

EXPRESSIVE ENACTMENTS OF ETHNIC MEMBERSHIP IN THE ROMANIAN-AMERICAN ORGANIZATIONS FROM CALIFORNIA

RALUCA ROGOVEANU¹

ABSTRACT. *Expressive Enactments of Ethnic Membership in the Romanian-American Organizations from California.* Centered on the missions and repertoires of the Romanian ethnic organizations in California, this study analyzes how Romanian-Americans negotiate their Romanian ethnicity as individuals and as members of organized groups. While describing ethnic organizations as loci of ethnic awareness, founded on the expressive identification of Romanian-ness in the American space, my focus is on the heterogeneous discourses of the most visible Romanian ethnic associations in California. This study identifies ways of "encapsulating" Romanian ethnicity in ensembles of cultural practices which showcase ethnic culture through artifacts and cultural events as signifiers of ethnicity.

Keywords: *Romanian-Americans, California, ethnic organization/association, cultural practices, identity, representation*

REZUMAT. *Reprezentări expresive ale apartenenței etnice în organizațiile româno-americanilor din California.* Lucrarea analizează misiunea și reprezentările culturale ale organizațiilor etnice românești din California și pune în evidență modul în care româno-americanii își negociază apartenența etnică în calitate de indivizi și ca membri ai unui grup etnic. Organizațiile românești sunt descrise ca spații ale cunoașterii etnice, construite pe baza unei viziuni despre "spiritul românesc" în Statele Unite. Studiul analizează discursurile eterogene ale celor mai vizibile asociații etnice românești din California și identifică principalele practici culturale ale acestora care încapsulează cultura românească în artefacte și evenimente culturale, mărci ale etnicității.

Cuvinte-cheie: *romano-americani, California, organizație/asociație etnică, practici culturale, identitate, reprezentare*

¹ **Raluca ROGOVEANU** is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Letters, Ovidius University in Constanta, Romania. She has an MA and a Ph.D. from the University of Bucharest. The books, book chapters and articles published so far are indicative of her keen interest in American culture and society. Between 2013 and 2014 she was a Fulbright Senior Researcher at UCLA. In 2017 she was awarded a Balch Fellowship at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Member of several American Studies associations from Romania and abroad, Raluca Rogoveanu has participated in many national and international conferences. Email: raluca.rogoveanu@gmail.com

This study analyzes Romanian-American representations of collective identity negotiated in sites of collective interaction, by discussing the roles, missions and cultural repertoires of some Romanian ethnic organizations in California. While examining the multiplicity of interactions between Romanian immigrants in California and the American space, this study maps the construction of a new social and cultural imaginary found at the intersection of Romanian ethnic culture, its institutions (Romanian ethnic associations from California), and American institutional frameworks and values. Functioning as loci of political and cultural identification and American political legitimization, the practices of these organizations socialize Romanian immigrants by encouraging them to identify with the American society. At the same time, they also function as spaces of Romanian ethnic awareness which encourage the sense of emotional identification with Romania. My study identifies the opportunities provided by the Romanian ethnic organizations to the Romanian immigrants living in California in order to preserve their symbolic allegiance to their native land. The exploration of the new Romanian-American imaginary delineated by Romanian ethnic organizations in California is operationalized in the study of collective ethnic representations of ethnic identities within the framework of social practices articulated in the mission, goals, and projects of Romanian ethnic organizations.

Estimated at about 1 million people, the Romanian population in the United States has three areas of concentration: New York, California and the Midwest. Los Angeles features as the second top city of residence for Romanian-Americans. California – a state which has been an immigration state since the beginning of the gold rush – boasts of one of the most numerous Romanian community in the United States. Starting from 15-16 families back in 1912 (Alecse, n.d.), Romanians established in California represent 14.5% of the immigrants of Romanian origin living in the United States of America (Voinea 62). Latest statistics point to over 60,000 people of Romanian origin established in California, although this figure might be slightly unreliable, since it does not allow for the undocumented migration and/or the unwillingness of Romanian first, second or third generation immigrants to identify themselves of Romanian heritage in vital statistics surveys.

This study is based on my research of Romanian-American communities and organizations from Los Angeles conducted in 2013. I was then able to participate in Romanian ethnic community events and interact with first- and second-generation Romanian-Americans. The reflections compiled stem from interviews with the leaders of Romanian ethnic organizations in California and other Romanian-Americans. Given my short time with them, I acknowledge that my exploration of the Romanian community is only a limited way of seeing their world, a perception mediated by a subjective, interpretative discourse. This

article attempts to describe Romanian-Americans as hyphenated identities who acknowledge the specificity of their Romanian ethnic experience and recontextualize it in an ongoing mediation between allegiance to the United States and affinity for Romanian ethnicity. The Romanian-American identity is a formation which moves beyond the binarist notions of “here” and “there” to situate itself in the transnational space of multiple geographies.

The analysis of ethnic immigrant organizations enables us to make better sense of the complex and dynamic developments that take place within immigrant communities. The formation of ethnic communities happens on a continuum delineated by personal and institutional networks, whose role is to maintain an ongoing flux of information between home communities and host communities. The role and impact of migrant networks and institutions has been largely studied in the theories of chain migration and of human capital (Boyd 1989; Fawcett 1989; Coleman 1993). Murphy and Leeper (1996) distinguish four types of ethnic institutions which act as facilitators in the creation of such ethnic networks: the formal and the informal family and the community institutions; the religious institutions; the economic associations; and the cultural organizations. Such ethnic networks form a lattice of information and people that link former, current, and future migrants. They are instrumental agencies in disseminating information about means of entry, accommodation, employment and they provide newcomers with useful advice and strategies on how to adjust to the new environment (cf. Van Hear 60). Newcomers, whether visiting or studying, resort to such means of information for instant assistance and information. Ethnic organizations make up a field of communication meant to build and sustain collectivities within situated contexts (Andersen 1983, Anthias 2001, Barth 1962, Nagal 1994, Olzak 1992) by developing and promoting a shared sense of “we” through interactive participation. Ethnic activism manifested through participation contributes to the formation and maintenance of a sense of collectively shared ethnicity by delineating a symbolic public space, which creates affirming narratives of belonging. Ethnic organizations function as spaces in which people develop broad loyalties, spaces for political activity and citizenship practice. The diversity, number and size of ethnic organizations indicate the extent to which immigrants want to profile themselves as different, by stressing on their ethnic specificity (cf. Cohen 685, 693). In his article on the direction of the interpersonal relations of immigrants, Breton (204) identifies three sets of factors that stimulate the formation of ethnic organizations: cultural differences between the ethnic group and the native population, the level of resources among the members of the immigrant group and the pattern of migration. More than four decades after Breton published his article, migration and diaspora scholars add other variables to the list, such as the level of

resources and the pattern of migration. The new taxonomies feature three sets of factors: the migration process, the opportunity structure in the host society and the characteristics of the immigrant community.² My analysis considers Romanian ethnic organizations as collective agents which carve a new discourse of community by mobilizing a particular type of ethnic imagination and nurturing ethnic identity through cultural practices.

While going over the agenda, goals and missions of the organizational framework of immigrant associations, I will not focus on the influence of the host or home governments to support immigrant organizations. Policies facilitating the establishment and the persistence of community organizations, funding, technical assistance and normative encouragement, or the interest of home states in proposing a diaspora politics model of engagement will not be areas which this paper aims to address. My focus here goes on the actions taken by organizations to promote themselves, by using their own resources in establishing formal institutions.

The reasons of the little visibility of Romanian ethnic organizations in the United States may lie partly in the relatively small number of people claiming Romanian ancestry. Yet other reasons can be found in the inability of Romanian ethnics to mobilize around collectively-driven organizational projects of national impact and in their reluctance to engage in large-scale transformative projects meant to widen the context of the Romanian participation in American society. Although I concede that the activities of Romanian organizations in the United States might not have had ample national visibility, I argue that their projects were still indicative of a certain level of local activism, a strategy of “identity becoming” in which the acquisition of American political and cultural competence did not preclude the preservation of the symbolic identification with Romania through a shared sense of “we,” through interactive participation in political and cultural events. Although the practices of the Romanian organizations might have never been inflected by radical nationalism or inflammatory rhetoric, I argue that their ethnic activism has been channeled into generating cultural projects which contributed to the maintenance of a sense of collectively shared ethnicity and, in the long term, configured a new space of transnational engagement.

In an attempt to avoid both an “essentialized” reading of the Romanian communities in California and a prescriptivist approach to an alleged “Romanian linked fate”, this study investigates the Romanian ethnic organizations in California by delving into areas of commonality and dissensus altogether. This study therefore acknowledges the existence of a certain level of commonality which all organizations share. This commonality is derived from the sense of common

² For a more detailed taxonomy of the factors which determine migration see Marlou & Vermeulen 285.

place of origin and the common language, emotional and strategic instruments which provide people with a shared history and a sense of allegiance to Romania. At the same time, my interpretation uses a vocabulary and an ethos equipped to accept instability, conflict, and contestation as inherent aspects of the political and cultural effervescence within ethnic organizations.

Throughout this study, I shall use the term Romanian-American as an ethno-national identity category, an analytical construct useful for inquiry into how Americans of Romanian ancestry talk about their ethnic identity. My decision to use it stems from a practical consideration: the necessity of producing a functional term to refer to a vast community of immigrants who claim Romanian ancestry in the United States, a term which is also conceptually fluid enough to label a variety of ethnic identifications. This term serves the practical need of reducing the “infinite” number of types to workable proportions by focusing the discourse on a limited number of instances from the “Romanian-American” spectrum. The search for a term to designate, in the United States, the community with Romanian ancestry (first, second-generation immigrants) poses difficulties related their different degrees of acculturation, integration, and assimilation in the United States. The variable of mixed marriages or intermarriages may compound to the difficulty of ethnic identification. The scope of discussion can be broadened even further if one considers various subcategories (such as Jewish-Romanian or Macedo-Romanian immigrants). The difficulties embedded in such a conceptual undertaking hint at the slippery labeling, imprecise terminology, definitional conundrums, and ambiguous taxonomies which a researcher involved in this assiduous task confronts headlong. In this ongoing shuffling between the need to taxonomize and the baffling recognition that such taxonomies can never be complete, I have struggled to find an angle of research productive enough to generate some reasonable assumptions and inferences about the Romanian-Americans, generally construed as the United States-based Romanian immigrants and their descendants who acknowledge their affiliation to Romania.

In the early 20th century, ethnic organizations emerged organically on the territories with high concentration of Romanian ethnic population. Functioning as local-based fraternal societies, mutual benefit societies and cultural societies, such fraternal associations were instrumental in creating the premises of upward economic mobility by helping newcomers find jobs in the sprawling industrial factories such as textile, garment, and construction. At the same time, they functioned as spaces for the preservation of folkways and traditions and contributed to the assimilation of the Romanian immigrants into the American society, by effecting profound transformation in how Romanian-Americans came to understand themselves as American citizens.

If in the past the enforcement of ethnic solidarity in fraternal and mutual benefit societies was justified by a clear social and economic agenda, the importance of ethnic identity has declined over time. Though not meant to imply that Romanian identity survives as a response to instrumental goals of collective social and economic interests, we cannot easily dismiss this aspect which links the salience of ethnic solidarity with economic and social fulfillment. Present day organizations do not focus on improving social life in the communities; nor are they keen on the social betterment of the community, since economic goals are left entirely with the individual; their professed mission is that of representing the community, by offering visibility and prominence to the Romanian community. The dynamics of migration nowadays has changed the function of ethnic organizations: from economic centers, able to provide financial assistance and relief and aid integration into host-country culture, to cultural identity defenders and preservers which serve psychological, emotional, and social fulfillment needs.

Apart from changed roles and functions, present-day ethnic organizations display different membership and structuring patterns. They may function as part of a larger network or organizational cluster or as singular entities, unaffiliated to a larger network. Different Romanian organizations exhibit different modes of formation and engagement. More often than not, they seem to stem from coalitions of affinities; affinitive relationality is the foundation that makes these organizations coalesce.

The Romanian ethnic associations from California are registered non-profit organizations. Based on my online search of organizational websites, I have identified the following organizations posted on the official page of the Romanian Embassy in the USA: Viitorul Roman Cultural and Aid Society (Virgil Adumitroaie - President), Casa Româna (Romanian House), Mariana Cișmaș - President, World Romanian Council (Mihai Stan- President), Romanian American Council (Neculai Popa- President), The Union and League of Romanian Societies (Daniela Istrate - National President), Romanian Diaspora (Aurelia Năstase - President). The site of Holy Trinity Church Romanian Orthodox Church from California lists some other organizations: Romanian Community Center of Sacramento-Sacramento, CA (President Abigail Budak). Other internet searches produced two more results Romanian-American Coalition and Romanian-Greek Catholic Alliance (President Chris Terhes). Viitorul Roman Cultural and Aid Society professes to be “the premiere organization for promoting the Romanian cultural heritage throughout Southern California and beyond.”

Casa Română is the organization of the Romanian community in Northern California which focuses on organizing “socio-cultural activities for the Romania

community by supporting and organizing activities for the Romanian speaking Community, as well as for all people with Romanian affinities” (1)

The Romanian Community Center of Sacramento, Sacramento, CA (President Abigail Budak) identifies the following purposes for which this Association has been formed: “to affirm the cultural Romanian values, to present specific Romanian issues in front of the Sacramento authorities, to open up communication between Romanians in Sacramento as well as with other similar organizations within USA, to advise and aid the new comers in the area, to teach Romanian language and culture among the young people, to organize and support a Romanian newspaper, radio and TV programs for the Sacramento area, to develop different community programs (kindergarten, elderly care, nutritional programs, translation assistance, job search and career assistance, food and clothing collections and distribution to the needy, legal aid, counseling, library, etc.), to provide information regarding the Romanian communities as well as information about local and federal governments of USA and Romania” (1).

The mission of The Union and League of Romanian Societies (Daniela Istrate, President), a network of organization comprising Romanian fraternal benefit societies throughout Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois, California, Minnesota, New York and Canada reads: “The mission of the Union and League is to provide help and support to its members, to allow for social interaction and to preserve the cultural identity of Romanian-Americans” (1).

The membership of these organizations is highly fluid and many of their projects rely heavily on the enthusiasm and voluntarism of their leaders (or founders) and their active contributors. Sometimes newcomers to the United States tap into such organizations by enlisting as members in organizational networks. Their goal is to learn information about job openings or other business-related opportunities. Their participation and contribution to organization has a practical component to it because they seek membership as a route to upward social mobility.

The recruitment of new members occurs when potential recruits express their intention of joining the group. The association then analyzes their credentials and decides on their eligibility. The induction of new members changes to a certain extent the structure of the group, which has a direct impact on the identity of the group as such. The responsibility of maintaining the group rests with all and each and every member of it and they need to determine the condition in accordance with which they are entitled to declare themselves members of a group.

With respect to the level of participation and activism in ethnic organizations, we can identify at least two categories of contributors: the active participants and the leaders. The active participants are the most invested in

the projects of Romanian organizations. They contribute to the staging of projects and derive a real sense of ethnic pride and fulfillment from their effort. Their activism becomes particularly visible in their effort to promote and cultivate the cultural practices of their communities. Participation in ethnically defined activities is occasion-dependent and devoted mainly to leisure-time, familial events and public gatherings where the affiliative component is particularly strong.

However, many Romanian-Americans shun organizational ties and tend to disengage from Romanian ethnic communities. Their choice reflects in many ways the priorities of many newly arrived migrants. Faced with the challenges of finding employment, learning a new language and adjusting to a foreign socio-cultural environment, they do not choose involvement in ethnic organizations as a priority on their list of adaptation pursuits. By turning their back to ethnic membership, they become the promoters of an alternative vision, in which ethnic communities do not foster but hinder individual development.

The presidents of the Romanian ethnic organizations rely upon membership contributions for the resources necessary to maintain the organizations. Such contributions can come in the form of annual membership fees paid by members, but in most cases, from the fees given by members attending an event. The leaders struggle to ensure the visibility of the organization which they represent and while looking for ways to ensure opportunities for the community they represent, they also attempt to become incorporated in elite spaces. Leaders benefit from enhanced status, within the community and get recognition from political actors inside and outside the United States, like ambassadors, and consuls.

Physical location (as characterized by proximity) is no longer a prerequisite for the practice of community-building and maintenance, as globalization of telecommunications facilitates the “interlacing of social events and social relations ‘at distance’ with local contextualities” (Giddens 21). Appearing outside the geographical confines of ethnic enclaves, such geographically-unbounded spaces of ethnicity include professional organizations, alumni associations, and religious organizations. The exchange of information between leaders and members within the organizations and between members and non-members occurs on the online forums. Most refer to job openings and business opportunities or remind readers of upcoming ethnic events and fund-raisers. Special vignettes of Romanian culture and history also feature, especially on festive days. Romanian ethnics use these networks to increase the frequency and intensity of their relations with each other and with the online community as a whole.

In the United States, such associations organize many ethnic cultural events, ranging from Romanian festivals, book clubs and heritage language classes after the church service in Orthodox churches, or exhibitions organized by heritage museums to picnic gatherings and celebratory events organized on

March 1st and March 8th, Christmas and Easter. Such cultural events provide a framework for the expression of the Romanian ethnic imaginary in terms of commonality and oneness through emphasis on common heritage. These events are self-referential, as they tell Romanian-Americans who they are and also function as markers of distinctions, differentiating “them” from “others”. They are also discursive strategies through which Romanian-Americans invent, reinvent, and reposition themselves in relation to an American political space, yet make rhetorical claim of identification and connection to Romania.

Many Romanian ethnic organizations do not construe themselves as political organizations promoting a political or partisan ideology, but as associations focusing on preserving a Romanian cultural identity. The leaders’ attempts to depoliticize the agenda of the Romanian ethnic organizations become obvious in the way in which these organizations’ mission is expressed. As their ethos predicates on the idea that culture transcends ideology, most organizations profess their apolitical nature and describe the core of their mission as developing around cultural events. A close look at the projects organized by these ethnic associations is indicative of their emphasis on cultural events, at the expense of their commitment to social and political issues. Organizations are eager to promote Romanian ethnicity and the cultural strands of a shared history, language, and ancestry, and they encourage the transnational ties for such objectives, but goals related to political demands have been, and are, rarely expressed publicly. There is a wide variety of ethnic activities carried out through such organizations, ranging from art exhibitions to book clubs and informal business meetings. Their main manifestations: ethnic choral and dance ensembles, language and cooking classes, athletic activities, dinners and dances, and various festivals.

The student organizations activating in California are the Romanian Club at UCLA and the Romanian Student Association at Stanford. In its statement of purpose, the former pledges to promote Romanian culture and provide support to the underprivileged Romanian community in Southern California. Its Facebook page bears witness to the campus activities they put together, mainly featuring traditional folk art and cuisine. The Romanian Student Association at Stanford professes to “advertise Romanian and its culture in the Stanford community and to guarantee a small community for Romanian students at Stanford”. From 2012 onwards the group seems to have entered a period of latency, as their latest recorded events date back to 2012.

The American Romanian Academy of Arts and Sciences (Ruxandra Vidu-president) is an institution “dedicated to the analysis, study and dissemination of Romanian contributions and accomplishments” (1).

A more transformative approach seems to be undertaken by Romanian-American Coalition and The Romanian Catholic Alliance. The main goals of The

Romanian-American Coalitions are: "to collaborate with other organizations, companies and individuals so as to promote Romanian community all over the world, to help people in need in Romania, to promote democratic and free-market principles, human rights and transparency in Romania" (1). Both the main and the specific goals of the organization (to strengthen the relationship between the USA and Romania, to promote Romanian business in the US) seem to center more on Romania rather than on the U.S.-based Romanian diaspora.

The Romanian Greek-Catholic Association is a non-profit charitable organization that advocates for the end of discrimination of the Greek-Catholic minority in Romania and the full restitution of the religious properties confiscated by the communist regime in Romania. Both this organization and the Romanian-Greek Catholic Alliance (President Chris Terhes) have a more politically-oriented agenda and see themselves as active contributors to the democratic transformation of their country of origin. Their mission (less corruption, increased respect for civil and human rights) seems to be part of a political repertoire which shows that the members learnt "the American way" policies and they attempt to transfer the newly acquired skills to democratizing struggles in Romania.

One of the cultural manifestations organized by *The Union and League of Romanian Societies* is *La Sequa*, a monthly literary event. This community-based initiative meant to construct a collective memory of the common event is the result of collaborative efforts of local ethnic communities. The meetings take place in private residences. The club rotates discussants each month: sometimes it is the person who selects the book or the one hosting the reunion. Outside facilitators (Romanian officials or academics in transit in USA) are invited to bring their contribution and insight into the book under discussion. The selected visuals (maps, photos, paintings) are meant to stimulate after-reading discussions. An authentic site of cultural production, *La Steaua* provides a platform through which national and ethnic identities are negotiated, and function as a multivocal cultural field in which different voices express claims of recognition. It also provides a context in which narratives of the past are substantiated by invoking cultural imaginaries which address the nature of nationhood, the role of ethnicity, and the sense of belonging to an imagined space. Romanian ethnic culture is showcased by "native clothes", dance, food, icons, and pottery items. These miniature tropes which reconfigure the sense of "Romania" function as symbols and markers of community building. Such artifacts or practices may, at times, dilute, exoticize, or commodify the sense of ethnic identity, but are nevertheless an effective strategy of evoking familiarity and the sense of communal cohesion. The discussions during the event spin tales of ethnic continuity, which reconstruct the spaces "here"/"there" and legitimize a discourse of attachment to the land and patrimony they left behind, while at the same time providing

insights into their self-making into the new world. The discussants' speeches involve equal amounts of remembrance (of some cultural elements), oblivion (of other elements), and imagination (expressed and invoked by the creative alteration of specific features of identities). The bias, the inconsistencies and discontinuities of personal narratives are embedded in their discussions about historical events which mobilize memories and subtly guide the participants' imagination in ways that influence their perceptions and interpretations of that event. Such discussions about the remote or the recent past occasion no single story to tell, but multiple ones. The act of reminiscing sometimes leads to idealized reconstructions of the personal and communal past, coupled with nostalgia for some diasporic locations or claims to cultural distinctiveness in particular times and places of Romania.

Such cultural events are passionate, performative, and familial they and lend familiarity, immediacy and a certain sense of intimacy to a collective event. The participants are sometimes expected to contribute a small amount of money in the form of a donation to the Romanian ethnic organization. Depending on the event, there is free participation (in festivals) or by invitation, (when the event takes place indoors). Sometimes members of Romanian consular offices attend the event and give opening speeches. Their presence lends legitimacy and prestige to the event and is considered a personal success for the organizers of that event. The information about the organization of events and their media coverage appears on various sites. Sometimes, such manifestations have their own Facebook page or appear on the site of Romanian consulates, on E. cultura.info (a cultural media platform), and on the site of Uniunea Ziaristilor Profesioniști din România.

The common denominator of these organizations is the heavy emphasis on cultural identification and cultural issues in public events. Intended as revisitations of canonical literature, such cultural events emphasize the bonds between members through expressive enactments of membership. They reimagine Romanian ethnic identity by extolling the virtues of a shared indigenous past. In such encounters, ethnic identity is recreated through the use of ethnically-charged items like icons, pottery, folk blouses, which function as expressions of group identity with intense symbolic significance. These ethnic objects have historical, political and social implications, as they contain a double narrative: the narrative of the home and of migration.

There is a variety of Romanian ethnic associations in California, ranging from large and well-established, to small and short lived. Not all of them are exceptional in terms of social, political and cultural involvement, or in terms of their ability to mobilize resources to benefit Romanian communities in the United States. Yet, they are still important for understanding ethnic, diaspora

and transnational processes, because the extent to which Romanian-Americans cluster in organizations and their willingness to contribute to the creation, development, and sustenance of such organizations are critical indicators of the salience of Romanian ethnicity in a global world. While dealing with similar essences, similar values, California-based Romanian ethnic organizations have their own discourse on ethnicity, construction of homeland and national ideology. Yet, they are united in the creation of a similar cultural imaginary which consecrates the sense of simultaneous belonging and allegiance to the Romanian and American spaces. Romania ethnic organizations are collective agents which carve a new public discourse through a particular type of ethnic imaginary, which recreates and re-imagines community in a new American space. They mobilize the imagination of ethnic communities through programs and initiatives which contribute to an enhanced sense of empowerment and identity among the Romanians in California, while preserving and connecting them to their Romanian heritage.

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