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Being and Becoming Kin

with an Ancient Matricultural Artefact

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Abstract

My identity story had started long before I was aware I had an identity, long before I was aware I had a story. It started with my ancestors, born on a beautiful piece of land at the crossroads between Orient and Occident in southeastern Europe: Romania. In my adulthood, when I immigrated to New Zealand, I wanted to forget where I was born and start life anew. Communism had imprinted a painful scar on my being. But I could not forget. Anything. My memory was etched with stories in my mother tongue, with images of my mother and father, my grandmothers and grandfathers, a house like a train full of children, my childhood village, river and secular forest, cherry trees and freedom to explore. Everything was still vivid and needed to be attuned. So, I brought them to the Land of the Long White Cloud. I encapsulated them in a matricultural Romanian artefact called ia, *a blouse I made with my own hands, an agentic nonhuman who speaks in symbols and meanings. She speaks about*

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history, feminine power and authority, strength and creativity. She is my armour. Through ia, *I found my place in Aotearoa. She and I became kin.*

Keywords: traditional Romanian blouse *ia*, cultural artefacts, sewing, Romanian matriculture, communism

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Résumé

L'histoire de mon identité a commencé bien avant que je ne prenne conscience d'avoir une identité, bien avant que je ne réalise que j'avais une histoire. Elle a pris racine chez mes ancêtres, nés sur une terre magnifique au carrefour de l'Orient et de l'Occident dans le sud-est de l'Europe : la Roumanie. Lorsque j'ai émigré en Nouvelle-Zélande à l'âge adulte, j'ai voulu oublier mon lieu de naissance et recommencer ma vie à zéro. Le communisme avait laissé une cicatrice douloureuse sur mon être. Mais je ne pouvais rien oublier. Absolument rien. Ma mémoire était imprégnée de récits dans ma langue maternelle, d'images de ma mère et de mon père, de mes grands-parents, d'une maison semblable à un train rempli d'enfants, de mon village natal, de sa rivière et de sa forêt séculaire, de cerisiers et de cette liberté d'explorer. Tout était resté si vif, appelant à être mis en harmonie. Alors, j'ai emporté tout cela avec moi au « Pays du long nuage blanc ». J'ai tout encapsulé dans un artefact matriculturel roumain : la ia, *une blouse que j'ai confectionnée de mes propres mains — une entité non humaine, dotée d'agentivité, qui s'exprime par des symboles et des significations. Elle parle d'histoire, de pouvoir et d'autorité féminins, de force et de créativité. Elle est mon armure. Grâce à la* ia, *j'ai trouvé ma place en Aotearoa. Elle et moi sommes devenues parentes.*

Mots-clés : blouse traditionnelle roumaine (*ia*), artefacts culturels, couture, matriculture roumaine, communisme

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As the identity story I write here unfolds, my identity continues to evolve and change, meaningfully entangled with historical, geographical, political, cultural and artefactual threads. Among the last ones mentioned, there is a matricultural artefact, a traditional Romanian blouse called *ia* that represents the core of my identity (Figure 1). This threaded story is written in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Land of the Long White Cloud, where I have

resided for the last twenty-five years, but it started with my ancestors in the other part of the world, hundreds of years ago. Like them, I was born in Romania, a beautiful piece of land, situated in a troublesome location, at the crossroads between Orient and Occident in the southeast of Europe. My identity story is framed within a system of symbols, values, and beliefs passed down by my ancestors and the land upon which *ia* and I were born. My ancestors and birthland, their histories and entanglements, are reflected in *ia* and *ia* is reflected in who I am today.



Figure 1: Ia *and me at Browns Bay beach, Auckland, New Zealand*

Ia is the most significant part of the traditional Romanian costume; it is worn only by women and traditionally made by hand. Historians and ethnologists believe that *ia* dates all the way back to ancient Dacia – a piece of land where Geto-Dacians lived before the Roman Empire conquest in 106 BCE, where Romania is today. Geto-Dacian women were depicted wearing blouses gathered around the neck, similar to the present *ia* (Buzila, 2022), on monuments such as the Tropeum Traiani in Adamclisi (Romania) and Trajan's Column in Rome (Italy).

During the Middle Ages, *ia* was worn by both simple women in villages and noble women, with the design being the same and differing only in the quality of the materials (Cherciu, 2021). During the two world wars, the traditional costume and *ia* were perceived as items of national identity. Queens Elisabeta and Maria of Romania, as well as ladies from the contemporary high society, introduced it to the royal court and promoted the costume, emphasizing its incommensurable historical and artefactual value.

Unfortunately, under communism in Romania (1947-1989), the traditional costume was distorted and mass-produced. The communist ideology wanted everyone to be the same, so regional differences, colours, and designs were neglected, distorted, and amalgamated in a cacophony of fabrics and threads with no regard to the ancient customs. Whereas in the old times every woman wanted to be unique and took pride in her bespoke *ia* in the countryside, communism celebrated uniformity. Mass-produced costumes invaded the market for folkloric dance assembles, choirs, and singers. In the last decades, there has been a revival of traditional sewing and wearing of *ia*, following the ancient patterns and symbols, both in Romania and abroad.

I lived in communist and post-communist Romania well into my adulthood and immigrated with my family to New Zealand in 2001. Romanians experienced an anti-communist revolution in 1989, overturning forty-five years of dictatorship. We, as citizens, thought our country was free and democratic after that historical event, however, 'ghosts' from the communist past had still been around for many decades after the revolution, hence our family's decision to look for a better future elsewhere. I wanted to start life again. Communism had imprinted a painful scar on my being. But I couldn't forget. Anything.

Ia came into my life activated by a feeling of *dor*. *Dor* could be partially translated as a feeling of longing, of missing something or someone, possibly from the Latin *dolor-dolus* meaning desolation or sadness (Antonescu, 2016). However, *dor* is a semantically and culturally complex word that a direct translation cannot fully explain. For example, some linguists attribute a pastoral origin to the word, due to the geographical distances that separate people in love, with the women in villages waiting for the shepherds and sheep to return home (Antonescu, 2016; Istrătescu-Târgovişte; 2009).

Another interpretation of the word *dor* is the long-twisted road that partners engage on, walking towards each other. It is dramatic not because the road is long, but because it is full of obstacles; most of these obstacles are mountains, rivers, hills, and deep valleys, all being interdictions imposed by the communitarian morality code, sometimes the distance between the two being real, and thus conducive to the suffering of a long-distance love that remains unfulfilled (Antonescu, 2016). In my identity story, *ia* encapsulates the feeling of *dor* for family, friends, and the land left behind, a long-distance love for my roots.

After immigration, I discovered my birth country anew, from a vantage point, at a distance of 17 000 km that makes everything more alluring. The entanglement with my birthland, its history, geography, and way of life - especially in the countryside - continues to haunt me and pulls me towards that part of the world. My fascination is partly due to the fact that many crucial historical events were taken out of our school history books by the communist propaganda. As students, we never learned about Romania as a monarchy (1881-1947), about our kings and queens who were influential political figures. They transformed Romania into a prosperous and modern country. The geography of the land also fascinated me. I started to reconnect with the landmarks more deeply, discovering regions of Romania I had not explored before. The history and geography of the country guided me in finding out about the history and locations of my family.

The history of my extended family, similar to that of the many other families, had been marked by political and social events. My maternal great-grandparents were illegal communist fighters before 1947, when the Romanian Communist Party took the power. My maternal grandfather married my grandmother who, on the other side, admired royalty. On my father's side, my grandparents lived in a village and suffered the effects of

forced collectivization; their land and animals were confiscated by the Communist Party, supposedly for the mutual 'benefit' of all citizens and they were exploited in agricultural cooperatives. Family life and close relationships among our family members always prevailed. After the severe economic austerity measures installed in the 1980s, with shortages of food, electricity, fuel, lack of freedom of speech, and restricted overseas travel, family and friendship bonds became closer, evolving into extended networks of material and moral support. My great-grandparents, who had printed flyers of communist propaganda in the attic of their small home, passed away before their ideals of a democratic life were shattered. My maternal grandparents, who were living in the same small house as my great-grandparents, were forced to move into an apartment building when the whole neighbourhood was bulldozed down. The developing infrastructure of the communist regime at the time required more housing for the massive movement of population from the countryside to the big cities, to work in factories. Industrialisation was on its way. My father left his village to take up an apprenticeship in the capital, Bucharest, and became a foreman at Vulcan factory, manufacturing industrial boilers for thermal power plants. Thus, he met my mother.



Figure 2: (upper row, left to right) My mother, grandmother, and aunt; (lower row, left to right) my great-grandfather, me, and my great-grandmother.

I only saw *ia* in all her complexity, essence, and beauty far away from our mutual birthplace. I discovered *ia*'s core symbols, meanings, and agentic nonhuman nature in New Zealand. After immigration, my memory was etched with stories in my mother tongue, with vivid images of my mother and father, grandmothers and grandfathers, a house like a

train full of children, my childhood village, rivers and ancient forests, cherry trees and freedom to explore. Everything was still vivid and needed to be attuned. So, I brought them all to the Land of the Long White Cloud, encapsulated in my *ia*, a blouse I made with my own hands.

More than two decades after immigration, I sewed this blouse during my doctorate, as a part of it, and an embodied material representation of my teacher identity. It is a non-identical replica of an original *ia* that was sewn by an anonymous woman at the end of the nineteenth century. Both blouses, the old and the new, speak about feminine power and authority, strength, ambition, and creativity, traits that my mother, my grandmothers, and my aunts fuelled into my life. I have also been inspired by the anonymous women who sewed *ia* in the past and by women in present times, in Romania and throughout the diaspora, who discover themselves and a new universe through sewing and/or collecting *ia*. Their individual and collective voices embodied in *ia* have carried me far away, both physically and metaphorically (Enache, 2026). *Ia* is my armour, my shield, with apotropaic powers – she protects and gives me the audacity to fly and become more than I have ever been. Through *ia*, I found my place in-between two lands, a subliminal spacetime of belonging. She and I became kin.

Biography

Dr. Mihaela Enache is a lecturer and researcher at Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. Her scholarship is situated at the intersection of identity studies with critical autoethnography and arts-based methods. She investigates traditional craft as a creative research practice. Mihaela founded *Antipodean Ia*, a community sewing group, in 2019.

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