

## SYMBOLIC (SELF-)IDENTIFICATIONS OF CARE WORKERS IN DIASPORIC MEDIA: ROMANIAN MIGRANT WOMEN IN ITALY

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**Abstract:** *The article looks at a corpus of personal stories told by Romanian migrant women who work as caregivers in Italy or by journalists, from the women's perspective, in two Romanian diasporic publications. It aims to gain an insight into the ways the narrators use the diasporic media space to (re)situate themselves in relation to the home and host societies. A methodological framework that incorporates elements from narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis is applied for examining the (self-)construction of agency and social roles, the negotiation of belonging to social categories, and the positionings that emerge, including towards dominant worldviews and discourses on low-skilled migrant women. The findings indicate that the women narrators build their identities in a complex interplay of (dis-)empowering stances, using their experience of migration to attain agency and to contest, but also reaffirm, in a transnational context, traditional gender roles, occupational and class stigmas, and stereotypical perceptions of nationality.*

**Keywords:** *diasporic media, discourse analysis, (dis-)empowerment, low-skilled migration, migrant women, narrative analysis, personal stories, Romanian care workers.*

### 1. Introduction: Diasporic Media and Identity Construction

Addressing audiences comprised of migrants and other minorities (historic, indigenous), diasporic<sup>1</sup> media can vary widely in terms of production (either by these groups or large media

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<sup>1</sup> Matsaganis et al. (2011:8-9) favour the term “ethnic media”, which they consider to have a wider applicability than the various other labels in use, such as immigrant, diasporic, community or minority media. In this article, I will use the term “diasporic media” (see Georgiou 2006, among others) because the publications I analyse address primarily the so-called “new” Romanian diaspora, formed as a result of transnational labour migration during post-communism (cf. Bratu 2014).

organisations), ownership and sources of financing, distribution, technologies used, audience size and location, content, and strategies and aims of communication (Bailey et al. 2008:63; Matsaganis et al. 2011:5ff.). What they all have in common is the specific role they play in diasporic identity building: in the process of mediation, they “bring together the different spaces of belonging” (local, national, transnational, distant and close, public and private), beyond the usual confines of place and time, and reinvest them with novel meanings (Georgiou 2006:12; see also Bailey et al. 2008; Georgiou 2012; Kama 2008; Matsaganis et al. 2011). At the levels of production and, especially, consumption practices, they provide diasporic publics with *symbolic resources* for defining new communal identities within transnational networks and for renegotiating individual identities in relation to “what it means to belong, [...] what the symbols of the imagined self, the Other and the community are, and how the boundaries around communities and places are appropriated” in the transnational social field (Georgiou 2006:13; see also Georgiou 2012). They mediate the migrants’ socialisation in the host countries and their participation in the public space, and, at the same time, maintain and reaffirm the migrants’ ties with the country of origin (Bailey et al. 2008; Georgiou 2006; Kama 2008; Matsaganis et al. 2011).

What sets the diasporic media apart from the mainstream media is their open, consistent engagement in advocacy work (Matsaganis et al. 2011:16), and their potential to constitute a counter-hegemonic force, capable of deconstructing dominant views in the public spheres of the home and host countries, and even of effecting social change (Bailey et al. 2008; Georgiou 2006; Kama 2008). Scholars bring to attention the capacity of diasporic media to “create an embedded alternative, mediated cultural space through the influences of both cultures and hegemonies, generating a unique new space for self-expression and/or resistance enabled by ‘alternative’ discourses” (Bailey et al. 2008:66; see also Georgiou 2006, 2013; Kama 2008). It is important to remember, however, that diasporic media “are not inherently counter-hegemonic in the sense of political resistance”, but their empowering capacity is shaped by the manner in which audiences access and use them to “engage with political and identity formation issues” (Bailey et al. 2008:66; see also Kama 2008).

Within this frame, the present study looks at the (self-)identifications, in diasporic media, of a category of low-skilled migrant women who are routinely targets of discrimination and exploitation at the intersection of gender, class, occupation, nationality, and geographical provenance (see Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008): Romanian care workers in Italy. My focus

here is a genre that features in two well-established publications of the Romanian diaspora in Italy (see Bratu 2014)—the *Gazeta Românească* [the *Romanian Gazette*] and the *Emigrantul* online news portal [the *Emigrant*]<sup>2</sup>—and that has been included, in recent years, in specially created sections: personal stories in which care workers recount their experience of migration, and attempt, thus, to refashion their identities, by (re)positioning themselves towards other social categories, but also towards certain dominant worldviews and discourses, revisited in the context of women’s low-skilled migration. They encompass understandings and perceptions of gender roles and women’s sexuality, low-skilled occupations (in connection to social class and gender), and migration from Eastern Europe, underlain by various ideologies that support social inequalities. Such views are embedded, in different forms (reproduced, contested), in the (semi-)public discourses on Romanian migrant care givers, which have gained visibility in the countries of destination and origin, and, not least, in the diaspora. How do Romanian women caregivers identify themselves in the personal narratives selected for analysis—mediated by the diasporic publications that host them—and what are the implications of such construals for their (dis)empowerment? Another aspect that will be considered, where relevant, is identity building as an integral part of the “symbolic boundary-work” (Lamont and Molnár 2002; see also Sayer 2005; Yuval-Davis 2006) done by social actors in their struggles to situate themselves better in the social field (Bourdieu 1990[1980]).

This study finds its place alongside other analyses of narratives about and by Romanian migrants in diasporic media or on online forums (Bratu 2014; Nicolaescu 2014, among others), but it aims to fill a research gap through its focus on the category of womencare workers and their symbolic (self-)constructions in the diasporic public space. In what follows, I present the socio-political context of the study, *i.e.* the main developments in the area of migrant domestic/ care work and the situation of Romanian migrant women in this occupation in Italy, followed by a presentation of the analytical framework, and a discussion of the principal findings.

## **2. Migrant Domestic Work<sup>2</sup>: General Trends and Implications for Women**

Over the past decades, both the demand for private domestic work carried out by migrant women (predominantly) and the supply have been on the rise at a global level, in response to a

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<sup>2</sup> The literature reviewed here and in the next section generally includes informal care work into the broad category of domestic work, one reason being the fact that many care workers in private households are asked by their employers to do all kinds of domestic work.

number of socio-political and economic transformations: the intensification of global inequalities and the subsequent movements of population from the poor South and East to the North and West; the structural factors (economic, legal, political, technological) that have facilitated transnational migration at an accelerated rate; a labour market for women outside the household and the need for female migrant workers to do the housework traditionally assigned to women; demographic changes in the host countries, for example an ageing population that requires social assistance; the neoliberal reform of welfare, resulting in a withdrawal of the state from the provision of certain social services (Lutz 2008a; Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008, among others). The feminisation of this occupation, based on the reproduction of gendered ideologies that naturalise domestic labour as a woman's job (going centuries back), has brought about a devaluation of the work done, whether it is cleaning or caring for categories such as young children, disabled persons, or the elderly.

The consequences for contemporary migrant women on the private domestic labour market are inadequate legislation, which favours illegality/ irregularity, low salaries and, generally, a lack of recognition, coupled with the public invisibility of migrant women who do this type of work (Boccagni 2013, among others). They often find themselves in a position of vulnerability, ranging from gender inequality and discrimination to exploitation through the infringement of various rights (proper accommodation, access to social benefits, availability of legal aid, availability of counselling, decent working hours and payment), risks of social exclusion, and risks to personal safety (abuse, violence, human trafficking). Another source of distress and even depression is the paradoxical expectation that caregivers do emotional work in the employers' families, while not being offered the structural support to care for their families back home (Boccagni 2013). The class dimension remains relevant, even though class-based distinctions between employers and employees have been shown to decline or even get reversed, with migrant women surpassing their employers in education and social class (Colombo 2007). Essential in the process of upholding "the international division of cleaning and caring work" are "particular racial and gendered ideologies, discourses and narratives" (Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008:199) that represent migrant domestic work through negative stereotypes, prejudices and stigmas, in relation to which women migrants have to "negotiate" their identities and do "'boundary' work" (p. 200). Among them are "stigmas" generated by the association of housework with "inferior morality" (Phyllis Palmer 1989, qtd. in Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008:200), discourses on deviant motherhood, and,

in the case of Eastern European migrant women, prostitution (Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008:204ff.).

The problems facing migrant domestic workers are discussed at length in the specialised literature (see, for example, the studies in Lutz 2008b) and specified in policy documents that aim to offer solutions (the International Labour Organization's *Domestic Workers Convention*, No. 189, 2011, or the *European Parliament Resolution on Women Domestic Workers and Carers in the EU*, 2016). On the other hand, migrant women may benefit from considerable help from the families they work for and the money earned on the job may contribute to their autonomy and upward social mobility, either in the country of origin or in the host country, which reveals the complexity of their situation, "between empowerment and exploitation" (Tuider 2015; see also Ambrosini 2012; Colombo 2007, about migrants in Italy). As Lutz points out, "migrant women are not 'cultural dopes'", they have their "own agendas" and "subjectivity needs" (Lutz 2008a:6; see also Boccagni 2013; Ottonelli and Torresi 2016).

As I discuss in the next section, Romanian migrant women in Italy are chiefly employed in the domestic/ care work sector, and are confronted with the major issues presented above, in the Italian context.

### **3. Migrant Domestic Work in Italy. The Situation of Romanian Women**

Italy is one of the EU states that are said to "consume" migrant domestic workers" (Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008:197), following several reforms of the welfare system, which have gradually transferred the provision of social services from the state to the non-profit and private sectors (Scrinzi 2008). Described as "familialist" (Scrinzi 2008), the Italian welfare system relies mainly on the unpaid work of family members, in particular women, and on the arrangements families make on the private market, on the basis of stipends and pensions from the state (Ottonelli and Torresi 2016:160; see also Ambrosini 2012). Volunteer and similar non-profit organisations, as well as the Catholic Church, have set up networks of support and care assistance. In the 1960s and 1970s, the domestic work of Italian women started being replaced with the work of migrants, often undocumented migrants who were poorly paid and vulnerable to exploitation (Scrinzi 2008; see also Colombo 2007). Over time, the model of welfare in Italy has shifted from "a 'family welfare' to a 'migrant in the family welfare' model" (Bettio et al. 2006, qtd. in Boccagni 2013:33). The general profile of the care assistant, also known as *badante* (a term considered

pejorative), is “female, non-Italian, originally from poor nations, living with the same families for whom they work—especially in the care of the elderly”; “middle-aged, separated or divorced, with dependent children in their country of origin” (Colombo 2007:207; 212). The private nature of the job, within the space of Italian households, alongside other factors, has opened the way to irregular migration, to the extent that Italy has seen “the growth of a parallel welfare system, which is informal and half-hidden” (Ambrosini 2012:363).

The statistics recording female workers in domestic employment and live-in care assistance, a sector dominated by migrants (Colombo 2007), have gone up by the decade. If the coordination between labour, social and migration policies has not always functioned properly (Scrinzi 2008), the Italian need for migrant domestic labour, acknowledged and sustained by the Italian state, has led to “the largest number of regularisations” in any EU member-state (Ambrosini 2012:316; see also Ottonelli and Torresi 2016) and, recently, to the implementation of European policies concerning the protection of domestic workers. The presence of Eastern Europeans, especially from Ukraine and Romania, first became visible during the regularisation in 2002. According to Italian national statistics, ten years later, in 2012 there were almost 146,000 documented Romanian domestic workers (statistics reported in the *Gazeta Românească*, “În Italia, lucrează oficial 146.000 de badante române” [“146,000 Romanian *Badanti* Officially Recorded in Italy”, 2012], and, most likely, a lot more irregular ones, given that the Romanian migrant community in Italy was around 1 million people at the time, of which 55% women and 45% men (Cela and Moretti 2013:80, based on an ISTAT report from 2011; see also Vlas 2013:82).

Romanian migration to Italy is characterised by feminisation—substantial numbers of women have migrated to do domestic work, especially as caregivers—and by “circulatory patterns”, which took shape in the early 2000s and remained in place after Romania’s accession to the European Union in 2007 (Ottonelli and Torresi 2016:159; see also Cingolani 2009; Vlas 2013). Many Romanian women started migrating before their husbands in response to the demand for domestic work in Italy, often leaving their children behind and making care arrangements that involved the help of close relatives, such as sisters and mothers (Cingolani 2009:184-185). According to Ottonelli and Torresi (2016:160), Romanian domestic and care workers tend to be older than other categories of domestic labourers in Italy, accept underpaid jobs in demanding conditions, have at least one child in care in the country of origin, and “display much higher rates of co-residency and irregular contracts than other domestic workers”, even after Romania’s EU

accession. Ottonelli and Torresi (2016:160) note that Romanian care assistants in Italy are poorly integrated into the host culture, and apparently have little or no intention of becoming civically and politically engaged, a way of acting that is not entirely uncommon when migrants do not regard their stay in the receiving country as permanent (see also Boccagni 2013; Kama 2008).

Romanian migrant women in this occupation, however, should not be seen as deprived of agency or entirely constrained by structural and institutional circumstances, but as choice-makers who tailor their migration projects to circulatory patterns, in pursuit of clearly defined goals of social mobility (Ottonelli and Torresi 2016; see also Cingolani 2009; Vlas 2013). For the migrant women analysed by Vlas (2013), the experience of migration in Italy translated into social remittances they transferred to Romania, and used to renegotiate and improve their status within their families, by interrogating “gender norms and traditional relations” (2013:85), and their social status in general. This does not mean, on the other hand, that Romanian domestic workers in Italy are exempt from the vulnerability and the exposure to risks specific to work undertaken in the circumstances discussed in this section (Ottonelli and Torresi 2016; see also Ambrosini 2012; Colombo 2007). The problems they are confronted with, at a transnational level, include their own care needs as mothers, wives, and daughters across borders (Boccagni 2013), or their rights as migrants, which, in situations of temporary migration, cannot be properly addressed by existing citizenship models (Ottonelli and Torresi 2016). In addition, a number of (semi-)public discourses on this category of Romanian migrants have become visible in the mainstream public spheres in Romania and Italy, with positive (Romanian care workers as heroes), but also derogatory connotations (demeaning occupation, migrant women as sexually promiscuous, etc.). I return to these views in the discussion of findings.

In the context presented here, it is essential to understand the ways Romanian migrant women employed as care workers in Italy (re)negotiate their status and (re)build their identities in the public space provided by the diasporic publications that invite their personal stories. How do the complex dimensions of exploitation and empowerment find expression in their narratives?

#### **4. Analytical Framework**

The specificities of the genre analysed—personal stories—and the widely acknowledged role of the narrative in the construction of identities (Bamberg 1997; De Fina 2003, 2013, 2015; Yuval-Davis 2006, among others) make narrative analysis a relevant instrument for the purposes

of this study. The method has been used “for the study of migrant populations, and of how their multifaceted identity construction projects intersect with the ways in which they discursively apprehend their transnational life trajectories” (Sabaté Dalmau 2015:92; see also De Fina 2003; Lanza 2012). It has also been commonly employed in the investigation of women’s voices and self-representations, including migrant women in transnational contexts (see, for example, the studies in Passerini et al. 2010; Draga-Alexandra et al. 2014). Along these lines, I take a social constructionist approach to the study of the Romanian care workers’ identities, as expressed in their personal stories of migration—similar to autobiographical stories—and I regard these identities as built in discursive interaction, “‘achieved’, not given” (De Fina 2015:24), with the mention that, in the present case, the stories are produced with a view to a public who is not in a position to respond immediately. Importantly, the stories I analyse are situated and mediated within the dispositives (Charaudeau 2011) of the two diasporic publications.

I draw upon analytical tools from narrative analysis as developed by De Fina (2003, 2015) and Bamberg (1997), adapted to the context of my study (see also Sabaté Dalmau 2015; Lanza 2012), and upon tools from critical discourse analysis in the representation of social actors and action (Fairclough 2003; Van Leeuwen 2008). I will be looking, first, at the construction of agency in the local context of “the story world” (De Fina 2003), on the basis of pronouns and representations of social action and actors as initiators or targets of action, where Van Leeuwen’s (2008) categories of “role allocation”, “activation” and “passivation”, “agentialisation” and “deagentialisation” are particularly useful. Second, I will examine the construction of the self in relation to others, at the level of negotiation of social roles, which also plays a part in the attainment of agency, and at the level of (non-)belonging to various social categories, starting from the “local” context of the story and connecting it with the “global”, societal context (De Fina 2003, 2013, 2015; see also Bamberg 1997). For Sabaté Dalmau, the analysis of the narrators’ identification with particular social categories can show how they “mobilize race, class, gender, ethnicity and religion in a gamut of homogenizing (inclusionary and exclusionary) constructions of close/distant migrant individuals and collectivities” (2015:92), and how they “deal with (naturalize, embrace, ignore, fight or resist) lived experiences of social inequality” (2015:92; see also Yuval-Davis 2006). Discursive devices that encode the narrators’ “stance towards ideologically laden categories and constructs” include “open referential categories, exploitation of indexicality, repetition, emphasis, logical reasoning” (De Fina 2013:45), which I will take into consideration. Evaluation, a broader



discursive mechanism, is central in the analysis, as it can reveal the attribution of responsibility for taking/ not taking action (De Fina 2003:96), or the “adherence to values, beliefs and behaviours”, and, thus, the expression of “moral stances” in the negotiation of belonging to social categories (De Fina 2003:21; see also Bamberg 1997; De Fina 2013, 2015).

These analytical categories can be correlated with the three “levels of positioning” in narrative analysis (Bamberg 1997; see also De Fina 2013, 2015), more precisely with level one—the positioning of the characters “in relation to one another within the reported events” (Bamberg 1997:337), level two—the linguistic and discursive devices used by narrators to position themselves towards their audience (Bamberg 1997:337), and level three—the positioning of narrators “above and beyond the local conversational situation” (Bamberg 1997:337; see also De Fina 2013, 2015). The concept of “positioning” used by Bamberg (1997) in his approach to narrative analysis, and by other researchers in subsequent approaches, is derived from the work of Davies and Harré, who define it as “a discursive practice ‘whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and intersubjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines’” (qtd. in Bamberg 1997:336). I consider it broadly compatible with the notion of positioning I have used in previous studies, based on the socio-communicative approach of the French School (see Charaudeau 2006). While most narrative analyses of this type deal with data from interviews and oral conversations, the discursive instruments presented above can also be applied to written narratives, such as those analysed here, which are seen within the interactional frame of the diasporic media dispositives. The discussion of findings will focus on levels one and three, and will minimally address level two.

## **5. Corpus**

The small corpus used for this study consists of twenty stories from the newspaper *Emigrantul*, published in 2017, and fourteen stories from the newspaper *Gazeta Românească* (GR), published in 2016 (the fourteen stories are spread across twelve articles). The texts come from two special sections dedicated to Romanian care workers, and, in the case of the *Emigrantul*, to other labour migrants, as well (I only selected narratives told by women domestic workers, predominantly care assistants). The newspaper sections are titled “Dulce și Amar” [“Sweet and Bitter”] in the *Emigrantul*, and “Serial GR, Vieți de ‘badante’ în Italia” [“GR Series, Lives of ‘Badanti’ in Italy”]. All the stories are highly individualised personal narratives, therefore different

from regular news stories (see Bratu 2014 for an analysis of such stories in the two publications). The *Gazeta Românească* employs a format that relies upon extensive recontextualisation of the women's narratives by the newspaper (many are retold in the third person), which brings them closer to features. On the other hand, they are construed from the perspective of migrant women as protagonists, contain lengthy quotes in the first person, and, in a few cases, the journalists' interventions are minimal (subheadings or interview questions that structure the narrative). By contrast, only two of the twenty *Emigrantul* stories are retold in the third person; otherwise, the voice of the newspaper is only occasionally heard, when it introduces the stories and, rarely, when it answers the direct questions and comments that migrants, as narrators, sometimes make at the end of their stories. All the narratives are written as part of a context of interaction set up by the two diasporic publications, as I discuss in the next section.

## 6. Presentation of Findings. Discussion

The personal narrative sections are configured around the goal of *sharing* the migration experience, with its positive and negative sides, a perspective conveyed in the association of “Sweet and Bitter”, in the *Emigrantul* section title, or in the evaluation of the migrants' stories as “full of torment and suffering, but also hope”<sup>3</sup> (Suceveanu 2016a, “Serial GR/ Vieți de ‘badante’...” [GR Series/ Lives of ‘Badanti’...]). The *Gazeta Românească* purports to present “the confessions of Romanian ‘badanti’, who related what Italy meant to them” (*ibid.*), stories that were either sent in by Romanian care workers or reported by the GR journalists or taken from the Italian press (Grosseto 2016, “Serial GR 9/ Vieți de ‘badante’...” [GR Series 9/ Lives of ‘Badanti’...]). “Sweet and Bitter” is introduced as the *Emigrantul*'s project to create “an online club, a special section” for the newspaper's main audience, comprised of “*badanti* and workers abroad”, “a big family”, in whose midst “we are prepared to listen, to understand, to help you, exactly as the members of a family would” (Negoiță 2017).

The stories are envisaged to give an authentic insight into the migrants' lives, to have a therapeutic function, embedded in the very act of telling, and to create an “interpretive community” (Fish 1980) of diasporic readers, brought together by a sense of friendship and commonality of experience. In this manner, the two diasporic publications integrate the migrants' narratives into

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<sup>3</sup> All the examples are in my translation. I will use the Italian forms, *badante* (singular) or *badanti* (plural); in the Romanian media, the word often appears with the Romanian singular (*badantă*) and plural (*badante*).

their own dispositives, and further shape them through the journalists' participation, to various degrees, in the story-telling. As (co-)authors of their stories, the migrants acquire a voice in the diasporic media space, an important form of empowerment that is not, in this case, triggered by political engagement objectives (see also Kama 2008). Empowerment through authorship is taken to another level by the *Emigrantul*, which, in December 2017, published a volume containing a selection of the migrants' personal narratives, *Dulce și Amar – Condamnați la străinătate* [*Sweet and Bitter – Condemned to Living Abroad*], announced to be the first in a series.

I now turn to the (self-)construction of agency, social roles, and belonging to social categories in the migrant women's personal narratives, which I discuss separately; in practice, though, it is difficult to draw a neat line between them, as they emerge together from the ways narrators position themselves in relation to other characters, their intended audience, and dominant worldviews and discourses in the countries of origin and destination.

### **6.1. Agency and (Dis)empowerment**

Many narratives dwell upon the women narrators' life circumstances before migration, their decision to go to work abroad, and the transformation of the self as a result of being and acting in the transnational social field (see Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). The *Emigrantul* personal stories emphasise the push factors, seen from the migrant women's perspective, while the *Gazeta Românească* narratives tend to focus on the work conditions in the country of destination; the changes brought about by transnational migration represent a common theme in all the texts. Agency, an expression of empowerment in narrative discourse (Lanza 2012), is lost and attained at different points along this journey. Before migration, the women narrators, most of whom have a working class background and are exposed to various forms of deprivation, present themselves as objects of others' actions (alcoholic, violent husbands or, sometimes, abusive parents), or victims of circumstances out of their control, such as the closing down of industrial plants during the post-communist transition, the accidental death of spouses, disease, etc. Most often, they are "passivated" (Van Leeuwen 2008), in the sense of "subjected" to actions they evaluate, implicitly or explicitly, as negative, harmful, and even ontologically disruptive:

I led a tormented life with an alcoholic husband. When he got drunk, he used to beat me, call me names, accuse me of all sorts of nonsense and he terrorised the kids. [...] Then God took him [...] He left me with

debts that I had to pay. (“Dulce și Amar: Amanta Italianului” [“Sweet and Bitter: The Italian’s Mistress”], 2017, June 20)

Another instance is what I label failed agency, when the women, either by themselves or together with their husbands, struggle, to no avail, to make ends meet in Romania, taking on both the roles of breadwinners and homemakers:

I worked in a sewing section, in a provincial little town with few opportunities to find another kind of work. I earned little, I worked a lot, and I could hardly cover the household expenses, my salary was practically gone in a day, and my debts were getting bigger. (“Dulce și Amar: Înjositor este să furi, nu să fii badantă!” [“Sweet and Bitter: It’s Degrading to Steal, Not to Be a *Badante*!”], 2017, May 24)

In certain cases, the narrators seem to have resigned themselves to an unfortunate fate or to unfavourable circumstances that are depicted as having affected their life trajectories ever since childhood (abandoned or unwanted children, for example).

In terms of gender roles, what draws attention in the women’s construals of this period is their acceptance of the role of breadwinner, in addition to that of nurturer, traditionally assigned to them, out of necessity, because their husbands are absent, disinterested, or incapable of fulfilling it. Their involvement therefore does not reflect a change in mentalities or family gender norms (some women narrators express their regret at not having “good husbands” who would perform this role). In the language of the narratives, this posture is often built with words from the semantic field of “burden”:

Her man was an alcoholic, and it was she who carried on her back, all by herself, the house, children and bank payments. (Chelaru, 2017a, “Dulce și Amar...” [“Sweet and Bitter...”])

The decision to migrate is often reached in the midst of a profound existential crisis that is impossible to overcome in any other way, a conclusion supported by the narrated events and, in a few cases, by the women’s turn to faith and divinity (God is invoked as part of the decision-making). It marks the first moment of individual empowerment for the women narrators, discursively realised in the ways they represent themselves as initiators of action:

It was the first time I felt that man did not love me, nor did he love his child, so I decided I would be the one to go to work abroad, so that my child could fulfil his dream... (“Dulce și Amar: Am plecat în Italia ca să-i pot plăti băiatului meu meditațiile” [“Sweet and Bitter: I Went to Italy So That I Could Pay for My Son’s Tutoring”], 2017, October 24)

This is often followed by a period of confusion and anxiety, in the new environment, and by new forms of subjection, reflected in a return to “passivation” mechanisms in the discourse of narratives. As domestic/ care workers, the narrators portray themselves as “slaves” (see also Nicolaescu 2014), at the mercy of their demanding employers, within a culture and language they do not fully grasp yet:

Work did not scare her, but the old lady she was looking after treated her like a robot, considered her an animal that was not supposed to get tired or eat too much, did not let her alone enough time for her to have a shower... (Chelaru 2017b, “Dulce și Amar...” [“Sweet and Bitter...”])

Gradually, however, a shift takes place and the migrant women re-emerge as agents, empowered, on the strength of resilience and other virtues they associate with an ethic of hard work, and a will to succeed. Interesting about the development of agency in this case is the fact that it takes shape out of constraining circumstances, notably exploitation and abuse in their employers’ houses (most narrators are live-in care workers). The women take every drawback in their stride, as illustrated by reoccurring sentences such as “I had no choice”. To this type of subjection, they counter-pose the notion that it takes a strong, resourceful, hard-working individual to be able not only to put up with such conditions, but also to reach their goals:

My first year in Italy was hell on earth, I missed my little girl [...] I was working in the house of two elderly people whose children would come and check if their parents were well attended to. It wasn’t easy for me to adapt to their lifestyle and expectations, but, when you have no alternatives, you take what you’re handed and go on. I was a hard-working person... (“Dulce și Amar: Rodica, mama care și-a găsit liniștea și fericirea” [“Sweet and Bitter: Rodica, the Mother Who Found Her Peace and Happiness”], 2017, October 16)

The Romanian care workers celebrate the values mentioned above as personal resources that enable them to succeed in the host society (see also Bratu 2014; Nicolaescu 2014), and, in the interaction with the intended audience, as a discursive strategy of self-enhancement, at an individual level. On the other hand, it is a position from which they cannot easily challenge their

work conditions or demand rights, because it partially rests upon accepting whatever comes their way, without even contemplating the possibility of complaint, for objective (their status in the host society) and subjective (negative perceptions of victimisation and weakness) reasons. Individual empowerment in this case does not easily transform into collective empowerment. This aspect has been noted by other researchers (Boccagni 2012; Kama 2008; Tuiider 2015). The Filipino migrant workers in Kama's study "seem to acquiescently bear the cross of subjugation and accept their *coerced marginality as a given*, not as a source of problematic interrogations of their positionality or the world at large" (2008:234-235, added emphases). For these migrants, many of whom are women caregivers, the diasporic magazine they produce becomes a source of social recognition as poets, journalists or authors, and of "empowerment in a basic, humble denotation: to have faith in one's ability [...] and to know fate is in one's hands" (Kama 2008:235). Boccagni (2013) attributes the phenomenon to the fact that migrant women, such as the Ecuadoran care workers in his research, often consider this kind of job to be no more than a means towards higher purposes, in particular the well-being of their children, and a transitory period before their return to the country of origin; in his view, this contributes to their non-engagement in collective, public claims-making for policies in their support (see also Tuiider 2015).

Based on the personal stories analysed, Romanian *badanti* in Italy go through a similar journey of empowerment as autonomous individuals, who can make their own decisions and provide for themselves and their children, but without seeking to question the circumstances of exploitation inherent in doing domestic work in the host society. They equate their achievements as migrants with financial remittances to their kin, independence from their husbands or a reversal of gender roles in the family (if the husbands stay behind to look after the children), reunification with their children, and a rediscovery of the self. Several narrators talk about their efforts to learn the Italian language and acquire skills and qualifications in order to land safer, better paid jobs, their attempts to find less abusive or legal employment, and, eventually, their upward mobility patterns in the destination country. In most cases, they represent themselves as self-reliant and in control of the situation, in spite of what could be perceived as a hostile work environment. Not all the personal stories, however, illustrate successful experiences of migration; the struggle with depression and disease is also mentioned in several narratives, not as many as could be expected, considering the seriousness and pervasiveness of the issue, problematised in research (Sîrghie 2012) and, increasingly, the media (Ciuhu 2018).

These processes of gaining agency in the transnational social field are intertwined with the migrant women's positioning as characters and narrators, and with their negotiation of belonging to various social categories. Prominent in the stories are the women's identifications as mothers and wives, and as *badanti* and migrants. The ongoing repositionings, discussed in the next subsections, disclose the complexities of symbolic (dis)empowerment and boundary-(re)drawing in the diasporic media space.

## **6.2. Social Roles and Categories, (Non-)Belonging, Positioning**

### **6.2.1. Mothers and Wives**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the migrant women's identification as mothers stands out in many of the personal stories analysed. As previously discussed, the husbands' or partners' incapacity to provide for the children, often compounded by alcoholism and violence, and a complete lack of resources and support are foregrounded in the narratives, especially in the *Emigrantul*. The women's decision to migrate appears to be forced by circumstances, as the stories build up a series of negative events and actions that can only find resolution in migration. Within this frame, the children's needs are represented as the main factor that drives women into migration, even though the decision is painful for mothers, as it usually implies leaving the children behind, and controversial in the eyes of others. The controversies stem both from the private sphere, where mothers are traditionally expected to fulfil their duty of care, which, in Romanian culture (as in many other cultures), requires physical co-presence (Boccagni 2013; Carling et al. 2012; Parreñas 2005; Tuiider 2015), and from the public sphere. The plight of the children left in the country of origin by their parents, with a focus on mothers, has been an important topic on the public agenda in Romania for years, as has the dilemma posed by substituting financial remittances for the mothers' nurturing presence (Mădroane 2016; see also Beciu et al. 2018).

Against this background, the migrant women's dramatic representations of their personal and family crisis can also be read as a justification, meant to counter criticism, therefore as an implicit positioning towards hegemonic understandings of motherhood and (semi-)public discourses that blame migrant mothers (see also Carling et al. 2012). Arguably for similar reasons, but also with a view to diasporic readers who might have gone through such experiences, two women describe how they obtained their children's consent before leaving:

That was the moment I decided to leave. I took my little girl in my arms, held her tight, kissed her on the top of her head, and asked her to forgive me because I had to go away so that I could provide for her daily meals and basic needs. She also held me tight and cried with me, and told me that the distance would remind us every day how much we loved each other. (“Dulce și Amar: Înjositor este să furi, nu să fii badantă!” [“Sweet and Bitter: It’s Degrading to Steal, Not to Be a *Badante*!”], 2017, May 24)

In this way, the narrators align themselves with the traditional view of women as nurturers, whose presence is needed in the child’s proximity, which finds expression in references to feelings of guilt, but also in their continued, intensified efforts to provide care “at a distance”. If all migrants assume a moral duty to their non-migrant family members and even close friends—the promise to remit and, eventually, return (Carling 2008)—, for migrant mothers it is doubled by a self-understood need to nurture their children and engage in compensatory strategies of building “intimacy” across the transnational space (Parreñas 2005). All the practices associated with transnational motherhood are highlighted in the personal stories analysed: financial and social remittances, reliance on communication technologies, visits, care arrangements that involve female kin (Boccagni 2013; Carling et al. 2012; Parreñas 2005; Tuider 2015). The children’s achievements due to the mothers’ financial and social remittances are a source of social recognition for Romanian migrant women (Vlase 2013), an aspect that surfaces in the personal narratives in my corpus, in the link made between the children’s trajectories and accomplishments (higher studies, marriages) and the mothers’ role in supporting them through their work. The narratives constantly stress the security and upward mobility migrant women obtain for their children, at the expense of great personal sacrifice. As a result, migrant mothers are simultaneously empowered and disempowered (Tuider 2015:37), as a “refeminization of their activities and relationships” takes place in the ways they understand their roles as transnational caregivers for their children (see also Parreñas 2005). This interplay of (dis)empowerment also extends, albeit differently, to their roles as wives.

In this regard, the women narrators in my corpus represent themselves in three different scenarios: (1) wives of abusive husbands, who generally fail in the traditional role of breadwinners, even before the women’s migration (often, the women are left by or leave their husbands, and then migrate); (2) wives of good, hard-working husbands—in some cases, they migrate together; in others, the husbands stay at home for different reasons (illness, childcare, etc.); (3) widows who have to manage by themselves. For all these women, the experience of migration, as construed in the self-narratives, turns out to be a source of liberation and a catalyst of change in the patriarchal



configuration of gender roles in the nuclear family. A few expose the pressure they are under from their husbands to return or, otherwise, deal with separation and divorce, which can be interpreted as an attempt to control or restrain their agency in the transnational field (see also Tuijter 2015). In the narratives discussed here, the migrant women generally resist such strategies and affirm their newly found independence; even if some go on to rebuild their life with new partners in Italy or Romania, their beliefs about a woman's status in the relationship seem to have been dramatically reconfigured.

Another stance expressed in several narratives is a symbolic negotiation of the patriarchal view that women are inclined to sexual promiscuity (the reified identity of the woman as a whore), accentuated in the context of migration (Ozyegin and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008). It is a stigma that is (re)produced in the Italian public space, regarding migrant women from Central and Eastern Europe, among whom Romanians are particularly targeted, after events involving Romanian prostitutes, in 2007 and 2008 (Balcanu 2009). As Capussotti (2010:200) found out in her interviews with Italian women employers, Eastern European women are considered “a threat to the position of Italian wives and mothers” whose intentions are to “snare” their husbands and sons (Capussotti 2007:199). Such perceptions are shaped not only by recent media representations, but also by the interviewees' memories of “a *vox populi*” in the 1970s, about “beautiful young [Eastern European] women [who] entertained Western men in hotels” (Capussotti 2010:200), mixed with subsequent popular culture representations. Nonetheless, it is not primarily the views in Italian society that the women narrators take as a point of reference, even though they also surface in their positionings, but the explicit or implicit accusations of promiscuity made by their Romanian fathers (sometimes parents), husbands, “*vox populi*”, and even public opinion in Romania (extended to their diasporic readers). Some narrators stress their identity as obedient, naive girls, in other words, “good girls”, who, because of their sexual innocence, married abusive husbands and ended up in a predicament (a condition that precedes migration). Others seem to openly accept this label, as migrant women, but claim either not to be judged for what they concede might be seen as deviant, morally wrong behaviour, or not to care about the opinion of others:

At home, many of those who hear that my husband and I live apart have “established” that the separation came because I had turned into a slut who abandoned her husband for an Italian man. Let them think and say whatever they want, I don't care. [“Sweet and Bitter: I Went to Italy So That I Could Pay for My Son's Tutoring”], 2017, October 24)

In general, however, the women narrators seek to position themselves as compliant with the expectations of morally accepted behaviour regarding their relationships with (Romanian or Italian) men. This may lead to raising symbolic boundaries between themselves and other Romanian migrant women in Italy, who trespass the norms, or to attributing their behaviour to exterior circumstances.

The personal narratives in my corpus construct other types of relationship, such as those between mothers and daughters, or between mothers and sons, and introduce other types of characters. For example, not all the women narrators are married or have children (two personal stories present the migration experience of underage daughters who follow other relatives to Italy). For lack of space, I do not deal with these aspects here.

### **6.2.2. Care Workers and Migrants**

Doing the job of a care worker is a defining part of the women narrators' experience of migration in Italy. Being a *badante* enables them to attain agency and a form of individual empowerment, as discussed in Section 6.2.1, while at the same time putting them in a situation that many scholars, policy-makers, and other relevant social actors consider exploitative (see Sections 2 and 3). The qualities and virtues they correlate with the proper performance of this job—physical stamina, willingness to work hard, determination, patience, mental strength, discipline, courage—are invoked as personal attributes that account for their success in the country of destination (see also Bratu 2014; Nicolaescu 2014). At the same time, they are strategically used to counter-act the demeaning perceptions and negative stereotypes of this occupation in the (semi-)public space of the home country. By contrast with the migrant women's self-portrayals in the personal narratives analysed by Nicolaescu (2014), such values are not claimed as something acquired in the host society and culture—Italy as part of the “civilised western world”—but as something the women narrators already had, something they developed while growing up in Romania; one narrator even refers to these virtues as inborn (see example below). Migration is simply what allows them to become manifest (and we can also see here an implicit positioning towards the conditions in the home country, where these women could not manage in spite of their positive traits):

I have also known hard-working, honest, educated, feminine, etc. women, who take good care of themselves, even if some, indeed, come from the middle of nowhere, humiliated, tormented, poverty-stricken, with their

hands coarse from work, married to men in name only. Now they are strong women [...] because they have always been. You do not become a lady, you are born one. (“Dulce și Amar: Emigrarea, o experiență cu mine însămi” [“Emigration: An Experience with Myself”], 2017, October 13)

Where I am from, only those who are lazy starve to death. (Rădiu 2016a, “Serial GR 7/ Vieți de ‘badante’...” [“GR Series 7/ Lives of ‘*Badanti*’...”])

The women narrators’ construal of their relationships with the elders fits this understanding of care assistance as an extremely demanding work, which migrants do successfully, despite the fact that it takes a toll on their health and, in combination with other factors, exposes them to abuse and keeps them in a state of servitude. Few are the relationships marked by deep affection, an illustration of the ties developed through care work, and by mutual respect and trust (filial attachment to the elderly is mentioned in such cases). Predominantly, the elderly are described as impaired, to different degrees, and, as a result, whimsical, mean, and difficult to deal with; sometimes, they are also prejudiced against care workers from Romania. This image of domestic and care work built in the narratives symbolically adds to the migrants’ individual empowerment (due to the values and personal resources needed to cope), while merely recording instances of exploitation, as facts, rather than problematising them.

In view of the above, several narrators openly reject the negative discourses on low-skilled migrant workers in the country of origin (in one personal story, this extends to the job of strawberry-picker, done by Romanian seasonal migrants in agriculture). They call upon readers to share in their indignation and reflect on what is perceived as an injustice:

This woman [former teacher] has chosen not to stop [working], she’s still thinking of her children’s future, that they might still need her and her work. Have you got any idea how many times this woman was humiliated by people who called her a “bottom cleaner”? (Chelaru, 2017a, “Dulce și Amar...” [“Sweet and Bitter...”])

In the home country, people call us strawberry-pickers and laugh at us, but have no notion of what a Romanian migrant goes through in the Spanish fields. [...] If you are not strong and you have no experience in working the land, you have no chance of lasting more than six months. (Rădiu 2016a, “Serial GR 7/ Vieți de ‘badante’...” [“GR Series 7/ Lives of ‘*Badanti*’...”])

The values brought to the fore in this context, with a pronounced moral dimension, could be considered an attempt on the women’s part to reclaim dignity and a refusal to feel shame because

of the nature of their occupation, almost a statement of class pride that discloses underlying class injuries (Sayer 2005). This is complicated by the fact that some of the women whose stories I analyse here used to have middle-class professions before migration, for example teachers or librarians, but most of them, as noted earlier, have a working class background. In my corpus, it is the most easily identifiable instance in which the migrant women narrators do symbolic boundary work, by repositioning themselves in relation to the non-migrants who hold such negative views of *badanti*, and by assimilating them, in the process, to social categories that stand for the moral and human crisis in Romanian society after the fall of communism. In addition, values like hard work turn out to be “the basis of moral approval” for Italian employers, who draw their own symbolic boundaries (Lyon 2010:214), so their mention in the narratives can be interpreted as evidence of well-deserved belonging in the host society. The migrant narrators also use evaluations of their work as *badanti* to (re)position themselves in relation to other social categories with a middle-class status, both in the country of destination and in the home country:

What I went through, I don't think any Italian woman I've ever worked for can imagine. Here women are protected. (Suceveanu 2016c, “Serial GR 11/ Vieți de ‘badante’...” [“GR Series 11/ Lives of ‘*Badanti*’...”])

I received 400 Euros a month. My mother told me that, at 16 years of age, I was making more money than the village doctor! (Suceveanu 2016d, “Serial GR 12/ Vieți de ‘badante’...” [“GR Series 12/ Lives of ‘*Badanti*’...”])

As migrants, the women narrators construct their belonging to a community of Romanians who either have done the work of *badanti* or have experienced, first hand, migration in Italy; their intended readers are part of this imaginary transnational community, where national identification is prominent:

My story is the story of many Romanian mothers, the exact same story of many Romanian women. (“Dulce și Amar: Rodica, mama care și-a găsit pacea și fericirea” [“Sweet and Bitter: Rodica, the Mother Who Found Her Peace and Happiness”], 2017, October 16)

Georgeta Cornăcel wanted to dedicate a poem to all the readers in her situation and tell them to be strong and never forget they are Romanian. (Rădiu, 2016b, “Serial GR 10/ Vieți de ‘badante’...” [“GR Series 10/ Lives of ‘*Badanti*’...”])

The narratives disclose relationships of empathy and association with other Romanian migrant women in Italy (“my sisters”, used about other *badanti*, for example) or, often, competition (see also Sabaté Dalmau 2015), noticeable in stories of betrayal and representations of the Romanian migrant community as lacking in solidarity, a positioning that has been widely circulated in the diasporic as well as the mainstream Romanian media.

In relation to the country of origin, the lived experiences of migration are viewed as a source of information that non-migrants usually replace with “specific imaginations” of the destination countries, which tap into inaccurate, “pre-existing ideas about life on the other side” (Carling 2008:1466). This is rendered, in the narratives, by the women’s references to their former selves, as non-migrants, when they used to envy what they believed life in Italy was like, a perception that migration subsequently altered for them. The experiences of migration contribute thus to constructing a diasporic community symbolically opposed to ordinary non-migrants:

[Food] is not bad, but I’ve noticed that fries and grilled meat are considered delicacies. [...] This is Italy, not what we dream of in Romania. (Suceveanu 2016b, “Serial GR 8/ Vieți de ‘badante’...” [“GR Series 8/ Lives of ‘*Badanti*’ ...”])

Another strongly articulated stance is the criticism of living standards and lack of opportunities in Romania. Important push factors, they are also emphasised as reasons for the women narrators not to return or, at least, not to return before they have secured a financially safe old age through their work in Italy. Such criticisms blend into a public discourse in the country of origin that holds the Romanian political class accountable for the phenomenon of massive emigration during post-communism (Mădroane 2016).

Regarding the host society, in addition to what has been discussed so far, the corpus contains, to a small extent, positionings towards the perceptions and representations of Romanian migrants in Italy: stereotypes about Romanian women as sexually promiscuous, stigmas associated with the Romanian Roma, other unspecified views that the migrant narrators take to be negative, because they turn to artistic creation in order to show Italians that Romanian migrants are talented (presumably, also an implicit positioning towards the representation of Romanian migrants as low-skilled workers):

He [Italian employer] would sometimes ask me if Romania comes from “Roma” [reference to the Romanian Roma minority]. I would always answer him in historical terms and, even if he never admitted it, he equally enjoyed offending and listening to me. I once heard him say that I was not Romanian, that I was too different from everything he had known before [reference to Romanian women]. (“Dulce și Amar: Italia nu e ce pare...” [“Sweet and Bitter: Italy Is Not What It Seems...”]. 2017, June 23)

I hope that, at the cultural centre Hora Unirii din Grosseto, I’ll enjoy as many cultural evenings, as much music and poetry as possible, I hope that young talents take part in these cultural evenings, so that we can demonstrate that we, Romanians, have our talents. (Grosseto 2016, “Serial GR 9/ Vieți de ‘badante’...” [“GR Series 9/ Lives of ‘*Badanti*’...”])

General views of migration as “drain” for the country of origin and “gain” for the country of destination can also be encountered.

The journalistic accounts that either introduce or retell the migrant women’s stories (see the presentation of corpus) usually align themselves with the main positionings in the narratives: the migrant women’s independence in relation to abusive partners, their plight as mothers “at a distance”, and, in particular, the view that the status of care workers is heroic and deserving of social recognition. They contribute, in this manner, to the simultaneous empowerment and disempowerment/ instrumentalisation of migrant women that I have highlighted in the analysis of the narratives. The journalistic voices further align themselves with the critical discourse of the situation in the home country, also present in the mainstream Romanian media, which, as I claim elsewhere, could lay the ground for transnational civic action (Mădroane 2016).

## **7. Conclusions**

This study explored the (self-)identifications of Romanian migrant women who work as care assistants in Italy, by looking at a relatively small corpus of personal stories in two diasporic publications. The analysis focused on the ways women narrators turn to the experience of migration to build their selves in the process of acquiring agency, to (re)negotiate social roles and belonging to social categories, and to (re)position themselves towards discourses that have visibility in the public spheres of the home and host countries, or towards dominant ideologies. The women narrators use the diasporic media space to construct their identities as transnational mothers and wives, as care workers and migrants, engaging with patriarchal worldviews on gender roles in the family, as well as with discourses on care assistance as a type of degrading low-skilled migrant

work. These positionings are mostly oriented towards the country of origin, but mobilise the migrant women's experience in the host society, bringing to the fore transnational ways of acting and transnational circumstances. The personal stories are a source of symbolic empowerment, starting from the authorship status granted to the narrators (in the *Emigrantul*), to the attainment of agency as individual autonomy, to the negotiation of equality in gender roles within the family, and to the reclaiming of dignity for the occupation of care worker. Not least, they offer narrators an opportunity to criticise Romanian society and the Romanian political class. On the other hand, they are a source of disempowerment, as they constantly reveal the "asymmetric" (Carling 2008) nature of the relationships between non-migrants and migrants, and the double binds the latter find themselves in, which, for migrant women working as caregivers, encompass family care at a distance or a glorification of personal merit in less than favourable work conditions. The stories address and co-construct an audience who has gained an insight into these matters because of the shared experience of migration; hence, they form the basis for symbolically building a communal identity. On the other hand, they represent only a part of the coverage in the two diasporic publications, otherwise populated with rather schematic positive or negative characters (see Bratu 2014). The (self-)narratives demonstrate, in their specific ways, the potential of diasporic media to offer migrant women a public space for resistance, but also for the reproduction of dominant worldviews and discourses, which are extended to relations and practices in the transnational social field.

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