



# SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I MOVE BACK? LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF EMIGRATION TO THE US IN POSTCOMMUNIST ROMANIAN LITERATURE

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**Abstract:** This article aims to discuss two literary representations of postcommunist Romanian emigration to the United States, one of the most understudied routes of migration, in sociological and literary studies alike. Relying on Carine M. Mardorossian’s (2002) research, I understand exile and migrant literature not as taxonomic but as paradigmatic categories. As I show, the paradigmatic difference between them plays out at the level of critical representation, which reveals a subtle, implicit, and rather involuntary critique of North American capitalism and its labor market. My argument is that any critique of capitalism and the labor market is closely connected to downward social mobility.

**Keywords:** emigration to the US, postcommunist Romanian literature, social mobility, critique of capitalism, high-skilled migrants.

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“Migrant literature is literature by authors whose work does not really belong to a specific national literature, or at least they have often been so treated, although there are signs of a change in this approach,”<sup>1</sup> says Mads Rosendahl Thomsen with regards to a variety of transnational authors – may them be the post-colonials, the political exiles, and the voluntary migrants<sup>2</sup> – originating from myriad countries and not particularly from Romania. Shifting the spotlight of attention to Romania, and precisely to postcommunist Romanian literature, would require a small, yet consistent rephrasing of this statement. Briefly, it can be said that when it comes to migrant literature written by Romanian-

born authors, more often than not it *does* belong to a specific national literature. The most recent history of Romanian literature acknowledges precisely this reverse process. All of the works included in the discussion about the literary representation of emigration were written in Romanian<sup>3</sup> and, with few exceptions, have not been translated into other languages. An additional observation should be added here, one that addresses directly the stakes of this study. Not only that Iovănel discusses the literary works on migration in the sub-chapter entitled “Sociographies” but he structures the entire chapter dedicated to the evolution of post-communist prose according to the genres of realism

which he regards from the outset as representations of marginality, analyzed through materialist concepts and the New Left critical theory.<sup>4</sup> However, although the critic is able to adequately outline the sociological categories at work, his analysis of literary depictions of migration within the formal framework of realism is less convincing.

Things become problematic from the perspective of literary historiography in general as well, namely in what regards the difference between migrant and exile literature. While migration in post-2000 Romania is dominantly economic and tends to be temporary, as I will show in the first section of the article, the communist period had encouraged perceiving migration in the terms of political exile. Hence, the difference between migrant and exile literature can be said to be, first of all, temporal. Nonetheless, Carine M. Mardorossian's research in the field pinpoints the fact that the shift from one category to the other should be understood not as a taxonomic change but rather as a paradigmatic one,<sup>5</sup> which would allow the simultaneous existence of the two categories. According to Mardorossian, the difference between the two lies in the fact that whereas exile literature builds on the opposition between home culture versus host culture, migrant literature makes the two levels overlap as dynamic entities: "The shift from exile to migrant challenges this binary logic by emphasizing movement, rootlessness, and the mixing of cultures, races, and languages. The world inhabited by the characters is no longer conceptualized as 'here' and there'.<sup>6</sup> Within migrant literature, home and host cultures are interrogated outside any clear-cut specificity (i.e., any form of nostalgia or idealization is left aside in favor of a more critical representation). But there is another important observation made by Mardorossian. As the scholar puts it

It is therefore possible to argue that at the same time as the movement from 'exile' to 'migrant' literature has the potential to make us examine the assumptions that ground our critical practices, its particular reconfiguration of these metaphors of displacement also runs the risk of obscuring the change from an epoch of revolutionary nationalism and militant anticommunism which produced exiles to an epoch of capitalist triumphalism which makes various migrant experiences possible.<sup>7</sup>

My paper builds on these typological distinctions in order to frame the Romanian works under scrutiny – namely, the volume of essays *Adio, adio, patria mea, cu î din i, cu â din a* [Farewell, My Country, with î from i, with â from a, 2003]<sup>8</sup> by Radu Pavel Gheo and the autobiographical novel *Avalon. Secretul emigranților fericiți* [Avalon. The Secret of Happy Emigrants, 2018] by Bogdan Suceavă. Both were written in Romanian for a Romanian readership by authors who emigrated to

the United States during the postcommunist transition and thereby sought to offer *authentic* representations of emigration. The drive for authenticity embedded within these testimonial writings is representative of what Adriana Stan calls "post-socialist realism."<sup>9</sup> As Stan points out, "in post-communist literary realism, anti-capitalism overlapped with radical individualism, with the result that the latter weakened the critical edge of the former."<sup>10</sup> A part of my analysis will explore this insight, in order to show that it is the distinctly *individual* experience of emigration which enables the assertion of an anti-capitalist stance, without, however, an overall consistent critique of capitalism as well.<sup>11</sup> Yet, there are two pronounced differences in that respect between the two works, as I intend to show in the second, third and fourth sections of my paper. First, I point out that the persistence of a binary logic between here and there inscribes Suceavă's novel in the paradigm of exile literature, while Gheo's volume more obvious concern with blurring the boundaries between the two locations makes it a typical illustration of migrant literature. Secondly, this paradigmatic difference plays out at the level of critical representation which translates into an *implicit* critique of North American capitalism and its labor market. A close reading of the works discussed will reveal that this criticism targets the cultural differences between the US and Romania. However, if Suceavă's novel shows an apprehension of cultural differences that only rarely hides a possible critique of capitalism, Gheo's volume develops an underlying, recurrent, although possibly involuntary, critique of capitalism. My argument is that any trace of a critique of North American capitalism and its labor market is closely linked to the type of social mobility experienced by the emigrant depicted in the respective work.

### **The Invisible Other: Postcommunist Emigration to the US**

Sociological studies on migration identify multiple migration flows and a variety of receiving countries throughout Europe after the end of communism. One broader demarcation line in this respect is the EU enlargement. As far as Romania is concerned, the country witnessed slow emigration flows throughout the first post-communist decade. It was the elimination of visas in 2002<sup>12</sup> and Romania's integration into the EU in 2007 which turned emigration into a mass phenomenon. As Sabina Stan and Roland Erne argue in their study on Romanian migration, "its intensification took place not during the 1990s, when Romania passed through a serious economic recession, but only after 2000, when the country entered a phase of economic growth."<sup>13</sup>

In what regards the first postcommunist decade, this period witnessed several types of migration, among which the migration of the ethnic population to



Germany, Hungary, and Israel, exploratory migration to Israel, Turkey, Hungary, and Italy, and the so-called “brain drain” to North America and Western Europe, which was a direct outcome of the internationalization of the educational system.<sup>14</sup> A large part of the Romanian migrants who moved to the West was young and educated. Not only that many of them already had at least a bachelor’s degree,<sup>15</sup> but the number of those who got a doctorate in the USA increased significantly: from 20 in 1980–1989 to 355 in 1990–1999.<sup>16</sup>

Not so much discussed were, however, the alternative routes of migration to the USA, through sponsorships and the visa lottery. Following the fall of the communist regime and the opening of borders, many Romanians who left the country either to Western Europe or the USA were sponsored by those who had managed to flee the country during communism. Others emigrated through the Diversity Immigrant Visa, known as the visa lottery. The program was established by the Immigration Act of 1990 and was aimed to make available 55,000 immigrant visas annually to a list of countries deemed as “underrepresented” among the immigrant population in the USA. The only two requirements for the lottery applicants were to be born in an eligible country and to have secondary education or qualifying work experience. One of the remarks made by Anna O. Law in her article on the Diversity Visa Program is noteworthy. Following the observation that “Perhaps one of the strangest footnotes to the diversity lottery odyssey is that the lottery unintentionally came to benefit many more nationalities than its original target beneficiaries,”<sup>17</sup> she adds that in 1998 “the top diversity visa receiving countries were: Albania, Nigeria, Bulgaria, Bangladesh and Romania.”<sup>18</sup> Law’s observation is based on the statistical data presented in the *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Services*. In the same document, but for the year 2001, it can be read that out of the 6649 immigrants from Romania, 1953 immigrated through the Diversity Program.<sup>19</sup>

When it comes to literary studies, the heterogeneity of emigration to the US is even less visible and less discussed. It is not that literary works that tackle the issue of emigration to North America were not published,<sup>20</sup> but rather that the academic spotlight has been put on the economic migration within the European Union.<sup>21</sup> In this context, the insistence on ‘brain drain’ as representative for this route of migration at the expense of other forms of mobility runs the risk of uniformizing – and romanticizing – the emigration to North America. In her remarkable book on the literary and cinematographic representations of East European women’s migration, Anca Parvulescu draws a line of comparison that reminds us of the inequities that shape the labor market on both sides of the Atlantic. According to Parvulescu, EU labor policies result in a form of Americanization, by which she refers to the emergence of “a Europe in

which racial, ethnic, and citizenship stratifications are mapped onto occupational stratifications.”<sup>22</sup> This kind of occupational stratification can be noticed in Gheo’s case, whose experience of emigration contrasts significantly with that of the autobiographical narrator in *Avalon*.

### (Un)Happy Emigrants: Exile versus Migrant Literature

Both volumes, Gheo’s *Farewell, My Country* (2003) and Suceavă’s *Avalon* (2018), offer in-depth representations of the writers’ experiences of emigration. The reasons that drove them to leave their country are explained from the beginning: “I will pursue a PhD in Michigan. I go there because in Michigan there is one of the most important specialists in the world in the field of mathematics that I study,”<sup>23</sup> writes Suceavă, adding later on that “there are things that one can do only in an American university.”<sup>24</sup> Simply put, what can be noticed based on this statement is that there is a solid argument that justifies the writer’s decision to emigrate to the US in 1996. In addition, there are other – political, not professional – reasons that determine him to leave Romania, initially for a limited period, but eventually choosing to stay abroad. Among these reasons, he cites the 1990s’ *mineriads*<sup>25</sup> and the press campaign led against his father. Not the same thing can be said about Gheo in terms of professional decision. The opening lines of his essay showcase the confusion with which the writer had struggled before moving to the States, in 2001, with his wife: “Everything begun with an envelope sent randomly at the Visa Lottery, part of curiosity, part of exasperation, part of the impulse of every person who lived their adolescence under the sign of the American mirage.”<sup>26</sup> Another significant observation that can be drawn based on this comparison regards the choice of the host country. A form of idealization comes across in both cases, concerning the American educational system and the US in general as well. Yet, their actual living in the United States will reveal a gradual change in the attitudes of the two emigrants.

The autobiographical novel *Avalon* displays a clear distinction made by the narrator between the home and the host culture. Throughout the narrative, an alternative romanticization of both the home and the host culture is played out, which is conveyed at the textual level by the recurrent use of “here” and “there”. The protagonist still nurtures the firm belief, even after moving to East Lansing, that he would eventually return to Romania: “I love Bucharest too much. I will move back. For me, *home* is somewhere else.”<sup>27</sup> It is this anticipated return that might distinguish Suceavă’s novel from the typology of exile literature. In this case, and precisely at this stage of emigration, the narrator’s particular experience seems far from Edward Said’s famous view on exile. For the Romanian-born academic emigrant, the exile is not “*the unhealable rift force* [my emphasis] between

a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,"<sup>28</sup> precisely because the return is not only imaginable but voluntarily planned. Nonetheless, as Mardorossian also pointed out in her analysis, the binary logic is unfixed, in the sense that both romanticization and alienation may define either the country of origin or the country of adoption.<sup>29</sup> Further building on this insight, I consider that the continuous interplay between home and host culture defines the mutable dynamics of migration. More exactly, whereas at the beginning of the novel, the narrator states repeatedly his desire to return, the rest of the narrative underscores the gradual replacement of one home with another: "Home was there. Here is something else. A temporary residence. When, in the meantime, has this place become *home*?"<sup>30</sup> The answer is to be found a few pages later when the reader is told that the birth of the protagonist's son represents the moment when the country of adoption became the narrator's new home. One should not forget, however, that, despite its processual nature, the experience of migration depicted in this novel does not authorize the blurring of the boundaries between the country of origin and the country of adoption. Regardless of which place turns out to be the "alienating there", one thing is for sure: a strict opposition is maintained between home and host country. Home is either here or there, there is no in-between.

Gheo's volume of essays draws a picture that is different from *Avalon*. This time, the dynamics of migration involves a different form of negotiating the (un) belonging: from feeling uneasy both in Romania and the United States to choosing the country of origin as home. As I will argue in the next section, Gheo's dissatisfaction with the host country is fueled by the downward social mobility he experiences here. For now, I will focus on how the volume challenges the conventional assumption that "many migrants and diasporics associate home not with a particular geographic location but ... with the experience of being perpetually between cultures."<sup>31</sup> Instead of emphasizing the in-betweenness, the author does the opposite and describes a double non-belonging. The precarious life he had experienced during the first postcommunist decade makes him contend that "we leave willingly although we are actually obliged to do so."<sup>32</sup> Moreover, after several months spent in Washington, he finds himself depicting the daily life in the US in a similar vein: "Sometimes, when describing America in darker colors, I had the feeling... no, not that I was exaggerating, but that I couldn't spot the specific difference, the bigger picture that makes the USA simultaneously the dream of millions of potential emigrants and the dull, grueling country that I'd discovered."<sup>33</sup>

Unlike the emigrant in *Avalon*, the two winners of the Visa Lottery do not plan to return, neither before nor upon arrival. Their decision to move back to Romania results from their disillusionment with the American

Dream. Noteworthy here is that the American Dream is not the promise of rapid upward social mobility, but rather it carries a nostalgic meaning, related to the promise envisioned by the younger generations during communism,<sup>34</sup> who longed for the American Dream by means of pop culture and consumer goods. Paradoxically, it is this very consumerist society, once over-praised, that becomes the object of the critique made by the postcommunist emigrant, as the last section will show. Coming back to the return, it can be argued that it is the precarious life that determines the couple to move to Romania. Even though it was avoided throughout the volume, the question of belonging is addressed directly at the end: "There is for each of us a place that we call 'home', which is closely linked to the brightest memories of our existence, which we cannot give up unless we alienate ourselves."<sup>35</sup> And for them, this place is the city of Timișoara. Even so, I consider that the enduring feelings of nonbelonging are enough proof to support the premise that what we are dealing with is migrant, not exile literature.

### Moving Up the Ladder: Academic Migrants and Upward Mobility

Undoubtedly, the reference to "happy emigrants" in Suceavă's novel is ironic, considering that the academic emigrants<sup>36</sup> are usually anything but happy. However, equally true is that the Romanian novel has a happy ending. The academic migrant not only successfully defended his doctoral thesis but, after a sinuous path through the academic job market, managed to get a tenured position at an American university. To put it differently, from being a PhD candidate, the emigrant becomes a professor, which confirms the scenario of upward mobility that illustrates the trajectory of other high-skilled emigrants. The documentary character of the novel lies, among other things, in bringing to the fore the large number of high-skilled Romanians who emigrated to the United States to pursue a PhD in hard sciences (to which can be added those in soft sciences, which are not mentioned in the novel). In 1996, writes Suceavă,

many of my friends and former colleagues were enrolled in doctoral programs in the United States. Liliana Florea has been at Penn State since the fall of 1995, Alina Sorescu at the University of Houston, and Cătălin Zara at MIT. Mihaela Vâjjiac and Ionuț Vâjjiac have been at Boston since 1994. Cezar Joița ... has been at SUNNY at Buffalo, and Aurel Stan has been at Louisiana State University. At Michigan State University only, there were at some point over 40 doctoral students of Romanian origins, in the fields of mathematics, computer science, physics, or chemistry. Although many of my friends stayed in the country, a large part of Romania has moved over the Atlantic.<sup>37</sup>



Although they might be perceived from the outside as “the lucky ones”, these migrant doctoral students face several problems during their studies, some of which resemble those met by the low-skilled migrants: language barriers, precarity, difficulties in getting recognition for credentials obtained in the home country, and the overall troubled adaptation to a different academic system.<sup>38</sup> However, what distinguishes this category from low-skilled migrants is that doctoral researchers do have the possibility of upward mobility in the foreseeable future. By the end of their academic stage, they are supposed to acquire the educational credentials required to enter the academic job market on an equal footing with the natives.

But if the promise of upward mobility might seem approachable through efforts done throughout the doctoral years – overwork, improving language skills, taking extra classes, etc. – applying for actual jobs marks a shift from a cultural assessment of the differences between the Romanian and American academic system, to a subtle critique of capitalism. At the academic job fair, the applicants talk to each other about the difficulties encountered in finding an academic position and the inequities that shape the labor market: “You know what I think it’s more difficult? To move from really doing mathematics to selling it. It is a huge difference between the mathematical investigation – authentic and solitary – and the market over here,”<sup>39</sup> or “They ask you to come to the interview to validate their statistics. Some universities have requirements that a given percentage of the interviewees needs to have an international background or a given percentage of them to be women.”<sup>40</sup> While some of the critiques are endorsed by the characters, others, such as the latter, are very soon dismantled; they are perceived as an exaggeration generated by the frustration felt by the applicants whose struggle to find a job does not seem to come to an end very soon.

Interestingly enough, the most consistent critique regards a third country: Canada. The conversation between the protagonist and an immigration officer sheds light on the inequities that shape the Canadian job market, wherein the migrants, regardless of their educational background, are assigned low-skilled jobs. What changes in this particular context is not the system but the position of the protagonist in that particular system. Instead of an academic who might anytime apply for tenure-track positions, he is perceived as a migrant. And sociological studies have shown that upon arrival in the host country, high-skilled migrants move down the occupational ladder,<sup>41</sup> as the analysis of Gheo’s volume will illustrate.

Thus, it can be said that any cautious – and rather involuntary – critique of North American capitalism and its labor market arises only when there is an actual risk of the immigrant downgrading his/her occupation and,

hence, replacing upward with downward social mobility. The persistence of the opposition between ‘home’ and ‘host country’ sets further boundaries at the ideological level. More precisely, the narrator in *Avalon* finds that the political instability in Romania permeates his home sphere (i.e., affects directly his family), while his swift adaptation to the host country prevents him from reconsidering the possibility of returning and makes him establish a clear preference towards the US.

### **From High to Low Skilled: Economic Migrants and Downward Mobility**

Although Gheo’s multiple jobs in post-1989 Romania – as editor, translator, professor, etc. – were underpaid,<sup>42</sup> they, at least, required high skills, which offered him some sort of comfort. Things changed drastically once he and his wife moved to the USA. This relocation meant a move down the occupational ladder. From highly skilled in their home country, Gheo and his wife were consigned to menial jobs as American immigrants, such as cashiers at convenience stores or fast foods. The following paragraph displays more than just a mere description of a working day in the American labor market:

One thing is for sure: we will move back [to Romania] in a year and a half, tops. More exactly, I am a cashier at a convenience store, the equivalent of our universal stores and as big as ours. I earn 7,50\$ per hour, I don’t sit down for a second or without doing anything. If there are no customers, I arrange the shelves, clean, or find – because I have to find – something to do. My English is pretty good, but sometimes I stumble when I want to formulate longer and more complicated messages. Gheo has two jobs. The first one is at some sort of a sophisticated grocery store (organic products, good, European wines, and the like), which is called *Trader Joe’s*. It’s the best-paid job in our household: 8,50\$ per hour. It is performed from 6 am to 2 pm. In the afternoon he goes to the *Barnes & Noble* bookstore, where he works in *receiving*. He scans the received books and puts them on the shelves. Poorly paid (6,75\$ per hour), but he doesn’t have to work with the spoiled and rude American customer; he works with books.<sup>43</sup>

First, this paragraph emphasizes the downward mobility along with the obstacles encountered by emigrants, such as the language barrier. Second, it presents the way in which the two emigrants cope with the occupational downgrade, by developing the comforting thought of returning to their country of origin.<sup>44</sup> Third, it offers a glimpse of the recurrent critique of the American *culture*, and, by extension, of capitalism. The work ethic, already visible in this paragraph, is battered; and so are the costumer, who is “spoiled and rude,” and consumerism. In short, it can be said that “the critical eye which dismantled Romania, now dismantles America.”<sup>45</sup> The

question that remains to be answered is what and how is dismantled.

The volume suggests by the same token an interpretation of the differences between Romania and the USA in cultural terms<sup>46</sup> and a deliberate avoidance of an explicit critique of capitalism. One of the first “letters” already states that the United States is “a different culture.”<sup>47</sup> At the same time, the critique of capitalism cannot take full shape because it is impeded upon by the writer’s anti-communist feelings: “As a Romanian, I can’t help but think how much nostalgia for the communist dictatorship still lives in the consumer capitalism,”<sup>48</sup> writes Gheo at some point, adding later on that “America is neither the paradise dreamed by the East European from behind the Iron Curtain nor the inferno of rotten capitalism.”<sup>49</sup> It is, thus, these anti-communist beliefs – and not the lack of any ideological substratum, as stated at the beginning of the volume<sup>50</sup> – that overpower the critique of capitalism and bring forth instead the analysis of cultural differences. Despite its declaration of de-ideologization, the volume offers yet another example of what Baghiu and Olaru call “anti-capitalist anti-communism.”<sup>51</sup> In the context in which the shortcomings of Romania’s transition to a neoliberal market were understood as deriving solely from communism, any consistent critique of capitalism per se was faulted from the outset. To that extent, migrants facing precarity in foreign capitalist labor markets – a writer in this case – could not comprehend their downward mobility as a systemic outcome of capitalism itself. This constant avoidance of tackling directly capitalism can and should also be related to the “radical individualism”<sup>52</sup> of the Romanian post-socialist realism. Gheo’s volume of essays or “letters” – which confirm the testimonial nature of the text – is written using the first-person and hence offers a subjective account of emigration to the US, a fact that overshadows by default emigration as a macro phenomenon.

Each of “the letters” focuses on a specific aspect of the American lifestyle and culture, from cars, whose necessity is determined by the large distances between places and by the absence of a highly efficient system of public transportation, to American food, the embracing of linguistic heterogeneity, multiculturalism, and political correctness. The writer’s critical eye, extremely well trained to spot every detail, tries to record all these differences in an objective manner. The Romanian reader, to whom the volume is addressed, is able to grasp the wider context beyond the clichés and ready-made images of American society. However, some (if not most) of these apparently de-ideologized descriptions hide a rather involuntary critique of capitalism and its labor market. For instance, the “letter” which tells of protein bars contains a remark that implicitly shifts the focus from the product itself to the alienating force of capitalism. A hundred pages later, a similar reference

to alienation is made: “If the communist system proved to be a failure at every level, the American communism, which excels at the economic level – I believe – is a failure at the human level.”<sup>53</sup> What stands between the two is the political stance of the writer, which downplays any critique of capitalism by comparing it with communism and by placing the latter in a darker light.

Yet, other descriptions reveal a rather explicit critique not so much of capitalism as of consumerism. In the USA, which the writer once refers to as “the country where the business is raised at the rank of life principle,”<sup>54</sup> everything can be commodified. The language employed by the writer is indicative that the critique may be intentional: “Everywhere you can go and relax means spending money – and, no matter how incredible it seemed to me before, you really spend it, because here all the methods to attract the customer and sell goods were exploited.”<sup>55</sup> But it is the same language that hides the very object of the critique: “I admit that now I understand better, on my own, what *a world* [my emphasis] focused on profitability means, in which the ideal is that every gesture made during the working hours brings an extra penny (i.e. it is efficient).”<sup>56</sup> It is this world – the people and/ or the country – and not the overarching system that is de-romanticized. Coming back to one of the observations made in the second section, it can even be argued that what is at stake here is the disillusionment with the American Dream.

It has been acknowledged that highly skilled migrants are prone to downward mobility and that the downgrade is most visible at the level of occupational status. What I tried to argue is that it is precisely the downward mobility which might generate a critique of American consumerism and of the capitalist labor market. As my analysis of Gheo’s volume has shown, an explicit critique of capitalism is constantly undermined through the writer’s interventions, who tries to offer a de-ideologized perspective and thus translates the systemic differences into cultural ones and presents them as such.

## Conclusions

Gheo’s *Farewell, My Country* (2003) and Suceavă’s *Avalon* (2018) manage to simultaneously reconfirm and challenge the state of the art regarding the postcommunist Romanian emigration and its literary representations. On the one hand, they prove that, from a taxonomic point of view, the literary representation of postcommunist Romanian emigration falls to a large extent within the category of Romanian literature. To put it differently, they strengthen the possibility of understanding the literary texts written by Romanian-born authors as Romanian literature about migration. This is, in my view, one of the main dissimilarities between migrant or exile writers during communism and postcommunism: the number of authors who fled



the country during communism and started writing in the language of the host country is higher than of those who migrated after 1989 and changed their language as well. On the other hand, the comparative analysis of the two volumes emphasizes the heterogeneity of migration routes to the US and by doing so, it challenges the common association of North-American migration with 'brain drain.' This heterogeneity, in turn, can be exploited to distinguish, following Mardorossian's observation, exile from migrant literature. However, while Mardorossian focuses primarily on the persistence or blurring of the boundaries between home and host countries as emblematic of the paradigmatic shift from exile to migrant literature, I tried to argue that it is within this distinction that an underlying critique of North American capitalism and its labor market can be identified.

The gradual shift from belonging 'here' to belonging 'there' in *Avalon* is conditioned by upward social mobility. Moreover, achieving socio-economic stability in the host country hinders the emergence of any critique of capitalism. As I tried to show, any form of dissatisfaction can be identified only when there is a

risk of replacing upward with downward social mobility. Another example is offered by Gheo's volume. In this case, the shift from double non-belonging to eventually choosing the home country can be perceived as the result of downward mobility. Both decisions to move from one country to the other (i.e., from Romania to the US and then back to Romania) are conditioned by the narrators' socio-economic status. Precarity in the home country is replaced with occupational downgrade in the host country, a replacement that at the textual level ends up revealing an underlying critique of capitalism and its labor market. Yet, this critique results from a timid translation of systemic differences into cultural ones. Shortly, what both volumes reveal is that (1) the critique of capitalism is not at stake for these Romanian immigrants, but comes across as a rather involuntary result and (2) the articulation of even the slightest form of critique is closely linked to downward social mobility.

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## Note

1. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 61.
2. *Ibid.*, 85.
3. See Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020* (Iași: Polirom, 2021), 331-335.
4. See Victor Cobuz, "Tabloul prozei contemporane și valențele realismului în *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020* de Mihai Iovănel," *Transilvania*, no. 7-8 (2021): 115-122 and Ștefan Baghiu, "Critica ideologică în epoca limbajului administrativ de stânga: o istorie New Left a literaturii române contemporane," *Transilvania* no. 7-8 (2021): 80-89.
5. Carine M. Mardorossian, "From Literature of Exile to Migrant Literature," *Modern Language Studies* 32, no. 2 (2002): 18: "The difference is that contemporary writers living in exile are now more likely to be categorized as producers of 'migrant' rather than 'exile' literature, thus reducing to a taxonomic change what I began this paper by identifying as a paradigmatic one."
6. *Ibid.*, 16.
7. *Ibid.*, 17-18.
8. The volume of essays is, in fact, made up of several letters addressed to the Romanian reader. The "letters" were previously published in Romanian magazines.
9. See Adriana Stan, "Post-Socialist Realism. Authenticity and Political Conscience in the Romanian Literature of the 2000s," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 64, no. 1 (2023): 73-84.
10. *Ibid.*, 74.
11. On the emergence of self-fiction in Romanian millennial literature, see Adriana Stan, "Genres of Realism Across the Former Cold War Divide," *Dacoromania litteraria*, no. 1: 116-125. One of the most important observations made by Stan is that self-fiction did not emerge in a socio-political vacuum. Instead, it addressed and was informed by neoliberalism (p. 120).
12. From 1 January 2002, Romanians were exempted from the requirement to possess a visa in order to travel throughout the EU.
13. Sabina Stan and Roland Erne, "Explaining Romanian labor migration: from development gaps to development trajectories," *Labor History* 55, no. 1 (2014): 22.
14. On the periodization, typology and routes of migration from 1990 until 2002, see, for instance, Stan and Erne, "Explaining Romanian labor migration" and Dana Diminescu, "Exercițiul liber al liberei circulații: o introducere în istoria migrației recente a românilor", in *Sociologia migrației: Teorii și studii de caz românești*, edited by Remus Gabriel Anghel and István Horváth (Iași: Polirom, 2009), 45-64.
15. Cristina Brădățan, László J. Kulcsár, "When the Educated Leave the East: Romanian and Hungarian Skilled Immigration to the

- USA.” *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 15 (2014): 510.
16. *Ibid.*, 513.
  17. Anna O. Law, “The Diversity Visa Lottery: A Cycle of Unintended Consequences in United States Immigration Policy,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 21, no. 4 (2002): 23. Law points out that the implementation of the Visa Lottery has its origins in the 1965 Immigration Act and that “the call for the creation of the diversity lottery arose from a group of politically well-situated Irish and Italian-American Members of Congress who sought to benefit their ethnic constituents by rigging the immigration system in favor of these ethnic groups.” (4)
  18. *Ibid.*
  19. US Immigration and Naturalization Services, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Services* (Washington DC, 1996), 42.
  20. In addition to these two works, it can be mentioned at least two other volumes of poetry: Andrei Dósa’s *American Experience* (2013) and Ciprian Popescu’s *Mile End* (2016).
  21. See, for instance, Ioana Pavel, “Literature and Migration: The Re-Presentations of Italy in Contemporary Romanian Prose,” *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 6, no. 1 (2020): 147-163 and Larisa Prodan, “Women Migrants in Italy: A Double Peripherality,” *Metacritic Journal* 9, no. 1 (2023): 185-197.
  22. Anca Parvulescu, *The Traffic in Women’s Work: East European Migration and the Making of Europe* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 7.
  23. Bogdan Suceavă, *Avalon: Secretul emigranților fericiți* (Iași: Polirom, 2018), 17, my translation: “Voi urma în Michigan programul lor de doctorat. Merg acolo pentru că în Michigan se află unul dintre cei mai importanți specialiști din lume în acel domeniu al matematicii pe care-l studiez eu.”
  24. *Ibid.*, 19, my translation: “Sunt lucruri pe care nu le poți face decât într-o universitate americană.”
  25. The *mineriads* were a series of violent events that took place during the 1990s in Bucharest, particularly in 1990-1991. They refer to the repression (with the help of the miners from Jiu Valley) of the protests in the University Square, organized against the leading party, the National Salvation Front.
  26. Radu Pavel Gheo, *Adio, adio, patria mea, cu î din i, cu â din a* (Iași: Polirom, 2013), 9, my translation: “Totul a început de la un plic expediat la întâmplare pentru Loteria Vizelor din Statele Unite, parte din curiozitate, parte din exasperare, parte din imboldul fiecărui ins care și-a trăit adolescența sub semnul mirajului american.”
  27. Suceavă, *Avalon*, 47, my translation: “Eu iubesc prea mult Bucureștii. Eu mă voi întoarce. Pentru mine *acasă* e în altă parte.”
  28. Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and other essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 173.
  29. Mardorossian, “From Literature of Exile,” 16. For Mardorossian, the binary logic is a construct, a result of interpretation: “Their ‘privileged’ status as in-betweens, mediators between two cultures thus often becomes the cue that grounds interpretation and constructs a binary logic between an alienating ‘here’ and a romanticized ‘homeland’ (or, as in the case of V.S. Naipaul, between a romanticized ‘here/England’ and an alienating ‘there/Caribbean’).”
  30. Suceavă, *Avalon*, 59, my translation: “Acolo fusese acasă. Aici e altceva. O reședință temporară. Când, între timp, a devenit locul acesta *acasă*?”
  31. Susan Stanford Friedman, “Migrations, Diasporas, and Borders,” *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*, edited by David Nicholls (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2007), 262.
  32. Gheo, *Adio*, 18, my translation: “plecăm de bunăvoie, deși suntem obligați s-o facem.”
  33. *Ibid.*, 179, my translation: “Uneori, descriind America în culori mai întunecate, am avut senzația... nu, nu că exagerez, ci doar că nu reușesc să prind diferența specifică, ansamblul care face ca Statele Unite să fie concomitent visul a milioane de potențiali emigranți și țara cenușie și istovitoare pe care am descoperit-o.”
  34. See Radu Pavel Gheo, *Noaptea bună, copii!* (Iași: Polirom, 2010). One of the narrative plans in this novel follows the daily life of four adolescents who live during communism in a village at the border with Yugoslavia. They are fascinated by Western culture and goods (especially those coming from the United States) and even try to illegally cross the border in Yugoslavia, from where to emigrate to the US.
  35. *Ibid.*, 251-252, my translation: “Există, pentru fiecare dintre noi, un loc pe care îl numim *acasă*, care este legat de amintirile cele mai luminoase ale existenței și la care nu putem renunța fără a ne înstrăina de noi înșine.”
  36. The use of the “emigrants” (in the plural) is determined by the documentary character of the novel. Starting from the observation that academic migration is understudied in Romania, Ioana Macrea-Toma suggests that the novel has a historical and sociological character. See Macrea-Toma, “Excepția sincerității: romanul migrației academice,” *Observator cultural*, no. 966 (11.04.2019), <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/exceptia-sinceritatii-romanul-migratiei-academice/>.
  37. Suceavă, *Avalon*, p. 107, my translation. In original: “mulți dintre prietenii și foștii mei colegi erau în programe de doctorat în Statele Unite. Liliana Florea era din toamna lui 1995 la Penn State, Alina Sorescu la University of Houston, iar Cătălin Zara era la MIT. Mihaela Văjiaș și Ionuț Văjiaș erau la Boston University din 1994. Cezar Joița ... era la SUNY at Buffalo, iar Aurel Stan era la Louisiana State University. Numai la Michigan State University erau la un moment dat peste 40 de doctoranzi de origine română, în matematică, informatică, fizică sau chimie. Deși în țară rămâneau mulți dintre prietenii mei, o bună parte din





- România mea se mutase peste Atlantic.”
38. See Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Will Sommerville, and Madeleine Sumption, *The Social Mobility of Immigrants and Their Children*. Washington: Migration Policy Institute, 2009, 2.
39. Suceavă, *Avalon*, 347, my translation: “Știi ce mi se pare foarte dificil? Să treci de la făcut matematică pe bune la vândut matematică. E o diferență foarte mare între investigația matematică, autentică și solitară, și piața asta de aici.”
40. *Ibid.*, 349, my translation: “The cheamă la interviu ca să-și valideze statisticile. Unele universități au cerințe ca un anumit procent dintre cei intervievați să fie cu *background* internațional sau atâta procent să fie femei.”
41. Papademetriou et al., “The Social Mobility,” 5.
42. In Romania, Gheo had four or five jobs at some point but he was not a full-time employee anywhere. See Gheo, *Adio*, 11-12.
43. Gheo, *Adio*, 121, my translation: “Cert este că ne vom întoarce în cel mult un an jumate. Mai concret, eu sunt casierită la un magazin cu de toate, gen magazinele universale de la noi și cam la fel de mare. Câștig 7,50\$ pe oră, nu stau nici o secundă jos sau fără să fac ceva. Dacă n-am clienți, aranjez rafturi, fac curat sau gălesc – că trebuie să gălesc – ceva. Cu engleza mă descurc, înțeleg cam tot, dar uneori mă poticnesc când vreau să formulez un mesaj mai lung sau mai complicat. Gheo are două slujbe. Prima la un fel de băcănie rafinată (produse organice, vinuri fine, europene, și de-alde astea) pre numele său *Trader Joe's*. E slujba cea mai bine plătită din gospodăria noastră: 8,50\$ pe oră. Se execută de la 6 am la 2 pm. După-amiaza merge la librăria Barnes & Noble, unde lucrează la *receiving*. Scanează cărțile primite și le așază în rafturi. Prost plătit (6,75\$ pe oră), dar nu are de-a face cu răzgâiatul și uneori nesimțitul client american, ci lucrează între cărți.”
44. Herbert J. Gans, “First generation decline: downward mobility among refugees and immigrants,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no. 9 (2009): 1162. One of the five ways of coping with downward mobility identified by Gans is returning to the country of origin.
45. C. Rogozanu, “Poliromii,” *Observator cultural*, no. 198 (09.12.2003), <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/poliromii/>.
46. A similar remark is made by Ștefan Baghiu and Ovio Olaru. They argue that the narrator of Liliana Nechita’s *Cireșe amare* (2014) presents social issues as “nearly always issues with *civilization* or *mindset* rather than systemic issues.” See Ștefan Baghiu and Ovio Olaru, “Capitalist Heterotopia & Lost Social Utopia: Documenting Class, Work, and Migration in Post-communist East-Central European Fiction,” *Central Europe* 21, no. 2 (2023): forthcoming.
47. Gheo, *Adio*, 21.
48. *Ibid.*, 50, my translation: “Ca român, nu pot să nu mă gândesc cât de multă nostalgie a dictaturii comuniste mai trăiește în criticile la adresa capitalismului consumist.”
49. *Ibid.*, 197, my translation: “America nu e nici paradisul visat de est-europeanul din spatele Cortinei de Fier, dar nici infernul capitalismului putred.”
50. *Ibid.*, 22.
51. See Baghiu and Olaru, “Capitalist Heterotopias,”
52. Stan, “Post-Socialist Realism,” 76.
53. *Ibid.*, 179-180, my translation: “Iar dacă sistemul comunist s-a dovedit un eșec pe toate planurile, comunismul american, care excelează în plan economic, este – cred eu – un eșec în plan uman.”
54. *Ibid.*, 68.
55. *Ibid.*, 76, my translation: “Cam în toate locurile unde te poți duce și relaxa presupune că o să cheltui bani – și, oricât de incredibil mi s-ar fi părut înainte, chiar îi cheltui, fiindcă aici s-au exploatat toate metodele de a atrage clientul și de a vinde marfa.”
56. *Ibid.*, 43, my translation: “recunosc că înțeleg mai bine, pe pielea mea, ce înseamnă o lume concentrată pe ideea de rentabilitate, în care idealul este ca fiecare gest făcut în timpul programului să aducă un ban în plus, adică să fie eficient.”

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