

Virtual Ethnicity
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SYMBOLIC ETHNIC BORDERS
IN THE VIRTUAL SPACE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will describe some aspects from my field of observation, the “Virtual Romanian Community in Vancouver” site, www.rovancouver.com, and its annex, www.voci.ro, comparing the two sites and emphasizing on the elements that could represent manifestations of an ethnic identity – viewed as a type of group identity. To better explain these manifestations and to interpret them from a wider theoretical point of view, I will adopt Anthony Cohen’s symbolist approach on collective identity; I will talk about ethnic boundary-stating and boundary-maintaining symbols, giving examples from my research on the site – examples of symbols capable of creating a Romanian exclusivist space. By doing this, I hope to show some of the possible ways in which ethnic identity is brought, developed and negotiated in internet.

When I started working on this project, I knew I will position myself on an unexplored field and I will observe it from a new view point; but I didn't expect so many surprising discoveries: I learnt more about the virtual space, about rules and possibilities here, about internet related experiences; I had the opportunity to look at this field with the eyes of an anthropologist, although my experience as an anthropologist is quite reduced; I had to face the terms ethnicity, race and their manifestations – which could be quite scary and unpleasant for me, sometimes; I observed people that share the same culture as me, in actions that I never noticed before; I tried to link all these in a coherent opinion, without judging them and without drawing value conclusions. But I often found myself in the situation of not knowing what I was seeing, of not knowing how to interpret and explain what I saw, of not having any control – a challenging and educative situation. The most puzzling surprise was the sudden extension of the field of analysis, as a new and quite different branch grew out of it¹.

Even from the beginning, the project involved choice – which is the most challenging aspect (both in research and life) – I had to decide on the object of my observations: to decide which internet site is suitable for the subject of the research (“Virtual Ethnicity”) and for my analytic abilities. My decision led to one of the “Romanians in Vancouver” web pages, found at www.rovancouver.com, for several reasons: first of all, I considered that having the same mother language as the users and webmasters will constitute an advantage for me, as I will better understand the information and the experience that they exchange online; secondly, their situation as a minority, as people living in a foreign country was, to a certain extend, similar to mine; then, I heard a lot of things about Canada as a culture, about the Romanians living in Canada, or preparing to go to Canada, about the Canadian Romanian communities as being quite solid and visible in the public sphere.

The ultimate reason was that the title of the site contained the word “community” and, at that time and in that specific context, I assumed that a space which intends to represent a “community”, would raise the question of identity, of the separation “Us” – “Them”; also, that a space built for the use of a minority group living inside a foreign culture, would contain some ethnic traits. Now I assume that my intuition went on a good

¹ I shall explain more in a short while

track, as I might have discovered proves to sustain this first impression. I cannot say that this site represents a community, virtual or material, but I dare saying that identity issues and ethnic issues are raised and expressed on this site, in specific ways.

When I talked earlier about the extension of the field of analysis, I was referring to the sudden birth of a new website, linked to the initial one, working in parallel with it, presented and advertised on it, having the same webmasters, owners and *declared* intention/ function, although with a different aspect and focus: www.voci.ro. This phenomenon took place in December 2004 and practically doubled the number of questions that I was asking myself and the range of my observation. I approached this new field from the same theoretical points of view as the other one, but I had to be more cautious, as this space was (and still is) under construction and continuous revision².

Observing www.rovancouver.com virtual space since the 26th of October and www.voci.ro since end of December, I gathered a lot of empirical material, a lot of facts – which I tried to interpret from the theoretical point of view that best describes them and finds their meaning. During the research, I tried to observe as much as possible and be as opened as possible, but my interest, my focus was attracted towards some certain aspects of the website. In the present paper, I took the final decision involved in the project: to choose the proper theoretical point of view, in order to best explain those certain aspects of interest.

Those aspects are mostly related to the informational content of the webpage, the categories and the layout, also to the articles, messages, forums (which in the case of the www.rovancouver.com and www.voci.ro are mostly used as topics for individual posts and less as spaces of debate), posts and announcements; and less to the direct interaction opportunities – the chat and personal messages with users or moderators³. Unfortunately, because of the lack of feedback that I got, my observations are not completed with interviews or opened discussions (on the topics that could have enriched my material).

The questions that I started asking myself while observing the site were: 1. in which way the elements contained on the site express ethnicity (if any!) and 2. who

² And, as the webmasters themselves once said, this space passes through an identity crisis

³ I actually didn't have any opportunity to chat, because of the time difference (I could rarely go online at a suitable hour for chatting with the people in Vancouver) and because of the poor use of the chat. Also, no one answered my personal messages, not even after I registered as a user

expresses it. I believe that the first question is important if one wants to understand how “virtual ethnicity” could look like⁴ and what are the elements that could build it (in the particular case of the Romanians in Vancouver site; of course, it is an example, I don’t have enough knowledge to generalize further). The second question is important if one wants to realize who manipulates the elements, so that their actual message becomes a little clearer⁵. I think these are the basic questions that come up when taking “virtual ethnicity” into focus.

After revising a wide part of the material, I came to the idea that the issue here is not whether the users (plus webmasters) form a Romanian community⁶ – online or offline – but whether the users (plus webmasters) resort to Romanian ethnic cues, while being online; and if they do, which are those cues and how are they used (with what meaning and function, for the actors involved). I introduce here the term “cue” with its common meaning in the communicational theory – that is an extra “allusion”, indication added to the explicit content of a communication. I hope this approach is the right one for an anthropological project of study.

The internet is one of the fastest means of communication, so its main concern is about transmitting information; but it is also a structure sustaining close human contacts. Being on this particular website, I had the feeling of being in a public and intimate place in the same time, on an opened and closed territory in the same time; anyway, it is a social space, where people interact in various ways (ways which develop and are mediated through internet) and exchange information. This means, according to so many scholars and theories, that they negotiate and exchange *symbols*. Operating – online, in this case – with the same symbols, even if they don’t attach to them the same personal significance, the users generate a network of commonalities: they generate common reference coordinates and a shared system of social representations⁷ – activated in the virtual world. The fact that they are used mostly in the virtual world doesn’t make them different from the others, doesn’t make them unreal: all symbols, in any world, are imagined and socially constructed.

⁴ In other words, in which way internet allows the manifestation of ethnicity and how does ethnic identity look online

⁵ Although access to the meanings is quite difficult without interviews and direct discussions

⁶ Although, in the beginning, I was tempted to analyze this quite deceptive and hard to grasp issue

Theoretically, if the intensity of the interactions grows, in a certain social space, the uniting power of the system of symbols grows as well. This doesn't always lead to community⁸ or collective identity, but it may offer the actors involved the possibility to enrich, to modify or to better outline and manifest traits from their personal identity.

The purpose of most web pages is to increase their popularity and, automatically, the intensity of the interactions supported by them (one can talk about social interaction even in the case of an online news paper, for example: there is communication, although it is only one-way). So, the sites must attract users, by responding to their needs or by creating new needs for them to satisfy in that particular space; this doesn't imply creating user-communities around the webmasters/ the moderators. I could say that websites are social constructions, in the virtual space, catering for people's specific needs and build out of specific elements. In analogy to any social constructions, a website must find a way to *differentiate itself* from the other constructions, to make *the users* differentiate themselves from the others and to satisfy their *differentiated needs*.

Talking about social differences, the first concept that comes to my mind is *the border*: it is a field where differences and similarities are permanently negotiated, a place where identities, on both sides, are challenged; it is not a simple separation line, closing people inside or outside. Because the border can be produced/ protected from inside but also from outside, it has an internal and an external meaning⁹; so it involves the idea of transactional identity/ ethnicity – concept theorized by Richard Jenkins (1998) in studies on ethnicity (such as this one aspires to be) – the idea of a continuous interaction between the self definition of the identity bearer(s) and the external categorizations imposed by the significant other(s).

More than this, following Anthony Cohen's thesis (1995, p.19), any social border has an intrinsic symbolic content, which constitutes its working mechanism. Symbols are created within the transactional process of identity, so the symbols are born out of the

⁷ Like a system of similar images about the world, but not necessarily with similar colors

⁸ According to theory (Victor Turner's, A. Cohen's works), community implies a shared system of symbols which guides, but also conditions the social life of the members. But the reversed statement doesn't prove right: in the type of situations described above, when common systems of symbols emerge out of interactions, the symbolic bounds are not necessarily strong and stable enough to unite the people in a community

⁹ It has certain meanings for both the actors inside it and outside it, meanings which are continuously negotiated

internal-external identity negotiations over the borders and, reciprocally, identities are born out of the border-expressing symbols. In other words, the differences stated through the presence of the borders are symbolic. If one desires to understand the differences (for example, between websites, users, needs – as in the present case), one has to pay attention to the meanings attached to the symbols marking the borders.

I find Cohen's "symbolist" approach on borders to be the most suitable theoretical ground for analyzing and organizing the material that I gathered during my observations on the www.rovancouver.com. By adopting this approach I hope to find possible answers to the two questions that preoccupy me and to integrate them in a wider context. In order to do so, when asking *what are the elements that could represent a Romanian ethnic identity in the virtual space* or *how do certain elements on the website stand for a Romanian ethnic identity*, I will look **for** the *symbols* used there and I will try to figure out if they carry some internal/ external *meanings*, the value of an *ethnic border*. When asking *who are the actors using these elements*, thus building the border, I will look **at** who presents and imposes the ethnic meanings of the symbols and who intends to differentiate himself from whom.

Nevertheless, I admit that beyond the theoretical frame, the answers given in this paper will have a considerable percent of subjectivity, as they will contain my personal interpretation of the facts.

I mentioned before that the www.rovancouver.com site is written in Romanian – one of the reasons why I've chosen it. As its presentation states, it addresses Romanians everywhere in the world, but mostly the ones living in Canada and the ones intending to come to Canada. It is conceived by a group of Romanians in Vancouver, on an international domain (".com"). That's why it has the perspective of the people living in a different culture, having intercultural experiences or preparing to have them. I noticed that, despite this intercultural context, there are no translations whatsoever of the articles and there is no option to view the site in another language.

It seems like the creators of the site paid careful attention to the words used. Even the click for the home page, that is universally (on websites all over the world) called "home", in English, is tagged here with the Romanian translation "Acasa"; this word has a very personal and affectionate connotation in Romanian, it means more than just

“home”, I would rather explain it as “my home”. Other clicks are tagged with idioms and with double-coded expressions, that in the informal language have certain connotations that express closeness between speakers; for example “dă-ți cu părerea” (something like “throw your opinion”).

Personally, this unofficial and authentic language made me feel very familiar in this virtual space, made me feel like I could understand the right message, that I was somehow as an insider – again, this was one of the reasons why I’ve chosen to observe this website. So, I had the feeling of being on the inside of a border; but beyond this personal and local feeling of mine, the language is a key element in the process of attaching meanings to symbols; symbols are understood and used within the cognitive and emotional limits of a certain language; in a different language, the meanings change, the symbols have different interpretation or they even have different aspect. The language delivers the first stones for a symbolic border. Cohen states that a system of symbols functions similar to a language, so the symbols have a similar exclusivity: only the actors inside the system can understand the meanings.

But in the same time, languages are strong markers of ethnicity; most ethnic conflicts in the world involve language issues – from imposing the majority’s language upon the minorities, to minorities refusing to speak the official language, from burning books, to the refusal to send children to school. Languages are perceived as bearers of the ethnic heritage and as differentiation instruments.

In other words, using only the Romanian language and a lot of idioms on a Romanian minority’s site, in a foreign country, can be seen as *a first level of symbolic border, with an ethnic character*. The first ones building the border are the webmasters, the ones approving and guarding it are the users. In addition to this, from time to time articles are posted by webmasters, but also by users, about the use of the Romanian language: people who start mixing Romanian with English words are criticized (I found a very ironic poem on this topic – “The Story of Ion the American” – Ion being a very typical Romanian name), the beauty of the native language is praised; there was even a comic about cultural adaptation, showing a little grandson not able to understand his grandfather’s fairy tales, because he didn’t know the “root”-language, and needing his father’s translation.

Surprisingly, on the new website, www.voci.ro, although the domain is Romanian and the webmasters are the same¹⁰, the use of the language proves more openness: there are a lot more English terms, most of the tags are in English, the calendar has English months and days, double-coded expressions and informal emotional connotations are almost absent, there is even an article in English (“Immigrants to Canada. Extract from Diary of Edward White”) and one written by a foreigner (Seraphim Rose). The language is much more formal and elevated, the categories of subjects are better explained, so the interpretations that one could attach to them are not too personal. At the surface level, this openness combined with formalization could mean that, in this field of interactions, the language is *weakening as a symbolic border element*; that such a rigid language differentiation and exclusivity are not necessary¹¹ to attract the users on www.voci.ro and to satisfy their specific needs. Unfortunately, the new site is not so active, updated articles and announcements don’t appear daily, so I have no measure of how deep this change goes¹². Plus, the new site exists in tandem with the old one, they are complementary in a sense.

Anyway, I think these two ways of employing the Romanian language need to be taken into consideration. After debating the language issue, another interesting aspect linked to this is the name of the sites. The old one is tagged with a significant name, www.rovancouver.com, which links a Romanian element with a Canadian one, on an international domain (reflecting intentionally or unintentionally the situation of the webmasters and the majority of the users). It is entitled “The Virtual Romanian Community in Vancouver”, which implies a precise audience and a very clearly explained symbol: A. Cohen (1995, p.15) indicated that the term “community” is a boundary-expressing symbol – the ones that use it together believe that they have more in common than with *the others*, that there is a bigger difference between them/ the others than the one between themselves. Community, as the inside content of the borders, unites

¹⁰ Dan Birsan, Anca Birsan, Crina Davidescu, Sorina Rusu, Ovidiu Cristureanu – all first generation migrants, with university studies and under the age of 40

¹¹ This doesn’t prove the absence of symbolic borders, but the possible strengthen of other symbols in the boundary-maintaining system – other forms of differentiating the users and their needs

¹² If it’s really about a change of discourse in this social space or it’s just a vocabulary exercise, now that the webmasters gathered more experience and, probably, more “public relations” skills

(the insiders) and separates (the insiders from the outsiders) in the same time, just as the boundary does.

This symbolic name is given by the webmasters; their intention could be either to actually bring together the Romanians living separately in Vancouver, or to provide an alternative (virtual) space for the Romanian communitarian relationships to manifest themselves¹³; or just to attract users by giving the site a resonant name, that could symbolize legitimacy. Establishing this site as belonging to the Romanian minority in Vancouver, the webmasters make a clear ethnic statement concerning the image that they want to associate with www.rovancouver.com. The meaning of this symbolic name is adopted by *some* of the users, as well – this can be seen in their posts and in the way they approach the site. For example the people who write about very intimate thoughts, about personal desires and disappointments (in the forum category “Romanian community in Vancouver” there are people from Romania posting about their economic, family, social difficulties in the country and express their hope of coming to Canada, asking an evaluation of their chances and searching friends – desiring to become part of this stated *community*), people who confess on the site as if the other users could understand and comfort them (there were posts in the forum, under “life in Canada” and “free zone” complaining about too much work and the continuous need to make more money, about having not enough time for friends and family, about the lack of certain Romanian products); there were few troubled people who didn’t write hoping for advice, they declared they wrote hoping for the others to listen to them and to show some compassion (a woman wrote a poem, “destiny’s force”, about her life’s tragedy in the category “humanitarian help”; in the same category there were other Romanians in the country, asking for material help or medicines).

But some people who posted, contradicted the idea of belonging to a Romanian community, they said they want to be Romanian-Canadians; others said that there is no community, that people mind their personal lives. There were some fights in the forum and in the “divers messages” category, between the ones claiming that there is a Romanian community, that a lot of collective actions are done in its name (also in the

¹³ I thought of this possibility because the Romanian (material) communities in Canada are told to be quite strong, united and keen on traditions

virtual space) and the ones claiming that there are only private initiatives assuming the name of the community. And of course there are the people who just read the information and the articles, without commenting about anything – the lurkers.

To sum up, some of the actors involved choose to consider the website a virtual community and some don't. The name of the symbol – “Romanian community” – represents an ethnic identity and contains an ethnic meaning. So, those actors' statement of belonging to this community is a way of manifesting their sense of ethnicity, in the virtual space.

Looking at the name of the new site www.voci.ro¹⁴ I find no *obvious* clue about the target audience, about what kind of “voices” are here represented. But the domain and the name are Romanian, so the site shows more openness towards all Romanians (not only the ones in Vancouver) and becomes more exclusive towards foreigners – at least at this introductory, first impression (which, actually, is popularly said to matter most) level. The motto on the home page says “The Friend that you need. We are here for you”¹⁵. There is nothing said about community; there is no promise that one could find community here, instead the attraction is that one could find something more personal, more individualistic, less ambiguous: friends. Also, this is quite a fashionable way of advertising for a website – inviting people to find their friends there.

There are more issues related to verbal cues, which could be interpreted in relation with symbolic boundaries. On both websites there is a link for proverbs, sayings and famous quotes: on the old one, most of them are from the Romanian popular culture and the ones which are not, are translated to Romanian; on the new one, most of them are international – for example the last words said by very famous historic characters. The tone used in communicating on the first site tries to create the impression of a group discussion, while on the other site the tone creates a certain distance between the people who post and the people who read the posts; it seems that here feed-back and online interaction happens less frequently and that here you can rather find advice than occasions to discuss. On both sites, I found some spelling mistakes, not big grammar ones, maybe some omitted letters or wrong letters; this could show that language

¹⁴ In Romanian, “voci” means “voices”

¹⁵ “Prietenul de care ai nevoie”

formalities and perfection are not so important for the moderators and the people who post.

In all these details, I see a difference between the two sites. The first explanation that comes to my mind is that the sites intend to cater for different needs, that they could address the same users, but from different points of view – so the symbolic systems have little chance to be the same.

The names tagged to the main and secondary links could be meaningful in depicting the symbols present in this space: for example, most of the tags on the old site refer in some way to Romania or to the Romanian culture. It's mentioned: events in Romania, famous people in Romania, Romanian football championship, Romanian links and forums. Although "voci" also contains information about Romania and articles about what's going on in Romania, it mentions that the articles are mostly about life in Canada, that the information refers mostly to Canada and Vancouver, that the discussion topics involve issues about life in Canada. On both sites there are links about immigration, about papers and official documents, information about how to manage in Canada, but I find it interesting that there is no information on the political life, contemporary culture, general typical Canadian problems (except the bad weather). Not even on the new site, that actually announces topics on Canada. There are few contradictions here: the first site has an international name, rovancover.com, and can be understood by almost anyone, but its content is very Romanian-focused; the second has a clear Romanian name but a more opened image, which is again contradicted by the strong Romanian traditionalism emerging from some articles. Both end up in being mostly Romanian oriented. I suspect these contradictions to be the result of mixing (more or less consciously) commercial purposes, home nostalgia, emigration advantages and problems, Romanian cultural patterns, with new computer techniques and some "western capitalist" patterns.

Going further to the images, pictures, drawings, comics we might discover new clues about the way ethnic borders are established.

The entrance page on the "rovancover" site was, for a long time (till December), represented by the first lines in the chat going on at that time; I had a strange feeling seeing this, I thought it was quite unusual: it seemed a very opened and sociable gesture. But it could have been a method to raise people's curiosity or to discourage from the

beginning the internet surfers who didn't speak Romanian. Then, for Christmas, on the entrance page there was a very common picture with a snowman. Then, in a very short while, it changed into a miniature of the home page of the "voci" site – which was newly constructed at that time; it was like an advertising for the new site.

This miniature is still the entrance page, as we speak, but it has the sign "approved" on it; probably the designers meant to encourage, by this sign, the use of the new site. These changes lead from quite an exclusive look, potentially having an ethnic borderline function, to a commercial aspect.

From the first week of observations I noticed the markers on the upper side of the home page: the map of Romania, drawn with the colors of the Romanian flag; a picture representing the "Daci", the ancestors who lived on the Romanian territory before the Romans conquered/ colonized it – this is an historical element often present in the nationalist public discourse; it's said that the Romanians are the children of the "Daci", so they are special among all Latin peoples. These references to Romania and to the ancient heritage are clear, basic ethnic symbols; the fact that the map of Romania is shown could be interpreted further: the map implies borders, exclusivity, so it is very close in meaning to the boundary-expressing symbol, that Cohen talks about.

There is also a comic with a boat crossing the see; I cannot find another meaning to it except the one reminding about the ocean that immigrants from Europe cross to get to Canada, the ocean that separates them from the "roots" and unites them on the "routes". This is the first deeper acknowledgement about the distance and the separation that generates *hybrid identities* (term theorized by Homi Bhaba, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy in the field of Post-colonialism, meaning a mixture of different cultures' patterns internalized in one's identity): being Romanians but also immigrants in Canada. This element is more than a "border stone" – it is a marker, an identity element that unites the people targeted in this site, it's a difference included with a similar importance in the internal definition as well as in the external categorization of the Romanians in Canada.

Surfing on the site, I found photo albums with memories shared mostly by the webmasters – a lot of holiday photos from Romania¹⁶, but also some from hikes in

¹⁶ As I like to say, the myth of returning to the *holly land*, the original land, present in all theories about Diaspora, is transformed here in the desire to return to the original land for the *holiday*

Canada; images representing traditions, such as dances, costumes, food, religious celebrations, icons; pictures taken from sport events or presenting the greatest Romanian sportsman in the last decade – the legendary Hagi, a worldwide known football player.

Entering the chat, one first sees a picture representing a folk dance that goes very fast, which is called “hora” and where the rule (for the partners in the circle) is to hold each other really tight while they turn; this dance still is a very popular¹⁷ tradition in the Romanian culture; its symbolic presence on the site could have the meaning of a very tight and pleasant relationship with the cultural heritage or among the users themselves (as the dancers in “hora”).

The webmasters manipulated the symbol quite well, by linking it to the chat: a lot of sites offer the chatting service, but the chat here is differentiated with an ethnic element – so the communication needs, to be satisfied on this chat, are differentiated with an ethnic element. I think that the webmasters’ intention was to say that in this chat one can be Romanian – if this is true, then it is an ethnic identity statement. It could be that the people chatting are not aware of this intention and of this ethnic cue, but they are for sure interested in communicating with other Romanians – that they know they can find here.

There is also a flash presentation of Romania, which was adopted on the new site as well. It is a flow of images with historic figures (with both positive and negative roles in the memory of the people), presidents of the last century, famous sportsmen, natural beauties, the most visited medieval cathedrals and castles, on the background of a very popular folk song, from a band that used to sing during communist times and gave people a little comfort and hope. Of course, this is what Romania means for the designers. Not everybody can understand the symbolic figures, the flash is rather conceived for an insider; and not even insiders share the same meaning for interpreting these images. But it is interesting that they made such a presentation and that they kept it like this.

Passing to the new site, one can notice that the quality of the pictures is much higher, the colors are better and the aspect is more professional; the home page is full of photos, all the main links are explained with an image. Looking at them, one can immediately notice that they represent universal aspects of life – the photos could be

¹⁷ Almost all weddings in Romania, no matter how elitist, are celebrated with “hora”

taken in Canada as well as anywhere else. The image on top of the page accompanying the motto, a little girl in a meditative posture, is very ambiguous: I don't know what it's trying to transmit, I can find lots of interpretations for it. There is always a "photo of the day" on the home page, with something funny or absurd. Most of the links don't have pictures yet, except for the articles or files taken directly from the old site.

Out of these images there emerges no ethnic element that I could comment upon. Here, the new site keeps a very opened and inviting image. It doesn't enable ethnic identities to manifest themselves clearly. As I was wondering myself why this attitude, I noticed that the site advertises for a web-design company owned by (at least) one of the webmasters; so, for business, the site must look good and must be inviting. Beyond this ongoing advertising campaign, the site is not very active – the last posts are since February and were written by the moderators.

So "voci" is nicer to look at but apparently people don't interact on it, they are not too attached to it and too enthusiastic about it. This could show that they don't identify themselves with what the site offers. Because of this poor interest from the users and because of their wish to advertise for the company, the webmasters suggested a topic in the forum called "Identity crises. Talk about the possibilities of using this web-site" – in order to find the interests of the prospective users. But till now activity didn't increase: the old site became a little more active while the new one seems a little bit abandoned.

One cause could be that, because the new site doesn't have enough visible, first-hand ethnic elements, it doesn't prove its concern for the specific needs of the Romanians in Vancouver, doesn't encourage the process of identification within its space. But I suspect that the causes are less in the apparent permeability of the boundaries on the new site, in the lack of accent on visual ethnic differentiation¹⁸, but mostly in the content of the articles and posts.

With this, we enter the final and most difficult phase of analyzing the field material: the interpretation of the writings. The two sites have some texts and articles in common – for example the ones about immigration conditions, about legal situation in Canada, about Vancouver, announcements about the "Romanian Communitarian Center" activities and events, about who the webmasters are and their declared intentions, an

¹⁸ Of course, there still remains the language differentiation

identical section called “confessions” with very few personal stories dating since 2002, dictionary, holiday pictures, jokes, proverbs and poetry, job offers, nursery schools, schools and universities, hospitals and banks in Vancouver), articles from the press in Romania (some of the links are under construction on the new site).

Of course the first site has more links and pages, as it is older and had more time to develop. What is strange is that the dynamic of the new site is very slow and the situation doesn't seem to improve. On www.rovancouver.com one could find matrimonial announcements, business announcements of all kinds (from people who want to sell Romanian traditional drinks and people who want to buy Romanian mineral water, to small firms in search for partnership), computer games, real estate announcements, commercials for radio stations in Romanian, traditional recipes, information about the football championship, models to write a CV, scandals in the public life in Romania, a lot of events going on between the Romanians in Vancouver (from folk concerts and football games to business meetings).

There are indeed many categories of articles, but some of the articles are posted under more categories; anyway, the material is quite varied. It refers mostly to the home country and to events related to the home country; or to the formalities and problems that someone leaving the home country would encounter during immigration. This could mean that the interest for such subjects is big; but it could also show the opposite: an attempt to encourage a poor interest, to compensate for a lack of information – although this second alternative is contradicted by what I know from other sources¹⁹. If people are interested in such subjects, it means that there is an active marker differentiating the users here from others: the users outside Romania have a strong concern about everything related to the home country, and the ones in Romania have a strong interest in joining the first ones. This is a double-direction relationship that brings people together, under the symbolic “roots” inside the “routes” (Diaspora helping the homeland) and “routes” inside the “roots” (people back home planning to become part of the Diaspora). The ethnic marker, expressed on internet, of being Romanian anywhere in the world and of always relating to Romania suggests a symbolic border, separating Romanians from others and

uniting all those “inside” it; this emphasizes again that borders not only segregate, but also bind together.

On a varied ground of articles, debates have more probability to be raised. Interacting on the ground made by these announcements, agreeing or fighting, asking or answering, the users seem sometimes really passionate. They get really into bargaining, proving they are right, contradicting, lamenting, being smart, being artistic, being curious, complementing. I don't want to judge, but I could say that sometimes, while reading the posts and the replies, I had the feeling of being in the middle of a conversation in the “heart” of Romania. The most passionate debate was around the theme ‘where to immigrate’: the Romanians in Vancouver and British Columbia had an argument with a Romanian immigrant from the French Canadian side; everybody wanted to prove that the place where they immigrated is the best place to be in Canada.

This was quite a strange conversation, as it combined a typical Romanian way of arguing (typical words and idioms, tone, irony and offenses, double-coded expressions) with a very Canadian issue (the comparison between the French and the English sides). I would say that this is a visible manifestation of the organic hybrid identity, of the permanent negotiation of identities, going on between Romanian immigrants in Vancouver, the host culture and Romanians elsewhere. Organic hybrid identity is presented by Pnina Werbner²⁰ as a natural, unconscious, continuous process of integrating new/ borrowed cultural images, objects of interest, concepts in language, practice and identity.

Other debates are gathered around church issues: there are few users who would like to involve the church in almost all the communitarian activities; for this they emphasize the role of the orthodox church in Vancouver, in unifying the Romanians and giving a meaning to their collective actions (from celebration dinners to the establishment of a “Romanian singles club”). But others refuse to give so much importance to the church – some say that communitarian activities could carry on without the religious guidance, some say that there is no community (as I mentioned before).

¹⁹ The media in Romania talks a lot about the active Romanian communities in Canada and presents their enterprises to improve the situation back home. On the other hand, I know and I've heard about a lot of people interested in leaving for Canada and USA

²⁰ “The Dialectics of Cultural Hybridity”, 1997

Beyond these arguments and contradictions, I would say that there are people who use the site as a place to meet other Romanians, to talk about their links to the home country and to behave according to the Romanian informal rules and cultural canons. It is a very pragmatic way of “being Romanian”²¹, in the communication that doesn’t need translation or explanation, in the social practices typically Romanian, reproduced online: a very instrumental, ‘down to earth’ ethnic identity, manifested in details (such as interest in cooking Romanian) and posts content (such as using an idiomatic vocabulary). The new site doesn’t offer the possibility of “being Romanian” at this basic level; in fact, despite its opened look, it is unexpectedly rigid and exclusivist: the forum topics and the discussions proposed are all about philosophic issues, philosophers, religious and spiritual issues. Most of the articles are about religion and harsh religious rules; the tone is quite solemn and the statements are sometimes extremist (one article promotes the traditional point of view of the church, about how women should behave: as housewives for their men). Besides the webmasters, there are only few people posting on this site; the way of being Romanian enabled here seems to be less appealing to many, as the philosophic language and the traditional religious practice are not so common, are not of every-day interest; also maybe people reserve only intimate, private debates for such issues and wouldn’t discuss online.

After looking at all the information presented in this paper, I would conclude that the ethnic markers used on the first site succeed in generating a symbolic border, that differentiates the needs and the identities of *some* of the users. It succeeds because the ethnic elements incorporated are simple, easy to notice and they function at a basic level of life (pragmatic, concrete and behavioral). The webmasters and users that identify themselves in ethnic terms on this site perceive the borders as defining a common ground necessary for communicating, a ground made of rules and meanings. The new site lacks this network of simple, shared meanings, it is much too elitist and philosophically oriented – so it lacks casual interaction, a casual space for negotiating identities and ethnic symbols.

I think that focusing on symbolic borders, as in this paper, could be a fruitful and revealing method to approach and interpret ethnic identity manifestations in internet.

²¹ In the sense used by Miller and Slater, (2000) ch.4

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