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**“BUT WHAT ARE YOU, MAMA?”: GENDERED MIGRATION, EPISTEMIC
INJUSTICE, AND FEMINIST RESISTANCE IN
DOMNICA RĂDULESCU’S *DREAM IN A SUITCASE* (2022)¹**

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***Abstract:** Domnica Rădulescu’s (1961-) memoir, *Dream in a Suitcase*, is about her journey from communist Romania to the United States. Without bothering much about ‘political correctness,’ Rădulescu offers her readers an intimate account of her life that is filled with gendered and epistemic dimensions of displacement. By critically engaging with the memoir, we intend to discuss how Rădulescu navigates and negotiates the oppressive patriarchal structures of her homeland, i.e. Romania, and the host land, i.e. the United States, that subjugate women through cultural exoticization, economic precarity, and academic exclusion. The essay is divided into several subsections. The first section uses Miranda Fricker’s concept of epistemic injustice to analyse how Rădulescu resists both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. By taking a feminist approach, the second section situates migration with other interconnected issues such as gendered labour, precarious citizenship and the racialised migration dynamic to show how patriarchal oppression cuts across national boundaries. Lastly, the third section explores Foucault’s concept of heterotopia as an analytical framework to examine how the memoir itself can be seen as a subversive counter-space that counters hegemonic power structures, dismantles many stereotypes regarding Eastern European women, and recuperates migrant female agency in translational contexts.*

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1. Introduction

While exile is a loss and a profound one at that, it is also a form of rebirth.
Domnica Rădulescu (2022b, p. 252)²

It is now a widely acknowledged fact that twentieth-century Romania went through a difficult phase. Beginning with Soviet-imposed communism³ and ending with a failed post-communist democracy, Romania and its people endured a lot during these turbulent times. After World War II, communists seized power in Romania through rigged elections, replacing the monarchy with the People's Republic in 1947 and enforcing nationalisation, collectivisation, and harsh political repression under Securitate. Moreover, the political opponents of this regime were ruthlessly imprisoned, exiled, or silenced by these secret police forces. Nevertheless, historians acknowledge that President Gheorghiu-Dej did popularise Romania in the West to a certain extent, by implementing certain independent foreign policies which increased trade with the West during his tenure.

After Gheorghiu-Dej's regime, newly positioned Ceaușescu also gained popularity because of his discourse around the well-being of the country. Yet little did change in Romania. His regime remained one of the most repressive, and his secret police was responsible for mass surveillance, control over the media and the press. After Ceaușescu's execution in 1989, the emergence of freedom of speech, though limited, marked a significant shift, but new forms of oppression persisted. With the National Salvation Front (NSF) at the helm of the country, a system of gradual state-controlled transition was established. For many, migration became one of the survival strategies to escape the political repression and socio-economic stagnation. Migration for the Romanians started as a result of the lasting legacies of authoritarianism and the fiasco of the post-communist transition. Thus, Romanian migration should be studied as forced expulsion. It was essentially the failure of a state that had systematically abandoned its

² The book was originally released in hardcover in 2021.

³ As Katherine Verdery (1996) notes, scholars increasingly use *socialism* to describe the historical period often labelled as *communist*. This paper refers to *communism* to remain consistent with Rădulescu's terminology.

responsibilities to safeguard its citizens, offering only the spectre of economic stagnation, institutional corruption, and a weakened welfare infrastructure (Matras, 2000).

Romania's European Union (EU) accession, once considered a path to prosperity, reinforced the country's peripheral status within the neoliberal order. As Papadimitriou and Phinnemore (2008) note, "Romania faced significant hurdles to meet EU accession criteria – challenges that ultimately reinforced systemic marginalisation rather than empowerment" (p. 16). These realities come alive in post-communist testimonial literature, where personal stories reflect a shared sense of disillusionment. Writers like Carmen-Francesca Banciu (*Mother's Day*, 2015) and Carmen Bugan (*Burying the Typewriter*, 2012) recount their own encounters with repression, exile and the struggles of fractured identities. At the same time, works like Matei Vişniec's *Procesul comunismului* (2022) and the anthology titled *Ego-grafii* (a collection of 86 autobiographical writings published by Polirom) tell the story of the various ways in which the rise and collapse of communism impacted civilians (Verdery, 2013).

Contini and Carrera (2022) argue:

Faced with the extent of migration today, social scientists have posed several questions, and in particular, they have examined the causes of migration, the integration of immigrants into host countries, and the development of their cultural identity. The newcomers are almost always poorer than those who settled before them and have different languages, physical appearances, customs, beliefs, and religious practices. The widespread perception is that of an upheaval of the social order. (p. 2)

Domnica Rădulescu's *Dream in a Suitcase* (2022a) similarly shows how she, being a Romanian migrant woman, has also gone through a painful crisis of non-belongingness. The memoir not only reflects her personal story but simultaneously critiques the disruption of the social order that ignites such migration, where 'otherness' and womanhood must be continually negotiated.

The memoir traces her journey from Bucharest to Rome, then to Chicago, and ultimately to a small town in Virginia. She leaves Romania with a small suitcase that carries her hopes, dreams, education, and sense of agency. In the United States, she graduates with her PhD. She secures a tenure-track academic position in a small Virginia town, where she faces new challenges of misogyny while striving to assert her identity as an immigrant, scholar, single mother of two children by different fathers, an academic teaching foreign languages in a predominantly English-speaking environment, and a vocal feminist writer advocating for women's right to make their own choices concerning their bodies, reproduction, and sexual

lives. Her narrative situates personal grief within broader histories of tyranny, exile, and displacement, resonating with the current plight of Ukrainian refugees and echoing the struggles of migrants across the post-socialist region. In a review of the memoir, Roxana Cazan (2022) cites Ileana Nachescu's *Boston Review* article, and observes that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reignited "regional solidarities within the postsocialist space" (p. 60). She notes how various groups are uniting in response to the war, pointing to actions like Pussy Riot's recent video filmed in the ruins of Kharkiv. Similarly, the political history of Romania reveals a complex course in which women's movements have been consistently shaped, and often constrained, by shifting regimes, ideological projects, and entrenched social hierarchies.

In the pre-communist period, women's organising emerged primarily through elite, class-based, and religiously divided networks. As a result, women's literacy rate, especially in rural areas, continued to lag until the communist government began prioritizing and strictly implementing literacy policies through increased state investment. The communist regime initially achieved milestones in eradicating illiteracy and expanding women's access to paid employment, yet this progress was undermined by authoritarian control over women's reproductive rights, most infamously through the 1967 anti-abortion law, which resulted in suffering and numerous deaths. Bucur (2024) notes that, although Romania's integration into the European Union, which occurred after 1989, introduced legal frameworks for gender equality, women still hold only about 17% of parliamentary seats and often serve as token candidates. This continuous under-representation stimulates exile and drives them to recount their own stories. Similarly, Rădulescu's work with its personal story of survival becomes a broader act of solidarity with displaced women and communities. It belongs to the corpus of memoirs that deal with such themes as Dina Nayeri's *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019) or Qian Julie Wang's *Beautiful Country* (2021). It tells the narrative of being exiled: the agony of leaving one's native country and the strength needed to start again while yet holding on to the hopes and memories of the former one.

Like many migration narratives, Rădulescu's story also deals with the dual repression of the loss of homeland and the imposition of new forms of servitude in the so-called 'dreamland.' Vladimir F. Wertsman writes,

After the Revolution of December 1989, which brought an end to communism in Romania, thousands of new immigrants of all ages came to the United States, and new arrivals (legal and illegal) continue to enter the country. The elimination of communist travel restrictions, the desire of thousands of people to

be reunited with their American relatives and friends, and the precarious economic conditions in the new Romania were powerful incentives to come to America for a new start in life (n.d).

Rădulescu's belonging to such a large group of immigrants sharing her experiences, both of her past subjugation in Romania and her present self-negotiation in America, makes her memoir a successful archival heterotopia (Foucault, 1967, p. 26), which not only preserves but also subverts this body of knowledge. Hence, when migrant women write about exile, displacement, and identity, their narratives become living heterotopic archives, liminal spaces where both past and present are critically examined. Her journey is emblematic of a broader collective struggle among Eastern European women that is documented in the works of Vesna Goldsworthy's *Iron Curtain: A Love Story* (2022), Kapka Kassabova's *Border* (2017) or Ágota Kristóf's *The Illiterate* (2004).

The notion of 'home' in this context becomes fractured and liminal. Romania remains a site of exclusion and economic marginalisation, a space that no longer provides material security yet continues to exert cultural and emotional gravity. Meanwhile, America, the aspirational site of reinvention, emerges as an extension of capitalist patriarchy, where migrant woman's labour is welcomed yet unacknowledged and her identity reduced to the functions she performs. Every role Rădulescu inhabits – girlfriend to an American poet, nanny, mother, provider for both her children and her parents, and inspiration to the next generation – is a spectral echo of the historical divisions imposed upon women in her homeland. Moreover, this recursive setup accentuates how precarious citizenship operates: a condition of conditional belonging that demands perpetual labour, compliance, and erasure. A critical feminist study of *Dream in a Suitcase* (2022a), with its systematic investigation of the text, practices, or social realities, disrupts hegemonic narratives of migration as self-actualisation, exposing instead the existential fractures that come with transnational displacement. It hints towards a larger discourse of migrant women's journeys, which makes it systematic and comparative; in opposition, a *reading* would likely stay closer to the text itself. The memoir, in its testimonial defiance, becomes an act of epistemic resistance, a counter-archive that challenges the economic rhetoric treating Eastern European migrants as both invisible and indispensable. By claiming her own voice, Rădulescu rejects the image of passive migrant women and asserts her right to speak, to think, and to exist beyond the limits of state socialism or neoliberalism. Her story leaves us with pressing questions: How does one resist when every space, be it the

homeland or the promised land, demands a form of erasure? And, more critically, how does one reclaim belonging in a world that renders displacement the very condition of survival?

Thus, by examining Rădulescu's journey within the larger discourse of migrant women's journeys, this paper, in three sections, argues that gendered migration is not merely an economic movement but a re-inscription of historical gendered subordination. Romanian migrant women, similar to many others from post-communist states, face a paradox. On the one hand, they must relinquish their former identities to assimilate into the global labour economy; on the other, they resist complete erasure through acts of everyday defiance, memoir writing, cultural memory, and community-building, where only a privileged few may openly sustain such resistance. Taking cues from Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice, the paper is an analysis of how Rădulescu counters testimonial and hermeneutical injustice by reclaiming the authority of migrant women's voices against dominant narratives. By taking a feminist approach to migration, the second section is about Rădulescu's experiences within other important contexts such as gendered labour, precarious citizenship and the racialised dynamics of migration in order to study how patriarchal oppression transcends national borders. Finally, the third section explores how Michel Foucault's ideas around heterotopia serve to illustrate Rădulescu's nomadic identity, which acts as a counter-space that subverts stereotypes of Eastern European women and redefines migrant subjectivity.

2. Gendered resistance and epistemic injustice

The memoir *Dream in a Suitcase* (2022a) reflects on the experience of displacement and self-reinvention. Rădulescu recalls leaving Romania in 1983, packing only a few personal belongings, clothes, photographs, and writings before starting a journey that would redefine her life. The decision to flee was driven by political circumstances, marking a permanent rupture with her and her comrades' homeland. In the first chapter, for example, titled "Escape," Rădulescu provides one such political circumstance. She talks about an attic theatre where she, along with many others, used to rehearse or perform plays. This place was hidden under the roof of the communist Youth Headquarters. For them, this space used to be a safe space, and through their performance, they enjoyed at least a little bit of liberty: "We take liberties; we can do whatever we want in this grey Attic space" (2022a, p. 10). However, as the narrative further unfolds, it becomes clear that this apparently safe or liberating place was never beyond the reach of the secret police. As she humorously writes, "The secret police agent is getting bored,

I think. They have nothing better to do with their time but to follow me” (p. 10). In such a society, not showing so-called “communist enthusiasm” was itself a crime (2022a, p. 7).

Moreover, the constant surveillance of civilians by the secret police is not something that came from any real evidence of “wrongdoings” but from the suspicion of being against the state regime. Rădulescu’s act of seeking a passport, or merely existing without overt expressions of allegiance to the communist state, is enough to raise suspicion. The secret police of communist-ridden Romania and their “omnipresent surveillance,” therefore, transformed the lives of the civilians into self-censorship, fear, and quiet rebellion. They ensured that even the most general activities, *i.e.*, walking home and attending theatre rehearsals, became political acts. Her anxiety about being reported is not paranoia but a rational response to a system that thrives on fear.

The decision to flee was thus driven by political circumstances, marking a permanent rupture with the homeland. Over time, the trauma of exile transforms into a process of creating new, real and imagined homes, shaped by lived experiences. Upon reaching Chicago as a political refugee during an unforgiving winter, Rădulescu is continually met with the inquiry, “Where are you from?” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 116), a question that, as Sara Ahmed observes, turns into a space one inhabits. This pattern of ruptured intimacy remains prevalent in Rădulescu’s life – first with her illicit Romanian lover, later with an American poet – and illustrates how personal choices are continually fractured by larger cultural and political constraints. These broken relationships are less the outcome of individual indecisiveness than the structural coercion of displacement: her father’s maxim that “character is destiny” (2022a, p. 67) becomes a cruel irony when what appears as crooked choice is the symptom of a life lived under duress. She writes, “Both through my writing and my life choices, I have become the ‘architect’ of my own residence of foreignness” (2022b, p. 254).

Her insistence that she had “no choice” (2022a, p. 156) in being born under communism foregrounds the limits of agency in exile narratives; thus, social coordination, as traditionally understood, has been framed in purely practical terms, wherein individuals align their actions with others in pursuit of collective functioning. However, power often demands a level of coordination, one that is not merely practical but also imaginative. When power operates by leveraging these shared imaginative conceptions, it assumes the form of identity power. As Karmakar and Chetty (2023) note, drawing on Fricker, this can be understood as a form of epistemic injustice – “which is an injustice belonging to a person in his other role as a knower

that is perpetrated on a speaker when the legitimacy of her statement is discounted by a hearer due to prejudice” (p. 501).

Gender, as one of the primary domains of identity power, exemplifies how social coordination is not only external but also internalised, affecting perceptions of selfhood and agency. An active exercise of gender epistemic injustice through identity power is evident when a man, even unconsciously, exploits his identity as a man to influence a woman’s behaviour, perhaps compelling her to defer to his authority or suppress her own voice. Fricker (2007) writes, “*the effects that a corrupt sexual ideology [...] can have not only on sexual but also on epistemic and discursive relations between men and women*” (emphasis added, p. 138).

This can be seen in her pursuit of education, which places her in opposition to the personal desires that shape her life, as observable in her relationship with her Romanian mountaineering lover before the escape. His rejection of Bucharest, calling it “the stinking capital” (2022a, p. 62), where she became “a monster” that held on to her university degree (p. 62), ignites her longing for escape, and her refusal to abandon her studies signals a kind of resistance, not just in relation to him but also to the forces that would render her invisible. Rădulescu’s struggle represents, in a broader sense, epistemic injustice, as her pursuit of education is perceived as unusual within a patriarchal system that values women primarily in relational roles. Her lover’s rejection of her choice reflects an embedded epistemic hierarchy where central social structures dictate which knowledge and aspirations are valid. This lack of representation of women’s desires based on their gender creates an “hermeneutical injustice” (Fricker, 2007, p. 148). Material power shapes epistemic authority, making women’s autonomy unintelligible within dominant frameworks (Fricker, 2007; Hartsock, 1998). Thus, the struggle against hermeneutical epistemic injustice, as defined by Fricker, “[...] the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource” (2007, p. 155), is inseparable from broader struggles for material and social justice.

The narratives of displacement, gendered power, and constrained self-knowledge exemplify the persistent nature of epistemic oppression. The university offers Rădulescu a means of survival and resistance, yet even education is embedded in structures that marginalise certain identities. In her contemplation between landscape and education, Rădulescu captures the collapse of both private hope (love, intimacy, individual futures) and public possibility (social life under dictatorship) in her relationship with the mountaineering lover before leaving Romania. The description of “beautiful landscapes” and “rigorous education” juxtaposed

against “no hot water and no heating” (2022a, p. 64) emphasises the dissonance between symbolic capital (space, lifestyle, knowledge, career, future) and material deprivation:

“Education translated into career, profession, future. Some version of a future. Living where we lived, we couldn’t really talk of either lifestyle or a hopeful future. Everybody waited in the same bloody lines for food at the grocery stores, restricted in what they could buy by the same stupid food rations and was being followed around by the same onerous secret police.” (2022a, p. 64).

These ideals are hollowed out; education leads to no future, landscapes to no meaningful lifestyle. It’s a critique of how oppressive regimes nullify even the most basic cultural and intellectual resources. Teampău (2024) writes:

In Ceaușescu’s Romania (1965–1989), under the official label of ‘women’s emancipation’, women’s interests were never truthfully recognised as a specific project but only as part of the larger social revolution. Women internalised this discourse and joined ‘the great army of communists’, where their gender identity was slowly erased and replaced by neutral political citizenship.

She further quotes the writer Lucia Demetrius, who suggested that women’s emancipation was never a feminist project but rather a state policy that mobilised women for the regime’s purposes:

I want to confess that when it came to my relation to the world, to my professional life, I have always considered myself a person, not a woman. I never had any feminist obsessions or frustrations. I never felt the need for feminist claims. (Demetrius, 1979, cited in Teampău, 2024, p. 78).

Moreover, in Rădulescu’s pursuit of higher education, systematic devaluation operates through what Fricker (2007) terms *testimonial injustice*, “the injustice that a speaker suffers in receiving deflated credibility from the hearer owing to identity prejudice on the hearer’s part” (p. 4). In Romania, her expertise in English literature was politically useless under Ceaușescu’s regime, where she foresaw being relegated to “teaching the alphabet to six-year-olds with a useless diploma” (2022a, p. 62). Exile did not resolve this. In the U.S., her “textbook” (2022a, p. 31) English and foreign accent left her vulnerable to subtle forms of prejudice, her credibility as a speaker undermined not by lack of knowledge but by linguistic mediation. In both contexts, her linguistic capital was dismissed, first by authoritarian censorship, then by epistemic exclusions abroad. What is usually dismissed as “culture shock” for outsiders trying to settle

into a new culture emerges for her as something much deeper and more pervasive, affecting not just social adaptation but the entire sensory and bodily experience. She says,

And they were wrong, those who called it ‘culture shock’. It was more like an overall physical and mental shock to everything that I experienced: from the tasteless pasty tomatoes, to the American mannerisms of rolling one’s eyes and smiling incessantly even when one didn’t mean it, to the strength of the sun, the consistency of the air I breathed, to the sound of the voices around me, to the exhaustion my jaws and head felt from speaking only English for hours, for days on end. I delighted in speaking Romanian with my parents when we gathered in the evening for dinner, throwing myself into conversation the way one throws themselves into a cool spring on a sweltering day. My native tongue felt cozy and refreshing to my soul and in my mouth. (2022a, p. 53).

For Rădulescu, migration disrupted not just her daily routines but her very way of thinking and feeling, which is reflected in the comfort she takes when speaking Romanian during family dinners. Her experience highlights how society shapes dominant epistemologies, dismissing women’s ambitions as invisible or deviant. Yet, by choosing education over societal expectations, she quietly resists these limits and asserts her own voice against patriarchal norms. Education became for her “a modicum of dignity and leverage in the overall inferno of life” (2022a, p. 62). Fricker (2007) argues,

Our interest in forms of epistemic injustice naturally directs us to the epistemological reading. However, we shall never be far from related material and ontological questions, for it is obvious that certain material advantages will generate the envisaged epistemological advantage; if you have material power, then you will tend to have an influence in those practices by which social meanings are generated. And in the hermeneutical context of social understanding, it is also clear that, at least sometimes, if understandings are structured a certain way, then so are the social facts. (p. 147).

Caught between love and ambition, the memoir negotiates personal dreams against the suffocating weight of an oppressive regime. Her decision is not about attachment to the city itself but about refusing to surrender her intellectual identity for a life defined by a man’s dreams. Her education lets her defy Nancy Hartsock’s assertion that “the dominated live in a world structured by others for their purposes” (Hartsock, 1998, p. 241), as she resists being subsumed into a role not of her own making.

This violent policing of women’s desire was not confined to the realm of education but extended beyond its border, penetrating the private sphere. Romania’s “abortion culture”

(Kligman, 2023), unlike those of its Eastern Bloc counterparts, represented an extreme form of biopolitical control, reducing women's bodies to state-owned property for demographic expansion. Just as the regime criminalised intellectual and political defiance, it also criminalised women's bodily autonomy by implementing strict pronatalist policies where childbirth was framed as a patriotic duty. Ceaușescu's infamous declaration that "the foetus is the socialist property of the whole society" (cited in David and Băban, 1996, p. 237) not only erased female agency but also imposed a hermeneutical silence on the suffering of women, leaving them with no socially sanctioned language to articulate their oppression, as seen in Cristian Mungiu's award winning film *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007).

In this context, Rădulescu's decision to prioritise her education over motherhood is more than an act of individual defiance; it is an epistemic resistance against a regime that sought to dictate the meaning of womanhood. The very hesitation in her phrasing, "for whatever that was worth," (2022a, p. 67) acknowledges that this choice is neither heroic nor fully free, but rather the only way to claim agency within constraint. As she stands "empty-handed, empty hearted," (2022a, p. 64) staring at the rooftops swarming with life, she meets the cruel absurdity of an enforced maternity policy that renders its subjects emotionally and physically barren. Her mother, though complicit in warning her against "shaming" (2022a, p. 64) the family, ultimately defies the system by secretly obtaining contraception for her, a small yet radical disruption of the state's monopolisation of reproductive knowledge. This moment echoes the collective struggle of women whose oppression was "ill-understood" because it was "collectively ill-understood" (Fricker, 2007, p. 149), reinforcing how epistemic injustice denies the marginalised the tools to make sense of their own suffering. In contrast, her lover's choice of a nicer landscape reflects the state's preference for an aestheticized, nationalistic vision of womanhood, one that privileges the reproductive over the intellectual and the maternal over the self-determined.

Within this environment of anxiety, even the simple act of packing the suitcase becomes an exercise in secrecy and survival, with items carrying the weight of memory and loss. Her last-minute panic, "It's not so bad here after all, Mama!" (2022a, p. 12), reveals how even the most oppressive conditions become familiar and how the unknown, even when it represents freedom, is terrifying. This reflects Doston's (2012) point: epistemic exclusions are infringements on the epistemic agency of knowers that reduce their ability to participate in a given epistemic community. Moreover, her mother's resolute insistence, "You must go, it's your chance to leave now or never!" (2022a, p. 12) is not just maternal encouragement but a grim

acknowledgement of reality as she believed that in this country, her daughter has no future. Her father's bitter curse, "goddamn the secret police, and may they all turn to dust one day and get what they deserve" (2022a, p. 12), is not just rage but a recognition of what Fricker (2007) precisely describes as epistemic injustice when constant surveillance and collectivised gender decisions by an oppressed regime not only cause epistemic harms but also constitute moral wrongs.

Thus, exile and displacement are not random misfortunes but result from a systemic oppression where the secret police and surveillance state control women's bodies and suppress creativity, ensuring that those who dare to imagine a different future are driven into silence, submission, or exile.

3. Gender, migration, and precarious belonging

The concept of precarious citizenship, characterised by restricted access to rights, social protections, and political voice, provides a critical framework for differentiating and analysing the lived experiences of migrants, particularly for women whose movement is shaped by both structural vulnerability and persistent social subjugation. Unlike traditional studies that emphasise legal status or formal incorporation, this lens foregrounds how institutions actively sustain inequality, rendering certain populations disposable or only conditionally included (Punathil, 2022). Rădulescu's journey shows not just individual challenges but also broader trends of systemic transformation, wherein gendered migration encounters inadequate protection, reduced rights, and a complicated redefinition of belonging. Rădulescu's "growing maturity" evident in her characters who "dare reinvent themselves in new circumstances and start afresh with self-confidence and trust, as the author herself did within her own spectacular and eventful migration journey," (Smith, 2015, pp. 228-229) comes with a profound sense of confusion and disorientation, where the promise of freedom collides with the reality of alienation. Her father's desire for his hometown, his inability to understand or accept the new language, and the harsh weather of the new place makes him feel trapped instead of free. She says, "Trading my father's life for my future? What future? It wasn't clear. The refugee trap! The American Dream trap! What were we to do now that we had all the freedom of speech in the world? What were we going to talk about?" (2022a, p. 55). This persistent ambiguity shows how migration reshapes lives not into clear narratives of progress but into tangled experiences of hope, sacrifice, and profound confusion about belonging and purpose.

Moreover, the condition of being a woman reveals how subjugation operates differently yet persistently across political regimes and intimate domains: under Romanian communism, despite the rhetoric of gender-neutral citizenship and labour equality, women were systematically confined to their dual roles as producers and reproducers, celebrated in propaganda as “socialist mothers,” while in reality doubly exploited and silenced within patriarchal structures. Teampău (2024) writes:

There is a large agreement among scholars of Romanian communism that, despite predicting gender-neutral citizenship, the regime had, reinforced traditional gender roles for women, highlighting women’s reproductive role and their identity as ‘socialist mothers.’ This was particularly the case after the late 1960s and, as LaFont (2001, p. 205) has argued, ‘instead of truly liberating women, state communism turned into a system that doubly exploited women in their roles as producers and reproducers.’ (p. 78).

By contrast, in the neoliberal landscapes of America, women migrants encounter a different but equally insidious form of precarious citizenship. This is visible in the relationships that Rădulescu goes through in her American life as well. First with Marc, who is an American-Irish poet from Cleveland who becomes engaged to the Romanian narrator. At the celebratory dinner, he is caught in the cross-cultural awkwardness between his limited Romanian and her father’s limited English. When presented with the sacred Jerusalem family wedding ring, his shocked silence and grimace expose his reluctance and his perception of the narrator as desperate. The narrator’s internalization of Marc’s judgment (“ridiculous naïveté,” “money grabber, a sex grabber, a manipulator”) shows how gender intensifies migrant precarity. A woman’s desire for closeness and family is seen as manipulation rather than love. Marc’s privilege as the “poet knight in not-so-shining armour” shows that he has the power to define the meaning of their relationship, while she has to explain her actions continuously (2022a, p. 60). Symbolically, Marc stands as both a failed lover and a representative of America’s ambivalent hospitality toward migrants, which is presented as superficially appreciative of their culture but unwilling to grant them unconditional belonging.

Just as post-communist transitions into capitalist democracies did not significantly dismantle patriarchal structures, similarly, in America, subjugation operates on a subtler yet equally insidious level. Giorgio Agamben’s idea of “bare life” (1998) and the “state of exception” (2005) explain how political systems strip citizens of protections, reducing them to bodies that can be controlled, managed, or even sacrificed. Judith Butler, with her “precarious life,” (2006), argues that certain populations and their lives are framed as less “grievable” (2009). Both reflect

how power functions at the intersection of politics and embodiment, showing how states and societies differentiate between lives deemed worthy of protection and those which are relegated to precarity.

Rădulescu's mother's near-death abortion in communist Romania exemplifies Agamben's *state of exception*. Under Ceaușescu's natalist regime, women's bodies were not their own but instruments of the state, suspended from legal protection. Rădulescu recalls her own "procedure," longing for an uninterrupted time to write, meaningful vacations with her sons, and intimacy with her husband. Her saying, "I feel grateful that my abortion took place under all the appropriate and necessary lights, with no electrical shortages and blackouts, which is how my mother had the one that left her with a massacred uterus" (2022a, p. 108), contrasts between her own access to care in America and her mother's perilous experience under Romania's communist regime. Her mother's septicaemia exemplifies a reduction to bare life, a life rendered disposable yet instrumental for political reproduction. Yet, even within the apparently available resources of the American context, Rădulescu's experience remains politically and socially mediated. It reflects Butler's notion of precarity: although abortion is legal, her body is still subject to discursive and public regulation, where protesters, social stigma, and medical surveillance render her life conditionally valued. She says:

We pass three ominous metal crosses the size of the Eiffel Tower that supposedly were built in memory of the "killed babies". *They are fetuses, you morons*, I argue in my mind with the crowds of Jesus and fetus-lovers, the crosses, the Christian truckers on the road. "It's a life not a choice"; it's a fucking choice! How about the babies dead of starvation, the children shot in gun violence, the women killed in acts of domestic violence? I develop an entire feminist lecture as we pass the glorious dark blue Appalachians just in the off chance that I may have to give such a lecture if ever I was to be judged for 'murder' by a jury of devoted life-loving Christians with gun collections in their living room cabinets, in the eventuality of a fascist take-over of the American government. I am prepared for everything. (2022a, p. 105).

Both women exist within structures that politicize reproduction, Romania through authoritarian biopolitics, America through democratic moral policing. In both cases, abortion reveals how women's citizenship is precarious, never fully autonomous but always negotiated within systems that make their lives vulnerable.

The intersection of gender, ideology, and displacement becomes especially visible for transnational women. Transnationalism, Stoican (2016) notes, "refers to cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations, and social formations straddling nation-states"

(p. 2). Rădulescu's identity becomes precarious and transnational, with her lost national identity and obligatory global expectations in both nations. Wirth (2013) argues that, in migration narratives, memory plays a performative role through an embodied act of critique, mourning, and resistance. Rădulescu's narrative reveals how transnational lives always dwell between the rights of displaced citizens and their performance of belonging. This is more accurately demonstrated when her father breaks down after his sister Mimi's death and is unable to mourn her during his last days in Romania. It becomes a permanent trauma in his migrant identity. His reaction of punching the walls and the talk of suicide reflect the traumatic separation one has to endure far from one's land and the memory which always accompanies migration. But his insistence that his daughter stays in America to fulfil her dream of belonging reflects how belonging is negotiated across generations. Father and daughter refer to the new weather as "grey and blurry winter" (2022a, p. 350) reflecting their broader confusion and precarity of belonging in a new land. Especially the father's discontent with the unfamiliar nature metaphorically mirrors the migrant body's unfamiliarity: politically, culturally, but also sensorily.

In this environment, citizenship ceases to guarantee safety and instead manifests as a condition of psychic suspension. Rădulescu's father, despite having carved out a new life in the U.S., remains irrevocably hitched to what he has left behind. But Rădulescu knows she is an "American now" (2022a, p. 146). This contradiction – the urge to return in her father and the insistence that his daughter remains – condenses the tragic double bind of migrant precariousness. Here, Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism" (2011, p. 24) becomes crucial: the father's belief in the American dream has become an attachment that harms him, and yet he cannot abandon it. The American promise, once enticing, has now calcified into a painful obligation. In other words, it now points to a future that is neither liberatory nor bearable.

Rădulescu, too, is not spared from this split existence. Her first encounter with menstruation in America, "I stare at the blood in my underwear and think of the mould under the sink, think how the blood looks like the jam we had in Romania" (2022a, p. 235), collapses the boundary between body, memory, and displacement. Even her menstrual blood becomes a reminder of the body's foreignness in a new land, a sign that the body, too, can betray its owner when uprooted. Chicago's ice becomes constant, not just climatically but existentially; it's in the alien textures of American supermarkets, in the bus station where language fails, and in the freshly painted saints on the American church walls. These saints, too bold and too clean, echo

Rădulescu's own struggle: how does one remain holy with one's past while living in a world that sanitises every form of foreignness?

Even several years after living and building a life in America, she returns to memory, and this comes up in the narrator's conflicted emotions as she prepares to visit Romania after sixteen years in America. She recalls her mother's endurance under the communist regime while struggling with her own maternal anxieties in a superficially secure yet alien American land. She wonders: "How did my mother manage to raise me in communist Romania [...] in a tiny apartment the size of my kitchen?" (2022a, p. 131). Her sense of self emerges through shifting metaphors, sometimes as "the girl on the train" moving forward into an uncertain future, sometimes as "the girl on the platform" watching life pass by (2022a, p. 127). These self-images capture her unsettled position as an immigrant who feels suspended between two worlds.

What emerges is the dramatization of the narrator's precarious citizenship as both immigrant and mother, caught between Romania's authoritarian past and America's illusory security. Bhabha's notion of "third space" (2004) is particularly relevant here: Rădulescu does not fully belong to either Romania or America but instead inhabits an interstitial zone that resists binaries, where her precarious citizenship constantly connects with precarious linguistic and cultural estrangement. Her own admission, "I stare at the list that I wrote on the back of my boarding pass and smile at how ingeniously I combined bogus answers with true answers to confuse the student, meaning myself," highlights the irony of self-classification, where her identity is lived as a multiple-choice test without a single correct answer (2022a, p. 141). She herself becomes a third space in her constant cultural negotiation.

Moreover, both her romantic and professional roles in the West reflect the multiple and contradictory parts that she has to perform, always opposed to the sheer reality of her gender role. Her womanhood and assertion of agency are always in conflict with the conventional gender ideals of her citizenship. Embracing her desire for her 'exotic lover,' she says, "I make love like I was made for it, deliberately and with abandon at once. I am perfecting it like an art in fragrant jasmine breezes" (2022a, p. 269). Yet, this feeling of pleasure becomes transgressive immediately with the recognition that "women and mothers aren't supposed to experience this totality of carnal and romantic thrill. They make for unlikable neighbours and unacceptable novel characters" (2022a, p. 269). Similarly, her professional life in the West reflects this conflict that comes with her gender performance. Her "hard-won university job," which makes her empowering, brings her material benefits such as allowing her to travel for her need and

desire, becomes equally confining, as it also ties her to “a stupid faculty meeting where balding white men sing their own praises” (2022a, pp. 269-70).

This contrast dramatizes the precariousness of her intellectual identity as an immigrant woman. She remembers her parents’ limited mobility under communism, trains with canned foods and nights at railway stations, and though she now moves freely, every step is still shadowed by estrangement, duty and unresolved longing. The untranslatable Romanian word *dor*, a profound longing for what was lost, might have been, or was never fully attained, reflects her struggle being in a precarious zone of (non)-existence. She mentions:

‘dor’, the untranslatable Romanian word that signifies an inexplicable longing and yearning for everything you lost or might have lost, or might have had but never got, with its haunting echoes and images of melancholy tunes spread over rolling hills with mythic shepherds and their picturesque sheep, gripped my entire being in its hold and tied me to my native land tighter than ever. (2022a, p. 31).

This desire represents the absurdity and precariousness of the transnational citizen, *i.e.* to exist in instability while yearning for stability. Smith (2003) argues transnationalism allows “(non)-citizens to live and work in transnational cities throughout the world while maintaining social and political networks linking them to people and places located in their countries of origin” (p. 15), but Rădulescu’s journey reveals its uneven realities, particularly for women who bear the intersecting burdens of gender, migration, and economic vulnerability. As a single mother, she doesn’t only cross borders; she is always trying to make sense of broken systems of care and recognition. In this setting, transnationalism and citizenship transform into a delicate trope where the ambiguities of belonging, identity, and survival are enacted.

4. Heterotopic subjectivity and gendered exile

Foucault’s heterotopia is a space that is real yet other, layered with contradictions, exclusions, and juxtapositions. These spaces challenge dominant narratives by existing in between, simultaneously mirroring and subverting established structures. Foucault reflected on the possibility of studying systematically a range of “different spaces” that somehow challenge or contest the space we live in: “not a science of utopias but of heterotopias, a science of absolutely other spaces” (Foucault, 1966). Johnson (2006) argues that, in modern times, heterotopias are more likely to mark out spaces of deviation rather than life stages.

For those exiled or migrant women, heterotopia becomes a lived geography of resistance and negotiation, and when written about their identity, body, and memory, they are continuously reconstituted. This goes beyond refugees and displaced people continually pushed to the margins of institutions, cities, and collective consciousness. Even though Rădulescu's situation appears far better than that of refugees or the stateless, her "tiny apartment in the city of Bucharest" reveals how her so-called "private" home becomes a haunted space of suffocation and dread rather than a sanctuary. The "matchbox apartment," obtained through bribery and desperation, is described as both privilege and prison:

When my father uses the word 'calamitous', it's like thunder, like the Russian tanks are rolling down our street. 'The Turks just wanted our land, but the Russians wanted to possess our minds and souls', he says. This is also the summer when the young daughter of my parents' friends who are both actors fell out of their apartment's balcony to her death. Her body was crushed on the asphalt, and she died on the spot. Her mother lost her mind. And a neighbour's child down the street died locked inside his family's refrigerator. He wanted to play a trick on his parents and hid inside the refrigerator, but he got stuck inside, and when they opened the door to the fridge to look for something to eat, they found him frozen like a block of ice. Many children died the same way. (2022a, p. 16).

In Agamben's terms, those outside the sacred "trinity of state, nation, and territory" occupy a space of non-belonging, stripped to "bare life" (Agamben, 2000, p. 23). Yet Rădulescu shows that even those nominally within the state's protective shell are not secure; the home itself becomes an emplacement of vulnerability, where national 'liberation' paradoxically intensifies fear, surveillance, and death. Children falling from balconies or freezing inside refrigerators transform domestic interiors into sites of horror rather than protection, exposing the fragility of belonging itself.

Here, Foucault's notion of emplacement is useful: "We do not live in a void but in a range of diverse emplacements" that may still contain "persistent if unacknowledged sacralised oppositions" such as private/public or family/social (1998a, p. 176). Rădulescu's apartment embodies precisely this contradiction; it is private yet penetrated by political dread, familial yet overshadowed by collective trauma. It resembles a heterotopia, "connected to all other emplacements, but in such a way that [it] suspend[s], neutralize[s], or reverse[s] the set of relations" that ordinarily define them (Foucault, 1998, p. 178).

Romania is depicted as a strong heterotopic place, with its physical areas or social sites, a 'prison of the everyday' masked by its stunning natural landscapes, which produces

confinement and desire simultaneously. Rădulescu's recollections of Bucharest and Braşov reveal a kind of duality. The Carpathian Mountains are celebrated for their romantic and liberating allure: "The torrential rains we walked in, the fluffy thick snow we tiptoed and made love on [...] Love was all that mattered" (2022a, p. 243). Yet the city stands in sharp contrast, it is cold and harsh: "The Party cut off the heat in apartments across the country [...] we lived in our cement bloc apartments like squatters" (2022a, pp. 63-64). This comparison of sublime scenery with material and political deprivation exemplifies heterotopia, a space that is 'other' in its simultaneous existence of beauty and restriction, pleasure and regulation. Feminine boundaries are inscribed within this spatial and social heterotopia. She reflects: "He chose landscape, and I chose university studies," (2022a, p. 67), stressing how gendered and personal agency function within the structural confines of heterotopic spaces. The mountains, though physically liberating, are paradoxically implicated in her alienation, while Bucharest, the urban and political centre, becomes a space of both entrapment and eventual self-realization, emphasising the ambivalence of environment, gender, and power in shaping the subject's lived experience.

Yet, Romania is also heterotopic in a more nuanced sense, as it generates counter-memories, humour, irony, and survival strategies that emerge under authoritarian constraints. The author illustrates this paradoxical attachment through personal memories, describing the "fast cars, a whirlwind existence of strong sensations and reckless choices" of her youth alongside moments of intimate longing and cultural connection (2022a, p. 67). Music becomes a temporal and spatial anchor: Queen's *We Are the Champions*, which she danced to with her Romanian boyfriend in "the glimmers of a late summer sunset seen from the balcony of our brand new privately-owned neighbouring apartments in Bucharest," (2022a, p. 174) and Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive*, sung by a classmate who had survived an illegal abortion, link her American present to her Romanian past. These recollections operate heterotopically, suspending linear time, juxtaposing past and present, and inverting conventional notions of home, even as she navigates life in the United States. In the same spirit, she chooses writing itself as a heterotopic archival resistance, an imaginative practice that creates counter-sites where exile is not only remembered but transformed. She says,

To illustrate some fertile encounters between the bittersweet imperfection of exile and the 'relaxed imperfection' of the truthful 'lies' of literature, I have chosen several works by immigrant writers who have put themselves indeed in the service of those "who suffer" history and not of those who make it,

authors of hybridic art who navigate between poetic memorialistic prose, experimental dramatic texts, and theatrical performances. (2022b, p. 253).

Romania's attentive memory in the author's writing functions as an act of heterotopic resistance. Even as she watches the revolution that would topple Nicolae Ceaușescu's decades-long dictatorship in December 1989 and mark the violent, chaotic end of communist rule, unfold from her in-laws' home in Maine, she experiences an instinctive desire to engage directly in the country's upheaval: "Instead of being happy that I found myself in the safety of my in-laws' luxurious home... I was dying to be where my people were dying in the streets" (2022a, p. 255). Foucault's conception of heterotopia clarifies this experience: such sites "contest and contradict" (Johnson, 2006, p. 78) the norms of surrounding society. In her memoir, by maintaining an active and critical engagement with her birthplace, she enacts a form of cultural and emotional resistance, preserving the reality of Romania in her consciousness while negotiating the distance imposed by exile.

Similarly, since memories of Romania continually intrude upon and structure her American life, her identity in the United States is structured not through stable fulfilment or belonging but rather through the *lack* of them. She often describes herself in the third person, connecting to the self that is lost: "The girl with the small suitcase carrying all her belongings [...] writes her story madly, every chance she gets" (2022a, p. 168). Her alternation between an externalised third-person perspective and intimate self-awareness becomes a critical mechanism to construct a heterotopic space, a site where contradictory identities and histories coexist. She exists, fundamentally, as a provider, emotionally, logistically, and maternally, yet is deprived of any reciprocal satisfaction. The internalisation of duty without pleasure structures her as a being-for others, disjointed from a stable being-for-self. In trying to offer cultural inheritance and memory to her sons, she is also, ironically, disconnected from the very emotional world she longs to pass down.

She critically exposes in her memoir subtle gendered subjugation, or the patterns that can be seen in average American couples with their marital dissatisfaction, compulsion, and infidelity. She says, "Most men I have known [...] got married because their wives got pregnant first and they felt compelled to marry them, whether they liked it or not. At one point or another, such a man is bound to feel trapped and want out" (2022a, p. 292). This shows how even in American middle-class life, women's identities are often judged by their performance of

domesticity and self-effacement and misogyny is embedded in normative life. She even criticizes the performative sociality of her female colleagues:

Again, I make fleeting friendships with female colleagues whose idea of fun at parties where all the adults get wasted just like the students they criticize, is to talk about university politics in self-important jargon and about the thrills and agonies of their vaginas and how they want to get away from their teenage children. (2022a, p. 292).

Here, the narrator positions herself outside the performative norms of social and academic femininity, asserting autonomy over her interests, relationships, and intellectual life.

The juxtaposition of “Romanian youth filled with hunger and fears” (2022a, p. 174) and American life in her forties stresses a late, displaced adolescence. Her desires for sex, booze, and fast cars reflect those she forbids her sons, suggesting a painful psychic split. She remains emotionally unfulfilled even as she is socially productive, a classic expression of what Sara Ahmed (2017) describes as the feminist killjoy, the one who absorbs and regulates the emotional temperature of the household, often at the cost of her own well-being.

Over time, America, and specifically her small town in Virginia, combines itself in a heterotopic space of resistance with her own reclamation of agency. In Foucault’s terms, heterotopias are real spaces that juxtapose multiple layers of reality, functioning as sites of otherness within ordinary social order (Foucault, 1987). The narrator’s connection with every aspect of her town, be it streets, corners, local tragedies, and milestones, produces a geography of memory and experience that resists normative narratives of domestic conformity: “Love, death, sex, pain, loss, break ups [...] all the people you learned to hate, love, like, dislike [...] it’s all here within a radius of two square miles. Who are you kidding; you’ll never be able to leave this place!” (2022a, p. 296). Her act of owning the Old Sheriff’s house marks a symbolic turning point, with her desire to “break the southern dialect code” (2022a, p. 133), region and identity. The house, with its ghostly, timeworn structure, porch chairs, and chandeliers, becomes a heterotopic space of resistance carrying the American history that she must negotiate.

Her repeated returns, “And ladies and gentlemen, this is the town where I always come back to after exotic trips to southern France, business trips to Los Angeles or New York, family trips to Chicago” (2022a, p. 295), reflects her resistance towards abandoning the town or her life that she has built and worked hard for, despite its challenges and frustrations. She formed a meaningful friendship with women artists through a ‘no-men’ art group, where their discussions

of art, death, and creativity inspired her for her second novel. These interactions also reconnect her to her immigrant past, including the Italian language of her early years in Rome, and allow her to explore erotic and imaginative desires. Through shared experiences of single motherhood, divorce, and professional struggles, the narrator finds camaraderie and empowerment. These women embody a lived, vibrant feminism, resilient, independent, and creatively bold, offering her the support, inspiration, and some sense of belonging she had long sought.

Rădulescu describes repeatedly getting lost while driving from the airport to the city, always mistakenly taking the “Chantilly” (2022a, p. 241) exits, a French name evoking lace and cream but leading only to Fairfax, Virginia. This recurring detour becomes a metaphor for her ambiguity in belonging and perpetual dislocation. She is always *almost home*, but not quite. The absurdity of American place-naming, the sanitisation of death through hospice, and her children’s questioning of ethnic identity (“Are we Romanian, Mama?”) destabilise any possibility of concrete rootedness. Her answer, “half Romanian, half American,” is asserted with certainty, yet the children’s question, “But what are you, Mama?” (2022a, p. 120-121), lingers with painful uncertainty. In these moments, she and her memoir exist as a heterotopic resistance, caught within spaces that are both real and imagined, familiar and foreign, and domestic and historically violent. In both birthplace and displacement, the female subject navigates ‘other spaces’ that resist singular narratives of home or belonging, creating instead a feminist cartography of in-betweenness.

5. Conclusion

Rădulescu’s *Dream in a Suitcase* reflects how the writing of one’s lived journey can become a powerful tool of feminist resistance, allowing the migrant woman to retrieve her voice and assert her visibility in a world that often seeks to silence or erase her. By confronting epistemic injustice, the memoir challenges the embedded patriarchy and neoliberal contexts that diminish migrant experiences as marginal or peripheral, overlooking the struggle behind lived experiences. Such writing also constantly binds the time and space of both homeland and hostland simultaneously, with the displaced individual reclaiming the agency of her precarious non-belongingness. Identity and memory are never fixed for such individuals. Within the broader field of migrant women’s writing, Rădulescu’s memoir, even with its quotidian and intimate life story and journey, reflects how one’s struggle can become a voice of resistance for all those who have gone through the same but lack the privilege to write. *Dream in a Suitcase*

thus becomes a form of heterotopic resistance by engaging migratory and personal experiences, as it simultaneously critiques and criticises the political and personal dimensions that shape it, especially when it comes to women.

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