



## “Welcome to America,” fragment from *Dream in a Suitcase. A Story of My Immigrant Life*

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### ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

Memorialistic chapter about the author’s arrival to America and her first months in Chicago in 1983, during the coldest winter of the century.

**Keywords:** memoir, anti-memoir narrative, imagination, journey, home, country, refugee, belonging, cold, suitcase

### ABSTRACT IN ROMANIAN

‘Bine ați venit în America’, fragment din *Vis într-o valiză. Povestea vieții mele de imigranta*. Capitol memorialistic despre sosirea scriitoarei în America și primele ei luni petrecute în Chicago în 1983, în iarna cea mai friguroasă a secolului.

**Cuvinte cheie:** memoir, anti-memoir, narațiune, imaginație, călătorie, acasă, țara, a aparține, refugiat, frig, valiză

### INTRODUCTION

“Welcome to America” is part of a larger memorialistic work titled *Dream in a Suitcase. A Story of My Immigrant Life*, a book I once swore I would never write. In the end it was the book itself that demanded to be written. I obeyed its call not because I think I have led an interesting or adventurous life, which is always relative and can be topped by more interesting, more adventurous lives, or because I am a celebrity which I am not, but

because I am a creative artist of the written and spoken word. And there came a moment in my journey as a writer when it felt necessary to choose the journey of my own life as the main subject of my next narrative. Several factors have also motivated me to embark on this journey of self-narration. A particularly crucial factor has been the relentless question of “where are you from?” posed to me in different variants hundreds of times during the last thirty-five years of my life as an immigrant in the United States. To put it in the words of the writer Sarah Ahmed, this question “becomes something you reside in,” “to be questionable can feel like a residence.”<sup>1</sup> In the writing of this book I have thus become the “architect” of my own residence of foreignness.

My *Dream in a Suitcase* is not a memoir in the popular meaning of the word, it is not a report of my life or of its “adventurous” episodes for the sake of a sensationalistic effect. Its genre is deliberately fluid and escapes definition. If I were to give this work a defining name, that would be an “anti-memoir,” a narrative of self-fiction whose principal unifying thread is the relentless quest for a home, for a place of belonging, whether real or imagined. But it is not all. This narrative is also a story of reinvention or in the words of H el ene Cixous of “coming to writing,” of “flying with” and “stealing” language. The French word “voler” that Cixous uses to encourage women to write themselves and create new discourses that reflect their own experience in the world, refers to both meanings of flying and stealing. It is an exilic narrative that attempts to recover and piece together the puzzle that has been my nomadic existence in the hyphenated spaces between countries, cultures, languages and identities, in the “stolen” language of my adoptive and adopted English. Though it is a work of self-writing, I consider it as an anti-memoir for several other reasons: I have crafted it in the same manner as I have crafted my works of literary fiction, with all the aesthetic strategies I have used in my novels; I believe that memory itself fictionalizes experience and even more so, exile memory writing is doubly a fiction due to its unreliable relation to the real, to time and space; it is an anti-memoir because it attempts to capture the processes of becoming of the past as a continuously changing rather than as an unmovable reality; finally, it is an anti-memoir because it resists and attempts to subvert phallogocentric memoir writing with the male narrator as the hero of his story, as well as the old clich es about “feminine” or women’s life writing. If I had to place this work within a body of literature and then more narrowly within a certain genre of exile writing it would have to be feminist women’s exile memoir writing. Mererid Puw Davie points out that “to focus on women’s life writing may be to move too close to an old clich e: that women are able to write about their own lives only because they have no other subject, no true intellectual enterprise,” and

she insists that for instance women's "Holocaust and Exile" life writing should be considered "literary narratives" (7–15).<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, Marion Kaplan explores the gendered nature of memorialistic writing. She notes that "There is a relationship between gender and memory. Women and men concentrate on different recollections." Talking about Kindertransportee women's memoirs of the Holocaust, she notes that "Only those women whose sense of self and history was strong enough wrote memoirs."<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, I am much more profoundly connected to such literary exile narratives by women writers than I am to any memorialistic works written by say Romanian American exile writers or East European immigrant writers.

As an artist of the written and spoken word who has chosen her adoptive country and the language of her art with deliberation, I function and exist across communities of thought and imagination rather than within national and ethnic lines which I have always found imprisoning and from which I escaped thirty-five years ago. My literary models and mentors are women writers, "thieves" of language who have created unprecedented discourses of belonging, empowerment and irreverent poetic reinvention. They are such writers as the incomparable French novelist Marguerite Duras, the luminous Chilean American poet and memorialist Marjorie Agosin, the Chicana brilliant poet and novelist Sandra Cisneros who generously mentored me in the writing of my first novel *Train to Trieste*. Magnificent women immigrant writers such as the Haitian Edwidge Danticat, or the Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie whose visceral writing plunges to the deepest circles of the hell that can be our world of genocides, slavery and brutal displacements, are also role models who inspire me in channeling the experience of being a woman exile artistically. In her book *Create Dangerously. The Immigrant Artist at Work*, Edwidge Danticat ponders whether there is such a thing as "an immigrant reader." She concludes together with Roland Barthes that the destination of a text is at least as important as its origins and that "the writer, bound to the reader, under diabolic, even joyful, circumstances can possibly become an honorary citizen of the country of his readers."<sup>4</sup> It is in such a location of openness towards world wide citizenry, or, in the words of the African American theorist bell hooks, from a place of "margins as a space of radical openness"<sup>5</sup> that I construct my residence of foreignness and unravel my *Dream in a Suitcase*.

The day I stepped onto the earth of my adoptive country one frigid December day in 1983 with all my belongings and a big dream of being a writer all stuffed in my worn-out Romanian suitcase, was also when I decided that the language of my art, of my critical inquiries and creative endeavors, was going to be that of my adoptive country, that is English. I was going to write in the language that I also lived in and for which I had

left behind my country of birth. Faithful to my vow of thirty-five years ago, I have written all my creative and critical work in English, except for several scholarly articles written in French, which has been the principal language of my teaching career and of much of my scholarly work. My writing career has grown from a deliberate and proudly assumed act of “betrayal” towards my own native language, which, although the closest and sweetest to my heart, as it is inscribed in the very molecules of my being, would not have sufficed to contain the totality of my experiences, life and imaginary worlds of the last three decades. Likewise, my assumed existence of uprooted citizen of the world, has had at its center a deliberate act of self-immolation that I performed in all lucidity on the day I said farewell to my country, family, language and the young girl I had once been. *My Dream in a Suitcase* is thus also the story of a perpetual act of invention and reinvention, of a life in translation and therefore by its very nature of a perpetual process of self-fictionalizing.

Despite its direct origins in the memory of my experiences *Dream in a Suitcase* is still a work of the imagination with a protagonist that resembles the person I believe to be, in possibly idealized forms, written in a voice that is that of this protagonist and that changes shapes, tonalities and pitches depending on the kind of experiences it attempts to recover from the meandering flow of memory. For a person in exile, the experience of reality is often poised on the edge between a past whose traces are no longer visible in the new spaces of our exile, and a slippery present in which we try to root ourselves without a full knowledge or understanding of our adopted earth. We associate the native spaces with our youth and the adoptive spaces with growing old. At the same time starting over and groping our way through unfamiliar universes reduces us to a state of continuous infantilization. We are both extremely old and extremely young as exiles. Time and space are eternally out of whack with each other. I am trying to capture this jittery simultaneity of experience and the layering of memory onto the present. I am interested in the processes of meaning making of a mind and life always divided between several worlds, geographies, cultures and languages and some of the crucial moments in the journey of exile that have fixated or rooted me in my American life and earth.

I have deliberately chosen to reorganize the memory of my life’s journey in terms of several defining moments, periods and experiences, of which by far the most radical was that of my definitive departure from my native Romania and the subsequent settling in the earth of the United States. “Welcome to America” is one of the chapters that has emerged precisely from the experience of the resettling on a new continent, in a new country in the frigid cold of Chicago in December of 1983 when my parents and I arrived with a couple of suitcases that carried all of our

belongings and each with a different version of that mythic and illusory American Dream in our hearts. That first epic winter of my arrival in Chicago was channeled through my creative imagination and emerged in my first novel *Train to Trieste* in a chapter titled “Chicago Winter in Sepia” in which my protagonist Mona is trying to survive that formidable cold. This is a brief passage from that chapter:

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During my first winter in Chicago my feet get frostbite. I have a tooth abscess. My face swells and I look like a fish again. I writhe in pain for three days until the abscess bursts open and the pain goes away, then I have a dead tooth in my mouth. I'm still working at the drugstore as a cashier. I register for courses to complete my university degree, and I switch to the evening shift, so I can attend classes all day. I take two trains and a bus to get to the university. There's graffiti on the trains that says things like Life's a bitch and then you die. The word *fuck* is written everywhere. You find out from the walls of these trains that *Jose is fucking Maria*. I am entertained every morning on the train as I try to picture these people who are having such an intense love life that they have to share it with the Chicago Transit Authority community. I earn money and learn the different stores on State Street and Michigan Avenue. I miss Italy. I miss the wide avenues of Rome, its special light, the pine trees, and the espresso coffee in narrow bars. I don't miss my country at all, only Italy. But it's not a painful kind of missing, it's substitute missing, because it's so much easier to miss Italy than my own country with everyone and everything in it that I love. [...] It's grey and cold in Chicago, so cold you think life will just stop and everybody in the street will simply freeze like mannequins forever. The businesswoman in a black fur coat and sneakers will freeze as she searches in her bag for her car keys. The man playing a saxophone behind an empty hat will freeze just as he lifts his saxophone toward the dark Chicago sky. The homeless woman will freeze just as she is about to stick her hand into the trash can; the policeman guiding traffic with his hand raised will stay just like that. Everything – the taxis, the limos, the buses, the child running behind his mother who carries a grocery bag from Dominick's in each hand, will freeze just as he's about to catch up with her. This is how I see Chicago this cold winter: in black-and-white stills. I know there is something I should be feeling but am not. I don't let in any feelings that could distract me from making it through this winter.<sup>6</sup>

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While the chapter “Welcome to America” recounts the actual arrival in the United States and in Chicago, the one mentioned above is part of a work of fiction inspired by the same episodes of my life. But neither are the memorialistic pages a photographic report of my life nor are the fictional pages devoid of the substance of my own life. Stylistically, I believe the fictional pages are bolder, more poetic and more adventurous, as they are told in the voice of my fierce character, Mona Manoliu. My memorialist pages were harder to write, and I find them more halting, at times

diluted, at other times fractured, as if touched by the hesitancy of self-revelation. For me, it has been harder to record the flow of my own lived experiences than to filter and process them through my imaginary processes and let them acquire a life of their own in the lives and voices of my heroine. Marguerite Duras considered that autobiography is an impossibility. She said: “L’histoire de votre vie, de ma vie, elles n’existent pas. Le roman de ma vie, de nos vies, oui, mais pas l’histoire. C’est dans la reprise des temps par l’imaginaire que le souffle est rendu à la vie.” (“The story of your life, of my life, they do not exist. The novel of my life, of our lives, yes, but not history. It is in the recovery of time by the imaginary that the breath is returned to life.”) In my life long journey as a refugee, immigrant, nomad on this imperfect yet still beautiful planet of ours, and as a “thief of language,” it has indeed been the “recovery of time by the imaginary,” that has been my most secure and exhilarating space of belonging.

EXCERPT FROM *DREAM IN A SUITCASE.*  
*A STORY OF MY IMMIGRANT LIFE*

**WELCOME TO AMERICA**

My parents and I landed on American soil at JFK airport in New York on a dark December day, dizzy and exhausted from the ten-hour flight filled with turbulences. Our three suitcases were vigorously kicked around by the American airport workers who also graced us with several swear words as we tried picking them up. We were not supposed to pick them up until the porters were going to place all suitcases coming off that plane in one place in the terminal. Our refugee airplane had special treatment. Despite the rude awakening to American airport procedures I was glad I could pick up the swear words of “what the fuck,” “get the fuck out of the way,” and “motherfucker.” The American gangster movies I had seen in Romania sandwiched in between news about the latest visit of Nicolae Ceausescu to a factory of wheel bearings or to a cooperative in some remote area of the country, had served some good purpose. And my journey was only beginning. From the pay phone at the airport I called our sponsor Zoila Valdivieso to tell her we had arrived in America, New York and we were waiting for our plane to Chicago. She said she was so excited, “I’m going to wait for you at the exit, I can’t wait to see you.” I called her collect because she had told me to when I called her from Rome, which to me sounded like Colette, the French writer. Despite my years of studying English language and literature, I still stumbled through many of the colloquialisms and my knowledge of Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Thomas Hardy or French writers like Colette was either a huge source of confusion or of funny coincidences.

Zoila waited for us at O'Hare airport wrapped in a fluffy gray fur coat and screamed with joy when she saw us. Her sister Mia accompanied her and the two of them spoke Spanish to one another which immediately gave me a sense of familiarity. Any of the Romance languages made me feel more at home than English which seemed cold and felt like I was talking out of a textbook. We descended upon Chicago in the coldest winter of the century and before anything else that I had thought I would do in Chicago in America, I had to learn how to survive the cold of that historic winter. That was going to be a main job, surviving the cold. The sheepskin winter coat that my mother insisted I take in my one suitcase and because of which I was almost stopped at the Romanian border by the customs police, proved to be a life savior. My mother kept saying "I told you so" while she was herself shivering in her light woolen coat, as she had chosen to take the family jewelry instead of her warmest coat. My father wore his sheepskin tall hat which protected his head from the cold, but his trench coat lined with faux fur was a joke in the face of the minus twenty degrees Celsius roaring outside or the five degrees on the Fahrenheit scale which I had no understanding of and which always tricked me in thinking it was warmer than it actually was. There were also two kinds of cold temperature measurements which added confusion to my will to survive: one was the real temperature measured in the Fahrenheit system still foreign to me and the other one was the windchill factor which I always understood as the windshield factor and imagined it must have been the force by which the wind hit the car windshields. The linguistic confusions infantilized me and added humiliation to my struggle with the elements. Not even the sheepskin coat fully protected me from the metallic cold of Chicago with its wicked wind from the lake blowing through all my clothing all the way to my soul. Nothing was as I had imagined it: the fancy suburb where our generous sponsor lived and where she found us a tiny temporary apartment for which she paid the first month's rent was deserted and lifeless. My father kept asking "where are the people?" Which made Zoila squeal with laughter every time we translated his question. The people didn't walk in the streets but drove everywhere. After years of semi starvation in Romania, I was beside myself with excitement to visit the supermarkets. Zoila took us grocery shopping on our second day after arrival and told us to choose anything we wanted. My father filled the cart with toilet paper and cigarettes, as those were some of the shortages, he had suffered the most from in Romania. She laughed wholeheartedly and said there was still going to be toilet paper in the supermarket the next day. My mother wanted to buy meat for a steak and Zoila got her a prepackaged steak called rib eye steak which I hadn't heard of in any of my English literature readings either. As for me I was so confused and dizzy at the sight of the different types of peppers, apples,

hams, cheeses that I decided to pick something I had never seen before such as marshmallows in a huge plastic bag. When asked about bread, my father said none of it looked good and gave up on choosing any of the breads in plastic wraps. Zoila filled up the cart with cans, jars, items in plastic bags and paid for everything with a card. It all seemed unreal and sad. For an incomprehensible reason the “visit” to the supermarket and the empty streets outside the supermarket made me feel more alienated and scared than the unbearable cold outside. In fact, they made me fiercer in my battle with the Chicago cold, wind, “windshield” winds, for it felt adventurous and harshly real, while the suburban streets and the supermarkets seemed artificial and soulless. I knew my father hated everything from the slowness in his gait that used to always be fast and brisk, from the film of sadness over his eyes. So, I tried to be cheerful and upbeat. I felt fake like the supermarket shelves filled with five kinds of giant peppers and ten kinds of tasteless breads in plastic bags.

We couldn’t afford to be sad, we had to put up a happy front for everybody who was helping us get settled and integrated. Shiny cars, sparkling stores, endless highways with mammoth trucks, the little fragrant soaps and four different sizes of towels in people’s bathrooms, large and small signs of abundance served as a kind of cheerfulness drug, a happiness injection, an anesthetic for the soul. My father mimicked the cashiers in supermarkets with a sideways movement of his jaws and a sound almost like a small roar as they went “aha” in response to every “thank you” and the incessant “how are you?” He had once been a charismatic university professor who now was reduced to infantilized mimicking of the three words and an onomatopoeia that he understood in English.

Zoila was preparing feverishly for Christmas and telling every single friend and acquaintance about “the family from Romania, yes they escaped with God’s help, I know, I prayed for them all the time and God answered my prayers, isn’t it wonderful?” At first all the God talk I heard around me seemed nice, even cute, a proof of the famous freedom of speech. But after hearing God invoked for everything from large things such as our adventurous escape to the most insignificant detail of everyday life such as finding a parking place, I became uncomfortable and scared. People were inviting us to their churches left and right and out of politeness we always said yes. Many of these people were also sending huge bags with clothes and shoes for us and even checks written in our names which we had no idea what to do with, as we had never seen a check in our lives and didn’t have a bank account. Going to church with our benefactors seemed like the least we could do to show our gratitude. I was excited about the piles of nice American clothes sent our way and said yes to everything. When we went to church the first time, my father kept asking “where is the church?” And “when does the service



start?” He was expecting painted golden icons and frescos, stained glass windows, incense and cupolas, and chanted prayers, like we had in our four-hundred-year-old Orthodox churches. He thought we had gone to a meeting in an administrative building. By our third incursion to one of our benefactors’ churches we feared that we were being drawn into a cult and started finding excuses to avoid the unpleasant incursions into suburban Methodist worshipping. I started spending more time with Zoila’s sister Mia, the only one who didn’t adhere to any of the religious fervor surrounding her, smoked cigarettes, cussed copiously and liberally drank vodka. My kind of girl. She made us laugh and took us on whirlwind tours along the dazzling Lake Shore Drive. She said she missed Cuba even though she was only two when her parents brought her to Miami to follow the adventurous Zoila. It turned out that the price of Zoila’s American adventure had been her conversion to the religion of her adoptive parents in Louisiana, who had been missionaries in Cuba, saving Cuban souls with Jesus messages that sounded like TV commercials and with lots of portable abridged Bibles. I had no idea what missionaries meant either, but it didn’t sound good at all. Mia swore and gossiped, and I learned all the cusses in the English language from her for which I was infinitely grateful. She said: “America is plastic,” she talked of Cuba as her true home where food had taste and the beaches were mesmerizing. She was the only one who kept worrying about my father and stopped in the middle of the street to ask: “he misses his country, doesn’t he?” Then she hugged him out of the blue. She won my father’s affection instantaneously and, in her presence, he laughed all the time. Mia’s wildness, her criticism of her adoptive country, the chaotic tours of the city she took us on, freeing us for a few hours from the stifling sanitized quiet of the Chicago North Shore suburbs, her unrestrained laugh, smoking, cussing, refusal of her sister’s adopted religion, were the first connection I established to America. Despite all her criticism, she loved living in Chicago in America. I understood that if you were young and knew the language you could make your own America. I wasn’t sure at all about my parents though. I wanted to live in her America, and I wanted nothing to do with the America of the Methodist suburban churches. Zoila negotiated it all though, she navigated through opposing currents with the cheerfulness that had charmed us ten years earlier when we had met her on the shores of the Black Sea. On second thought, it was the combination of the two Cuban American sisters, their light arguments half in Spanish, half in English, that brought us solace from the physical and human coldness of that winter.

The Christmas party offered in our honor by Zoila’s best College friend, now a millionaire and owner of a huge wax company titled Turtle Wax, was in the domain of the Dallas episodes we used to watch. We hadn’t

heard of Christmas parties either, as we just celebrated on Christmas Eve with gifts and carols around a fir tree my uncle had cut from one of the thick forests in the nearby mountains. The enormous table filled with foods of every imaginable kind of meat, cheese, vegetable, fruit, pastry and other edibles we had never seen, held more food than our entire family would have consumed in a year. We stared at it and didn't know what to do, what to take, where to start. My father asked Mia to bring him some whiskey, my mother went for the French cheeses and I attacked the strawberries and chocolate desserts. My face hurt from all the smiling I had to do. I felt clumsy and dropped everything on the shiny floors as I was trying to eat and satisfy years of pent up hungers while also telling all the guests so curious about "the Romanian family," "our story" and describe our country about which nobody knew anything other than Nadia Comaneci and Dracula came from there. Suddenly as I was talking about that country with my mouth full of chocolate pudding to rich people who didn't seem to give a damn about my or anybody else's country, it all felt unbearably fake and unreal. I had no idea what that country was all about, it seemed like a picture in a travel agency. The rugged mysterious Carpathians, the golden beaches by the Black Sea, visit Romania! The general din, the conversations, the Christmas music, luscious decorations all seemed equally unreal, a movie set. I was suspended between two unrealities, ungrounded and irrelevant. Why had I come to America? For chocolate pudding? I followed Mia to the balcony to smoke a cigarette, followed by my father, carrying his whiskey glass like a precious goblet. The three of us smoked heartily in the frigid night staring at the starless sky, at the sparkling Christmas decorations and the shadows of the people milling around in the spacious strongly lit rooms. My mother was talking to Zoila and she was laughing, she seemed happy. I didn't know what happy meant any more. I didn't care about happy at that point, I wanted real. The cruel wind blowing from the lake was the only thing that felt painfully real. I swallowed it greedily.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Domnica Radulescu is Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature at Washington and Lee University in Virginia, US. She is the author of ten books, edited and co-edited scholarly collections on topics ranging from the tragic heroine in Western literature to feminist comedy, to theater of war and exile. Radulescu is the author of three critically acclaimed and internationally appreciated novels: *Country of Red Azaleas* (Twelve, Hachette 2016), *Black Sea Twilight* (Doubleday 2010 & 2011) and *Train to Trieste* (Knopf 2008 & 2009) and of several plays. *Train to Trieste* has been

published in thirteen languages and is the winner of the 2009 Library of Virginia Fiction Award. Two of her plays, *The Town with Very Nice People* (2013) and *Exile Is My Home. A Sci-fi Immigrant Fairy Tale* (2014) were finalists in the Jane Chambers Women Playwriting competition. The latter play was produced for a four-week run at the Theater for the New City in New York in April/May 2016 to excellent reviews. Radulescu received rave reviews for her novels and plays. The internationally bestselling award-winning author Sandra Cisneros said the following about Radulescu's writing: "Domnica Radulescu enriches American letters with her Romanian perspective. We are lucky to call her ours." Radulescu is working on her fourth novel *My Father's Orchards*.

## NOTES

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- 2 Mererid Puw Davies, ed. *Autobiography by Women in German* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000), 7–15.
- 3 Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair. Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.
- 4 Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously. The Immigrant artist at Work*. (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2011), 13–16.
- 5 bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" in *Yearning, Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002).
- 6 Domnica Radulescu, *Train to Trieste* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 190–91.