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## THE ROMANIAN-CANADIAN DIASPORA- TRANSNATIONAL ASPECTS

**Keywords:** *transnational; Romanian-Canadian diaspora; communist trauma; dislocation; assimilation; integration.*

**Abstract:** *The paper first discusses the acceptations of the term 'transnational', then the main features of the Romanian-Canadian diaspora from the transnational perspective and then the transnational aspects reflected in the literary productions of such Romanian-Canadian writers as Eugen Giurgiu (the novel *Ewoclem*), Flavia Cosma (the novel *The Fire that Burns Us*) and Kenneth Radu (the volumes of poetry *Letter to a Distant Father* and *Romanian Suite*, the short story "Baba" and the (partly fictionalized) biography *The Devil Is Clever. A Memoir of My Romanian Mother*).*

'Transnational' is a term that can have a broad and a narrower specialized meaning. It can generally mean "operating in or involving more than one country" as in "global warming is a transnational problem" or "extending or going beyond national boundaries" as in "transnational corporations" (Merriam-Webster on line) or in "The European Union is a transnational project." Its specialized meaning has emerged in relation to the study of migrants and diasporas and it is this meaning that will be used in this paper. It refers to the immigrants preserving connections with the country of their origin, relations that can be social, cultural, political or economic:

Transnational migration is a pattern of migration in which persons, although they move across international borders and settle and establish social relations in a new state, maintain social connections within the polity from which they originated. In transnational migration, persons live their lives across international borders. (Glick Schiller 96)

José Itzigsohn underlines that Peggy Levitt's *Transnational Villagers* has made an important contribution to the study of people's way of living across borders by distinguishing three different contemporary approaches to transnational migration: the social science approach prevalent in the United States; the European approach focusing on the emergence of rights and solidarities beyond the boundaries of nation-states; and the cultural studies approach, stressing the formation of hybrid cultures and focusing on the multiple and shifting character of identities within this new transnational frame (Itzigsohn 281).

If, as Ewa Morawska maintains, the scholars of the 1990s inclined to believe that living in transnational spaces deanchors contemporary immigrants from both sender and receiver societies or produces 'bifocal' identities and commitments, she argues that

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“transnational involvements of immigrants and their children and their assimilation into the host society typically are concurrent . . . [and] produce different varieties of transnationalism-with-assimilation combinations” (Morawska 133).

The Romanian diaspora in Canada now counts approximately 200,000 people. The fact that some say that their number is much larger testifies that numerous Romanians opt for total assimilation to their host society. This diaspora is the result of three waves of immigration. The first wave was made up of immigrants coming in increasing numbers to Canada at the beginning of the 20th century, a phenomenon that demonstrates both the efficiency of the Canadian government’s propaganda in its wish to settle the western prairies, and the dissatisfaction of the Romanian immigrant peasants with their economic and social condition in their native country. This economically–motivated first immigration wave was stopped by World War I and then by discriminatory changes in the legislation referring to Central and Eastern Europeans in 1930 (Radu, *The Devil* 109). A second wave of Romanian immigration to Canada extended from 1946 to 1989, when Romania was under a communist regime. These immigrants, most of them intellectuals, were seekers of political asylum, fleeing the political oppression at home. Most of them are involved in interethnic and transcultural relationships and, at the same time preserve close ties with some Romanian ethnic group, whether a congregation or cultural association based on common language and/or values, being thus “doubly integrated”, as Rodica Albu describes them (Albu 84). Like Flavia Cosma, they consider themselves both Canadian and Romanian and maintain strong transnational connections: they often travel to Romania, publish their works both in Canada and in Romania, or foster business relations between the two countries. They are fluent in English but also cultivate their Romanian. After the Romanian anticommunist revolution of December 1989 which overthrew the Ceausescu regime, a third wave of Romanian citizens immigrated to Canada, their motivation being again economic, as at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They aim at a successful and rapid integration by cultivating their neighbours, their fellows at work and during various voluntary or club activities. Quite often they avoid Romanian company in order to speed up their integration and sever connections with their country of origin describing their attitude as “cutting the umbilical cord” (Albu 85). They try to speak as little Romanian as possible. In this third wave of immigrants there is also a small group of middle-aged and elderly people who have come to Canada to help their children or other relatives and have had no choice but stay on. They can feel at home only among Romanians and are frequently active members of Romanian congregations. Their English is rather poor and they speak mostly Romanian. In terms of acculturation they illustrate separation or isolation (Albu 85).

Next I am going to discuss transnational aspects illustrated in literary works by such Romanian-Canadian writers as Eugen Giurgiu, Flavia Cosma and Kenneth Radu. The first two belong to the second wave of Romanian immigrants, asylum seekers in Canada, and they frequently came to Romania after 1990, while Kenneth Radu is a third generation Romanian-Canadian who never visited his country of origin. The transnational dimensions of their writings differ and an interesting aspect is the language in which they were written: Giurgiu’s novel *Ewoclem* was written in Romanian, so even though it was published in Canada (Montreal 1996) it addresses only Romanian-Canadians; Flavia Cosma’s novel *The Fire that Burns Us* was first published in English (1996) by the

American Singular Speech Press, targeting therefore both the Romanian diaspora in the US and Canada, as well as the North American reading public there in general, and then its Romanian version appeared in 2011 in Bucharest, whereas Kenneth Radu's books all appeared only in English addressing all North Americans, even if perhaps implicitly Romanian – Canadians first.

*The Fire that Burns Us* evokes the tragedy of Alexander and Anna, a young Romanian married couple during the communist regime: when the husband goes to a western country and then defects, the wife is not allowed to join him as he is considered a “traitor of the country and the dreaded enemy” (Cosma 74). We witness their internal drama over long years of separation as well as a reflection of their everyday life in the two specifically different social contexts. The archetypal theme of the novel is lovers' search for reunion when separated by an adverse destiny. Their love is described in intense, deeply moving terms. So we can understand why Alexander is never able to take in the real meaning of Anna's divorce, an enforced gesture that she accepts only in order to be able to continue her efforts to get a passport, leave Romania and arrange to meet Alexander abroad, a meeting he can however no longer accept. The brutal treatment at the hands of the Securitate people, her losing her job when she first refuses to divorce her husband, her miserable hopeless grey life, all this gradually leads Anna to despair and suicide. Flavia Cosma impressively exposes how Communist Romania in its fierce wish for a standard ‘new man’ devoted to the regime brutally repressed and suppressed difference, and persecuted people attempting to preserve an independent mind up to complete victimization.

In contrast to Giurgiu's vision of Timothy's host country in Ewoclem, Alexander is eventually disappointed with the people around him, the only truly great difference remaining the freedom of movement. His love for Romania never dies, even after 30 years in his adoptive country and is a great source of inner strength (Irena Harasimowicz-Zarzecka *Postfata*). As keeping in contact with the relatives and friends in Romania is dangerous for them the defector has great difficulty in establishing and keeping a real connection, which thus remains mainly psychological, as is Alexander's case too:

How stupid it seems to find every world so similar to every other! Except for the freedom of seeing it, because this world doesn't hide itself . . . Therefore, I still accomplished something, that I am seeing the world, but in fact only this face of it, and now in seeing it I know it and feel much freer from it – now the other is forbidden to me. They are forbidding me both the things I didn't want and those (especially) that I loved so much: the Black Sea, my wife, my parents' graves. (Cosma 73)

Although he does achieve an economic integration, for Alexander Vișan the separation from his wife and country is a cause of deep suffering that practically prevents him from establishing normal social relations in the new country, it is a traumatic experience. Yet when finally all hopes of reunion with Anna are shattered (even if under the false pretenses of the communist regime) Alexander does contemplate attempting to start building a new life. Nevertheless his transnational longings do not end. For, as Avtar Brah argues, this is, more often than not, the usual general pattern:

The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure (Brah 193).

Published the same year with Cosma's novel, Eugen Giurgiu's *Ewoclem* is a first person narrative laid in Toronto which has a slight postmodern twist and a touch of magic realism. The narrative combines an evocation of the protagonist's prewar childhood in a small Transylvanian provincial town, life in communist Romania in the 1950s and then under Ceausescu, and the protagonist's life in Toronto as a young immigrant teacher of French.

The historical and geographical specificity is set against an archetypal theme – the quest for belonging, for home, for the good place. This quest is finally concluded with his settling in Balm Beach, Canada, his marriage to Roberta, his beautiful former high school student and living in the cottage called *Ewoclem*.

Contrary to Alexander Vişan, Timotei Dumbrava never feels homesick. He only gets introduced to the Romanian immigrant community in Toronto by a Canadian friend, he has not sought it and is not attracted to it. When they meet at social events Romanian Canadians do not debate ideas but exchange gossip. They are not a real community but a cluster of small groups and individuals that speak ill of, and distrust, one another. Regionalism and religious denomination are reflected in Timothy's Romanian consciousness: he feels more or less an alien to the Romanian community whose majority is Wallachian and Orthodox whereas he is from Transylvania and a Catholic.

Timothy Dumbrava is lucky to get a job as French teacher very soon after his arrival in Canada and his good economic situation, as well as his knowledge of English and French bring him a social status that facilitates his integration.

His job gives him access to well-off Torontonians as Roberta St George, one of his favourite pupils, invites him to her family's Christmas party. Hospitality is described as a feature of Canada, as the very title of the novel indicates. Alec St. George embodies a Canada with no social barriers for people who can prove their worth, whereas in contrast, Timothy realizes now that what he has mistaken for friendship in Romania, was only a rich family's patronizing way of using him to the advantage of their beloved daughter.

The transnational dimension of the protagonist's identity is reflected in his constant thinking of the crippling effects the Romanian Secret Police has on Romanian citizens and even on expatriates. Consequently he is surprised to see that Canada is not immune to communist ideas. Timothy's main reason for being othered, his coming from a communist country, is viewed in different ways in his new environment. Some consider him a dissident who could not bear censorship whereas the teachers and pupils with Leftist ideas regard his defection as a betrayal. At a turbulent meeting organized by communist activists in his school he gives a convincing picture of communist realities and persuades his audience that his defection meant a choice of freedom and dignity.

Dumbrava's transnationalism also reflects in his getting involved in activities that have an impact on Romanian political life. Thus he secretly translates a document that

turns Ceausescu's visit to Canada into a failure, in addition to the way he speaks publicly about communist Romania, which makes a difference to the political awareness of many citizens in his host country.

The narrative constantly opposes the order, individual freedom of movement and the rule of law and conscience that reigns in Canada to the infringement of elementary human rights in Communist Romania, going even as far as the practice of politically motivated murder: a Romanian journalist, a sculptor and his friend sitting for a portrait, are assassinated by agents of the Romanian secret police.

We may therefore conclude that the two representations of Romanian Canadian identity we have discussed so far are marked by the social category and gender of the protagonists and by the historical context of the action. But the archetypal motifs underlying the two narratives make them appeal to a larger audience than the merely ethnic one in Canada or the possible emigrants in Romania.

The case of Kenneth Radu is different from those of the previous writers discussed. He is a third generation Romanian Canadian whose transnationalism could only manifest itself at first in reading press reports about communist Romania but whose imagination and poetic sensibility were certainly fired by projecting alternative lives in the country of his ancestors. Thus the poetic persona's voice in his first volume of poetry *Letter to a Distant Father* (1987) is sounding across an enormous silent space extending from a contemporary Canadian setting to a nursing home on the Black Sea where his father is dying and then reaches further back to the family's life in a peasant village before the son illegally crossed the border. Remembering this rural childhood he compares it with the academic life he now leads, and is about to prepare to return for a visit to see the father he had thought to be dead.

The same wish to return to Romania for a visit haunts the title character of "Baba", a short story in Radu's 1990 volume entitled *A Private Performance*. It is a four-generation chronicle of a Romanian family of immigrants to Canada. Baba is an octogenarian who has spent 50 years in the new country without learning English, a gesture that shows that she has practically refused to leave her old country mentally. Derrida considers that for displaced persons, exiles or expatriates the mother tongue is the ultimate country and ultimate home (Derrida 91). Her last wish is to go over to see Romania again, a wish her integrated Canadian daughter refuses to fulfill, giving a new selfish destination to her mother's savings.

The December Revolution that put an end not only to Ceauseascu's dictatorship but also to the communist regime in Romania enhanced Radu's transnational concerns to a remarkable extent. He did not visit Romania himself but his son did and the latter's accounts and pictures bore artistic fruit in the father's volume of poems entitled *Romanian Suite* (1996) that has a picture of Casa poporului/The People's House on its cover. The central poetic voice is that of a Canadian pianist gardener of Romanian descent, whose grandfather "played the pipe still/remembered the old village /and told stories to his new wife/and their children, which passed/like a song from their mouth to mine" (13). Two recurrent motifs underpin the cycle of poems, gardening and music, which become metaphors of man's universal creative powers, against which specific

Romanian historical, cultural or anonymous figures play a suite of contrapuntal themes. Ceaușescu and such avatars as Dracula, Prince Vlad the Impaler and the Devil himself play the archetypal theme of evil:

Scholars seek historical  
equivalence, Vlad the Impaler,  
like scientists explaining myth.  
I am pre-existent, made manifest  
in dreams and icons of deepest  
despair and the psyche's unlit  
corners, cobwebbed and shrouded  
like the sky tonight.

What good a cross without belief  
Against my incisive teeth,  
What good garlic in the window  
When they invite me over  
The threshold in their dreams. (19)

The theme of evil is counterpointed by the motif of healing music in poems evoking the inspired performances of Dinu Lipatti, Radu Lupu and probably Tudor Dumitrescu (that the author mistakenly refers to as Dimitriu, 35).

The transnational content of the poet's psyche and deep identity is suggested by the fact that the Romanian vignettes (culminating with the poem "Uprising" which echoes the December Revolution) are placed in the first section of the collection under the title "Tales from the crypt", a title as evocative of death as it is of resurrection and life. There are also anonymous Romanian dramatis personae, such the Immigrant, the Immigrant's wife, the Nurse, The Crazy Bride, who conjure up a life of hardships and starvation. The Crazy Bride battles the Devil himself for the hand and soul of her groom and Love overcomes and defeats the dragon, for the sake of the man but also for her people. The cycle ends with a wedding feast at which the (Canadian) pianist (and poet) celebrates (Romanian) resurrection and life. Food images recur throughout the poems as a trope for physical survival whereas music becomes the trope for spiritual food.

Kenneth Radu's next book with a marked transnational dimension is *The Devil Is Clever* (2004). The first word in its subtitle – *A Memoir of My Romanian Mother* – and the title of the series in which Giurgiu's book is placed – *Colectia Memoria/Memory Collection* – share their root word: memory. Therefore anamnesis or remembrance (Ricoeur 18) is the technique of both writings and their goal - that of offering a record of events/epochs that should be remembered. The major difference between the works discussed so far and Radu's 2004 book is the type of literary discourse they belong to: non-fiction /biography in the case of *The Devil Is Clever*, and fiction or poetry in the case of the others. Beginning with Ovid's *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* there have been many moving accounts of the "plight of exiles, refugees, and immigrants, whose often wrenching departures from home bespeak the horrors of political persecution, economic deprivation, various degrees of unfreedom", as Marilyn Adler Papayanis puts it

(Papayanis 1), but undoubtedly Romanian immigrants' stories would have been of little interest in Canada, and consequently hardly found a publisher before 1971, the year when Canada was the first country to officially proclaim the policy of Multiculturalism aiming at removal of cultural and racial barriers to full participation in Canadian society and at cultural exchange and mutual knowledge and appreciation. Multiculturalism permits "a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships" to coexist (Bakhtin 263). The preservation of ethnic heritage is an important aspect of this cultural policy.

Radu's transnationalism is manifest in his references to Romanian culture, both popular traditions (religious practices and customs, music, dancing, cuisine) and representative cultural figures (Dracula, Brancusi). Richly interspersed with Romanian words, Radu's Memoir is written in English. Addressed to a Canadian readership, it translates Romanian culture to Canadians and functions as a sort of ethnic cultural display put together out of filial love: Kenneth Radu recounts his mother's parents' immigration in 1909 from Romania to Dysart, the prairie village the displaced Romanians set up in Saskatchewan. In spite of her losing her mother and getting a stern stepmother at the age of barely one year, Annie Corches had a happy childhood with her brothers and sisters on her father's farm, until the latter died too, of cancer, in 1920, when she was only 7. Picked up by exploiting relatives, Annie is able through hard work to make a living and finally marry and take over by the roles of wife and mother.

The reader closes the book with the narrator's voice in his ears, a son haunted by his mother's stories, but also a patient researcher of the past, the past of his family and the past of Canada related to it. He presents his Romanian mother's evolution with great psychological insight. The formative values of her ethnic, historically-marked background are projected against a universal scheme. Thus the Romanian woman's love of family and nurturing expressed in her excellent cooking and her domestic expertise or the Romanian woman's creativity expressed in manual work like tapestry or crocheting are projected against the archetypal quest for the Promised Land, the peasant's love of land or woman's love of nature and closeness to it, manifested in Annie's passion for gardening and her "green fingers".

The Old Country that the Corcheses left behind was one of great social oppression caused by a feudal type of agriculture where the landowners practiced heavy taxation on the peasants that were legally bound to the boyar's estate (107). The immigrants pursue the archetypal dream of a new beginning in the Promised Land, where economic success will bring about a more prosperous and dignified living. Throughout the book the narrator achieves a rich picture of the Romanian culture the immigrants carried over the Ocean with them, a culture translated, that is transported and transferred, to the new land.

Radu also emphasises historical instances of official discrimination of immigrants: his sense of ethnic heritage identity is hurt by the hegemonic position of British and French cultures from which the edge of society is discarded as culturally inferior and ethically intolerable. Radu quotes minister of the interior Clifford Sifton's definition of the kind of immigrants he was encouraging: healthy animals, "born to the soil" (Radu, *The Devil* 39), with the sole purpose of making it fertile. Sifton's definition

is followed by the much more offensive and contemptuous words that appeared in the *Calgary Herald* of January 18, 1899, describing immigrants coming from other countries than Britain as “a mass of human ignorance, filth and immorality” (Radu, *The Devil* 40). While admitting that illiteracy was probably higher than among the lower class British immigrants, the narrator strongly protests against the accusation of filth underlining his grandmother’s personal and house-cleaning habits and peremptorily concludes: “cleanliness was not exclusively a Puritan preoccupation. The Romanians, dare I say, were as clean as the English” (Radu, *The Devil* 40).

As regards the charge of immorality, the narrator accuses the newspaperman of perverse fantasies and stereotypes, pronouncing it irrelevant and even laughable. The narrator underlines how much such discourse can hurt, how insulting such venomous words are, even to the descendants of the immigrants of those times. The writer’s ideological position is clearly adversarial to this type of oppressive national discourse, he pleads for freedom from national stereotypes and from oppression by a nationalist orthodoxy of any sort.

Among the defining aspects of cultural identity the Romanians in Dysart have brought over with them the narrator enumerates music and dancing. Their dances, particularly the hora, symbolize community, harmony and continuity as the operating principle of life, the linked circle of the dancers suggesting the pattern of beginnings and endings continually merging into each other (72-3).

Food, family and feasting associated with hospitality are other major component parts of Romanian cultural identity and values the Memoir represents. How much the narrator relishes this traditional food and particularly his mother’s expertise at preparing it can be seen from the recipes he prefixes to each of the four Parts. But food can be the manifestation of difference and in his presentation of mamaliga/corn-meal mush, he enlarges upon food as symbol of class differences and social rank. Radu shows how social contempt for a class that was practically regarded as “beasts of burden” is transparent in the psychological make-up of Olivia Manning’s heroine in *A Balkan Trilogy*. Fashioned by British arrogance and paternalism, the author tells us, expresses disgust with both Romanian peasants and mamaliga, their basic food (65).

On the personal level, Radu’s *Memoir* is the story of a deprived orphan, psychologically and physically crippled by unmotivated cruelty, who does however finally manage to build a family of her own and thus in the end it is a success story.

On the collective level, the book is a ‘heritage’ piece with a marked transnational dimension nourishing the interest in ethnicity that multiculturalism has brought about in Canada. Kenneth Radu positions himself as a Canadian who wants to explore his ancestors’ cultural heritage, giving a voice to a formerly silenced ethnic subjectivity. We can deduce that Annie encouraged her son to write her story as a gesture that would give her a feeling of empowerment, of overcoming the silence she used to strategically take refuge into most of her life. Thus she would have a sense of subverting the silence often imposed on the ethnic subject either by the state apparatus or by their internalized inferiority complex (Kamboureli 17).

We may therefore conclude that the transnational dimensions of the writings we have discussed differ by the authors’ belonging to different types of immigration, being

also marked by the social category and gender of the protagonists and by the historical context of the action. The archetypal motifs underlying the narratives and poems with both English and Romanian versions make them appeal not only to the merely ethnic readership in Canada or the possible emigrants in Romania, but to a larger audience in both countries and even elsewhere. If the transnational dimensions of Giurgiu's and Flavia Cosma's novels are based on their direct experience of Romania, before and after their flight to Canada, and can be read as stemming from their authors' wish to produce "cautionary stor[ies]" (Olos 8), Radu, a third generation fully assimilated Canadian, produces writings that are transnational in that they vibrate with the emotion of what it is like to feel the blood of your Romanian ancestors in your veins and culture. Their transnational dimension is based on documentation and imagination, on vicarious, not direct, experience.

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