

My Ukraine is here: Travelling memories of belonging in the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada (1945-1991)

Elisa Lucente, University of Pavia

Abstract

The research project aims at investigating, through memory studies and oral history theories and methods, the construction, contestation and negotiation of collective identities in the third wave of Ukrainian immigration to Canada. Notably, the diaspora constituted itself when Ukraine - as an independent statehood - did not exist. So, the failed political struggle of a specific wave facilitated the intellectual imagination of a homeland still yet to come. They embarked on constructing the “Ukrainian culture” (Fowler 2016) from abroad, a project that turned out to be risky and challenging but fundamental in the definition of the Ukrainian nation after 1991. Moreover, the receiving context, Canada, is in itself particularly interesting in critically engaging questions concerning multiculturalism. Nowadays, the “multicultural ethos” of Canadian politics is well-recognized, however, it is oftentimes discarded from the analysis that this feature is the result of a negotiation among inhabitants who juggled multiple identifications.

This project seeks to understand how a community has discursively managed its multiple self-belonging through historical narratives. In order to do so, the methodology focuses on the semiotic aspect of history combining urban analysis and ethnographic methods. For this reason, it was necessary to analyze both sources in archives and to carry out interviews. Sources were collected in 2022 during a 12 months research stay in numerous Canadian institutions (Victoria, Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Edmonton) and during shorter stays in New York and Chicago. The research questions structuring the analysis are: What are the third wave's peculiarities and why is it relevant for diaspora and nationalism studies? To what extent and how the third wave conducted memory work on the Ukrainian national idea and the symbolic memory scape of both Ukraine and WWII? Did the diaspora form counter-memories along with and against dominant narratives? Moreover, while the fieldwork went on the sources and the individual and family histories unveiled deep layers of complexity: it became overall a question of migration and Canadian identity. Is Canada a Nation? What does it mean for Canada to be a Nation? In the end, this thesis aims at offering a multifaceted paradigm of community that acknowledges the longings to belong and the contradictions of return while remaining critical of the politics of identity and nation. Overcoming methodological nationalism does not mean underestimating – especially at the time of writing – how powerful the idea of the nation remains: “Some exiles die of rage; some transform their exile into a country” (Cixous 1993).

Biography

Elisa Lucente is a PhD candidate in History at the University of Pavia, Italy. She holds a BA in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Pavia and an MA in

International Cooperation on Human Rights and Intercultural Heritage from the University of Bologna, received in 2020 after defending a thesis on memory politics in post-Soviet Lviv based on four months of research in Ukraine. Her PhD experience was deeply impacted by both the covid-19 pandemic and the onset of the war in Ukraine.

Elisa's academic interests include microhistory and urban cultural studies. In the future, she plans to continue pursuing questions of space, memory and identity-building processes in migratory contexts. Her publications include *In the free and new family. The symbolic conflict: the idealization of Taras Shevchenko in the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada* (Pavia University Press, 2022) and *'The moon was not Stalinist'. Post-Soviet Memory: Narratives from the borderland city of Lviv* (eSamizdat, 2021) and the forthcoming *'Nurturing their children and themselves'. The Ukrainian women's movement in emigration: Navigating domesticity, nationalism and feminism in DP camps (1945-1951)* (Contemporanea, 2023).