (206) where she kept her Romanian past.

Gradually, Mona adapted to her new homeland. She brought her family to America, she became a doctoral student, she married, had children, then left her husband and began a new independent life. She entered and got out of several languages. Words created for her new worlds like "little fireworks" (265) or like "balloons in conference rooms... I launch them on stages of school theaters toward weary audiences who yawn and nod asleep" (264). A sense of fatigue and limited accomplishment is the sign of her disintegration and reintegration. Mona returns to Romania and finds out that her former lover was, in fact, a member of some underground anti-Communist movement. So her fears had no justification. Questions are given answers, readers solve narrative puzzles, but solutions are not very good from the perspective of a well-constructed plot. Mihai continues to be involved in underground activities. This time he is hunting for his former oppressors, the members of the secret police-- a parallelism that is not very good for the image of Romania's new democracy!

Not true, but truthful, is the writing of Dominica Radulescu. Her greatest achievement after deterritorializing her Romanian self is her narrative verisimilitude. For a writer, this is no small thing. Her gift of words is remarkable; her sensitivity with the words of her new language is to be appreciated. But narrative construction still leaves something to be desired. Here is a relevant example of Radulescu wording her new self, her "both and" new globalizing identity. "And maybe I will get used to having two countries, to having no country, to being my own country, and stretching across the Atlantic Ocean, one foot in the Indiana cornfield, the other in the berry-filled meadow in the Carpathians, like a

huge baobab tree” (301). In the paratext of the book, Sandra Cisneros, author of *The House on Mango Street* and the very well known Mexican-American author, gives a very generous tribute to Domnica Radulescu, as a new member of the Republic of Letters. Says Sandra Cisneros, “A spirited, passionate, funny look at the world in the time of the new millennium. Domnica Radulescu is a remarkable writer enriching American letters with her Romanian perspective. We are lucky to call her ours.” My question: but is Domnica Radulescu theirs? The baobab is huge, vital, enduring, but alien to both American lands and Romanian ones. In spite of the benevolent metaphor, Domnica Radulescu seems unable to tame her new (hardly acquired) alienness.

The other term of my comparison in this essay is Alta Ifland. Information about this writer is scarce. She was born, apparently, in Transylvania, Romania⁴. She grew up under communism and immigrated to the United States in 1991. She studied French literature and philosophy in France. She writes (and translates) in French (second language) and English (third language). Her bilingual book of prose poems, *Voix de Glace/Voice of Ice*, was awarded the 2008 Louis Guillaume Prize. Alta Ifland’s writing has been analyzed in one of the best known sites for world literature. John Taylor talks about the “Languages of Alta Ifland” in an essay he published in the above-mentioned site. “Alta Ifland’s writing raises important questions about the legitimacy and practice of autobiography that are too often taken for granted by American writers. In an alert literary age, the fifty-three thought-provoking short prose texts of her *Voice of Ice / Voix de Glace* would have attracted considerable attention outside the circles of small magazines and bookshop readings, in which this book indeed attracted attention when it came out in 2007. The author, described in a back-page résumé of this bilingual edition only as having been born in Eastern Europe, having studied literature and philosophy in France, and currently living in California, remains somewhat mysterious as a person. Yet this autobiographical discretion—so rare among contemporary writers – is justified thematically; it creates the possibility of speaking with an “im-personal” authorial voice, one of the several essential philosophical issues raised in this volume, which was first written in French, the author’s second language, and then self-translated into English, her third. Moreover, there are indications that “Ifland” is a pseudonym, even perhaps a heteronym in Pessoa’s sense, with its imaginable literal meaning of an “if-land,” a “place of conjecture,” and a lofty one at that. Apropos: “My language doesn’t belong to me. All that belongs to me is a long, flowery absence at whose edges roses are growing alongside my legs,

⁴ According to http://emergingwriters.typepad.com/emerging_writers_network/2009/05/short-story-month-guest-post-alta-ifland.html, she grew up in Eastern Europe. Her birth place is not mentioned on this site.

encircling them, climbing and covering my body like a tomb. Deep in the absence, my language unearths its words of fog, dead like me, and holds them for an instant above the tomb, then lets them fall like petals.”

This characterization also holds true for Alta Ifland’s second volume: *Elegy for a Fabulous World*. Here, the narrative voice confesses to having been born and raised in multi-ethnic Western Ukraine, an area called Ruthenia; she is a Hungarian with relatives in all the neighbouring countries, including Romania.

The book is divided into two parts. As in the very existence of these writers, routing is important in signifying both before and after immigration. This dyadic structure emphasizes the rupture that immigration entailed. Ifland recreates a very confusing, ambiguous space where proper names, for instance, belong to several linguistic repertoires: the Hungarian repertoire, the Russian repertoire, and the Romanian repertoire. The book is made up of a sequence of vignettes which together draw the contour of a larger portrait of the community. Alta Ifland successfully imports Sandra Cisneros’ narrative strategy from *House on Mango Street*. As in her unacknowledged model, Ifland hides behind a female narrative voice who takes particular pleasure in constructing very short, but very particular characterizations, and powerful narrative vignettes. Adelaide Bauer had a body “so thin it seemed more like a veil designed to cover an ashen absence” (13). Aunt Rajssa was “sour as lemon, bossy, a good housekeeper” (17). Uncle Otto’ s “body was made of dream-matter, dwelling in a galaxy of its own, in which time was nothing but matter’s ceaseless longing to be, and space nothing but the crater through which an ageless volcano spewed out particles of being” (21). Ifland is very aware of the simultaneous existence of a material and an immaterial level of existence. As in Chagal’s painting, the real, the earthly naturally, normally mix with aerial beings and visions. Adele Bauer, for instance, “mounted the comet’s tail the way a knight would mount a horse or a witch a broom, and the couple levited under confetti of words, higher and higher into the sky...” (22).

Ifland’s realism of her native land is completely different from Domnica Radulescu’s. It is a realism that implies a genuine sincerity of perspectives, a paradoxical perception that involves the other and surpasses photography obedient to the surface of things. “Truth is not the real, and to tell the truth means much more than to present the facts as they are. To tell the truth means to refuse the accepted pact between facts and the realists who see them” (24). The narrator’s definition of beauty relies on this epistemology. “At some point in life I discovered that others thought I was beautiful and that the weight of their eyes on me was the consequence of this beauty. Carrying your beauty around day after day is a little tiring, but I don’t complain...”(25).

Slowly we find out that as this narrative unfolds, the truths form “a small town of Western Ukraine” (31). Nearby is the city of Dombrad, Hungary where the narrator

has relatives. This far away remote place is not only ontologically ambiguous, but also self-providing, which emphasizes its isolation and peculiarity. "Uncle Pista made the wine himself and kept it in wooden barrels in a dark, damp cellar" (33). The place becomes even more isolated than authorities would like it to be. Self-imposed isolation becomes a response to totalitarianism.

The difference between America, where the narrator longs to be, and her Eastern European birth place translates into the difference between cleanliness and order, on the one hand, and disruptive dirt on the other hand. Eastern Europe, the forgotten little town from Western Ukraine, a place where imperial interests have clashed so often, mocks any imposed order by cultivating dirt and disruption. "In a city like Los Angeles, a plastic chair has its feet in the aseptic world of efficient humans, and its soul shrivelled as it may be, illuminates the space around it with the message: 'Man-made. Separated from the messy chaos of shapeless matter. *Ordered* for you.' But in our town a plastic chair had its roots in the rootless wilderness of the mob's dark instincts. The space between chairs was peppered with cigarette butts, thick spit, beer bottles, and something else, which the eye couldn't see, but longed to be clean" (36).

Ifland proves to have very good knowledge of the inner mental mechanisms of the Europe she invokes. The lack of rules, the unpredictability of reality pave the way for the comic absurd. In this world "no one arrives anywhere because there is *no where* to arrive at" (132).

In this marginal disruptive world which challenges hierarchies and order, there is a margin of the margin, the marginalized of the marginalized: the Gypsies. The aesthetic virtues of Alta Ifland's lexis is amazing in this part of the book. The Gypsies show, by contrast, the lack of freedom that characterizes the mainstream society in this forgotten corner of Europe. The Gypsies come and go from "a bitter-sweet-and-sour place where laws didn't exist and we could enjoy life's pleasures with no punishment, as in Pinocchio's garden of delights, but also where we could disappear without a trace, caught in a dark vortex of lawlessness" (41). These secretive movements have a gendered component that increases the attractiveness of these disrupters. "The Gypsy women had a shameless way of looking at everyone ... as if behind their chanted invitation lay another secret one to something forbidden, vaguely obscene" (42). This liminal world is protected by the Gypsies' refusal to mix with anyone (44). Comments connect this part of the narrative with later segments. Unfortunately, in America uniformity gets even the daring Gypsies: "even the gypsies wear blue jeans in America, and the fortune-tellers live inside the TV screens" (45).

The realities of the communist world and its imposed routes are satirized with mildness. The narrator's family live on "Always Onward Street" (47), "yesterday's news is also tomorrow's, the same news of an eternal gray reality" (53). "Pioneers

marched in the same hypnotic rhythm toward the peaks of Communist Neverland...” (60). And coffee, the miraculous drink which the communist leaders stubbornly refused to give to the people under all sorts of pretexts, becomes, because of frustration, “a savory concoction extracted from life’s fullness” (60). Besides the stifling rules of communism there is still in this part of the world some Austrian-Hungarian sensibility and people, in spite of the broken languages they talk, are still “gluing them together like the wings of a fragile, fabulous bird” (58). For Ifland, space is not an obstacle, but a “mask” (69).

The second part of the narrative gives one solution to the Eastern Europeans’ obsession with immigration: marriage to a foreigner. The new Post-Communist reality displays proudly its new inauthenticity. The church is brought from a nearby village into town, like a flower repotted in a new pot; the old dictator’s mansion becomes a restaurant for the benefit and full use of the people. Food, and showing off who we are for the others – especially for the Americans - are the naive and also aggressive manifestations of the Eastern Europeans eager to get integrated and recognized by the world they were forced to leave in order to construct the Leninist chimera. Ifland mocks the Eastern Europeans who pretend to have been victimized and who tell the naive Westerners stories about their suffering under the communist regime, when any insider knows that “everybody was spying and denouncing each other,” everybody was the persecutor and the victim at the same time” (103). But this “both-and” reality typical of totalitarian regimes is difficult to grasp, and it is even more difficult to make it be understood by the outsiders.

The author is able to catch two other peculiarities of those who “benefited” from the Communist dictatorship, who pressed down and squeezed down. They show “lack of respect for any kind of rules or laws” (114) and have “an infinite ability to absorb and express the most contradictory opinions,” (114) having been mentally raped over and over again by senseless propaganda.

Leaving for a supposedly better life is a movement that is both sadness and mirth even if the destination is America, even if the reason is marriage. Marriage to a foreigner is the only efficient solution to deal with the heritage of the totalitarian past. The author describes with the delicacy of a Japanese haiku “the parents’ image framed by the door” when the two newly-weds are about to leave. It is an image that would “freeze forever the never ending flow of the always present past” (96).

Running from the past, anxious about the future, both Ifland and Radulescu get stuck in a disquieting eternal present. Irony is not only instrumentalized when characterizing the old country and the new one. Irony is also directed at the authors themselves by the authors themselves. Ifland’s and Radulescu’s spokeswomen try hard “to get official membership into the club of freedom, milk, and beef” (121). The two writers

construct various patterns of deterritorialized Romanian literary egos, they both point to immigrant routes that at a certain moment in Eastern Europe's recent past expressed the hopes of everybody. Both writers are significant for an ongoing phenomenon in the American republic of letters nowadays: the rising of Eastern European- American literature, hyphenated ethnic literature rising into prominence in the wake of the fall of the Communist regimes.

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Summary

Romanian Immigrant Travel Routes to America

Mihaela Mudure

Babes-Bolyai University
Cluj, Romania

This paper claims the existence of various immigrant travel routes in American literature. The literary argumentation relies on Domnica Radulescu and her first novel *Train to Trieste* and on Alta Ifland's collection of short stories *Elegy for a Fabulous Land*. Both writers were born in Romania and were confronted with totalitarianism and its impositions upon individual identity. Travel and mobility have shaped the identities of these two writers in decisive ways which draw the contours of an emerging hyphenated ethnic literature: Romanian-American literature.