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DIASPORA BELONGING BETWEEN EXCLUSIONARY ISOLATIONIST DISCOURSES AND COSMOPOLITAN IDEALS

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Abstract

Reviewed literature on "long-distance nationalism" with its roots in methodological nationalism and more recent constructivist theoretical frameworks that allow for the fluidity of identity, intersectionality of social power dynamics and regard for the immigrant connectivity and simultaneity of virtual presences, provide us with a spectrum of analytical lenses. The mechanism that explains either isolationist, exclusivist tendencies in some migrants or their agency as envisaged promoters of cosmopolitan lifestyles, rests in the stories migrants tell about themselves and how they choose to structure emotional affinity into identity constructs of self and others. While accommodating the theoretical framework of seeing diasporas as transnational digital networks or as amorphous "imagined communities" potentially molded by political elites, this article chooses to consider diaspora affiliation as a category of social practice, fulfilling psychosocial needs of self-actualization. This theoretical

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framework provides the basis for semi-structured autobiographic interviews and analysis of narratives, as artefacts structuring the basis of belonging and othering within first- and second-generation of Romanian American migrants. This analysis may help examine how diaspora engagement with state actors is decoupled from the native territory's evolution and governance. It also intends to be the basis for recommendations for further research to better understand transatlantic diasporas and to inform potential policy making with regards to engaging diaspora community entities in promoting cultural identity resilience, skills that protect and promote the positive anchoring of members.

Keywords: belonging, long-distance nationalism, transnationalism, diaspora cultural identity, Romanian American diaspora, autobiographic narratives.

Introduction

Transatlantic mass migration has significantly influenced both North American and European societies for over a century and a half, fostering a dynamic cultural hybridity. The insights gleaned from this historical phenomenon are crucial for informing future policies in developed countries, particularly as they face demographic aging and seek to accommodate migrants from diverse regions. This investigation into how migrants negotiate their sense of belonging within both their native and host societies emerges in the context of a growing climate of anti-immigration populism manifest on both sides of the Atlantic. The migration anxieties that characterized the United States and Eastern Europe at the turn of the last century and particularly during the post-Great Depression era, differ only in the sense that contemporary concerns surrounding migrants are now directed towards those from regions outside the U.S. and the EU. Recent events, such as Brexit, have however targeted East Europeans and Romanians in particular, reflecting a backlash against perceived threats to cultural identity that echoes the discourses and restrictive mobility policies of previous generations. In Romania and Central Eastern Europe, emigration has historically been viewed, both in the interwar period and in recent decades, as indicative of backwardness and governance failure when juxtaposed with more developed Western nations.

In her examination of the initial wave of transatlantic mass migration, Tara Zahra posits that migration has been utilized as a governance tool to cultivate an exclusivist conception of ethnic homogeneity throughout Eastern Europe. She asserts, *"Ethnic cleansing and immobility were ultimately flip sides of the same coin in East Central Europe. The more Germans, Jews, and other minorities emigrated or were deported, the tighter the state's iron grip on its "preferred" citizens, who were needed to fill the demographic craters left behind. Immobility was the terrible cost paid by East Europeans for achieving the long-standing dream of homogeneous nation-states after 1945."*[1] In a sense, the "captivity" of peoples behind the Iron Curtain was a barbed wire solution to a struggle against emigration from Eastern Europe not just a Soviet Union imposition. *"From the late nineteenth century onward, East European governments justified restrictions on mobility in the name of "protecting" their citizens from exploitation abroad, fearing that East Europeans might become the "slaves" or "coolies" of the twentieth century. Today, East Europeans enjoy unprecedented freedom to move within Europe's borders, at the expense of those outside them. Having won that hard-fought right to freedom of movement, the privileges of whiteness, many East Europeans appear to be most invested in maintaining an iron curtain around the continent's edges. Freedom of mobility, in the view of anti-refugee activists, should be the exclusive right of Christian "Europeans."*[2] Zahra further contends that, similarly, on the other side of the Atlantic, many descendants of East European immigrants—once the subjects of U.S. anti-immigration laws—seem to endorse populist candidates and isolationist policies designed to safeguard their status as "white Americans." The alignment of migrants who lead transnational lives—and their descendants—supporting isolationist political agendas poses a paradox, given that such positions could undermine their own mobility. Notably, far-right parties, invoking a nostalgic vision of cultural homogeneity, have gained traction among diaspora members holding dual citizenship and participating in electoral processes on both sides of the Atlantic. To unravel this apparent contradiction in political mobilization, a robust theoretical framework is necessary to explore the enduring affiliations with native cultural identities and the emotional reservoir tapped into by skillful

[1] Tara Zahra, *The Great Departure: Mass Migration from Eastern Europe and the Making of the Free World*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2016, p.18.
[2] Tara Zahra, *Ibidem*, p.300.

demagogues. The same identity structuring processes that produce narratives of fear and isolation can also lead to resilient identity outcomes, cosmopolitan attitudes, tolerant and appreciative of cultural diversity, strengthening community building and nurturing sentiments of self-actualization.

Conceptualizing Diasporas from a Constructivist Perspective

In the study of national identity and ethnicity which must be at the basis of an imagined diaspora body, academic theories often historically sparred between primordialist and constructivist theories. Primordialist schools attribute national identity to shared memories, common language, or inherent characteristics, whereas constructivist approaches, focus on the socially constructed and negotiated nature of identity within social interactions.[3] The latter framework is equipped to address the fluidity of identity transformations evident among migrants—not only during the liminal period of relocation but throughout their life cycles, influenced by various contexts that necessitate the social renegotiation of self in relation to the host society. In the context of migration these schools of thought aligned with the established assimilation theory proposed in the early 20th century by the Chicago School of Sociology, which presumed a "race relations cycle" later refined by sociologist Milton Gordon into stages of acculturation, structural, marital, identification, attitude receptional, and ultimately civic assimilation.[4] It expected migrants to fully adopt the culture of their host society, often at the expense of their own cultural identities, the process being differentiated only in the degree of social distance from natives. The one-directional process thus expected much higher levels of assimilation levels in second than first-generation migrants. The model eventually evolved to accommodate an understanding of migrants as subjects rather than objects of assimilation, accounting for variation based on parental adaptation and social status on arrival.[5] Processes of acculturation and assimilation are now

[3] Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 85.

[4] Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, pp. 60-83.

[5] Rogers Brubaker, "The Return of Assimilation? Changing Perspectives on Immigration and Its Sequels in France, Germany, and the United States," *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies* 24, no. 4, 2001, pp. 531-548.

more commonly related to individual social environments,[6] accommodating the persistence of hybridity in diaspora identities and allowing for acculturation to be multifaceted, contextual and not merely one-directional in a migrant's life-cycle. As a result of technological changes related to virtual connectivity a paradigm shift occurred in migration studies allowing for transnationalism to be not just a structural feature promoted by institutional actors from above but also by migrants from below. Transnational migrants, retaining both origin and destination country ties, create social fields with unique expectations, values and interaction patterns shaped by different power relations experienced in each community.[7] This third space social field impacts identity construction, offering new venues for shaping in and out-groups. The social context within the destination country plays a significant role in shaping the evolving personal narratives of migrants, allowing for a continuous restructuring of identity that accommodates both current needs and the reverberations of past experiences. The theoretical framework of transnationalism further elucidates this phenomenon, suggesting that migrants not only maintain robust connections within both their origin and destination communities, inhibiting complete assimilation but also engage in potentially non-ethnic modes of identification.[8] The imagined third space of transnationalism is described as potentially leading to a cosmopolitanism form below or it may just be a construction of new identities within the host society, serving uses in the new environment.[9]

Identity is often delineated through a personal value system influenced by familial and native settings, as well as through external perceptions imparted by interactions within the host society, laden with its own predetermined values and ascribed roles. Migrants exercise agency in identity formation; their self-perception is not static but can be radically influenced by the external narratives presented to them. Historical patterns in American society have seen migrants repeatedly scapegoated for broader socio-economic

[6] Herbert J. Gans, "Discussion Article: Acculturation, Assimilation and Mobility," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 1, 2007, pp. 152-164.

[7] Peggy Levitt, "Transnational Migration: Taking Stock and Future Directions," *Global Networks* 1, no. 3, 2001, pp. 195–216.

[8] Jon E. Fox and Cynthia Jones, "Migration, Everyday Life and the Ethnicity Bias," *Ethnicities* 13, no. 4, 2013, pp. 385-400.

[9] Halleh Ghorashi, "How Dual Is Transnational Identity? A Debate on Dual Positioning of Diaspora Organizations," *Culture and Organization* 10, no. 4, 2004, pp. 329-340.

issues, creating a cultural landscape wherein mainstream discourses shape attitudes toward inclusivity and diversity.

The inclusiveness of both the host and origin societies play a pivotal role in shaping individual identities. Societies that embrace a coexistence of multiple identities and recognize the contributions of various cultural, ethnic, and social groups are more likely to cultivate a sense of collective belonging for individuals. While a discussion on identity intersectionality and power relations saliently informs the discourse surrounding migrants, it extends beyond the immediate analysis of a coherent Romanian American identity. Nonetheless, it is imperative to recognize that various forms of identity expression and performance exist within diverse settings. Family narratives, for instance, can entrench inclusionary and exclusionary frameworks that pertain to gender, race, sexual orientation, educational attainment and socio-economic status.

Moreover, instrumentalist and constructivist theories underscore the significance of political elites and institutional agents in shaping narratives of identity. By interpreting national identity through a constructivist lens, we can aspire toward promoting social cohesion and integration that facilitate dialogue and negotiation. Outlining this premise of discursive nature of identity, its fluidity in constant renegotiation of personal identity in rapport with collective narratives, Stuart Hall articulated its contingent attributes: "*Identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast with the 'naturalism' of this definition, the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed - always 'in process'. It is not determined in the sense that it can always be 'won' or 'lost', sustained, or abandoned. Though not without its determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it, identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency. Once secured, it does not obliterate difference. The total merging it suggests is, in fact, a fantasy of incorporation.*"[10] This nuanced understanding of identity formation, when applied to migrants, allows for the possibility that the hybrid cultural identities crafted by migrants, can

[10] Stuart Hall, "Who Needs 'Identity'?" in Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans, and Peter Redman (ed.), *Identity: A Reader*, London: Sage Publications, 2000, pp.15-30.

coexist and be affirmed contextually in varied social sites through narration which forces a categorization of self and others.

A framework for promoting diaspora cultural identity resilience and belonging, must consider the multi-layered fluid nature of a national diaspora as an "imagined community" and its potential to spin either into isolating echo-chambers promoting radical forms of "long-distance nationalism"[11] as well as into constructive forms of "encapsulation" and "cosmopolitanism"[12] that accommodate and affirm the inherent diversity of both native and host societies. In an age of interconnectedness people leading transnational lives are afforded the potential to nurture simultaneous presences in both native and host society contexts, even retain civic and political rights through condoned dual citizenship.

Migrant families navigate a complex terrain of belonging, caught between their native and host cultures, often describing the sense of being "neither here nor there," this rapport is shaped by both external public narratives and the internal stories they construct about themselves. Just as it has the potential to serve as a bridging human capital of relevance for state-sponsored soft-power projections and public diplomacy exercises, this third space of diaspora's solidarity with its loose anchoring in both societies may also be primed in situations of volatility by maverick political agents seeking to influence political outcomes in host or native country.

Migrants redefine their personal narratives of cultural belonging and the settings within which they seek self-actualization by actively engaging with both their native and host communities. They draw on cultural practices, language, and traditions from their homeland while simultaneously adapting to and integrating aspects of their new environment. This dual engagement helps them create a hybrid identity that encompasses elements of both cultures. The content of those narratives may lead to cultural resilience and positive anchoring just as they may lead to victimizing marginality and isolation. The availability of community support and venues for bonding with both native and host community members provide emotional support,

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[11] Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World*. London: Verso, 1998, Chapter 3, pp. 58-74.

[12] Leurs, Koen, and Sandra Ponzanesi. "Connected Migrants: Encapsulation and Cosmopolitanization." *Popular Communication* 16, no. 1, 2018, pp. 4-20.

which allows them to feel connected and valued. Preserving native country cultural practices within social venues does not limit the ability to adapt and integrate into the host culture but may help demystify host society expectations and facilitate a sense of belonging in both environments. Awareness of local perceptions shared within diaspora community-based organizations may empower migrants to confidently navigate their identities and take control over their own life stories, rejecting negative stereotypes and nurturing a positive self-image when exposed to external host society-imposed judgements or pre-assigned social roles. On the positive side of the spectrum of outcomes, the migrants' positive attitude towards integration creates a roadmap for self-actualization. On the negative end of the spectrum, migrants may also structure exclusivist perceptions that lead to isolation from their host communities and a projection of the sentiment of belonging into a mythologized version of homeland, one where the exiled individual is not just the titulary group member but also unencumbered by the realities of interdependence on others. When the perception of a threatened homeland or specific cultural values can be mobilized through public discourse, it fosters resentment of the challenges experienced in the host society's multicultural space as well as resentment of the diversity present in the homeland. These emotional and psycho-social dynamics were first described decades ago by Benedict Anderson.

Benedict Anderson's "long-distance nationalism"

Diasporic nationalism is the political manifestation of the emotional, nostalgic projections of belonging of dispersed communities towards a particular territory that is perceived as their ancestral homeland or titulary state. The key ideas proposed by Benedict Anderson are that nations are not naturally occurring entities but socially constructed, the sense of belonging in identity self-affirmation beyond the immediate, experienced known community of one's formative years is an abstraction. The notion of print media capitalism in shaping national consciousness through standardized shared narratives, symbols and historical myths across vast spaces envisioned that national identity went uncontested within given territories. This is something increasingly difficult to attain except in some of the most isolated of authoritarian regimes. Exiles in diaspora communities maintain strong ties with this physical homeland by participating in national events,

contributing financially, and engaging in political activities, including lobby efforts to sway host country public opinion for liberation or territorial adjustment on behalf of the homeland.

Benedict Anderson's treatment of the emergence of national identity and 'nation-ness' as an "imagined community" and "cultural artifacts of a particular kind'[13] opens the inquiry as to who does the imagining, who has agency in structuring and standardizing such notions of belonging through public communication and performance, as well as how the actual markers of such identity might evolve over time adapting to actual needs. He argued that 'communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.'[14] How individuals relate to and affirm those tenants of cultural belonging has implications for the potential political mobilization of such latent cultural affinity. The prevalent non-political form of that affinity is engrained into the individual from formative years, often with family circles and early socializations.

Anderson's treatment of national identity among emigrants narrowed on 'long-distance nationalism"[15] referring to the increased connectivity between emigrants and native communities and access to media products from the native country noting that "the mediated imagery of 'home' is" exported to the adoptive country.[16] Writing in the 1990s, he observed that in the United States there has been a long-standing accommodation of this form of nationalism reenacted in several subcultures, through associative ties sustained with the country of origin, and he saw these as to the detriment of the host society.[17] His critical perspective, tributary to the traditional methodological nationalism vein, prevalent at the time of his writing, confounded national culture with the propagation of a standardizing worldview within a given titulary state territory. This led him to lament that "the national institutions and national identity forged during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries no longer have their old

[13] Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. London: Verso, 2016, p. 4.
[14] Benedict R. Anderson, 2016, *Ibidem*, p. 6.
[15] Benedict Anderson, "*Long-distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics*," Berkeley, CA: Center for German and European Studies, University of California, 1992.
[16] Benedict Anderson, 1992, *ibidem*, p. 8.
[17] *ibidem*, p. 11.

commanding power."[18]. Within that mindset, processes of assimilation and acculturation were seen as natural outcomes and proof of full integration while retention of ethnic or cultural identity as suspect. It was not an insignificant observation however that the spread of national identity narratives itself was often dependent on elites who had been educated abroad, being part of cultural diasporas who played pivotal roles in lobbying for the formation of titulary states based on claims of representing shared ideas of common descent and shared history.[19] The history of the pivotal role of the Romanian American diaspora, working in tandem with other Central European peers, in swaying the Woodrow Wilson administration towards post-world war territorial settlements in Central Eastern Europe comes to mind here as a relevant example of an effective diaspora-led public diplomacy lobby. Diasporas exist as social imaginaries in relation to an existing or envisioned titulary nation state, and in this sense membership within such communities is closed yet shifting in their inclusiveness and pegged to that territorial sovereignty of the place of origin.

Whether such transnational diaspora communities are functional, coherent units, socially relevant to themselves, outside of that rapport with that administrative territory is not a given. Cultural affinities may well circumvent the state unit, with both sub-regional and transborder relevancy. Cultural identity and belonging may include multi-ethnic options or divergent confessional paths and take multiple forms that do not necessarily need to have political relevance. Anderson's perspective narrowed on the potential nationalist mobilization of transnational diasporas to be regimented into state interests. These discussions overshadowed the actual heterogeneity of such diasporas, the existence of subcultures, waves of migration with different interests, and even the multi-generational aspects of such communities with their distinct rapport regarding their composite cultural identity bridging country of origin and host society. Anderson's framework, reflecting dynamics of globalization in the 80s and 90s, could not grasp the ascent of transnational lifestyles, the condoning of dual citizenship with digital connectivity allowing descendants of migrants to experience a simultaneity of social anchoring.

[18] *ibidem*, p. 10.

[19] Benedict Anderson, 1998, *ibidem*, pp. 58-74.

Expanding on Andreson's concepts Nina Glick Schiller and Georges Fouron adapt his framework to explain how first and second generation migrants retain a level of interest and commitment to the national politics of their country of origin.[20] While diasporas have long played historical roles in titulary state nation building, these influential contributions have not been the subject of systematic inquiry into how they mobilize and act within public diplomacy exercises shaping public opinion within the host country, when some actions are ethical or when these shifts into militant extremism.[21] These issues are likely to receive more attention, with Ukrainian, Jewish and Palestinian diasporas in the United States employing an array of public opinion shaping strategies ranging from militant mobilization, armament lobby via influential party donors, engaging students in university protests or in shaping opinion regarding resettlement and assistance of refugees. Diaspora organizations when faced with the territorial annihilation of their titulary state do tend to go as far as to enlist members as foreign citizen volunteer combatants within the territorial struggles of their respective states.

The actual mobilization of dispersed diaspora communities for the assumed needs of the titulary nation states may be a specific contextual occurrence but it is important to notice that these communities are hardly homogenous subcultures. They are shaped by the distinct and diverse host community environments, operating at hyper-localized scale or at best temporarily mobilized transnationally for specific immediate goals. They are not replicas of the titulary nation state's interests or ambitions.

Expanding on Anderson's long-distance nationalism, Nina Glick-Schiller decouples the political mobilization from the notion of diaspora which she acknowledges as a dispersed population with a wide range of experiences and approaches to self-identification.[22] That distinction allows us to see the diaspora community as engaging in identity affirming social

[20] Nina Glick Schiller and Georges E. Fouron, *Georges Woke-up Laughing: Long-Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home,* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 20-22.

[21] Alain Dieckhoff, "The Jewish Diaspora and Israel: Belonging at Distance?," *Nations and Nationalism* 23, no. 2, 2017, pp. 271-288.

[22] Nina Glick Schiller, "Long-Distance Nationalism," in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World*, Carol R. Ember, Melvin Ember, and Ian A. Skoggard ed., New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum, 2004, p. 571.

activities centered on collective memory yet not referential to the evolution of the titulary nation state. Most importantly, while a shared memorialized social history is important, it is not vital for the imagined community to have political ends but simply remain centered on cultural and social issues of relevance to local members.

An influential study based on Anderson's observations about "long-distance nationalism" was conducted by Zlatko Skrbis[23] on Slovene and Croatian diasporas in Australia. His study pointed out that ethno-nationalism and globalization are "complementary not contradictory processes"[24] and that long-distance nationalism is profoundly adapted to the conditions of a modern global system."[25] One of the most important findings of Skrbis' study was that interviewed Slovene respondents presented less "ethno-national discourses" or negative preconceptions about their Yugoslav former conational peers than their Croatian counterparts.[26] The Slovenes were more reserved in their narratives about the homeland, refraining from imparting superiority or exclusivist nationalist attitudes to their descendants. While both compared groups presented aspects of long-distance nationalism, what Skribs' study suggested though this finding is that diasporas' narratives of belonging have consequences both for their own members and the countries of origin. It is this comparative finding that suggests attitudes and emotions are shaped in the intimacy of family narratives before they are tapped into by politicians. Irredentist militantism displayed by certain diasporas is a rare occurrence reserved for situations within which the territorial integrity or even existence of the titulary national state is threatened, leading to the active mobilization of diasporas in lobbying efforts. The more prevalent form of diaspora engagement is through both financial and political remittance, including the patronage of progressive reforms and governance expectations aligned with those experienced in host societies.

[23] Zlatko Skrbiš, *Long-Distance Nationalism: Diasporas, Homelands and Identities*, London and New York: Routledge, rev. ed, 2017.
[24] *ibidem*, p. 2.
[25] *ibidem*, p. 79.
[26] *ibidem*, p. 183.

Going a step further, it is not the longing for belonging that should be scrutinized, as it serves psychosocial needs in an era of rapid changes, but rather it is the nature of the diaspora discourses that should be evaluated. Both ethnic and civic centered national identity constructs (on both sides of the Atlantic) are just as prone towards anti-immigration isolationist rhetoric and towards building figuratively or not "walls" against "others" of distinct cultural backgrounds. The discussion should shift from vilifying nationalist movements to deconstructing and evaluating the content of proposed national narratives, their inclusiveness and ability to accommodate others without dehumanizing or creating rigid hierarchies of otherness. One approach that has been gaining traction in providing an alternative theoretical framework for migration studies, is that of mapping web presences of diasporas to understanding how migrants interact and shape public opinion in host countries.

Dana Diminescu's "connected migrant" as a cosmopolitan ideal

Writing in 2008 on the distinct typology of migrants in recent decades Dana Diminescu proposed an epistemological manifesto for a "connected migrant."[27] She contrasts current migration experiences as distinct from the exile paradigm of prior generations, highlighting digital connectivity and transnational communication as the determining factors in maintaining ties and navigating identity affirmations across borders. The "portability of the networks of belonging,"[28] positions them as empowered actors with agency in structuring simultaneous connective presences within their diasporic contexts, creating solidarity structures that are distinctly mapped geopolitical actors, independent of state institutional agendas. Their virtual presences at a distance also imply a level of non-conformity to socially pre-assigned roles by either home or host country.[29]

This framework removes the migrant from the paradigm of being marginalized victims while it also circumvents the lens of methodological nationalism, seeing their belonging in binary human capital gain/loss plays between native or host countries. Looking at the agency of connected

[27] Dana Diminescu, "The Connected Migrant: An Epistemological Manifesto," *Social Science Information* 47, no. 4, 2008, pp. 565-579.
[28] *ibidem*, p. 573.
[29] *ibidem*, p. 578.

migrants frees us from placing them as marginal, misrepresented in public consciousness or as socially isolated individuals simply because they do not strictly fit in the "us/them" narrative of either of their anchor societies.[30] Migrants versed in digital technology access information, informal support networks and remain connected with home communities for their own benefit and in doing so nurture and instrumentalize new configurations of ethnic identity. It could be argued that the widespread access to digital technology connectivity platforms have the same momentous determining impact in shaping migration experiences of belonging and identity constructs that Benedict Anderson assigned to print capitalism in shaping the spread of national self-understanding.[31]

Building on Diminescu's "connected migrant," André Jansson[32] and other scholars in the field of digital migration developed the notion of "encapsulation"[33] to describe the patterns employed by migrants to strengthen their bonding ties with co-nationals and leveraging pre-existing migrant communities in host countries. He also discusses how migrants create digital spaces to connect with the native culture, developing practices and attitudes towards engaging with the host society. While it centers on highlighting the benefits of feeling anchored within their transnational setting, the treatment of the concept acknowledges the potential for it to reinforce patterns of isolation, of discharging frustrations in digital echo-chambers, leading to potential radicalization or self-fulfilling segregation.[34]

Digital migration studies pursue the mapping of how migrants develop such virtual socialization platforms that contain and affirm migrants' needs for reenacting cultural practices, memories and identities, virtual presences that serve as extensions of physical diasporic communities.[35] Diasporas or those defined by hyphenation based on host state are fickle

[30] Mirca Madianou, "Polymedia Communication and Mediatized Migration," in *Mediatization of Communication*, Knut Lundby ed., Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014, p. 324.
[31] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, rev. ed. 1996, pp. 9–24, 36.
[32] André Jansson, *Mediatization and Mobile Lives: A Critical Approach*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2018, p. 74.
[33] Koen Leurs and Sandra Ponzanesi, "Connected Migrants: Encapsulation and Cosmopolitanization," *Popular Communication* 16, no. 1 , 2018, pp. 4–20.
[34] André Jansson, 2018, *ibidem*, pp. 137–138.
[35] *ibidem*, p. 74.

presences that might exist as virtual online forms of socialization but are more palpably extensions and cumulations of physical micro-communities, scales that are not necessarily congruent with states. The imagined diasporas are not replicas of states and may occasionally and topically work to promote or subvert public or people-to-people relations. Of note here is the use in digital diaspora studies of the national concept, referring to the country of origin rather than the ethnic basis one. In digitally coding the virtual mapping of such interactions, the multi-ethnic makeup of the titulary national diaspora is something that should be addressed.

Unfortunately, Diminescu's e-diasporas project did not include a study of the Romanian diaspora. We do not know if and how such an approach would have considered the virtual footprint of Romanian diaspora organizations. If it would have incorporated co-ethnic citizens of the Moldovan state who may or may not hold dual Romanian citizenship yet are perceived and assumed as part of the national diaspora body. An ethnic definition may have marginalized the inclusion/exclusion of non-titulary ethnic minorities coming from these states. Despite the linguistic and cultural affinity, it is not a given that these two overlapping diasporas may choose to affirm or decline membership within a network of congruent mobilization, an imagined transnational body. A digital mapping of the online presences and interconnectivity of these two diasporas may indicate if the two are working in tandem or not. With dual or multiple citizenship becoming a legal commodity pegged to labor mobility within the European Union, and to some extent to transatlantic reciprocity, the discussion of whether the nation state should be unit of reference in defining a diaspora should be scrutinized. The interactive features of social media platforms afford the possibility to actively express ingroup solidarity that is no longer defined or driven by state institutions or social benefits. Virtual socializations explore shifting boundaries of belonging, even negotiate a synthesis between inherited values and ideas with those experienced within the host society.

Diminescu spurred research in mapping virtual diasporas over several years.[36] Her approach treats virtual presences as fostering meaningful interactions across borders. Digital migration scholars seem to endorse the view that these connected migrants go beyond reshaping bonding patterns of

[36] Dana Diminescu, "Introduction: Digital Methods for the Exploration, Analysis and Mapping of e-Diasporas," *Social Science Information* 51, no. 4, 2012, pp. 451-458.

cultural/ethnic solidarity, leading them to foster bridging ties, instrumentalizing their cultural background within cosmopolitan attitudes while remaining cognizant of the diversity in migrant experiences and respecting local specificities.[37] The sought after inclusive cosmopolitan worldview of interconnectedness and acceptance of cultural diversity is not seen as mutually exclusive with the identity layer of national or ethnic cultural encapsulation.[38] Integrating these parallel layers of self-identification is however an ideal to be imagined within highly successful skilled migrants. It may not however reflect the realities of political polarization and resurgence of far-right isolationist movements that also operate in the digital and social media realm. Scholars tracing the impact of communication technologies and transnational digital connections on families living apart, in new forms of being virtually together, in "co-presences," highlighted aspects of emotional well-being associated with maintained strong bonds despite the physical separation.[39] The mapping of digital diasporas through online ethnography approaches,[40] both social solidarity and intimate spaces for togetherness, was already underway before the COVID pandemic brought these spaces into true focus.[41] The pandemic experience shifted much of the physical socializing of diasporas online while it also highlighted the limitations of such virtual support networks. The mapping of e-diasporas indicates they are not replicas of state constituencies located abroad but that they craft notions of belonging which may occasionally and topically work to promote or subvert public or people-to-people relations.

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[37] Floris Vermeulen and Elif Keskiner, "Bonding or Bridging? Professional Network Organizations of Second-Generation Turks in the Netherlands and France," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 2, 2017, pp. 301-320.

[38] Miyase Christensen and André Jansson, "Complicit Surveillance, Interveillance, and the Question of Cosmopolitanism," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 9, 2015, pp. 1473-1491.

[39] Loretta Baldassar et al., "ICT-Based Co-Presence in Transnational Families and Communities: Challenging the Premise of Face-to-Face Proximity in Sustaining Relationships," *Global Networks* 16, no. 2, 2016, pp. 133-144.

[40] Stefania Marino, "Making Space, Making Place: Digital Togetherness and the Redefinition of Migrant Identities Online," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2, 2015, pp. 1-9.

[41] Donya Alinejad et al., "Diaspora and Mapping Methodologies: Tracing Transnational Digital Connections with 'Mattering Maps,'" *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs* 19, no. 1, 2019, pp. 21-43.

Diminiescu's connected migrant helped digital migration scholars envision migrants as not isolated vulnerable misrepresented individuals in host societies, but as active agents in developing virtual informal and formal support networks, communities believed to contribute to a cosmopolitan mindset. It is the opposite view to that of Benedict Anderson in describing the mobilization of the diaspora in exclusivist echo-chambers and its unaccountable involvement in national politics.

Integration of concepts on a spectrum of potential outcomes

Bridging the two frameworks, Anderson's specific observations decades before the current era of interconnectedness were a rare form "encapsulation," one that isolates the individuals from the host society and mobilizes them for specific political lobbying goals imagined to be in the interests of the titularly nation state of that diaspora. Echoing Anderson's remarks about the need to evaluate the style in which communities are imagined, Anna Triandafyllidou proposes a different dichotomy, that of "plural versus neo-tribal nationalism."[42] She argues that the main driving forces of national identity formation, have less to do with the ethnic/civic dichotomy or discernable historical processes, and more to do with the interactive dynamics between mobility and diversity present within discourses and practices of nationalism. It is these majority/minority identity constructs, often imposed within urban multicultural settings, which define the conflictual or inclusive nature of the interactions. This approach allows for expressions and reproductions of potentially benign forms of long-distance belonging, including commemorative or ritualistic events, narratives reenacting shared experiences that are all dimensions of social memory.

Attachment to homeland is the interplay between the building pull for collective shared cultural expressions, and the pull of the host nation's structuring of belonging within which cultural diversity may be constructing otherness.[43] What has changed since the time when Benedict Anderson drafted the conceptual framework for the advent of nationalism is a

[42] Anna Triandafyllidou, "Nationalism in the 21st Century: Neo-Tribal or Plural?" *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 4, 2020, pp. 792-806.

[43] Anna Triandafyllidou, "Nations, Migrants and Transnational Identifications: An Interactive Approach to Nationalism," in *The Sage Handbook of Nations and Nationalism*, eds. Gerard Delanty and Krishan Kumar, London: Sage, 2006, pp. 285-306.

technological change that affords parallel narratives salience in competition for shaping public opinion. Social media and online platforms confer agencies and amplify the voices and narratives proposed by small subcultures, such as vocal micro-scale diaspora entities that silence less engaged peers, while competing with narratives proposed by state actors. A diversity of "subcultures" can now more authentically vie for public space alongside state-sponsored narratives, shaping notions of belonging/otherness.

Embarking on this more nuanced evaluation of the nature of belonging constructs present in diaspora hubs, I acknowledge that many Romanian American diaspora organizations had adapted over decades to serve the needs of former exiles, who arrived during the communist period. They tend to present a "mnemonic community" drive for socialization, that of transmission of narratives and representations of the past within a safe space. Those communities of memory interwove family/kin experiences and the notion of nation in a process of recalling the past.[44] I adopt Barbara Mistal's perspective on the social nature of remembering and position the need for belonging narratives to be shared in social settings provided by diaspora hub organizations not just within the intimacy of transnational mobile families. "*Although memory is a faculty of individual minds, remembering is social in origin and influenced by dominant discourses. In other words, while it is the individual who remembers, remembering is more than a personal act as even the most personal memories are embedded in social context and shaped by social factors that make social remembering possible, such as language, rituals and celebration practices.*"[45] Seeing social memory as an ensemble of practices, through which the community reenacts past experiences and ritualizes them, implies that those reenactments sustain a shared cultural capital but do not remain static or unincumbered by the local context and current interests within which it is expressed. While remembering homeland is important to long-distance nationalism it need not be, and usually is not instrumentalized into political agendas.

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[44] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

[45] Barbara A. Misztal, "Collective Memory in a Global Age: Learning How and What to Remember," *Current Sociology* 58, no. 1, 2010, p. 27.

Commemorative ceremonies or traditions bonding to the homeland and its diverse dispersed diaspora may take the form of celebrating femineity, fertility, or spring (e.g., Martisor) or cultural markers such as the "Romanian blouse." While there may be cultural events celebrating the national day or some territorial unification, these cultural commemorations revolve around ethnic food or traditional dances and usually do not elicit any political statement beyond the bonding effect. While symbolic displays of flags and national anthems of both host and origin countries are always a staple of such events, these tend to be formalities to be consummated before the much more important rituals and interactions of togetherness are engaged in. Shared memory operates not just in public discourses and state symbols but through dancing, sharing foods, the manifestations of a specific *habitus* originally experienced in the homeland and suspended in time.[46] For migrant descendants, these reenactments are means of expressing appreciation of parental affection. In the first generation these social rituals function as mnemonic triggers for recollections but for the second-generation migrant these imparted shared memories must be related to their utility for current circumstances. In that sense, the past is not static but continually reinterpreted "in relation to factors related to the present."[47]

Diaspora cultural events, especially those dominated by the exiles of past generations tend to center on the importance of classic cultural products from the envisioned golden age of the nation, in Romania's case the pre-communist interwar period. Those classical cultural products are constantly reproduced as the lore to be imparted with second generation descendants. There is often a perception that those classics are not acknowledged or appreciated in the host society, which may not reflect cultural marginality as much as the absence of relevance or specific audience for the reproduction of past cultural products. A far more impactful cultural rekindling of ties is offered in recent years by the propagation of Romanian film festivals in several major diaspora hubs throughout the United States. These current cultural products of the native society often critically examine historic themes of shared social traumas, be it fascist or communist-era social dilemma. The topics have found a ready audience in these diaspora hubs,

[46] Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, Oxford: Berg, 2002.

[47] Jim McAuley, "Memory and Belonging in Ulster Loyalist Identity," *Irish Political Studies* 31, no. 1, 2015, p. 129.

serving to rekindle an unsettling sense of belonging. A certain angst is manifested with the current challenges of the native nation state, but it serves as a binding concern not necessarily mobilized into political activism.

Belonging and being easily incorporated within local collectives wherever diaspora entities might have public presences, is enjoyable in the sense of offering an intimation of an imagined experience of one's homely environment. It may not necessarily be the performance of rituals learnt or marked within one's family from an early age but may yet be an imagined homely ritual that can be shared socially in a gathering, a shared vision of home from another time or space. This might mean the reenactment of a rural ritual or the production of a cultural marker such as embroidery of the "Romanian blouse" despite all participants having lived urban lifestyles for generations and relying on curated understandings of the ritual or cultural product itself.[48]

These forms of socialization provide participants with a sense of order and meaning conferred by belonging in a succession of lives, a sense of predictability in shared values that are under siege by centrifugal forces of globalization, rapid demographic, and technological changes. Pretending that these individual needs for psychosocial safety are not real would be a mistake. Just because these needs are tapped into with cult-like potency by toxic nationalist demagogues does not mean these needs cannot be addressed and channeled into inclusive tolerant narratives.

Immigrants from Romania, regardless of social status and generation, assume without questioning that they are from a unique community with its own ancestors, history, culture, territory, memories, including the trauma of a past communist social experiment. If this cultural identity is tied to the nation states of Romania and Moldova it is at best a banal form of "long-distance nationalism." Expressing a strong identification with these ancestral homelands is not limited to performing commemorative rituals of socialization. It is reiterating or reconstructing the narratives about the past, the visual expressions of much deeper ties involving family and friendship networks that provide meaning and validation. These are reassuring especially during the initial phase of relocation in different diaspora hubs.

[48] Ghassan Hage, "Migration, Food, Memory, and Home-Building," in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, eds. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz, New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, pp. 416-427.

The "communications revolution" with simultaneous presences does not relegate these forms of physical public socializations to some marginal subculture but rather amplifies the accessibility of these public shows of identity affirmation. Virtual spaces of association may well be reactions of local nativist tendencies and discourses that peg individuals within pre-set roles in the hierarchy of local belonging. The attachment to an ancestral homeland is a product of the emotional upbringing environment experienced, a distinct feature from the learnt knowledge about what is said of that place.

The discursive and non-discursive practices that evoke the homeland in the diaspora setting are part of what Michael Billing labels as "banal nationalism"[49] an identity embedded in mundane existence, unfiltered through conscious reflection.[50] This passive, uncritical incorporation of what an assumed cultural identity means to the individual implies that agency in defining it belongs to other actors, possibly agents promoting targeted political agendas. The process of creating one's own narrative implies a critical review of one's values and perception of how one fits in or not within multiple social constructs.

Conclusions

Citizenship is not a universal proxy for either integration or acceptance. In daily life it is not the citizenship papers that one flaunts to impart a sense of belonging but the interactions and behaviors that betray a certain cultural background that play a role in either belonging or not to the dominant group, to an identifiable "national habitus." It is this banal level of segmented assimilation that requires actual community building interventions and the mediating role of culturally attuned diaspora community-based organizations. Both the marginalized and the ideal, skilled "connected migrant" on the projected spectrum provided by Anderson and Diminescu would benefit from strong diaspora hubs that would truly anchor individuals to their physical host communities.

[49] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London: Sage, 1995.

[50] Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, Oxford: Berg, 2002, p. 28.

Oral history projects centered on autobiographic interviews are tools for constructing and evaluating the basis of belonging. Family intergenerational dialogues on the basis for cultural heritage socialization solicit the articulation of how in and out-groups are to be defined in the host-society context. This approach allows us to explore personal discourses and narratives of migration performed within the family setting offering insights into how migration influences identity formation and transformation not just during the liminal stages of uprooting but as a constantly renegotiated space between assimilation and transnationalism. While the goal of a successful integration and upwards social mobility of migrants is often envisioned in the framework of national borders and formal citizenship, social and psychological integration is one of individual self-actualization with a social field that affords them the sentiment of belonging and accomplishment.

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