Displacement and Emplacement in Narratives of Relocation by Romanian Women Authors

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Introduction

The present argument aligns itself with theoretical positions that question the celebratory interpretations of relocation narratives. The starting point of my analysis is S. Pultz Moslund’s study that questions the glorification of the migrant subject as the normative type of consciousness of our times. The author considers that the contemporary critical discourse, with its focus on metaphors of fluidity (migrancy/uprootedness, cultural flows, becoming, nomadic identities) overlooks the enduring relevance of centripetal coordinates (settlement, rootedness, being) in the fabric of contemporary identities.1 Far from minimising the significance of migrancy and cultural flows, this approach suggests a more comprehensive perspective that would balance all these coordinates (movement and stillness, cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity, cultural being and cultural becoming). Along similar lines, Michael Peter Smith argues for the importance of analysing the emplacement of displaced individuals, foregrounding the enduring relevance of locality upon experiences of resettlement: ‘When the semantics we appropriate to represent human mobility are too fleeting, ephemeral, and unbounded, we move from a world where social structures still matter to a world of pure flexibility, deterriorisation, and disembeddedness.’2

The present paper analyses recent narratives of women’s relocation by Romanian authors, foregrounding the ways in which the migrants’ transnational itineraries are punctuated by instances of groundedness. I have chosen the syntagm ‘narratives of relocation’ instead of ‘migration literature’ given that the primary corpus of this analysis is made up of different literary genres, a novel3 and a memoir.4 Both authors experienced similar histories of uprooting, as they left Romania in the early 1980s and underwent temporary settlement in Western Europe before reaching the United States of America. The reason I have chosen these works is their autobiographical core of transplantation, inherent in the memoir and fictionalised in the novel. Râdulescu confirmed the autobiographical nature of her novel, specifying that it reflects her personal itinerary of uprooting, in a manner mediated by her creative imagination.5 The analysis of these works is highly relevant for both a Romanian and a foreign audience, as it presents recent perspectives on women’s migration relying on novel theories about transnational migration, translocal processes and transcultural identities.

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3 Domnica Râdulescu, Train to Trieste (New York, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008). Subsequent references to this book will be included in the text in parentheses as Train.
4 Rodica Mihalis, The Gypsy Saw Two Lives (Houston: Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co., 2011). Subsequent references to this book will be included in the text in parentheses as The Gypsy.

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Theoretical Background

As a general term, transnationalism refers to cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formations straddling nation-states. Transnationalism denotes ‘processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement’. Transnationalism is facilitated by globalisation, designating manners in which developments in transportation, technology and communication have accelerated the speed, intensity and impact of various linkages. The present paper relies on a cultural studies approach to transnationalism, interpreted as a special type of consciousness generated by the individuals’ multiple identifications, de-centred attachments and simultaneous being here and there.

While transnationalism is not a new phenomenon, the migrants’ enhanced ability to travel back and forth between homes gives it a new dimension, discarding the diasporic connotations of absence, loss and alienation. The classical definition of diaspora implies a sense of irremediable rupture with one’s homeland paralleled by a wish to return to it and a sense of alienation in the host country. At the same time, diaspora formation is conditioned by coercive elements at home that enforce departure (political repression, starvation, etc). By affording a regime of multiple national belonging, the transnational condition discards the connotations of diasporic loss. This regime of intensified relocation may generate transcultural transformations that connect immigrants with specific locations along their itineraries. A transcultural approach to cultural contacts involves a transcendent cultural dimension, shaped by a layer of shared norms that enable communication across cultural differences. Claire-Karen Voss defines the transcultural space as an unbounded cultural dimension, where one experiences the condition of being human beyond cultures. This outlook supports the idea of communication across cultural identifications, along transcendent lines of self-definition: ‘In the transcultural space we … begin to see what being human really means’. Along similar lines, Hannerz considers that the transnational ties of contemporary culture create a sense of global interconnectedness, conceptualised as ‘global ecumene’. These transnational connections configure the contemporary global setting as an open landscape of social relationships, cultural flows and transnational commons. Considering cultural diversity as one of the transnational commons, Hannerz argues that individuals are free to operate creative confrontations, selecting and inserting different cultural practices into their profiles. This argument shares the transgressive implications of transculturality, connecting it with a transnational context of intense circulation.

Notwithstanding the fluid connotations of transnational affiliations and transcultural outlooks, there are critical voices who argue for the enduring relevance of stability and settlement in...
contemporary experiences of resettlement. A unilateral understanding of contemporary migration solely as displacement and deterritorialis-ation may overlook ways in which these patterns of mobility are grounded in ‘spatial registers of affiliation’. Researchers associate translocality with an emphasis on ‘local-to-local links’ that shape the immigrants’ experiences in specific locations. In order to highlight the need for further conceptualisations of locality within transnational studies, Guarnizo and Smith have advanced the notion of grounded transnationalism. Their approach aims to filter transnational processes through a multifaceted grid that considers the specific contexts of the migrants’ resettlement along with the fluid, free-floating dimension of their relocation. Guarnizo and Smith promote the dialectic of embedding and disembedding as a lens that enables the interpretation of transnational identities as simultaneously shaped by centripetal elements of situatedness and centrifugal impulses of relocation. Relying on these theoretical considerations, the next section investigates the immigrants’ ambivalent relation to the Western European spaces they traverse. More specifically, the analysis foregrounds the protagonists’ ability to bond with these sites of transit despite their nostalgic moods and uncertain itineraries.

Germany and Italy: sites of transit

Rodica Mihalis and Domnica Rădulescu belong to the category of Romanian migrants who left Romania before 1989, fleeing communist restrictions. Rodica Mihalis’s memoir presents her childhood and adulthood in communist Romania, followed by her relocation to the United States via Germany.

This section focuses on Rodica’s temporary stay in Frankfurt where she applies for political asylum at the American consulate. By investigating her translocal experience, the discussion establishes the interplay of emplacement and displacement that configures her brief encounter with Western Europe. As she gets off the train in Frankfurt, Rodica is struck by a feeling of interpersonal alienation and lack of human empathy. As she buys herself coffee and pastry, Rodica notices how the shop owner attempts to chase away an old woman, who is carrying an empty plate. Moved by the old lady’s situation, Rodica buys her some pastry, thus arousing the man’s disapproval (The Gypsy 119). The fact that he shrugs his shoulders and leaves emphasises the impression of human disconnection that dominates Rodica’s first impression of the German setting.

Rodica’s transit through Germany is largely characterised by a sensation of uncertainty, fuelled by her expected transition to the status of a political refugee: ‘No one knew how it felt to be suspended between two countries. I could not return to Romania without facing prison, and yet I did not know if America would accept me. Even if it did, I had no idea how long the process would be. The uncertainty overwhelmed me’ (The Gypsy 133). As an illegal immigrant, Rodica feels out of place while waiting for the approval of her legal departure to America. Rodica perceives this state of intermission as an unsettling experience that generates her reluctance to connect with the German setting: ‘For me, Germany was just a stop on my way to

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freedom. I was an observer, not a participant’ (The Gypsy 144). The temporary nature of Rodica’s stay in Germany is correlated with her inability to become attached to a specific point in her transnational itinerary. Rodica’s reactions to Frankfurt suggest that she feels predominantly displaced in this foreign setting. However, certain aspects of her recollections illustrate how Rodica’s states of detachment and alienation intersect with unexpected instances of groundedness, resulting from her transcultural perceptions. The author declares that a major direction of her writing is concerned with the dissemination of a transcendent message that foregrounds the human dimension of individuals: ‘I hope to take the readers to a deeper level of understanding, not only of a different culture, but also of the universal human emotions that are similar for all’.17

After receiving a favourable response from the American authorities, Rodica decides to travel to several German cities (Bonn and Koln). On her way to Koln, a German traveller (Johannes) offers to be her guide and invites her to rest at his parents’ place. Although Rodica is initially reluctant to accept a stranger’s kindness, she eventually becomes his guest: ‘However, as surreal as the story is, it happened. I went with Johannes, a perfect stranger, to his parents’ house’ (The Gypsy 147). The compassion of strangers experienced by Rodica along her transition through Germany suggests that people’s emotions have the potential to transcend physical and cultural borders. Johannes’ openness and generosity contribute to Rodica’s transcultural understanding that connects her with certain German realities. The most important moment of her transcultural awareness takes place in a German cathedral, when she accompanies Johannes’s family. During the sermon, surrounded by people who speak a different language, Rodica experiences profound human attachment. Her transcultural perception involves an overall feeling of harmony and understanding that cancels any possibility of separation:

At the end we held hands and prayed in German. The words didn’t matter, but the unknown hands holding mine felt strong and reassuring. For a moment my heart spoke the language of compassion and friendship. I didn’t feel the presence of God necessarily, but I felt cared for and accepted. (The Gypsy 147; emphasis mine)

Rodica’s experience of translocality illustrates that the migrant’s residence in an intermediate space can be discussed in terms of simultaneous displacement and emplacement. Her stay in Germany is an example of grounded transnationalism shaped by transcultural values like compassion, care and acceptance. The following section discusses Mona Manoliu’s experience of transit through Italy, foregrounding the intersecting axes of belonging and (up)rootedness that configure the migrant’s relocation.

Train to Trieste is a work of fiction inspired by Domnica Rădulescu’s background of migration. It presents the life trajectory of Mona Manoliu, a girl raised in communist Romania, who escapes Ceauşescu’s dictatorship in the early 1980s. As well as in Rodica’s case, Mona’s migration to the West entails a chain of relocations via different European cities: Belgrade, Trieste and Rome. After her short transit through Belgrade, Mona crosses the Italian border illegally, pretending to be the wife of an Italian man, Mario. She spends her first two weeks in Italy as a guest of Mario’s family in the city of Trieste. Mona is surprised by the beauty of this place, which she has imagined as impersonal space of refugee transition:

I had thought Trieste was going to be an improvised city, small buildings built in a rush at

the frontier with Yugoslavia to welcome refugees who had crossed the border. Somehow I saw the city in my mind as a transitional space where the train to Trieste stopped, then passed through to real cities like Venice and Rome. But it isn’t like this at all. It hurt me to discover it was a beautiful city, because I knew my journey couldn’t end here. I had to get to Rome, at least. (Train 159)

Mona’s reflections suggest that her transnational trajectory cannot be defined only in terms of groundlessness, given her impulse to connect with people and places. Trieste’s beautiful architecture and joyous ambience function as possible triggers of attachment that Mona tries to avoid. Mona’s relocation trajectory is shaped by the Italian policy of immigration, unfriendly to refugees. Her experience illustrates the division between Eastern and Western Europe caused by the high numbers of Eastern European refugees that triggered hostile reactions in the West. As a result, Mona cannot envisage her stay in Italy as permanent, although she feels connected with the Italian surroundings. Mona is full of regret for not being allowed to remain in Trieste, ‘this border city that painfully surprises me with its melancholy beauty and languorous canals’ (Train 160). Her feelings suggest how the axis of emplacement triggers the migrant’s strong desire to settle in Trieste. However, Mona overcomes her impulse to settle in Trieste and she accepts her destiny of deracination by activating mechanisms of detachment. At some point, she imagines herself on a ship that carries her away from this city that she has envisaged as a possible home:

I have a foreboding of sadness to come. Trieste could have been my final destination, not just a point of passage. I am in the heart of Trieste, and I can’t feel it, I can’t hear it: a heart pumping with a silent beat, for I am already far away on the sea. E la nave va, and the ship goes on. I am my own ship of estrangement and uprooting. (Train 160; emphasis in the original)

The scenario conceived by Mona captures the paradoxical configuration of her migration across multiple borders. On the one hand, her embarkation illustrates the dynamics of displacement that dictates Mona’s separation from this site. Similarly, her inability to feel and hear the city’s heart strengthens the migrant’s disconnection from the space she traverses. At the same time, her being positioned in the very heart of the city illustrates the effects of emplacement that makes Mona feel close to Trieste and its people.

The following episode of Mona’s translocal experience unfolds in Rome, the city where she is hosted by Mario and Luciana’s friends (Marina, Vittorio and their daughter Roxana). Initially, Mona feels confused and lonely, but she gradually develops a strong affection for her new life: ‘I become attached to my daily routine with Roxana, Vittorio and Marina, as if I were one of their family’ (Train 170). Her gradual adjustment illustrates the dynamics of emplacement as a relevant coordinate of her transnational itinerary: ‘I feel at home, as if I’ve lived in Italy forever’ (Train 171; emphasis mine). The character’s ability to form connections with yet another novel city illustrates the migrant’s need to ground her fragmented experience in a particular setting. Before starting the formalities for obtaining refugee status, Mona expresses her desire to visit the Colosseum. Her intention to visit this architectural emblem illustrates an overlapping of emplacement and displacement forces in her transnational profile:

I want to see the Colosseum, which the Romans had built in their ferocious hunger for

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glory. The Romans who then invaded and colonized the Dacians, stole their words and left them with only fourteen, and thus gave birth to my people! My tormented, violent, messed-up, poetic people, from whom I have run away forever! I find it comforting that my origins are here, in this dizzying city. I am not so far away after all. (Train, 166; emphasis mine)

On the one hand, Mona’s desire to visit the Colosseum reveals her willingness to connect with the Roman cityscape, which marks her need for groundedness. This ancient monument reminds Mona of the historical intersections between the Roman Empire and the province of Dacia, placed in the territory of today’s Romania and conquered by the Romans in the second century BC. This historical overlap marks a moment of continuity along Mona’s segmented trajectory, foregrounding an instance of embeddedness. The migrant’s awareness of a commonality between the Romanian and the Italian backgrounds helps her feel more familiar with Rome. However, Mona’s invocation of her ancestors awakens recent memories of uprooting, pointing to her diasporic rupture.

On the day of her departure to America, Mona regrets that she has to resume her border crossing journey: ‘I panic and I want to run after them [Marina, Vittorio and Roxana], to hug them one more time, to beg them to help me settle in Rome, Roma, amore mio (Train 175; original emphasis). Mona’s reactions reveal the profound nature of the bonds she has forged with the people and sites in Rome. Her desire to choose this city as permanent residence illustrates her impulse to embrace the axis of emplacement. Her former unwillingness to explore Trieste is replaced by a strong desire to absorb Rome’s vitality. As Vittorio accompanies Mona on a tour of Rome, she is fascinated by the lively atmosphere of the city, the crowded piazzas and the beautiful monuments: ‘The world is suddenly wide open to me, and I’m greedy to have it, all of it. I can do anything I set my mind to. I want to do everything’ (Train 167). Mona’s access to a country situated beyond the Iron Curtain reveals the possibility a life permeated by energy and freedom to travel. At this point, Mona understands that the axis of displacement contains the promise of a fluid identity, shaped by her ability to move beyond the confines of a single nation state. This awareness makes her decide to uphold her deracination as a marker of freedom that has been denied to her before. As she officially becomes a political refugee, Mona decides to cut her hair, marking a new stage of her migration experience. Mona’s gesture represents her determination to discard nostalgic attitudes and willingly adhere to the axis of displacement: ‘I see my Romanian past in my mind, all its passions and fears, all the people and sounds and smells and tastes, being wrapped in cellophane like a package for me to carry as I move toward my future’ (Train 170). Mona knows that she has to sever the connections with her past in order to turn her uprooting from a traumatic episode into a borderless perception of space. Her decision to freeze her memories is meant to facilitate Mona’s easy adjustment to new cultural spaces.

Rodica’s and Mona’s transits via Western Europe prepare their change of status from illegal immigrants to political refugees and eventually American citizens. The next section analyses their evolution in America foregrounding specific strategies of emplacement and particular recordings of displacement. A part of the discussion focuses on their decision to perform temporary return to Romania that illustrates their different degrees of homeland attachment.

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19 Florin Constantiniu, O istorie sinceră a poporului român (București: Univers Enciclopedic, 1997) 33.

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America: the last destination?

Rodica is determined build a good life in America and she focuses on her integration, rather than the maintenance of connections with Romania. After her divorce from her American husband, Rodica has to cope with his suicide and raise her two daughters. Her personal story of adaptation becomes more relevant to Rodica than the overthrow of Romania’s communist regime. Her moderate enthusiasm while watching the CNN broadcast of the Romanian Revolution reveals Rodica’s stronger attachment to her American routines: ‘Completely aside from overseas politics, 1989 was a year of great personal challenges. I was an Eastern European mother trying her hardest to assimilate into the suburban America stay-at-home mom style’ (The Gypsy 263). Her dispassionate stance while witnessing the downfall of the political regime that motivated her uprooting suggests that she has shaped a transcendent sense of identity that does not bind her with the realities of the Romanian nation. Rodica’s conception of ‘home’ entails a non-spatial definition, and it represents a self-preserving strategy dating back from her adolescence. Rodica remembers that she learned to protect herself from her father’s violence, by seeking refuge into a home above territorial constraints: ‘I did make a home; I was not homeless. My new home was secure and wonderful because no one could hit me while I was inside it. No one could take it away from me. This new home was in my heart’ (The Gypsy 55). Rodica’s nomadic conception of home provides the necessary psychological balance that helps her deal with the challenges of immigration and motherhood: ‘Secretly, I already had a home, inside of me, which I carried everywhere’ (The Gypsy 229). Rodica’s recurrent thoughts about the home within herself illustrate her fluid national belonging that is correlated with a strong willingness to adjust to different cultures. As a transnational migrant, Rodica is able to fight homeland attachment in order to facilitate her children’s integration in America. For example, Rodica does not teach her daughters Romanian, fearing that this process might prevent them from becoming true Americans:

I wanted my children to be one hundred percent part of their American culture. I was trying so hard to fit in, harder than I had ever tried at anything before, because this time it wasn’t about me. It was about my children being accepted. ... I wanted to be fully assimilated into my new culture, not maintain the two cultures in parallel. (The Gypsy 264)

Rodica’s tendency to transcend national loyalties is paralleled by an obsessive focus on Americanisation, which suggests that affiliation with a national model of culture can become a strategic choice for immigrant adjustment. At the same time, Rodica regrets that her quest for assimilation has made her fail to pass her native culture to her children: ‘Not teaching my girls Romanian is one my greatest regrets as a parent’ (The Gypsy 264). Her disappointment illustrates Rodica’s incapacity to completely shun her attachment to her native background notwithstanding her efforts to transgress it. In other words, her desire to become rooted in America is paralleled by her awareness of her displaced condition that imposes the fluidisation of her allegiance to Romanian cultural values.

Despite her thirty-year absence from Romania, Rodica considers this space an important marker of affiliation, referring to it as her ‘mother country’ (The Gypsy 360). On her first journey to Romania, Rodica experiences perfect continuity with her past, realising that the landscape has preserved its familiar core: ‘Strangely, some things don’t change’ (The Gypsy 362). A feeling of permanent connection despite separation is triggered by Rodica’s encounter with her old friends: ‘When I left Romania, I said good-bye to all my childhood friends, thinking I would never see...’
them again. *Time and distance were irrelevant* because these friendships were true and deep, like the roots of a wise tree* (*The Gypsy* 356; my emphasis). Rodica’s effortless reconnection with post-communist Romania is facilitated by the enduring human bonds that remained strong despite the physical and temporal borders that separated them. This feeling of continuity across distance helps Rodica create a positive impression during her first visit in Romania. She is happy to rediscover her native country as a space of freedom, different from the oppressive context of the past: ‘What I rediscovered in 2007 was a country of hope and revival’ (*The Gypsy* 362). Gradually, Rodica’s regime of transnational mobility intensifies, as she develops the habit of engaging in frequent physical travel between America and Romania: ‘Every time I speak with my friends, every time I go back, I have the feeling I am a free bird, allowed to fly everywhere, on any branch of any tree in the world. The *freedom to fly free* was why I defected in 1981 and that dream came true’ (*The Gypsy* 365; my emphasis). Rodica’s accelerated relocation weaves a pattern of transnational identification that offers a profound sense of freedom. The metaphor of flight renders the transcendent connotation of transnational mobility that provides the possibility of loose affiliations and intense border crossing. Rodica’s identification with a free bird indicates her conception of space as a borderless dimension that she can explore by choice. As a twenty-first century American citizen of Romanian origin, Rodica enjoys her transnational condition that provides the comfort of multiple homes:

> I am allowed to go back deep to my *roots* in Romania and then fly back to my *branch* in my home, America. Many times people ask me, ‘Do you like it here in America?’ I chose to live in America. I married, and I raised two children in America. Do I like it here? My answer is yes, because this is *home, but I may fly anywhere*. It’s a home, not a cage. (*The Gypsy* 365; my emphasis)

Rodica’s hypermobility does not entail the abolition of her need for grounded, stable references. Instead of dissolving the idea of home allegiances, her freedom to relocate shapes a multidimensional conception of home. Her reflections configure ‘home’ as a tree that simultaneously grows in different soils, with the roots in Romania and the branches in America. I suggest that the wholeness of this tree is provided by Rodica’s transculturality that establishes continuity between her native country and the land of resettlement. Rodica associates Romania with a site of origins, although she does not call it home. However, the idea of roots points to an enduring connection between Rodica and the space of her birth. At the same time, America is specifically referred to as home, the place where Rodica has performed the vital roles of wife and mother. Her overlapping loyalties suggest that the intersection between roots and routes makes up the fabric of Rodica’s transnational identity, illustrating how the axis of emplacement meets with the fluid patterns of repeated resettlement. Rodica’s experience of transnational migration illustrates the transition from a bounded cultural universe, delineated by impenetrable frontiers, to a world of free travel. Her passage from a static communist setting to a world of unhindered mobility illustrates the shift from home as a cage to home as a point of multiple departures. The next section analyses Mona’s evolution in America, underscoring the merging of her diasporic outlook with a regime of transnational belonging.

Mona’s life in America represents a chain of events that mark her gradual emplacement along the lines of successful integration: marriage, divorce, the birth of two sons and her becoming an academic. As well as Rodica, Mona gains a transcultural outlook that facilitates her free exploration of cultures. The enduring relationship between her and a Mexican immigrant (Marta) illustrates the possibility of forming meaningful connections across cultural differences.

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Kindness and solidarity, transcultural human values, connect Mona with the Mexican woman, who guides Mona through her tough beginnings. This strong bond is also born out of perceived cultural commonalities, as Marta’s Spanish background is related with Mona’s Latin inheritance: ‘Tonight we are a big, happy family speaking Romanian and Spanish and English. . . . I feel like Marta is my blood relative, one of the no-nonsense, feisty women in my family’ (Train 265; emphasis added). The time she spends in Marta’s home makes Mona feel comfortable, offering her a context of warmth and harmony. The fact that Mona considers Marta the equivalent of her family reveals the depth of their relationship that defies cultural differences. At some point, Mona becomes aware of her transcultural transformation that facilitates her navigation through various cultural backgrounds: ‘I move in and out of words with ease, in and out of languages: Romance languages, Germanic languages, Slavic languages. They slip off my tongue lightly and create iridescent and incandescent patterns like little fireworks’ (Train 266). The ease with which Mona handles cultural multiplicity is paralleled by her joyous discovery of different cultural worlds. The association of foreign languages with colourful decorative designs foregrounds the perceived beauty of discovering alterity. Mona’s fascination with otherness illustrates her acquired transculturality that facilitates her adjustment, partially dissolving her traumatic uprooting.

At the same time, Mona is haunted by the image of Mihai and by her yearning for Romania, the space that witnessed their love. Mona struggles with her diasporic nostalgia and she almost succeeds in blocking her memories. However, she never attempts to subdue her source culture in order to forge a sense of American identity. Rodica Mihalis and Domnica Rădulescu present different strategies of survival adopted by Romanian female refugees to America. Mihalis is more focused on fashioning an American identity for herself and her daughters. By contrast, Rădulescu associates the condition of motherhood with the initiation of the second generation into the values of Romanian culture. Mona teaches her sons Romanian and she tells them bedtime stories about the Romanian mountains (Train 260). Her unfinished love story and the enigma of Mihai’s death in the Romanian Revolution can be considered diasporic parameters that cause Mona’s temporary return home. As soon as she crosses the Romanian border, Mona’s senses are welcome by familiar fragrances, sounds and memories. The untamed beauty of the landscape transposes Mona in her youth, when she and Mihai felt protected by the mountains’ presence:

The morning our train crossed into Romania, dawn was sneaking through the humid pine forests of the Carpathians and jolted my body awake with the shock of recognition. Although there were no signs along the tracks, no announcements of stops with Romanian names, I knew I was on my native soil. I felt it in the way dawn filtered through the tall, symmetrical fir trees. . . . I knew it because all my limbs felt the right size, and because I could hear the echoes of my name, my laughter and moans stuck forever in the valleys. (Train 276; my emphasis)

Domnica Rădulescu illustrates a stronger diasporic perspective, emphasising the enduring bond between Mona and her native land. Mona’s reconnection with Romania seems more emotionally charged than Rodica’s. Her immediate identification with the natural canvas reveals the strong dimension of her exilic longing. The rich variety of perceptions that bond Mona with the Romanian setting foregrounds the deep link between Mona and her homeland despite the long interval of separation. As she performs her physical travel to Romania, Mona also experiences temporal travel to her youth, given her vivid memories of Mihai. However, her past orientation

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is paralleled by the integration of Mona’s American present into her identity frame: ‘I am different and the same’ (Train 284). The idea of difference points to Mona’s transformation imposed by her contact with multiple cultures. At the same time, her perceived sameness indicates the long lasting connection she has maintained with her source culture. The author presents Mona’s gradual transition from her identification with her (Romanian) past and the acknowledgement of her transnational self:

My body is fuller from having carried my children, there is a powder of lines around the corner of my eyes, there is a fierce glitter in my look from my uprootings and the ambitions I have tried to fulfil; my limbs feel stronger and my muscles tighter, my hair is as unleashed as ever, only there are some fine strands of gray in it now. ... Now I have a whole life in the American Midwest. (Train 279; emphasis mine)

Mona’s physical travel to Romania helps her accommodate her Romanian and American experiences. Her reintegration into a familiar space triggers her revaluation from a comparative angle that reveals her differences from the young Mona. The adult Mona realises that dislocation and motherhood have made her tougher and more determined. Her American existence contains a series of transformations that mark her transition from a girl to a responsible woman. Her investigation of Mihai’s death foregrounds her need to understand her youth and connect it with her present. Mona finds out that Mihai is alive and that he was not a collaborator of the Secret Police, as she sometimes suspected. These truths entail the possibility of new beginnings, enabling the integration of Mona’s Romanian life into a transnational perspective. Mona’s temporary return entails the transformation of her diasporic longing into transnational self-definition that accommodates plural allegiance:

Now that at least some of the fog surrounding Mihai has dissipated, my heart can rest from all the tumult of the last twenty years. ... And maybe I will get used to having two countries, to having no country, to be my own country, and stretching across the Atlantic Ocean, one foot in the Indiana cornfields, the other in a berry-field meadow in the Carpathians, like a huge baobab tree. (Train 301; my emphasis).


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Mona’s desired equivalence between the self and country and her ideal of having no country underscore her transnational perspective, which does not privilege the nation as a primary criterion of identification. The symbol of the baobab tree is meant to emphasise Mona’s subsequent transnational itineraries, enabled by Romania’s new political regime. In African folklore, the baobab tree is represented upside down, with twisted branches that resemble its hanging roots. It is also associated with strength, long life and adaptability to harsh circumstances.\(^{21}\)

If Romania stands for Mona’s roots and America for her branches, their overlap suggests Mona’s transnational regime of identification that promotes neither country as an identity reference. Moreover, the idea of suspended roots implies the difficulty to maintain groundedness in the context of transnational migration. The symbol of the baobab tree also implies the immigrants’ increased ability to adjust as a prerequisite for the negotiation of cultural identities. On her way to Mihai’s house, situated in a remote area of the Carpathians, Mona fashions her plans of transnational travel between America and Romania. As she is about to face Mihai, Mona dreams of having a house like his, surrounded by the wild beauty of the Romanian scenery: ‘I should buy a house like this one with clematis and grapevines all around it and a wooden porch, here in the middle of the Romanian nowhere. For me and my children when we come back next summer.’ Mihai lets out a swirl of blue smoke and looks up. He looks at me’ (Train 305; emphasis mine). In order to retrieve her lost love, Mona is willing to build a future that will blend her Romanian and American lives. Her planning to return the following year signals the maintenance of her transnational condition through a pattern of repeated relocations. These episodes of physical travel will enable Mona to transgress the fixity of national borders by having homes in two countries. The novel ends abruptly, with no further details of the lovers’ encounters. The last sentence of the passage suggests the continuation of their relationship in the new conditions of transnationality projected by Mona.

**Conclusions**

The analysis has considered two narratives of relocation that illustrate the fragmented nature of Romanian migration before and after 1989. Rodica’s and Mona’s temporary settlement in Germany and Italy demonstrate that their translocal uprooting is paralleled by elements of emplacement that ground their journeys in specific locations. Their transcultural outlooks, developed in such instances, mark the emergence of enlarged cultural perspectives that facilitate the migrants’ ability to connect with foreign spaces.

The protagonists’ American experiences illustrate their different approaches to immigrant integration ranging from diasporic to transnational configurations. Mona Manoliu displays a stronger diasporic perspective, illustrated by her longing for Romania, which parallels her efforts to build an American future. Rodica Mihalis presents a less melancholic outlook, since she focuses on her displaced condition, struggling to assimilate. In other words, her emphasis on Americanisation reveals her need to ground her experience of uprootedness in the American setting.

The fall of communism marks Mona’s and Rodica’s transition to a regime of transnationality, manifested through their ability to reconcile their Romanian and American affiliations. Rodica compares her Romanian and American coordinates with parts of a single tree that stretches

across space. With its roots in Romania and its branches in America, this vegetal metaphor implies Rodica’s transnational identity that facilitates her simultaneous belonging to both countries. Along similar lines, the adult Mona compares herself with a baobab tree that grows in the Romanian and American soil. This image foregrounds the character’s achieved transnationality that cancels the physical distance between these two countries, undoing the separation imposed by national borders.

Although the protagonists’ contacts with different cultural spaces engender patterns of transnational identification, their fluid allegiances do not exclude their need to form attachments to the specific settings they cross along their journeys. Considering the immigrants’ need for groundedness that parallels their transnational conception of home, the analysis demonstrates that contemporary experience of uprooting cannot be discussed exclusively in terms of fluidity, becoming and disembeddedness.