



III. People and the Never-Ending Archive



Sounding Out the Personal Archive

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about working with archives—finding, accessing, making them intelligible, producing and curating them—and what this process looks like when we privilege sound as material, process, instrument, and logic. In our audio project, we took personal archives as a starting point and through audio recording we produced two more related archives: a carefully edited and curated one, the podcast *Americanii*, and an unedited “rough” one, the totality of audio recordings (and some photographs) we produced in several weeks of fieldwork.

Americanii is a curated oral archive that preserves personal stories gathered in the field while creating new narratives from them. It employs different storytelling structures that show the potential of the sound medium as a way to access and mediate these oral histories.

Through this project, we interrogate the way personal archives can be understood and approached, not just as material collections but rather as complex assemblages of objects, stories, memories, and sounds purposefully collected, managed, and produced in non-institutional settings. We show the potential and limits of the intimacy inherent in the process of audio recording, and how intimacy can be a way not just of accessing archives, but also of producing them.

KEYWORDS

Sound recording, informal archives, storytelling, intimacy, podcast.



Introduction

This paper is about working with archives, and what this process looks like when we privilege sound as material, process, instrument, and logic. By archive we refer to an informally organized collection of objects, documents and oral histories, inherited and preserved by a person who is a family or community member, interested in early Romanian emigration to America. We took these personal archives as a starting point and through audio recording we produced two more related archives: a carefully edited

and curated one, the podcast *Americanii*, and an unedited “rough” one, the totality of audio recordings (and some photographs) we produced in several weeks of fieldwork in Romania.

Through this project, we interrogate the way personal archives can be understood and approached, not just as material collections but rather as complex assemblages of objects, stories, memories, and sounds purposefully collected, managed, and produced in non-institutional settings. We show the potential and the limits of the intimacy inherent in the process of audio recording, and how intimacy can be a way not just of accessing archives, but also of producing them.

Americanii is a six-part narrative non-fiction podcast about Romanian emigration to the United States in the early twentieth century, financed by the Administration of the National Cultural Fund and developed by Claudia Câmpeanu, Diana Meseșan, and Mara Mărăciuescu. It recounts the stories of life in America that were preserved by the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of early Romanian migrants and touches on several themes, such as the role of women in these migrations and the impact of migrants' resources on the development of their community back home. These stories were born out of both the memory of those who continue to share them and the incredible documents they have amassed: diaries, photographs, various physical objects, newspaper clippings, birth certificates, and other records.

In order to produce the podcast, the three of us (a journalist, a sound artist, and an anthropologist) embarked on a research journey that lasted several weeks and took us to towns and villages in eight counties in central and western Romania.

Our research resulted in a total of around forty-five hours of audio recording, hundreds of photographs, many pages of notes and sketches. We recorded interviews, informal conversations, ambient sound, and sometimes just our presence and interactions.¹

Below, we analyze how the negotiations and performative speech inherent in the act of recording affected the production of the podcast. We show how writing with sound compares to ethnographic writing, and how the future listener's presence always acted upon this writing. We debate storytelling as a tool for increasing visibility of these personal archives.

Through discussing the production process of the podcast, we also contribute to conversations about the particularities of accessing, collecting, producing, and publishing archives when working with sound and privileging this form.



Personal archives

The archives and their keepers

During our research we discovered several personal archives preserved by the descendants of these early migrants to America. These were informally organized private collections of documents, objects and oral histories inherited or obtained through research that our interviewees kept at home. Some of them had amassed an impressive amount of physical objects, either brought over from America or connected to those who worked there: letters, diaries, trunks, birth certificates, and photographs. Some heard the stories of migration first-hand. Walking around their village, they would hear stories about these migrants, the Americans ("Americanii"), as they were called by the villagers. While their search for their own family history is what drove them, they also archived the stories of their village. For them, the search for answers or validation of the stories they heard growing up is still an ongoing project.

Ioan Radu-Coman² is a regular at the Sibiu Public Library. When we met him, he brought over several folders of handwritten notes transcribing information that he found about his village, Deal, from materials in the library. He showed us several texts that he had discovered in newspapers published by the Romanian communities in America: articles about the donations to the Church made by other men from his village or advertising for services by and for Romanians. He told us of the objects and knowledge these Americans brought back to their village, and mourned objects that were lost, such as his grandfather's Colt pistol, which rusted away hidden in the ground from the Communists. He heard stories about America from his grandmother and father, but not only from them:

I spent time with many Romanian Americans, after I went to high school: I have an entire bag of notebooks with notes from

1) We used two different sound recorders: a handheld stereo recorder (Zoom H2n) and a recorder with a shotgun microphone (a Sound Devices Mix-Pre3 with a Rode NTG2).

2) We use personal names with the interviewees' permission to make their stories and their participation in the project public, through the public podcast and related materials.

these people, not only those who worked in America. For those I had a sweet spot. You know... I still have one and will always have. Because, you know, these people, they sweat for America.

We saw the same connection with these stories and the same importance given to preserving them with Adam Măran from the village of Ilidia. One of the first things he told us after we met was: "I'm going to tell you some stories I heard. I read a few excerpts, some letters, some other stuff, so not much, but for me it's a lot."

During our interview, he showed us letters his grandparents had sent each other, photographs taken in America and sent back home, and also marriage records he had found in the forest, an artefact thrown away by an institution that likely lacked the resources or interest to preserve it. He still had his grandfather's tools, and spoke very fondly of them and the space his grandfather had worked in, located on the same property his own house was built on. Mr. Măran had also heard many stories of America when he was young, from people in the village, some of which were still alive.

Another keeper was Dana Velțan. Her aunt gave her family documents relating to her grandparents' and her father's experience in America shortly before she died. It was the first time Mrs. Velțan saw them, since they had been kept hidden because of the stigma this American experience (her father was born there) brought to her family during communism. He rarely talked about this, so it was Mrs. Velțan's mother who shared these stories, not her father. When her aunt gave her the documents, for Mrs. Velțan:

It was like a series of surprises and discoveries. And the year I retired . . . I dedicated a few months to studying these papers. I asked for translations from Hungarian for some of the documents, the school certificate is in German, and I discovered Drutz's book³ about Romanians in America, written very close to that period, so not from documents

but from oral histories, from real life, it was extraordinary.

It was a lack of context around her father's birth in America that drove Mrs. Velțan to find out more about her grandparents' experience there. As she gathered more details, the best way for her to preserve them was to write them down as a straightforward family story. When we visited her in her home in Cluj, she presented us with a kind of altar made of rescued and preserved photographs, documents, objects, and even a school notebook of an aunt born in America, who had returned to Romania as a girl.

Accessing and re-sounding the archives

In sum, the personal archives we worked with and tried to access through our research encounters were eclectic assemblages of written texts, oral stories and anecdotes, objects, photographs, documents, monuments, and in some cases even buildings and yards—which served as anchors for our interviewees' stories and helped legitimate their right to bear and tell them: houses where their relatives had lived or were built/bought with migration money. But, beyond these, what we seemed to have accessed was an entire archive of feelings (akin in some ways to Cvetkovich 2003) that not only invoked but also re-enacted the trauma of migration or that of being left behind, the wonder of the migration experience and that of returning home. This affective archive seemed to reveal itself to us not only discursively ("These are tears that I have inherited," Mrs. Budiu from Arad told us) but also through the very act of remembering and telling these stories. For some of our interviewees this connection with the experience of their relatives and the stories they left behind was constitutive of their own identities, and therefore the complex archives they had amassed were deeply *personal*.

While we initially framed our research as one of accessing these archives, during our encounters it became clear that we were actively



3) Drutz, Șerban. 1922. *Românii în America* [Romanians in America]. Chicago, Illinois: S. Alexandru Typography.

participating in the process of producing them. These archives—especially in their immaterial form, but not only—were produced and reproduced in these instances, re-invested with significance and protected against forgetting. Our interlocutors expressed their gratitude to us for allowing them to tell these stories and show us their many objects, as if occasions like these were crucial to feed those stories' continued existence.

Some of these stories, as expected, sounded rehearsed (because they had been told many, many times) and some were even finished texts, written down in the form of historical studies, monographs, notes, or short stories. What we noticed was that for the family members of these early migrants writing their story down was a guarantee that these stories will live beyond them. Where *Americanii* came to complicate the situation was in turning these texts back into oral histories, as well as trying to turn the physical artefacts into sound objects that would speak to our listeners.

As rehearsed as these stories might have been, the interview situation (we could call it a social-technological situation) made room for improvisation, filling in gaps (through our questions and interventions), and, more generally, for producing and re-presenting the personal archive anew. What is significant for this situation is the fact that we were recording sound, not only for *preservation*, but also for *presentation*, and our interviewees were keenly aware that they and their stories were going to be represented by what we and our machines recorded. The act of recording not only made their own archives present, but also produced another one, one that would travel and live a life of its own, and one that had to translate the complexity of what they had shown us. The pressure, for all of us, was about how to adequately do that.

The personal archives we worked with, in their multitude of forms, were also re-structured and re-signified in relationship to the very act of recording. Turning the recorder on, pointing or repositioning the microphone, often acted as an index for how

important, significant, or useful the information was (similar to photography), and helped re-orient our interlocutors in what they offered or re-presented to us. Similarly, for us it was often a guessing game trying to figure out what we should record, and how to use the equipment to interact with the different layers and possibilities of the stories we tried to access.

In the rest of the paper we will explore the particular possibilities and limits that working with sound can offer in translating and re-presenting such *personal* archives.

Sounding objects

We started off knowing we wanted to gather intimate personal accounts of the impact this circular migration had on the family history, but along the way we encountered many physical artefacts. The work we did, talking about and sonifying these objects, showed us the limits and possibilities of sound as a medium for research and representation.

For Măran, Coman and Velțan, it was a joy to speak of their family artefacts and this enthusiasm came out into the recordings. Mr. Coman spoke fondly of a tablecloth from one of the companies whose cruise ships took Romanians to America; he uses it to this day to celebrate the Fourth of July with his family. Also, Mrs. Velțan teared up when he read from her great aunt's diary, a first generation Romanian-American, who died at nineteen, after returning to Romania. In these moments, we as researchers were in sync with their special passion for the subject of early emigration. Often, this translated into the way they spoke of these artefacts and the intimacy that was created among us, and exposed the vulnerability they were willing to show regarding their own family histories.

The sonification of the physical artefacts proved an interesting challenge. In the case of Virgil Rogozea from Drăguș, who had his great grandfather's diary, sonification of the artefact was relatively straightforward.



He read directly from it. Similarly, we made others read excerpts from birth certificates, or handwritten letters, and describe photographs to us, if they didn't offer to do it themselves. But sonifying the most visual of these objects usually failed.

In our interview with Mr. Coman, for example, he brought several objects, including a dictionary that his father had given him. When we saw it, our instinct was to encourage him and the other people present there to describe to us what they were seeing. From the conversation below, it is clear that it was something they were uncomfortable doing.

Bianca Karda (BK): Hey, look. Favorite...

Ioan Radu-Coman (IRC): I think Vasile Radu brought this . . .

BK: Pictorial Dictionary . . .

IRC: My grandfather.

BK: Sure, wait and we'll photograph it also. Yes.

Mara Mărăcinescu (MM): Please put it aside and I'll be asking you, Bianca, to describe what you see.

BK: OK, I'll try.

MM: Yes, just try.

BK: What we're seeing . . .

MM: Yes, go on . . .

BK: We're looking at Mr. Coman's things . . .

BK: There's a dictionary called The Favorite Pictorial Dictionary. What I'm seeing is a stamp on the back of the cover, with an address from Philadelphia, a name, Lexicon, and I don't understand this here, English . . .

IRC: Probably.

Later on, after Mr. Radu-Coman factually described one of his photographs, we tried to imbue it with feeling, thus rendering the act completely staged:

"Diana Meseșan: He looks very proud, or it's just the moustache . . . IRC: It's probably the moustache."

In staging the story, we tried to recreate the situation that generated that object, but at the auditory level, it came off as an example of our work process rather than a focus on the story the artefact told.

When we didn't encourage them, the descriptions were brief—probably because it was difficult for all of us (interviewers and interviewees) to transcend the moment and imagine how the situation would be experienced by future listeners. To most of us, the objects seemed self-evident. We tried asking questions that would require descriptive answers, or we proceeded to read from the texts ourselves. We rarely used the descriptions of the more visual objects in our podcast because they were forced and did not do justice to the archival object itself. The only time these descriptions worked on a sonic level was when more than one member of the family was there and so we "captured" the natural excitement surrounding a photograph. This happened once in Drăguș, where one of the women we spoke to showed us a famous picture of her grandmother that everyone around the table recognized and clamored to comment on. Another instance was in a Skype interview where one of the family members took out a photo that they had not seen in a long time. Generally, to resolve these awkward exchanges in the editing phase, we used voice-over narration instead of the recorded material. Did this lessen the authenticity of the artefact for the listener? Most likely it did.

After public auditions of several episodes of *Americanii*, we often heard people were frustrated because they would have liked to see the physical object. Our editing created unique visual landscapes for the listeners. This, we thought, allowed the audience to use their imagination, but when it came to the photographs, describing what we were seeing was not enough. It worked against the main advantage of the sound medium: offering the listener the chance to have any visual reference she desires when she listens. In this case, because of the nature of the artefacts we were speaking of, real, concrete objects, imagining them as something other than what they were proved frustrating.

Our failure to adequately sonify the objects, and thus translate an important part of these personal archives, was partly due to



the limits of working with sound, our own personal limits as interviewers, and possibly the limits of the genre that we tried to work within. The finished product that we envisioned was a conversational, discourse-rich podcast, which required turning such material artefacts into texts that worked with the rest of the texts we recorded.



The process of audio recording

In our fieldwork we treated sound as an artefact, rather than merely a document. This implied working with and prioritizing different layers of sound and led to a particular methodology of recording, which came with its own limitations and questions of authenticity.

The object of recording

We came to this project with some experience in recording interviews for research, as well as in recording interviews and ambiances for podcasts or other sound works. Our differing experiences and backgrounds brought us to viewing the audio recording simultaneously as a form of documentation (a document of something else) and as an artefact in itself. This dual quality had, at times, competing consequences for how and what we recorded, as well as how we saw the relationship of the material to the larger project (and implicitly to the finished product, the podcast).

In other words, the recording as document could be satisfactory and valuable even if fragmented, partially inaudible with competing sounds in the background, while thinking of it as an artefact introduced requirements of coherence, clarity, sufficient length and quality of sound. A recording that was interrupted by the barking of a dog or the passing of an airplane or truck would have been perfectly fine by the standards of documentation used in an anthropological or journalistic research project, while these

characteristics rendered it (almost) unusable in an audio production project such as our own. Thinking of our recordings as audio artefacts also introduced concerns of form, adequate representation of the story, as well as complementarity with other materials we had previously recorded or were planning to record. Also, this made us privilege longer stretches of speech as opposed to lively but fragmented conversations, which we knew were harder to edit and use.

Thus, the purpose of the process of recording was not (only) understanding, but rather building a large and diverse collection of building blocks for our podcast, a coherent, usable sound archive. This influenced our interviewing technique, limiting the presence of our voices in the interview material. Still, the actual recording was, to a large degree, the result of tactical negotiations between us and our interviewees, negotiations that took place within the opportunities and constraints of the concrete events of our encounters. We met in people's homes, in their yards, in dark restaurants, and in public libraries. We socialized with them while they played the good hosts and offered us food, drinks, and the hospitality of their homes, so small talk and conviviality were unavoidable. We had to tend to complex dynamics between them when we interviewed more than one person at a time. We also had to accommodate complicated home situations (such as the presence of pets or interrupting family members).⁴ While we would have liked to let the prefiguration of the finished product shape the object of our recording, we actually had little power to do so.

Hierarchies of materials

We recorded three types of material: interviews, ambient sound, and documentation of the research process. We worked with this typology from the very beginning, attempting to collect sufficient material in each of these categories, with fairly clear intentions of building the finished audio product using all three.

4) In our interview with Galeni Mărza, her son would interject and often complement or "translate" for the listener what we heard from his mother. You can hear him, for example, at 24:36 in Episode 3 adding "she was the host" to explain who the woman that was rumored to be in a relationship with her mother-in-law's husband was.

However, we clearly privileged interviews and designed the encounters and the activity of recording around collecting this particular kind of material. The meeting with the interviewees was therefore structured (in intention, at least) around this event: we waited respectfully until sufficient rapport was created, made small talk, accepted hospitality, explained the project, all in anticipation of the moment when the *interview* actually started. After the interview was finished we often received a tour of the house/yard, were shown objects and photographs that were related to the stories we had heard. The interview situation was marked by various cues: finding a quiet, protected space, sitting down comfortably, arranging our bodies for the most effective auditory access, positioning and turning the shotgun microphone on, removing objects that could interfere or interrupt the process of recording, switching our attention mode into a more formal, involved one. The sound we recorded, therefore, was the result of a fairly contrived situation that was meant to produce a type of material that *would count as interview*: coherent, articulated, cleanly recorded. This is what we were there for, we would have said. This was going to be the material that counted.

There were instances, however, when the reality of the fieldwork challenged our intentions, as we have already outlined above (in particular when more than one person was present for the interview). Also, no matter how hard we tried to clearly demarcate the types of situations and sounds we recorded, they often bled into each other. For example, important information was recorded accidentally or while one of the recorders was left running.

Each interview created a different auditory setting. We had the quiet, controlled space of the one-on-one interviews, the loud, overlapping space of a spontaneous group interview or the interrupted space of the online interview. These settings directly affected the intimacy of the encounter, and consequently the nature and tone of the in-

terviewees' speech. While their voices were the central focus, recordings of our own workflow and of general ambiances were also important sonic layers. Thus, the other two types of sounds we recorded were intended to serve different functions, and not necessarily be the main material.

We recorded ambient sound with the intention of using it mainly for stylistic and supporting effects: to create a sense of place, to give texture to the other types of sounds we were using, or fill in moments of no speech/silence. Thus, we recorded church bells in Sântimbru, the sound of wind and our steps on the grass while walking to a monument in Vinga, the sound of rain, tires on gravel, and the car engine while driving to Ilidia. Although we recorded plenty of sound, we used it less than we thought we would. Somehow, in the process of editing, its subordination to the main material and to the structure of each episode as well as the tight economy of time/length made it unnecessary. Again, sadly, what mattered was the discourse, or sound that could be turned into discourse, missing out on the valuable possibilities that field recordings could provide in telling a story.

The rest of the recordings fell somewhat in-between interviews and ambient sound, constituting a category of material that was to serve the purpose of authenticating our other recordings and, overall, our project. We kept the Zoom H2n recorder on during most of our visits, and oftentimes turned it on a few minutes before arriving, in order to capture the moments of meeting and introductions. We turned it on while we were driving from site to site, when discussing plans, as well as when we were debriefing after the interviews. We thought of these kinds of recordings as ways of documenting the research and recording process and a device of building authority and credibility, in ways not dissimilar to the ways in which anthropologists build their own authority, writing it in into their texts (Clifford 1983). It was our way of showing that "we were there."



Authenticity in sound: intimacy, spontaneity, and “the natural”

These ambient and documentary recordings were important for two reasons. Firstly, this awareness of the ambient sounds was meant to enhance our storytelling and offer “authenticity.” Secondly, we needed as much descriptive sound as possible in order to help the audience visualize what we were seeing—both at the level of our own workflow and the presentation of the artefacts.

What we discovered through our research was that having the best setup for high-quality recordings came into conflict with being in the moment (having spontaneity and authenticity). In the same way, spontaneity and authenticity sometimes caught us off guard and resulted in sound that was often unusable (the speaker was too far away from the microphone, too many people talked over each other, and so on).

Steven Feld, an anthropologist, musician and sound artist, said that, for him:

the real joy and pleasure of recording is an enhanced sociality, an enhanced conviviality, an enhanced way of engaging with listening to people, to places, to objects, to all manner of sound-making things, including the sound of myself breathing, myself walking, the sound of my heart beat, the sound of myself recording. The sound recording process and object always is a recording of social relationships in action; that’s why I think of the sound recorder as a device to produce an enhanced social, physical co-present relationship with objects, with others, with myself, through the medium of sound (Carlyle 2013: 209).

Feld speaks here not only of the importance of voice or songs, but of all the other sounds that surround the ethnographic process. His work with the Kaluli people of Bosavi in New Guinea clearly makes audible this relationship of people to their surrounding soundscape, something we also tried to achieve by recording for as long as possible. Our initial intention was to docu-

ment this soundscape and use it as the basis for an immersive experience into our interviewees’ soundworlds. Expectedly, what we ended up with was documenting the soundscapes of our research encounters. As Feld said: “Someone . . . will hear this and immediately want to know about who was present and where, in other words, they will want to link an idea of authenticity to the experiential authority of somebody who was physically present to hear these things in their moment” (2010: 113). We offered this presence by recording ourselves outside the actual interviews.

One of the most significant instances of being in the moment, both physically and technologically, happened while driving to Ilidia. It is a great example of how the unpredictable nature of recording ambient sounds leads to the recording of a meaningful interview, which also reflects our own research process.

On the day of our interview, it was pouring rain and the road was awful. We were worried that our rental car would not make it all the way to Ilidia, and we were impressed by the water that was pouring down the roads. On our first field trip to Cluj-Napoca, an orange warning of severe weather was issued, so we thought perhaps the rain would follow us on all our field trips, becoming an interesting sonic element. So, while slowly driving on the roads, we started recording the rain pouring down, and in a moment of respite from the rain, the sound of the car on the gravel. It was right after pulling the hand-held recorder back in the car that we spotted a man trying to hitchhike.⁵ What followed was a spontaneous, warm interview on our way to Ilidia. Had we started recording after he got into the car, we would have missed the entire transactional conversation of the actual pick-up. Also, having him tell us on record how bad the road was further certified our previous recordings and helped our auditors visualize the bumpy road that they could already hear.

This experience goes hand in hand with instances of intentional ambient recording.

5) Excerpt from the first episode of *Americanii*.

We started all of our recordings long before actually sitting down for the interviews. We recorded ourselves walking, opening and closing doors, meeting people, discussing how we drink our coffee, or asking around for directions. For example, during the interview with Francisc Stoianov in Vinga, he mentioned a monument built with the money that Bulgarian emigrants had made while working in America. After our interview we went to see this monument. Because we had brought the two recorders with us, we could focus both on the person being interviewed about the history of the monument and the ambient sounds.⁶

In Arad and Covăsânt though, our process of recording all these ambient sounds at length was less successful, as it did not give us the material we would have liked to use in the editing phase. Being fully in the moment and interacting spontaneously with the situation and the objects we were looking at meant sometimes taking our attention and ears off the equipment, which affected the nature and the quality of sound.

For example, in Covăsânt, our interviewee left to speak with his parents, and we remained in the interview room alone with some archival documents, some divorce papers. The plaintiff had filed for divorce because of physical abuse, and one of us was reading the document full of dramatic details. At this time, the microphone was on the table. Full of frenzied enthusiasm and caught in the moment, we didn't realize its role and position until later on. We didn't give it enough technical attention and missed the chance to record the moment properly for the listeners.

The very thing that gave our experience authenticity and dynamism—that we were all equally involved in the research process, in the interactions with the interviewees, and to some degree in the technical act of recording—created risks and limitations for the actual material we produced. Just like for an ethnographer, participant observation came at a cost, splitting attention between the act of observing and recording.

The same way for Carlyle “the sound recorder [acts] as a device to produce an enhanced social, physical co-present relationship with objects, with others, with myself, through the medium of sound” (2013: 209), for us, these were recordings of the social relations in action that produced the material for our project. Authenticity for us then was our attempt to make these relations visible, or to allow the listener to at least catch glimpses of them in the podcast. We wanted the archives of sound we produced to bear the sign of the conditions and social relationships that produced them.

The interview as performance. The audience as an absent presence. Intimacy and technology

We also negotiated this authenticity with regards to our interviewees' speech. For a lot of them, the written text, whether as preserved artefacts or originally produced text, acted as an anchor for their stories. Some had the diaries of their relatives, such as Virgil Rogozea and Dana Velțan. Several told us that they verified the details of their stories by checking out the official village histories, known as monographs. Some even began writing such monographs, for example, Gheorghe Tătaru, who had a working copy of a text about his family history when we met him. While reading it, we realized that he wrote down not only stories that he knew from his family, but also details that were clearly taken from sociological articles written by ethnographers that came to his village a couple of decades after the migration.⁷

Our interviewees' knowledge of stories about America thus came not only from first-hand accounts, but also from secondary texts that then became part of their own discourse. It was important for them to get the *historical facts* right, probably in order to offer some authenticity to the village narrative and to support their own personal reputation. There were many informal layers to their discourse, but they did not always translate into informal forms of speech. We

6) In this particular situation, while Mara Mărăcinescu continued speaking with our interviewee, Claudia Câmpeanu was recording the ambient soundscape, and Diana Meseșan was taking pictures. It was a multiple tracing of our research.

7) Drăguș was one of the first villages studied by Dimitrie Gusti's Sociological School in 1929.



often encountered a tension between wanting to present a coherent speech, worthy of radio, and having a more spontaneous conversational tone. Often, when going door-to-door or with a larger group of interviewees, many told us they wish they had been better prepared for our visit.

We often worked against this prepared/performed speech, something that did not always sit well with them. The only way to ease their nerves was to give them time and the opportunity to read out their own texts or act out their speech. For example, Mrs. Velțan was very friendly and welcoming, but was clearly nervous around us. Shortly after meeting, we explained to her our approach to recording, that is, having the recorder on from the very beginning, even before sitting down for the actual interview. Despite her being initially comfortable with the situation, within the first ten minutes she made us stop recording because she wanted to rehearse the text she wrote before starting to tell us the actual story.

We had a similar situation in Drăguș, with Virgil Rogozea. His speech sounded very different when he was the center of attention (microphone pointed at him) compared to when he was part of a group conversation. In Episode 2, he is reading directly from a written text, while in Episode 5, he is participating in a free dialogue. His tone is more relaxed in the latter situation, a sign of greater intimacy.

In all these different interview settings, this intimacy was always framed by the use of the microphone, a very visible presence because of its size (almost 30 centimeters, covered in a fuzzy wind protection). We constantly negotiated its presence with the interviewee: through our own physical positioning, by having the microphone on for the longest possible time, or by ensuring that the person holding the microphone wasn't the main interviewer. We had to keep the microphone present and physically close to the interviewee because of the listener; in a way, with the microphone we carried the listener along with us.

On our trip to Ormeniș, we had an interesting moment of technical negotiation. We interviewed a village elder of German ethnicity, Regina Roth, and because we didn't speak German we were not the ones asking the questions. At one point, while Mrs. Roth was speaking, Cătălin, our local guide and the interviewer, gestured and whispered towards us to hold the microphone further away from her mouth. In that moment, she did not visibly object to the microphone, but it was interesting to see him act on behalf of the interviewee and feel entitled to comment on the way we were recording, while we were acting on behalf of the audience.

Feld often speaks of a "technical mediation" that is found in his work. In describing his piece about European church bells, he recognizes that the transparent sound that comes through in the composition is the result of many hours of recording and careful layering, the result of a meticulous construction (Feld 2010: 101-102). The choices he made while recording, the different perspectives he chose, or the particular times when he would record, are all the result of mediating the natural soundscape through his recording. This transparency is perceived as such by the audience in spite of all the hours spent on the technical details of recording and editing.

For us, this "technical mediation" translated into qualms about the limits of transparency and the meaning of authenticity in presenting our research and production process. The more immersive episodes of the podcast relied heavily on erasing the seams of the research and the production process and the fragmentary nature of the material (which would be an assumed matter in academic writing).

Managing the archive. Interpreting in the field

Recording while doing the research meant that the archive we were collecting posed logistical challenges, especially because of the particular format we worked in, namely sound. Audio recordings are not immedi-

ately transparent to those who want to manage them, they have to be translated and made visible through techniques of cataloguing and all kinds of metadata.

Every day, after the field sessions, we saved all audio materials, made back-ups, and added textual information to every recording, information that would make it later recognizable (the metadata was encoded into the recording). As simple and straightforward as the process might seem, at the moment of the first archiving we had to make choices about *what this material actually was*, to select a handful of details and use them to describe the whole piece of recording, with consequences for later retrieval and use. It was a first interpretation that rendered the material visible in particular ways and obfuscated it in others.

The formal interviews didn't pose many problems, and the process of archiving them was straightforward, especially since we had already planned to have them all transcribed. What proved more difficult was deciding what to do with the long stretches of ambient sound and the more tactical recordings of informal conversations and interactions with the interviewees. We knew we couldn't listen and re-listen to them in the process of producing the finished audio product in order to locate interesting and relevant information. Therefore, we used our emerging analysis and understanding of what we were documenting in order to produce a scheme of archiving with keywords and brief descriptions that were primarily about what moved/excited us in the moment and what we thought would be usable or particularly eloquent during editing. While this was necessary, given the limited time we had for producing the podcast, our indexing and descriptive principles greatly reduced the material and, again, subordinated it to the interviews and to how we envisioned the podcast's final form.

At the same time, we supplemented this kind of metadata with fieldnotes and explanatory sketches (in particular kinship charts we needed to build in order to under-

stand the complex family relationships that were being described to us) that proved useful in the editing phase.



Producing the podcast

The podcast can be thought of as a carefully edited and curated public archive, an archive of the stories we collected as well as of our experience in the process of collecting them. It is a collective archive, whose authorship and production is distributed temporally and, in some ways, among the many people who participated in the process of documentation, recording, and editing. As we have already pointed out, it was not simply the result of *collecting*, but it was also produced in complicated ways through our interactions and expectations of the finished product.

Getting to the final cut involved moving the material through several technical operations: transcribing the interviews, uploading them into the editing software, selecting and cutting the usable bits, assembling them into the final sequence, adding sound effects and music and mixing them all for quality. Some of these operations can be seen as ways of visualizing the material, of transforming sound into either discourse (text) or images (the editing software had an important visual component). This filtering and processing raises the question of whether the material we produced (sound) could be addressed only or primarily as sound, or had to become something else in order to be worked with? How similar is editing and curating sound to editing and curating other types of materials, and can we escape our visual and textual conditionings in working with sound? In what ways can we allow sound to be just that, and in what ways do we approach it with the same tools and impulses we approach visual and textual materials? Is listening and engaging your hearing enough to escape these impulses? And how



can we counter the ephemeral quality of sound, as it has to be constantly recreated—through various technologies—in order to be accessed, understood, consumed?

Editing sound versus journalistic and ethnographic writing

The main advantage of sound for us was to make somebody or something present, in ways writing would never be able to, to preserve voices and all their extra-textual content, to minimize the filters we inevitably use when telling any kind of story. We soon realized that working with sound for the purpose of producing an audience-oriented podcast was going to be a balancing act between staying close to the material and valuing individual voices, on the one hand, and communicating a coherent and convincing story, on the other.

Working with actual voices to be preserved in the finished product was very different from our previous work with ethnographic and journalistic writing. In ethnographic writing, the interview material, for example, is turned into discursive data and figuratively thrown into the analysis machine with all the other voices. No matter how personally close we are with the interviewees, their actual voices disappear and make it to the final text as bits of text that fit in with the argument and all the other data being used. With all the experimental and reflexive turns in ethnographic writing, with all the drive for polyvocality and political responsibility, the individual voices of the research participants are, in the end, subordinated to the main argument and invariably, to the voice of the ethnographer, the author. The required anonymity actually frees (emotionally, at least) the writer from some of the responsibility she has towards the people whose voices she is trying to represent. But, when you're working with voice, you cannot do that. What struck us was that we could not stray from the actual recordings, and that any kind of "theorizing" had to be done and shown with the material itself.

We also had to heed journalistic conventions and expectations, especially in the choice of materials to be included in the finished podcast. After long discussions and negotiations, we decided we needed convincing and charismatic (articulate) characters and strong stories, which made us uneasy about losing some of the richness and texture of the totality of materials we had collected and also the complexity of the story we were trying to tell.

Editing for story

We constructed our episodes having the audience in mind and using the tools of storytelling. The editing was not about the archival objects as much as it was about the stories told by them, and the way they fit into a larger theme for an episode. We carefully crafted the rhythm, chose sound design elements, and wrote the narration to serve a particular story.

Stories, either as a narrative thread that could carry an entire episode or as long quotes that also had a stand-alone value, were what gave structural coherence to all six episodes. In other words, the main principle for selecting and organizing the materials into the podcast was the narrative quality of the material that had to be strong enough to sustain the episode.

For example, for Ilidia, we could have worked with multiple narratives. We eventually structured the episode by telling the story of an entire village of migrants through the individual story of Adam Măran. Alternatively, we could have spoken more about his grandparents' love story and the way their relationship survived while they were apart, or we could have focused on the story of Adam Măran more closely, as the dedicated keeper of these stories. We chose to focus on Ilidia because it helped us prove our point: migration to America at the beginning of the twentieth century was truly a phenomenon. We also took elements from Mr. Măran's story and used them in the episode focusing on the theme of women's



migration, Episode 3, to serve the story of exceptional working women, either in America or back home.

We wanted the stories to be told by the interviewees and only when lacking supporting recordings to be retold and re-framed by us through narration. This was the case with Episodes 1, 2 and 5. Instead of a classical voice over narration, the action in these episodes is driven by our direct interventions during the interviews. In Episode 4 for example, narration was needed to fill in gaps in the narrative, where the interviewee's speech was unclear and lacked important details, or, if it was the case, to shorten a story that dragged out and wouldn't fit in the length of the episode. Lastly, those episodes that required heavier narration retold multiple stories gathered around a particular theme. For example, for Episode 3, we share stories of the women that left for America, and we explore the reasons why we do not hear more of these stories.

The use of sound design was limited to bringing out the potential of the stories told in the past tense. For the second episode, in which we retell the story of how migrants travelled to America and how they lived there, it was important for us to help the listener imagine this trip and the conditions there. The design more closely resembled that for a movie than for other episodes because it included more sound effects rather than just added ambiances.

On the other hand, there were those episodes where the unfolding of the action was important—in Ilidia and Drăguș. In both Episodes 1 and 5, the structure of the episode follows the linear time structure of the interview. In Episode 1, we start with the hitchhiker that we mentioned earlier, continue with the sit-down interview and end with our walk around the village asking the older folks if they remember stories told by the Americans. In Episode 5, we start off at the mayor's office and end up in the yard of Lavinia Rogozea where the ladies from the choir sang for us "Arz-o focu America/Damn you, America", the song that sparked

our interest in the topic. For these, we only used musical elements to support different moments in the narration (the introductions or the arrivals of new characters in our story). We thought sound design elements would crowd the auditory space, not leaving enough room for the listener to focus on what was said, or interpret it in her individual manner.

Storytelling as a tool is important to keep the audience engaged. Stories of these Americans had been made visible before. There are several scholars studying these stories, and the Romanian magazine *Historia* had even published a special issue on early American emigration.⁸ But the podcast is a digitally native format that would allow new audiences to experience these stories in an immersive way. We also worked with our publishing partners to make a mini website to include further written information and some of the photographs we took in the field.⁹ Thus, having an online presence and employing these different types of narratives worked to secure a wider audience for these stories.

Americanii as an active, public archive

We conceived *Americanii* as an active, public archive: public, because it is online and free to access, and active, through its openly active curating.

We started working on *Americanii* knowing fully well the potential of the sound medium for accessing personal oral histories, sometimes difficult ones, or larger social arguments.¹⁰ The intimacy inherent in the medium (we are speaking to individual listeners through their personal devices directly in their headphones) was something we were counting on. We knew that for the end result we had to have the listener in mind. We were creating an inherently intimate archive, one with which people could interact and access directly.

Being a public archive raises questions of adequate representation, dignity, and ethics. We felt a keen responsibility towards

8) *Historia*. n.d. "Historia, special nr. 8, septembrie 2014" [available online at: <https://www.historia.ro/revista/historia-special-nr-8-septembrie-2014>; Accessed on March 1, 2019].

9) Sunete pe bune, 2018. *Americanii* [The Americans]. Last modified December 2018 [available online at: <https://scena9.ro/Americanii>].

10) The previous podcast we worked on addressed the issue of violence in adolescent couples (*Sunt în casă cu răul/I live with evil*) and tied domestic violence to gender politics.

the people whose voices we were going to let have a public existence and also towards those whose voices and stories we were not going to include in the finished material (for various reasons).

From the very beginning, we told people who we were, why we were recording, and how we were going to use the finished material. Also, we told them when we turned the recorder on (or that we had it on) and asked for permission to record or keep and use the recording. One person asked us not to make his name and identity public (and we didn't use any recordings or photos taken in that meeting), and another one wanted us to make sure his speech was grammatically correct before including any quote in the finished podcast. What definitely helped was that the act of recording—through its intimacy and through its resembling any other unrehearsed encounter—was very different from other ways of collecting testimonies (for example, signing a paper or a document).

The question of adequate representation and relationship to various master narratives was a delicate one, for this public archive we produced was obviously not an un-curated one. We definitely wanted *to say something* with this finished material, and the way we produced and assembled it says a lot about ourselves as people and professionals, and also about our views, sensibilities, and positionalities. Just like Roshanak Kheshti pointed out in an interview, we should be more aware of this and what we *do* with the sound recordings we produce as ethnographers, journalists, and sound artists: “If contemporary ethnographers considered this question vis-à-vis sound recording in the way that we have come to expect of their ‘writing culture,’ then perhaps we’d have a different way of relating to sound recording, one that understands the use-value of these media beyond just being passive archives” (Chatlosh and Kheshti 2018: para. 4). Our archive was then active in the sense that it was meant to *do* something beyond making some stories and memories public.

For Episode 3, the one about women migrants, we felt that we needed to counter the master narrative of the man hero who travels alone across the seas, works hard, and supports his family. These men certainly did this, but the story of migration to America was not only about them. We felt it was important to intervene, with our small writing of history, in the larger History, and show that women also migrated and worked, that the story of migration was also about the women who were left alone at home to do the work of two people, tending to the family, household, and the fields. We wanted to sound their voices, the few ones that were preserved in the memories of their descendants, in photos and writings. We told stories of the rebel women who escaped their marriages and left for America, who worked in factories and pretended to be men in order to be paid more, women who defied their communities by staying home and working alone or challenging the norms of a still conservative society by wearing modern clothes or driving cars.

On the other hand, we had to decide what to do with certain themes and master narratives that were invoked in the stories of some of the interviewees, themes that we were not necessarily comfortable endorsing, such as nationalist readings of the historical contexts or various events. Should we just let the material be, without any critical commentary (which could be read as a tacit endorsing on our part)? Should we frame it and qualify it in relationship to our own positions? Or should we just leave it out altogether, even if it was good audio material? How do we mitigate the responsibility we have towards the people we worked with? In the end, very little of this nationalist point of view was kept in the material—it was a curatorial decision we had to assume responsibility for.

At the same time, we were clearly not the only ones actively curating the materials we worked with: we were part of a chain that had started long before us. What surprised us was the way the recording process



interacted with the personal archives of our interviewees. During our fieldwork we realized that the type of preservation work done by Mr. Coman, Mrs. Velţan, Mr. Măran, one that started from a type of self-archiving, mirrored our workflow with the sound medium. Their interest for understanding the larger context in which their family stories existed spoke of the same self-awareness that we had as recordists, of our own place in the soundfield and our relationship to others. Similarly, our own work process is very present in the podcast much in the same way their personal drive framed the production of their own archives. Lastly, we faced some of the same issues they did when it came to preserving our research, in particular how the archive we had amassed could have an existence at all outside an institutional context. The podcast was one partial solution, but what should happen to the rest? What happens to the rough archive of all our recordings if it is not given over to an institution that could preserve these artefacts beyond the life of the online platforms they live on now? How would we tell/share this archive's production in order for it to be preserved?¹¹



Afterword

For us, this project revealed some of the potential of working with sound (as material and technology) when it comes to personal archives. Sound offers possibilities to record the complexity of an encounter, with all its textual and experiential layers, and also to archive and make it available in ways other more material and visually/textually oriented methods can't. Sound, being so closely tied to the body and its immediate experience, works with intimacy and what that can bring to any research endeavor: trust, spontaneity, credibility. Also, its availability on a wide range of mobile and browser listening applications, alongside entertainment-ori-

ented content, makes it more accessible and susceptible to random discovery by a wider public.

As simple as it may seem, sound quality matters and it drives not only the chances of any piece of material to be included in the finished product, but also the direction and the nature of the finished product itself. Variations in sound quality are, of course, partly a technical question, but they are also the result of our discriminating treatment of recording situations, as well as of our democratic and enthusiastic immersion in the excitement of the moment. What would alleviate this problem is treating all recording time as formal recording time (from a technical point of view) and clearly assigning technical responsibility in particular moments to specific people, even if it means that some persons cannot participate in the immersion inherent in the documentation process. This raises particular problems in situations like ours, where all members of the team are interested in interacting with the interviewees and actively participating in the process. Our solution would be to take turns and rotate responsibilities. Alternately, the production process could be opened up to include other types of interests and competencies in working with sound, in particular technical ones, by working with sound technicians.

In other words, we need to develop more appropriate methods, we need to enter into productive dialogue with other sound artists, acoustic ecologists, or sound professionals, with people who come to this process through other professional and personal trajectories less encumbered than our own limits. This would open us to the possibilities of using and learning from all kinds of sound-based research. We also need to further explore the use of publishing and research contexts other than the academic ones, contexts that can be more democratic and more appealing—to both the public and the participants—such as audio documentaries and podcasts.

As a curated active archive, *Americanii* allowed for the keepers' stories to become

11) There is an ongoing project called Preserve This Podcast (<http://preservethispodcast.org/>) that addresses these very issues. Perhaps by implementing their guidelines we will be able to keep this curated archive alive outside of the personal space.

publicly available and provided the general public with straightforward access to these personal archives. The podcast was aligned with the keepers' own need for their personal archives to be recognized and "kept alive", since their archival work is centered on building, maintaining and preserving these stories. At the same time, the podcast, through its structure, implied curating the available recorded material by balancing and taking into account at all times both the keepers' and the listeners' needs.

For us, coming from three seemingly competing fields (journalism, anthropology, sound art) and collaborating on a single project exposed some of the limits these

disciplines have when it comes to working with materials, audiences, and representations. At the same time, it offered ways of addressing these limits. The public nature of a podcast, the ephemeral, personal, and less mediated nature of working with the human voice, and the immersive quality of the research experience all make for a more publicly responsible and more attractive and accessible anthropology, a more socially grounded sound art, and a more analytical and relevant kind of journalism. The podcast form can be a valuable methodological resource for artists, journalists, and anthropologists.

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