

Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru  
University of Bucharest

**SHADOW LINES OF SELFHOOD:  
SUBJECTIVE TEMPORALITIES IN DOMNICA RĂDULESCU'S TRAIN  
TO TRIESTE<sup>1</sup>**

**Keywords:** history, hybridity, migration, postcolonial, Romania, subaltern, temporality

**Abstract:** This paper will aim to expand Amitav Ghosh's notion of the "shadow lines" of history reflected in the microcosm of a single family to the individual account of dislocation, migration and relocation in Domnica Rădulescu's novel *Train to Trieste*. I will show that this story of the experience of one representative of the Romanian-American diaspora under communism and in the first years following the fall of communism, the first one of its kind, constructs a subjective line of temporal development – symbolised by the recurrent image of the train – which supplements official history. It shows a possible way in which personal narrative can escape the neocolonial limitations imposed by official historical discourses on subaltern cultures. If Amitav Ghosh builds a model of circulation for cultures through the metaphor of the transit lounge and Gloria Anzaldúa proclaims the fluidity of all borders – which she rereads as borderlands – Rădulescu's *Train to Trieste* focuses on a highly personal story, whose predominant narrative tense is the present, which overcomes the limitations of Romania's various subaltern positionings and in which the protagonist's success comes almost exclusively through the strength of individual agency.

Since the advent of New Historicism, it has been widely acknowledged that fiction and history share a narrative approach to "real-life" events. Whilst there are many ways of writing history, the degree of faithfulness to "what really happened" can vary in both history and fiction and is widely dependent on the author's interpretation. Despite narrative conventions that support different views, in both cases the claim to truth is relative: both omniscient realist fiction and traditional history books observe the causality and coherence of central narratives, often to the detriment of individual details located on the margin. These details, however, are sometimes more relevant to the need to explain the causality of "what really happened", and the aim of subaltern studies has been to build such a margin-sensitive historical discourse.

The subaltern studies collective began as a group of historians of India who felt, in the early 1980s, that Indian history was limited because it adopted a nationalist perspective. While this perspective claimed to be all-encompassing, the collective argued that it reflected the views of an elite, the nationalist bourgeoisie (educated in the colonisers' tradition and therefore having internalised many of the colonisers assumptions regarding what a modern society should be like). The perspectives and voices of those outside the centres of power – peasants, workers, tribal peoples and women – were neglected. The subaltern studies collective attempted to listen to these subaltern voices and utilise the radically different ways of seeing history that they represented. Dipesh Chakrabarty points out in *Provincializing Europe* that an explicit aim of subaltern studies is to write the subaltern classes into the history of nationalism and the nation and to combat all elitist biases in the writing of history, informed by canonical "Western" concepts connected to the idea of Europe as cultural authority (Chakrabarty 102). As Ranajit Guha shows, the basic aim of subaltern studies is to make the insurgent's consciousness the mainstay of a narrative

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claim about rebellion (Guha 145-6). The approach to history proposed is from below, or from the margin, from the perspective of the non-elites, so that the central narratives in history books are challenged, changed and often turned upside down. However, despite the awareness that such a change of perspective was necessary, the question was how to build a discourse that could reflect it without falling prey to the theoretical categories inherited by the colonised from the coloniser through ideological conditioning.

Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" demonstrates her concern for the processes whereby postcolonial studies ironically reinscribe, co-opt, and rehearse neo-colonial imperatives of political domination, economic exploitation, and cultural erasure. In other words, is the post-colonial critic unknowingly complicit in the task of imperialism? Is "post-colonialism" a specifically first-world, male, privileged, academic, institutionalised discourse that classifies and surveys the East in the same measure as the actual modes of colonial dominance it seeks to dismantle? Spivak encourages but also criticises the efforts of the subaltern studies group to locate and establish a "voice" or collective locus of agency in postcolonial India. As Spivak argues, by speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, subalterns will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate position in society. The academic assumption of a subaltern collectivity becomes akin to an ethnocentric extension of Western logos – a totalising, essentialist "mythology"– that does not account for the heterogeneity of the colonised body politic.

I would like to suggest that while theoretical discourses on history usually encounter epistemological and terminological difficulties in genuinely reflecting a subaltern consciousness, fiction, more precisely the novel form, through its commitment to individual accounts, is better equipped to express the inevitable ambivalence of subaltern perspectives, as well as their struggle to free themselves from traces of internalised imperialist or totalitarian cultural conditioning.

In *Colonial Desire*, Robert Young draws a connection between the intrinsic hybridity of discourses situated between cultures (such as diasporic ones) and the linguistic hybridity that constitutes for Bakhtin *heteroglossia* – the quality we encounter in the novel form to bring together the multiplicity of discourses that exist within a society at a given time. Young points out Bakhtin's use of hybridisation to describe "the ability of one voice to unmask the other within the same utterance" (so that the respective voice speaks for oneself and for an "other" at the same time, whether consciously or not) and shows that there are two types of such hybridity, intentional and organic. Young goes on to show that:

Bakhtin's doubled form of hybridity therefore offers a particularly significant dialectical model for cultural interaction: an organic hybridity, which will tend towards fusion, in conflict with intentional hybridity, which enables a contestatory activity, a politicized setting of cultural differences against each other dialogically. Hybridity therefore, as in the racial model, involves an antithetical movement of coalescence and antagonism, with the unconscious set against the intentional, the organic against the divisive, the generative against the undermining. Hybridity is itself an example of hybridity, of a doubleness that both brings together, fuses, but also maintains separation. For Bakhtin himself, the crucial effect of hybridization comes with the latter, political category, the moment where, within a single discourse, one voice is able to unmask the other. This is the point where authoritative discourse is undone. Authoritative discourse Bakhtin argues must be singular, it is "by its very nature incapable of being double-voiced; it cannot enter into hybrid constructions" (344) – or if it does, its single-voiced authority will immediately be undermined. (Young 22)

Thus, Young implies, the novel form is a privileged genre in hybrid cultures through the fact that it is organically endowed with a great capacity to subvert authoritative discourses of all kinds and, ultimately, to expose official meanings and their opposites at the same time. It thus becomes possible in a novel to express culturally diverse and even politically opposed messages in the same sentence, while being equally faithful to both.

An example of how authoritative discourses such as colonial ones can be undermined through hybridisation can be discussed using Amitav Ghosh's concept of the *shadow lines* in the novel that bears this title. Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* focuses on a very particular personal history (the experience of a single family) as a microcosm for a broader national and international experience. The shadow lines are arbitrary divisions between people that show porousness of geographical borders, as well as the

artificiality of a range of binary categorisations of culture and areas of the human psyche. Amitav Ghosh's shadow lines represent a metaphor that expresses the inevitable blurring of the line between such fixed categories and insists on the need to theorise the transitions and negotiations between them. In Ghosh's "transit-lounge of culture" (Dixon 11) identities are in perpetual becoming and always on the move in space, so that they are shown in their continual spatial and temporal evolution. Being on the go means being motivated to evolve in time, to move towards something better.

A similar focus on becoming and negotiation characterises ethnic American discourses on identity and agency. Robert Dixon extends Anzaldua's shift of emphasis from static to dynamic cultural patterns to Ghosh: circulation as a model for the global era. Ghosh undermines the thought held in classical ethnography that the culture of the Western observer is a stable and coherent point from which to observe a native society (Dixon 11). On the contrary, this former culture is also in change and is just as much of a relative discourse as the culture of the latter is, therefore should have equal authority, which is actually the point of subaltern studies. Robert Dixon celebrates Anzaldua's shift of emphasis from static to dynamic cultural patterns that encourage negotiations between cultures and stresses the potential of such an approach to similar hybrid contexts, wider than Anzaldua's own.

How far can we go if we try to expand subaltern studies to a non-postcolonial, non-Indian, immigrant, yet hybrid culture such as that of the Romanian diaspora in the United States, formed of people who moved there at a time when life in Romania was deeply affected by one of the most extreme versions of communist ideology and thus torn between indoctrination and double-think? I want to argue that Domnica Rădulescu's 2008 novel *Train to Trieste* – arguably the first fictional account of the experience of the Romanian migration to the United States under communism – builds a novelistic discourse that reflects Bakhtin's subversive hybridisation. The novel successfully exposes the cultural conditioning perpetuated by the totalitarian communist regime in Romania and further proposes a way to overcome the limitations of Romania's various subaltern positionings through an otherwise very American success story. This story features a Romanian female immigrant who survives the trauma of dislocation and reinvents herself as a Romanian-American, almost exclusively through the strength of individual agency. As she builds herself a life in the US, she tries to reject her past memories for a while so as to be able to move on. But then she realises that this would leave an irreparable gap and resolves to exist in two parallel temporalities, two different lives placed in a perpetual dialogue: the present in which she lives intensely (reinforced by the almost obsessive present tense used throughout the novel) and the flashbacks from her Romanian past. These flashbacks keep emerging from Mona's inevitably troubled subconscious as she forges her new life in the United States and maintain a recurrent, yet repressed feeling that her life, on another level, continues in her country without her being there: "In order not to lose myself in this city of strangers, I carry a country inside my head" (Rădulescu 195).

*Train to Trieste* is an example of how in a novel private temporalities can escape the limitations imposed by the fact of being locked in a subaltern historical discourse, as whole nations were under the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. It proposes a version of a narrative of empowerment representative of a whole group of people: Romanian political asylum seekers in the United States before 1989. This narrative reflects the move from a state of bondage to a state of chosen and assumed freedom. It is at the same time an individual reflection on history and how it affects people on the deepest intimate levels. As the author told me in an interview in December 2008, the novel aims to show in the first part, set in Romania, that in the middle of political pressure and corruption of the deepest human feelings by the double-think imposed by the regime, "people lived intensely". This was their main political act of resistance. The novel is generous in depicting the liveliness of moments such as the New Year's Eve party in the chapter suggestively entitled "Say It's Only a Paper Moon". As the title hints at reality and ideology being both illusions to such an extent that it is sometimes hard to say which is the reality and which is the ideology, this, however, cannot hinder the joy of the young people who are celebrating a new beginning:

A new decade will start after tonight, the eighties. We are hopeful. We have colored confetti. Maybe our

president will die and the world will change. There is food that everybody's parents have prepared for our party, which they spent whole days standing in line to collect. There's the famous *piftie*, frozen gelatin filled with garlic and pork. *Sarmale*, cabbage leaves and grape leaves stuffed with rice and meat. Pickled apples and pickled tomatoes. Whoever said Romanians are starving? Mostly, I care about the music. *Do we have enough dance music?* I hate that greasy trembling gelatin anyway. All I care about is dancing and *do we have enough wine?* The party has hardly begun and we're already tipsy from the Murfatlar, red wine that is exported everywhere in the world but hard to find in Romania, because the state trades our wine, our leather, and our tractors for hard currency. (Rădulescu 70)

This dramatisation of one of the strongest national myths, that of the Romanians' extraordinary capacity to sublimate pain into joy through laughter, becomes even more powerful as the same chapter gives a few examples of the widely circulated political jokes of the age. Earlier in the novel, the more serious issue of one's love for one's country is posed against patriotism as a communist political duty, exposing the subtle situation in which a whole nation ends up hating one's country, since love for it was a requirement of a regime that only deserved to be hated:

When I am ten years old, I have to write a composition about why I love my country. I stare and stare at the white page and cannot bring myself to say why I love my country. I know I love my country: the beautiful mountains, and the sea, and the old buildings, and the universities, and the wheat fields, but everybody will say that. It's what all the literature books tell us: they tell us why we love our country, and they tell us how beautiful and rich our country is, and that we all love it. Then suddenly it comes to me. I love my country because I *miss* my country, like I miss my mother when she is not with me. But I live in my country. Why would I miss it, if I am in it all the time? But I know what I know. I miss the country I once saw in my father's eyes as he was telling my mother and me about his childhood before the war. (...) (Rădulescu 38-9)

This "missing" quality of love, which later on becomes a good excuse to philosophise around the infinite meanings of the quintessential Romanian word *dor*, "something like a longing, like a yearning that you can't explain and you don't know why you have it", as Mona's father defines it for the benefit of non-Romanian readers (Rădulescu 40). Yet in the particular case of this plot we are prompted to interpret it as longing for that country that Mona will carry in her head a few chapters later. The fact that she now lives very far from home helps her imagine her country as it should be, untainted by communist dictatorship, the way she hopes she will find it again when she goes back to visit after the Revolution. At this point, towards the end of the novel, Mona realises that she now has two countries, as both have grown to mean equally much to her:

Perhaps my own country will become the country I had once missed so deeply in the composition I had written more than thirty years ago. And maybe I will get used to having two countries, to having no country, to being my own country, and stretching across the Atlantic Ocean, one foot in the Indiana cornfields, the other in a berry-filled meadow in the Carpathians, like a huge baobab tree. (Rădulescu 301)

Mona Maria Manoliu is a capable young woman who has the courage to love to the deepest core of her being, then leave her love and all her inhibitions behind in order to follow her convictions. She boards the train of freedom to Belgrade and then to Trieste and Rome, to then fly to the United States. Chicago, the city where she arrives and where she is hosted by a family of Christian fundamentalists (one of the funny episodes in the novel), is depicted in terms that are deeply imprinted with some of Rădulescu's own memories about the same city where she too arrived as a political refugee. The novel is deeply personal and the obsessive present tense contributes to the reader's identification with the character. We follow Mona's development through her process of coming of age and her progress towards freedom. Mona's adventure of becoming an independent citizen of the US is also full of ghosts

that never stop visiting her from her past, even though the second part, located in the States, is more conventional than the first, as it is a version of the American success story.

*Train to Trieste* is partly autobiographical and thus reflects both a deeply personal experience and a collective story that led to the formation of the Romanian-American diaspora. Like her protagonist, Domnica Rădulescu emigrated to America via Italy in 1983, settled in Chicago and, even though she lived through less extreme situations than Mona, she similarly reinvented herself as a successful American academic. She is currently professor of French and Italian at Washington and Lee University and has published extensively in the fields of drama, women's studies and Romanian studies. She has been active in the Romanian Studies Association of America and has been a Fulbright lecturer in Romania (at the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj). This shows an interest in maintaining connections and in continuing not only to live in several languages (of which English, which she spoke fluently when she arrived in the US, is only one), but also to exist at the same time in the two cultures to which she belongs by birth and by choice: the Romanian one and the American one. Language reflects this option in the novel: if Rădulescu continues to be as fluent in Romanian as she is in English and her American-born children are bilingual, *Train to Trieste* is written in English (the language of Rădulescu's intellectual make-up) but is sprinkled with Romanian words invested with an emblematic function. There are many such words – *tergal* (a thin woolen fabric), *televizor*, *țuică*, *cariocă* (italicised, but carefully spelt with all the Romanian diacritics) – and their lively poignancy and almost magic capacity to bring back valuable memories, partly explained for the book's American target audience, could not have been rendered in English translation. Close to the beginning of the book, a comment on the mixed origins of Romanian language signals, again, the character's desire to emancipate from a historically imposed subaltern consciousness, to escape a prescribed version of history and to build her own version for herself:

Sometimes, when I wake up from my nap in the afternoon, my father talks to me about Romanian grammar and how there are more words that come from the Romans than from any other language, that's why it's called Romanian. But there are fourteen words from the people who lived on this land before the Romans, who were called Dacians. They were blond and had blue eyes. The Dacian words are *copil*, *moșneag*, *barză*, *țîrnăcop*. *Child*, *old man*, *stork*, *hoe...* and I can't remember the rest. I like the Dacian words a lot, and I want to be Dacian from before the Romans came. I don't like the Romans, how they invaded and killed the Dacians and how they stole all of their words and left them with only fourteen. (Rădulescu 28-29)

This passage, which comments on one of the least aggressive manifestations of communist ideology – its nationalist rhetoric regarding the origins of the Romanian people and language – is symbolic of how official histories coexist with individual lives. Roman colonisation, with its linguistic consequences – on which Ceaușescu's regime was very keen because it was opposed to earlier theories regarding the Slavic origin of Romanian and thus helped assert the Soviet-free political line of the day – comes to be perceived by extension as just another instance of what any power discourse (including the communist one) is: an attempt at gaining a position from which to effectively control people's minds.

The gradual emergence of the character's dream to escape the established, controlling discourses of an absurd system is depicted in terms of absurd imagery, which draws allegorical connections to what was actually the growing absurdity around. In a country closed to the rest of the world, in which people try to build rich personal lives and various forms of escape, yet they encounter difficulties as the most intimate choices are politically controlled, Mona finds it increasingly hard to cope with having to live two different secret lives at the same time. There is a scene in which, even though she knows that Mihai does not live in Bucharest any more, she enters his room and finds there a decrepit old man (a sinister embodiment of the moral degradation of the system) that triggers in her the desire to set herself free:

I have no idea what anybody wants from me anymore. In this moment, as I sit on the chair in Mihai's old room, with the ancient man with brown soup in his beard, I only know that I want to run away forever. I want to be on the train to Trieste, to find myself in the exact moment where it crosses the

border into Italy where olive trees grow, where velvety, dark green pines cast their profiles against blue hills and Roman ruins, where people speak joyously in sentences that sound like opera arias and say things like *mamma mia* and *mascalzone*. (Rădulescu 126)

The train to Trieste is not a real train to Trieste, but one of the freedom myths of the kind that people forced to live in totalitarian regimes sometimes build in order to protect their sanity. The train does not even exist as such:

It wasn't really the train to Trieste. We just called it that, because it went to the last little Romanian town at the border with Yugoslavia called Jimbolia, from which you could get to Trieste – if you took the train to Belgrade and convinced the Serbian authorities you needed to get to Trieste because you would be killed if you were sent back to Romania. (Rădulescu 131)

In reality things are much more complicated. Yet the train is a powerful chronotope that crosses through Rădulescu's novel and represents a strongly significant organising principle on the spatial and temporal axes of the novel. As the cover photograph shows – with the girl sitting on her suitcase by the railroad, whose face we cannot see (therefore she can be anyone), because it is turned in the direction the train might be coming from and hopes it will come – it is not the reality, but this strong, stubborn hope that matters and that takes her on her adventure journey through Belgrade to Trieste, Rome and then Chicago. The second part of the novel is a story of escape and success, which presents an optimistic version of the American dream come true provided one has the strength to emerge from the conditionings of subaltern consciousness and follow one's path unhindered by external circumstances.

As soon as Mona arrives in Chicago, what happens in Romania is only reflected from a distance, in symbolic tones, in relation to her memories and to her parents. There is no account of the anticommunist Revolution in the novel, because Mona is not there when it happens. Yet this apparent historical absence is in fact a perpetual presence throughout the novel, and it is actually through its lack that it fulfils its meaning much better. It is in the final chapters of the novel, when Mona is back in Romania and catches up with the less official events that have happened in her absence from Mihai's friend Radu, that we are reminded of the actual purpose of this novel. It not to give another account of the history of the Romanian Revolution, albeit from one individual perspective, but rather to subvert the tyranny of official historical discourses through one narrative that adopts its own subjective temporality and thus crosses the shadow lines of history as prompted solely by individual agency. It is at this stage, just before Mona's encounter with Mihai (who, contrary to what she knew, is still alive) in the last chapter, called "The Encounter", that we are reminded of the symbolism of the train; yet this time its trajectory is covered backwards:

I rewind everything back again to the night before my departure from Brasov, two days before I took the train from Bucharest.

I am falling through a deep tunnel like Alice in Wonderland, everything passing by me in reverse order. Images of myself and of the people in my life moving backward flash at me from all directions, in the deep tunnel where I am sliding in a breathless free fall. It all moves faster and faster and I know that soon I will hit the ground with a thick thump and millions of pieces of myself will be scattered to the stars. (Rădulescu 300)

As she makes her journey backwards, Mona puts the puzzle pieces together and realises that she had to leave her country behind and to go through the false knowledge of Mihai's death in the Revolution in order to find the strength to overcome a static, sitting condition and to become a traveller towards something unknown that will force her to reinvent herself. By now, too, Rădulescu's novel has managed to persuade us that narrative discourse can master the driving force to subvert controlling ideologies and allow formerly subaltern voices to speak out in ways that history seems insufficiently equipped to speak.

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