

BOOK REVIEW

Diaspora Online: Identity Politics and Romanian Migrants.
By Ruxandra Trandafoiu. Brooklyn, New York: Berghahn
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Ruxandra Trandafoiu enters the field of international migration through the door of communication studies, by investigating the online cultural and political expressions of Romanian immigrants. Her research site comprises twelve diasporic websites and discussion forums set by Romanians based in Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America, where more than 3,000 messages are perused. The methodological choices are boldly set in the introduction. Diaspora, rather than immigrants, circular migrants, free movers, or something else, is chosen as the working concept of the analysis, although it is not assigned the traditional meaning. For the purpose of the study, diaspora comprises all citizens abroad, holding onto an identity project that was shaped by their impulse to move and the necessity to stay. The author also discusses the practical and ethical challenges of doing ethnography on the net, and of being both subject and object of the analysis. This situatedness undoubtedly shaped the focus of the book, structured around the politics of identity in hybrid spaces.

There is no single identity of the immigrant, and there is no single experience of immigration, tells us the rich online material used by Trandafoiu in this book. The travel from one country to another, actual, intended, or imaginary, unsettles one's sense of being. Diasporic forums are the sites where anxiety, despair, uncertainty, alienation, loneliness, hesitation, as well as joy, hope, wonder, achievement, and reconstruction are talked through, and worked through. In the process, one's identity, country, nation, and culture are re-imagined and re-appropriated, along redrawn lines of class, generation, and locality. Trandafoiu captures these flowing emotions, gestures, and constructions in a vivid and empathic way. She aptly situates historically the latest wave of Romanian immigrants to the West, and follows their typical routes and alterations. The temporality of the process is captured by the many facets of longing, nostalgia, and transformation. Trandafoiu records as well the input of the premigrants and the aspiring (pp. 41-42), alongside immigrants, illustrating the processuality of international

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migration, both as individual act and as social fact. Immigration is rebuilt through diasporic traces in the cloud, as an open process refuelled by experiences and narratives. Unhappiness, at home and away, pours on internet forums, leading to self-examination, reflexivity, and becoming political (p. 44).

Trandafoiu connects the experience of post-communist Romanian diaspora to instances of immigration documented in the literature, pointing to similarities and highlighting specificities. In the introduction she argues the need to incorporate the study of present Eastern European immigration into the theoretical contributions to the field, and briefly enumerates, through a bullet point list, the openings it may and should bring (pp. 18-19). While these are bold and pertinent, they only reiterate points that have been constantly made in the last two decades, especially by empirical and theoretical work on international migration coming from the disciplinary fields of anthropology, human geography, critical security studies, cultural studies, and sociology (see the work of Aihwa Ong (1996), Cecilia Menjivar (2000), Gloria Anzaldúa (2007), Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Christina Szanton Blanc (1994), Patricia Zavella (2011), Peter Nyers (2003), Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) among many others). The strength of the book comes instead from the capacity to let the immigrants speak.

Organized in four parts and eight chapters, "Departures" (Chapters one and two), "Arrivals" (Chapters three and four), "Politics" (Chapters five, six and seven), and "Second Life" (Chapter eight and Conclusion), the account follows the course of personal and social changes of immigrants, as they traverse the geographic and mental space from homeland, nation, and place to another country, another culture, and another locale. Each chapter is titled by a phrase that indicates "cultural intimacy" (Herzfeld 2005) with the immigrants, going straight to the core of the lived experience they bring online and. Chapter one, "Land without Horizon", explains the beginning of massive post-communist migration to Western Europe by defining it as an act of protest against political elite's failures, and contextualises it historically. Through immigrants' voices online, it amounts to a cultural historical tour, as their reflections reiterate the staples of Romanian national identity tensions, in particular its constitutive relation with the orientalisising West. Internet forums also provide a space for mediation, interrogation, and self-reflection in the liquid state of geographic, social, and cultural transition. Chapter two, "Taking the Bull by the Horns" describes the effect of the emigration pandemic, generated by a sick identity, as natural selection: successful immigrants are persons endowed with abnormal capacities. Social envy and stigma push them further to improve, so as to better fit the new environment, transforming them into extraordinary subjects.

Chapter three, "Waking up among Strangers", addresses the process of settlement. The encounter of the other and the everyday adjustment to the new country are articulated as a search for the appropriate word to describe the experience. Integration, adaptation, participation are put forward and discussed in the attempt to capture the transformation. Translation and cultural mediation

are opposed to marginalisation and isolation. Online discussion occasions diasporic mobilisation and convergence against discrimination. It also reveals racism and xenophobia in the strategies of blaming, othering and distancing that are habitual in the process of adjustment. Acknowledging the immigrant position translates into sharp delimitations, disavowal, and exclusion, manifested in scapegoating the Gypsy and intradiasporic cannibalism. Chapter four, "Nobody Wants to Know Me", discusses the legal status and forms of employment of Romanians in Italy, Spain, and the UK, highlighting the liberal paradox of workforce demand and legal constraints, and the social justice paradox of workers without basic rights. It then looks at the associative models in the three states, culturally populist in Spain, politically representative in Italy, and culturally organizational in the UK (p. 102).

Chapter five, "Brothers, We Need to Do Something!", expands the discussion of online activism, emphasizing the molecular character of the activities of contestation, lobbying and petitioning. Though they stopped short of developing into permanent political structures, Trandafoiu argues that "paradoxes, conflicts and tensions need to continue online because it is through criticism and challenges to any form of authority that online micropolitics can evolve as an alternative and viable form (p. 131). Using the metaphor of purgatory, Chapter six depicts the space of suspension in which immigrants struggle to find their home. Paralleling this nowhere space, the internet is a fitting source of diasporic reflections (p. 136). From this point, the author discusses the legal and practical relationship with the mother country, Romania, by looking at its institutionalized forms, electoral participation, and possibilities to return. In Chapter seven, "America, Romanian Land", the author turns to the specific experience of Romanian immigrants in North America, marked by a different immigration regime, access to citizenship, and role of geographic distance. This and the previous chapter indicate the emergence of a hybrid identity, which accounts for both the home and the new country in the complicated fabric of immigrants' lives.

In the final chapter Trandafoiu provides a more technical analysis of Romanian diasporic websites. She notes the propensity to ethnic branding; the inward orientation serving the particular needs of immigrants, especially the new ones; the formation of fluid online hierarchies, functional in that they allow solidarity, change, and mobilisation; and the crucial role of the webmaster. The Conclusion suggests two avenues for further research: first, the investigation of "the role of memory in the elaboration of diasporic identity projects" (p. 194); second, a closer look at the relationship between the virtual and the material: "how identity is performed on- and offline, at the border between different "scapes," [...] and between cyber- and physical spaces", and the formation and experience of borders (p. 196). At the end, the author lists a number of recommendations, or "rather wishes I feel compelled to make" (p. 197) - they read as a tribute to immigrants, the flesh of this book.

Trandafoiu's study is an achievement, a rich, pleasurable, informative, and evocative rendering of online expressions of the Romanian diaspora. She captures the productive, reflective, and mediating role played by the online space - an arena allowing for community gathering, splitting, and healing. Her work is a valuable contribution to the incipient scholarship on post-communist Romanian emigration, and on recent Eastern European international migration - in a specific configuration of articulation between the local and the global. It is also a strong addition to research employing online data, and taking diasporic online rhizomes as a legitimate strategic research site. In this sense, I suggest that online presences become ordinary facts for geographically immobile people, just as much as they are for diasporic groups and, at a superficial glance, the interactions, flows of emotions, appearances, disappearances, processes of othering, and self-reflective redescrptions are rather similar. Thus, I wished the author discussed a bit more the specificity of diasporic websites, which, as her research indicates, were at the same time sites frequented by not yet migrants too (in author's terms, premigrants). Perhaps an accompanying definition of diaspora is ripe: people who travel daily distances on internet, whose lives are spent behind the computer screen, in spaces that are distant recreations of foreign realms, and whose illusory realities are uncannily similar to the foreign realities of actual immigrants.

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