

REPRESENTATIONS OF ROMANIAN ETHNICITY ABROAD: ROMANIAN HERITAGE CENTERS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract This study works towards a more thorough understanding of the concept of Romanian ethnicity in the United States, through an analysis of two heritage centers in the United States, the Romanian Folk Art Museum in Philadelphia and the Heritage Organization of Romanian Americans in Minnesota. Construed as agencies which shape the way we understand the past and future of Romanian diasporic communities rather than as unbiased repositories of ethnic information, the two institutions are explored in terms of scope, agenda and impact. My description focuses on the resources of such institutions enlisted towards collecting, preserving and providing access to materials that document the settlement and development of Romanian ethnic groups in different American states.

Keywords Archives, communities, ethnicity, heritage, identity, Romanian-Americans.

I. Introduction

This study explores the role of heritage centers in creating representations of Romanian ethnicity abroad, by intertwining memories of homeland and narratives of emerging Romanian-American identities. To this end, the paper focuses on the role of Romanian heritage centers as creators and disseminators of discourses, by means of which Romanian ethnic groups in the United States document experiences of Romanian migration and settlement, produced through stories embedded in documents and artefacts. Moreover, it provides an

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overview of the collections stored by such ethnic institutions and offers some insight into the projects organized by them and connected institutions.

The heritage centers which make up the focus of my investigation are the Romanian Folk Museum in Philadelphia and the Heritage Organization of Romanian-Americans in Minnesota. My interest in these two particular institutions falls short of offering a comparative description of their respective facilities (libraries, archives and museums), but it nevertheless provides an overview of the strategies used by two Romanian heritage centers to collect, preserve and provide access to their inventories of documents and artefacts. My investigation is mainly based on the research conducted in Los Angeles and Philadelphia in 2013 and 2017 respectively, but the information incorporated in this paper draws both on fieldwork and on the exploration of the web pages of the two ethnic heritage centers.

II. Heritage, Ethnicity, Memory

In 1994, Huyssen¹ noted our contemporaries' obsession with heritage and ancestry: "As we are approaching our fin de siècle, issues of time and memory haunt contemporary culture. Museums and memorials are being constructed as if there were no tomorrow." Indeed, the recent decades have witnessed a growing interest in spaces of memory and commemorative practices. Gone are the days when the historical documents in archives were the exclusive privilege and competence of historians and archivists involved in ethnic archiving and research. The democratization of archives has created citizen-archivists and citizen-historians, keen on gaining access to historical societies which offer details about their racial or ethnic ancestry. Digital technologies have transformed archival access for archivists and researchers alike, who have been given free access to a repository of knowledge that was not long ago only the domain of the privileged few.

A large body of scholarship describes ethnicity and nationhood (sometimes ethnicity as nationhood), by reference to the sense of solidarity and commonality of feeling, belief in the common descent and in extended versions of kinship or symbolic family. While Basch, Schiller and Blanc² propound approaches to ethnicity which focus on difference and hybridity, other analytical investigations draw on Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities"³

¹ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

² Nina Schiller et al, *Towards a transnational perspective on migration: race, class, ethnicity, and nationalism reconsidered* (New York: Academy of Sciences, 1992).

³ Anderson, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2016).

and construe ethnicity as a collection of memories saved of the past which can be discretionarily used by present-day generations.

Deploring “groupism”, understood as “the tendency to take homogeneous and bounded groups as units of analysis of social life”, Brubaker⁴ advocates the construction of alternative epistemological approaches and routes, better suited to systematize the multifaceted and fluid forms of ethnicity. The sociologist refutes “complacent and clichéd constructionism” and considers that constructions like “identification” and “categorization,” “self-understanding” and “social location,” “commonality” and “connectedness” are more relevant concepts to describe how ethnicity works. In line with Brubaker, Calhoun⁵ describes ethnicity as produced in specific historical and social conditions which reflect a commonality of culture. He considers that ethnicity lacks explanatory power, since it is a variable rather than a constant element, and constructed by exchanges between immigrants and the adoptive society. Both Brubaker and Calhoun view ethnicity as an ongoing process of personal and collective identification, triggered by responses to social, political conditions and therefore highly susceptible to alteration under different circumstances.

My study defines ethnicity as an ongoing commitment of individuals within a group, who make the committed effort of identifying, constructing and expressing a collective ethnic identity, which emerges out of the aggregated efforts of people who jointly participate in community-building activities.

2.1. Romanian Heritage Centers: Building Meanings and Collections

In the former half of the 20th century, mainstream American cultural institutions showed little interest in the history of ethnic minorities. Heritage centers, ethnic historical societies and museums came into being through community engagement projects initiated by local ethnic community leaders.⁶ Financed by sporadic private donations, these institutions had a narrowly defined scope, lacked staff and support and their programs testified to few public outreach initiatives. The growing trend of ethnic history and ethnic studies in academia in the 1960s led to the professionalization of the “ethnic” sector. As a result, as archives and libraries started to compete in documenting the history of immigration and ethnicity, new historical centers came into being (e.g. The Immigration History Research Center created in 1965, the Balch Institute

⁴ Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2.

⁵ Craig Calhoun, *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Wiley Blackwell, 1994), 159.

⁶ Dominique Daniel, Amalia Levi, *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada* (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2014), 4.

for Ethnic Studies in 1976). This ethnic revival, which reverberated in the American space, became manifest in a considerable number of government grants to subsidize heritage centers and historical societies intent on preserving and promoting stories that document the existence of various ethnic groups in America. Generous federal and local grants were awarded for collecting historical materials, publishing histories, and organizing exhibits and special events that represented the multiethnic facets of the American society.

Nowadays, cultural heritage centers represent a notable part of the non-profit cultural sector. According to statistics made public by UNESCO, there were 2,664 non-profit cultural heritage organizations in the United States in 2001, which accounted for approximately 10 percent of all non-profit arts, culture and humanities organizations. There are different types of cultural heritage organizations, from cultural and art centers to ethnic and folk organizations and festivals.

Some Romanian heritage centers in the United States (like The Romanian-American Heritage Center in Michigan) boast large spaces, which accommodate a church, museums, an archival center and souvenir shops. Others (like the Romanian Cultural Heritage Bukovina from California) hold smaller spaces, which house private document and artefact collections in church-based halls. Regardless of their size, these institutions take upon themselves the mission of preserving and promoting the stories that document the existence of the Romanian immigrants in America, by collecting historical materials, publishing histories, and organizing exhibits and special events. As expressive manifestations of local ethnic communities, Romanian heritage centers illustrate the participative dimension of various Romanian communities across the United States. Their coming into being is a community practice meant to exploit elements which are considered essentially ethnic, and in the process of gathering manuscript or artefact collections, the community reflects and asserts itself. The building of the cultural legacy depends on the accumulation of available materials, as well on the willingness of the community to use that material in various contexts towards different purposes. The creation of heritage centers is therefore indicative of the willingness of the group to preserve its ethnic distinctiveness and create a dynamic ethnic community.

But cultural heritage is more than an array of material objects in the form of printed words and artefact collections. Intangible heritage, which includes a large gamut of traditions (music, dance, weaving practices, ritual processions) is also an important component of the Romanian ethnic heritage in the United States. My description of the two heritage centers considers an overview of “tangible” cultural objects stored and also showcases the “intangible” cultural practices promoted by each center.

Located in Romanian heritage centers, archives are memory-building spaces which gather and preserve documents that narrate the story of Romanian-Americans in different states. By weaving the stories of Romanian-Americans, such centers build the group identity of Romanian-Americans, which lies at the confluence of many factors: their real and imagined memories of home, the migration process, and the realities of their existence in the new world. Building on Michel Foucault's notion of "archive" in its figurative sense, as a set of discursive rules or "the law of what can be said", archives may be described as inventories which shelter what is worth keeping and memorialized. In *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Foucault explains how classification achieves coherence, in the act of grouping, regrouping, pigeon-holing and isolating items, all stages of a carefully planned archiving ritual. Jacques Derrida in *Archiving Fever* (1996) stresses the selectivity inherent to an archiving system: private-family archives or public ones alike, all bow to the same principle of selection by prioritizing. By means of functions like unification, consignment, and classification, the archivist hopes to create a legitimate, orderly inventory of archive-worthy content.

The notion of archive has travelled a long way: initially construed as collections of written documents, archives have now become digitally mediated superstructures of data. At first preserved and used by professionals, such collections have gradually become more open to the public. Moving away from the "warehouse theory" (archives as units entrusted exclusively with data preservation roles), Appel⁷ considers that archives should be given roles which go beyond their original mission. More than neutral collections, such repositories of ethnic information are genuine ethnic promoters, since they are agencies which shape the way hyphenated Americans understand the past and foresee the future representation of their ethnicity in the United States.

Building meaningful collections requires the commitment to devote time, energy and effort to finding documents often hidden, ignored, sometimes damaged and destroyed. Because Romanian immigrants settled in various U.S. states across an extended time frame, there are many collections scattered in various regions, which document the Romanian immigration in the United States from the early 1900s onward. After overcoming the hardships of gathering material about Romanian-Americans and finding adequate rooms to preserve it, archives needed to create pathways to ensure wider public access. Nowadays, data are subject to media transformations, and technological mediation is part of the storage and sharing of the cultural items included in the collection. But mass digitization comes with at least two

⁷ John Appel, "Immigrant historical societies in the United States, 1880-1950" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1960), 263.

challenges. One refers to the cost of developing and maintaining digital archives, which is hard to consider during times of budget cuts. The dark paradox of today struggles is unescapable: research convenience correlates with large costs for archiving institutions. Yet another challenge comes from the looming danger of cybernetic attacks, as these technologies can only offer the illusion of secure preservation, rather than certitudes.

Recent studies have brought new ways to explore archives and archival collections, in the light of feminist and postcolonial interrogations and performance studies. Feminist and postcolonial discourses remapped both the role of the archive and that of the archivist, in the sense that archives offer adequate material to enable the audience to challenge assumptions cultivated as truths.⁸ The new archiving practices favour not only the inclusion of forgotten voices (after all, what is left out can be considered an alternative archive), but also the scrutinizing of the ideological practices conducive to the establishment of present-day collections. Archives can also be read as sites of performance, whereas the focus goes not on gathering/aggregating material but on praxis, on imagining ways to use/manipulate/operate data within a culture.

The construction of heritage happens by passing down memories, in the process of intergenerational socialization and education. But memories-related processes are hardly accurate; they are selective and biased, meant to fulfil individual or group requirements of identity at a particular time and space.

Times change, and as they do, people look back on the past and reinterpret events and ideas. They look for patterns, for order, and for coherence in past events to support changing social, economic, and cultural values.⁹

Hobsbawn and Ranger¹⁰ warn of the propensity to invent and fabricate traditions as repetitive practices, “run” with ritualistic rigor in order to create expectation of an ideal past. Individuals may use deliberately distorted “myths” and inaccurate traditions by “forging” memory constructions and using them as biased instruments to impose alternative versions of identity

⁸ Dana A. Williams, Marissa K. Lopez.2012. “More than a Fever: Toward a Theory of the Ethnic Archive,” *Publications of Modern Languages Association*, 127, 2 (March 2012): 358, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2012.127.2.357>.

⁹ Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed ground: America's landscapes of violence and tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 28.

¹⁰ Eric J. Hobsbawn, Terence O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.

and legitimize themselves in a tradition of choice. As part of the same process, cultures and traditions may be suppressed, memories, “conflated and embellished”; the overlapping of local memory with national memory results in unreliable versions of ethnicity, infused with local colour.¹¹

Discussing the Americans’ appetite for commemorative practices, Gillis¹² opines that ethnic Europeans in the United States use different commemorative practices, while consuming and interpreting the available memories which “best suit their particular sense of self at that time”. Their choices resonate with their sense of heritage and identity, with their trusted version of history; their interest is to establish continuity not with the “official” past, but with a suitable historic past.¹³ Preserved in archives and museums, documents and artefacts trigger memories/invented representations of an ideal past, which further reinforce the sense of loyalty to an imagined group. Attached to items, such memories create a sense of togetherness and cultural solidarity which determines the formation of a vital national identity.¹⁴ The collections stored in various heritage centers reflect the way in which members understand and bond with their ethnic community, as well as the version of ethnicity they want to embrace. Such collections speak of shared bonds and sense of belonging; they speak of inclusion as well as of exclusion, of people who legitimize themselves by such practices and people who disassociate from them. This distinction, enacted in the act of including and excluding items in heritage centers, draws on ideologically-inflected collective choices. This decision-making act is fraught with conflicts and contestation and prone to being endlessly rethought and reconstructed in the process of ethnic identification.

2.2. Romanian Heritage Centers in the United States

Established in 1983 as a not-for profit association, *The Romanian Folk Art Museum* has held an exhibit space and a gallery in Philadelphia since 1998. It has a branch in Princeton New Jersey, which houses the archives, a library and a space filled with printed and visual materials, as well as an office in Brasov, Romania. There is also a Resource Center on Romania where twelve large boards on the hallway walls document the Romanian immigration to the United States. A gift gallery sells Easter painted eggs, rugs and books to visitors nostalgic for their European roots.

¹¹ David Lowenthal, *The past is a foreign country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1.

¹² John R. Gillis, “Introduction: Memory and identity: The history of a relationship,” in *Commemorations: the politics of national identity*, ed. J. R. Gillis (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 18.

¹³ Hobsbawm, Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1.

¹⁴ Lowenthal, *The past is a foreign country*, 44.

Initially intended as a space meant to house ethnic items, folk costumes, hand-sewn textiles, woven rugs, pottery, painted furniture and decorated eggs, the museum has become a prominent heritage cultural space in Philadelphia. The present-day premises and much of the existing inventory stems from the effort of the Perciali family, who actively involved in organizing 120 exhibitions throughout the United States and Romania. After 1990, the center started collaborative relations with Romanian artisans. The artistic and economic transactions have been facilitated by the Romanian-American League, created by Rodica Perciali in April 1996 and incorporated in the state of Pennsylvania in 1999. The League was intended as a transnational ethnic association engaged in developing transnational programs of democracy and civic education. The twofold mission of the organization, as expressed on the web page, is

[...] to encourage the creation of a Romanian-American diasporic alliance, able to create social and cultural projects that will strengthen the civic society and economic projects to benefit Romanian artisans and the country at large.¹⁵

The organization hopes to create a Transylvanian village in Princeton (New Jersey area), as a destination point of all Romanian-Americans interested in getting in touch with their roots. The activities and activism of the League and Museum have received many accolades in the press throughout the decades. More than 40 articles printed in U.S. newspapers between 1986 and 2006 cover the exhibitions, programs and projects of the cultural center in Philadelphia. However, the web page of the Romanian Folk Art Museum deplores the lack of interest and support from the Romanian Government, as well as the inability to find volunteering personnel and interns to help with project development within the center.

The cultural core of the Romanian-American community in Minnesota, The Heritage Organization of Romanian Americans in Minnesota (HORA), is a non-profit organization intent on “enriching Minnesota’s diverse cultural landscape by preserving and sharing the valuable heritage of the Romanian American community”¹⁶. Started in 2009 by a group of enthusiastic first and second-generation Romanian immigrants to Minnesota, HORA has had a notable editorial presence and organized a vast array of cultural projects throughout the years. Located in Landmark Center, Saint Paul, the Romanian American Cultural Center houses a library of 700

¹⁵ “About the Romanian Folk Art Museum,” in *The Romanian Folk Art Museum*, accessed 22 April 2020, <http://www.romanianculture.us/>.

¹⁶ “About HORA,” in *Heritage Organization of Romanian Americans in Minnesota*, accessed 3 March 2020, <https://hora-mn.org>.

Romanian titles and can be visited by appointment. It is intended as a space in which non-profit organizations, groups, religious establishments and individuals who share Romanian ancestry can meet and celebrate their ethnic traditions. The first President of the Center and founding member of HORA, Raluca Octav, a former senior curator and president of the South Transylvanian fortress of Fagaraş, worked for the Minnesota Historical Society for several years. Throughout the years, she has involved energetically in publishing the center newsletters, in organizing exhibitions and giving speeches on Romanian history and culture. The creation of HORA stems from the generous involvement of the Romanian community members in Minnesota. The development of ethnic projects also calls for their vision and financial donations and there is a constant need for contributing volunteers. HORA's three areas of engagement are: Romanian Language Classes, Oral History Projects and Youth Internships.

In 2012, HORA was awarded a Legacy Grant from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund to create an oral history project, intended to document the early history of the Romanian immigrants to Minnesota and their cultural heritage. The grant applicant, the Heritage Organization of Romanian Americans in Minnesota (HORA), HORA's sister organization- the Romanian Genealogy Society and Town Square Television conducted interviews with Romanian-Americans from December 2012 to May 2013. The interviews were next developed into eleven oral histories, an emotional, orally archived testament to the Romanian immigration to Minnesota which is now available to historians, researchers and private individuals alike. In 2013, HORA was awarded its second Legacy Grant, worth \$10,000, from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through the Minnesota Historical Society. This grant funded the creation of a documentary film based on the 2013 interviews of Romanians immigrating to the Twin Cities during 1900-1940. Narrated by Don Shelby, the documentary *A thousand dollars and the way back* was released in September 2014 and had its European premiere at a Cultural Heritage Night in Timisoara, on November 28, 2019. The documentary is an emotional narrative of early Romanian immigrants to Saint Paul in the first four decades of the 20th century. It is structured as a group of interviews with children and grandchildren of the early immigrants, most of them immigrants from the Banat and Transylvania regions, who initially settled in the industrial areas of the Midwest and later moved to other areas across Minnesota.

HORA also offers Romanian Language Classes for adults and children in the Twin Cities. The schedule follows the regular school calendar and the curriculum promises to offer adult or children students the ability to learn the language and connect with the

Romanian culture and traditions. HORA's Youth Internship program is another area of activity that testifies to the social engagement of this heritage organization. The program, designed to benefit young Romanian-American applicants, offers paid internships in the area of Communication, Web and Social Media; the deliverables of these programs are intended to strengthen the communication between HORA and the local Romanian-American community.

One of the most recent projects developed by this heritage organization is "Stitches of Love", which aims to nostalgically revive the art and craftsmanship of Romanian embroidery in the United States. Invoking *Șezatoarea*, a beloved Romanian tradition, whereby women used to come together and hand-sew clothing items (each displaying intricately unique patterns of ethnic motifs), the project is intended to "revive the poetry of our ancestor's folk motifs and bring their stories to life"¹⁷ (<https://hora-mn.org/>). This original "cross-stitching collective project", is a practical opportunity (albeit charged with social and symbolical meaning) to come together and create a new Romanian legacy abroad.

III. Instead of Conclusion

The two Romanian heritage centers under discussion have developed two different pathways to cultivate and promote the Romanian ethnic culture in the United States. The former capitalizes on the creation of a transnational route to Romania, by creating organizational and business projects; the latter creates the premises of a social dialogue across generations. Both create a participative model and make use of the resources which drive the creative energies of the local community, by offering educational and volunteering opportunities. The two Romanian heritage centers in the United States are community-oriented and intent on preserving and promoting the Romanian ethos abroad. Construed as discursive and representational form of belonging, these ethnic platforms preserve, promote and celebrate the Romanian spirit, inasmuch as they negotiate endless versions of Romanian identity in the United States. Rather than focusing narrowly on preserving document and artefact collections, these heritage organizations work in expansive ways, by developing a broad range of cultural and educational activities. They are active cultural agents which access federal grants, organize language teaching classes

¹⁷ "About HORA," in *Heritage Organization of Romanian Americans in Minnesota*, accessed 3 March 2020, <https://hora-mn.org>

and social- recreational activities, all projects tapping into the participative potential of local Romanian-American communities. The creation and expansion of Romanian heritage collections in different states across the United States should be part of a larger Romanian transnational project, emerging out of a “historically grounded act of cultural politics”¹⁸. To be successful, this project needs to consider all the variables which mobilize ethnic knowledge towards strengthening people’s access and engagement with Romanian culture abroad.

¹⁸ April Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade: Inventing the Norwegian American through Celebration* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 20.