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M. Paula Survilla: The Persistence of Memory and Formation of Identity - Migration and the Homeland in Belarusian Experience

In 1931, Spanish surrealist Salvador Dali produced the collage entitled "The Persistence of Memory." Rendered using oil on canvas, it is a well-recognized example of the genre, and a well-known image in Western-centric popular culture. His unexpected juxtapositions and manipulations of recognizable objects is as much a useful aspect of this work as the image it communicates. I am sure many in this room recognize the work and have personal opinions about the meaning of the image, whether you have seen the original, or have seen the image on one of the varied and at times bizarre objects on which it is found in the marketplace.[1] Considered a commentary about time and the lack of permanence of the human condition, the melting clocks also lend themselves to other interpretations.

Figure 1: Salvador Dali's The Persistence of Memory (1931)

An image such as this is a good place to begin an exploration of topics that are by their nature subjective and personal, and at the same time linked to recognition and ideas of collective belonging. Memory and identity are intimately intertwined. They are tied to our life experiences and our relationships with others. Our world-views are especially guided by our memories of events, traumas, achievements, of loss and of love, and the significance and resonance of those moments. Memory and identity also exist as elements of persuasion, as recognized components of cultural and social change, of political constructions and power, and of cultural framing. In my discipline, these aspects generate

[1] Not only is this image found on a myriad of objects in our current material culture, but the fascination with the image and its implications is evidenced in its use by many diverse scholars and disciplines as a reference point in their discourse (neurology, psychology, engineering to name a few). The image at once invites collective and highly individualized interpretations.

discourse about culture, political change, and adaptations to a changing local and global landscape. The list is not a passive one. Whether we are members of a diaspora or not, identities and cultural constructions are in constant flux as environments and social and cultural politics continually change. The most obvious locations are linked to our personal lives, the place of migration, and the relevance of the homeland in our world-views.

In my experience as a scholar of things Belarusian and as a first generation Belarusian, being Belarusian has required the negotiation of memory, experience, and identity in constant relationship with homeland and with migrant spaces. It has also meant recognizing the presence of collective memories and identities – as agreed upon and performed by Belarusian communities for their own membership as well as somewhat differently for outsiders. As a child frequenting the Belarusian community in Toronto, as an invited member of the dance troupe Vasilok during my time in graduate school, and as doctoral researcher living first in Bielastoccyna and then in Miensk, the multiple community perceptions of identity that I encountered complemented or contrasted with the nature of my own personal experience and Belarusian world view. Similarities are an easy aspect of these experiences, but the challenge as a cultural scholar was, and remains, to reconcile that my tool kit of memories, of assumptions, and of identity was unique … and that it was my job and my challenge to understand and to respect what I did not recognize. What has become evident is that there is no "one" way to be Belarusian since the personal components of identity are defined by private and singular journeys. What can be identified are the more resonant themes that have and continue to play a role in defining memory and identity for a Belarusianess, potentially informed by perceptions of homeland and community life in the Diaspora.[2]

As many of us are aware, geographical separation from a "homeland" as a perceived cultural "core" in no way diminishes its presence in the manifestation of our personal identities (whether our perception is positive or negative). It is in the intersection between our personal identities and a sense of contribution to a collective presence and community life that a "persistence of memory" can become a foundation for that life. It can also become the site of negotiation for how a group sees itself, how the members engage in community, and our relationship to our communities in the context of a broader global space.

[2] Agunias, Dovelyn Rannveig, and Kathleen Newland. Developing a Road Map for Engaging Diasporas in Development: A Handbook for Policymakers and Practitioners in Home and Host Countries. Geneva, Switzerland: IOM/MPI, 2012: 2)

The 2012 report by the International Organization for Migration/Migration Policy Institute offers the idea that members of diasporas are by nature, transnational since:

…they are actual or potential bridges between countries through their […} shared sense of belonging [where] …Networks, identities, and belonging are of course complex and interrelated aspects that define one's personal history, rather than that of a group (Policy Makers, 2).

My focus on this description reflects the assumption that being Belarusian is not exclusively tied to active relationships with the homeland or to the "recentness" of migration. Migration is a process of loss and rediscovery. I use the words "cultural reinvention," not because what was present before has lost its value, but because new conditions demand new perceptions and new approaches to cultural participation. This same policy report, which was written as a background paper for those exploring the empowerment of world Diasporas (through a series of symposia at the UN) is helpful in describing the ways in which a Diaspora community behaves in relation to its identity and its relationship with the "homeland." The authors define the active parameters of community empowerment as the "mobilization of resources" (2). The importance of the Diaspora is directly tied to the engagement and contribution to these resources, or what the authors call "capitals." These capitals are divided into human, social, economic, and cultural categories and clarify what are keys to the strength of a community. As we shall see, these "capitals" offer a means for discussing community action, degrees of empowerment and priorities, and comparisons with other Diaspora groups who benefit from action in the same migrant spaces.

Migration, Loss, and Reinventions

For Belarusian immigrants of the mid-twentieth century[3], my parent's generation, migration meant forced severing of contact with family, home, communities, social and class status, language, and economic stability. There is the story of the young man who, in leaving, could not contact his siblings or his parents and found out his mother had died years after her passing. The shock of loss was compounded by the realization that he had lived with the hope of seeing his parents again, even when that hope could no longer be fulfilled. These lives and experiences deserve their own ethnographies.

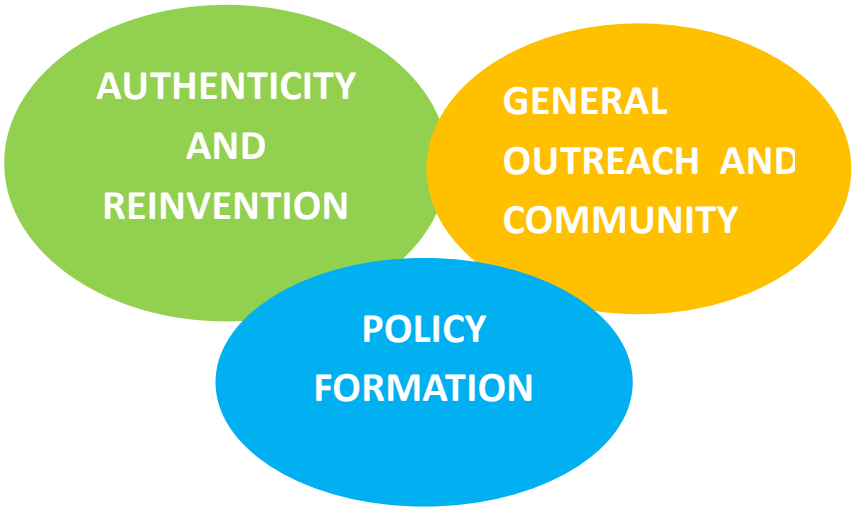
[3] At the turn of the twentieth century, the conditions for immigration to North America were defined by a very different context. Much of that migration was influenced by economic stress. In that period, the orientation of the Belarusian immigrant in the United States was much affected by the labeling of new immigrants as Russian or Polish due to religious identity and due to perceived geographic ambiguity in territorial names in Belarus. See Survilla, Maria Paula. "Terminology, Controversy, and the Interpretation of History" in Of Mermaids and Rock Singers: Placing the Self and Constructing the Nation through Belarusan Contemporary Music. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Many conditions of migration were filled with periods of trauma and poverty. Many had no choice but to leave, and many left, not for economic reasons, but because they were at risk as a result of their advocacy, their politics, their use of the Belarusian language – the stories are many. Under these stresses, those who left also did so with a profound sense of loss – while carrying a considerable burden of responsibility. They saw themselves as keepers of culture, history, of language, of music, of literature, of ideals of independence, of lifestyles and rituals, keepers and protectors of a Belarus. Despite their displacement, Belarusians found one another. Despite their economic challenges, they organized, they celebrated, they marked important moments, and educated their children. Many Belarusians in these migrant spaces performed their identities and are part of a history of Belarus that is concrete, present, dynamic, and that cannot be ignored. As each new generation enriches the Diaspora, they come to an established space that has been negotiated and nurtured by those that came before them. Those newly engaged in migration are often unaware of the legacy of those earlier communities.

Diaspora history is tied to mobility and cannot concretely depend upon even an imagined sense of homeland as a source for stability. The conditions and reasons for migration change. The social and political conditions of the homeland itself are also in process. As a result, the "homeland" as a construction that informs memory and identity becomes something quite different in the changing collective and agreed-upon memory of a community. In my own early research of the Diaspora in the early 1990s,[4] I explained the connections between three parallel conditions in Diaspora efforts towards the collective and official (here public) definition of identity in the host immigrant environment. These help to explain the energies that connect internal community activities to external education and recognition of those identities, and eventually to affecting attitudes towards Belarus in discourse and at the policy level (here I mean government policies towards Belarus). As the diagram illustrates, these three conditions can be labeled as the negotiation of the authentic, efforts towards outreach, policy formation.

[4] Survilla, Maria Paula. Music and Identity: Belarusans Making Music in North America. Master's thesis, University of Michigan, 1990.

Figure Two: The intersection of memory and identity formation with community life and political voice.



Authenticity

The negotiation of the authentic reflected at once the loss of homeland and the responsibility for ensuring the survival of Belarusian culture. The stance is one of protection and of resistance to what is viewed as political conditions and colonial cultural management. Belarusian communities are not alone in experiencing this approach to their cultural expression. Ireland's colonial experience with England is one such example. The encountered denial of the existence of Belarus, or the denial of the existence of a Belarusian culture or language, motivated a need to assert ones identity and to explain what Belarus is not. With this sense of the authentic came a concrete idea of what the homeland should be, an expectation that could not necessarily be reconciled when access to Belarus became possible. Living in Miensk during the adradzennie period, I came to identify the frustrations of those committed to different definitions of Belarus and to differing tolerances and demands for the authentic. As much as Diaspora members were convinced of their position, some Belarusians in Belarus expressed their right to things Belarusian by virtue of the fact that they had not left. The dynamic is fascinating as much as it is frustrating. It brings into focus the disconnection between a perceived authority attached to the homeland and the world-view generated in countries defined by migration and immigration.

Outreach

Outreach, in its many forms, becomes one of the responses to cultural assertion. In addition to the efforts of scholars of the Belarusian community, (as exemplified in Dr. Gimpelevich's treatment of the history of BiNIM), in the history of the Diaspora, community efforts were and are often focused on educating the public at large, and being recognized as a distinct member of the diverse communities that contribute to the multicultural character of Canadian and USian populations. In Toronto the celebration of CARAVAN in the 1970s offered a chance to highlight Belarusan culture for fellow Canadians who had often never heard of Belarus. Other singular events served a similar purpose. Moreover, first- and second-generation children of Belarusian immigrants who were part of these efforts, potentially developed their sense of cultural belonging through participation. For the outsider, these events, were more than wellintentioned cultural tourism. On a broader level, such efforts at outreach were potentially significant at the political policy level.

Policy Formation

Part of this process of definition and outreach is the practical impact on policy formation. How much of a host country's foreign policy towards Belarus can be affected by community life and the articulation of cultural and political identities? The answer is, all of it. Many members of the Belarusian community actively affect the development of governmental policy when it comes to Belarus. Although for some of us this means sitting in State Department meetings in Washington, or actively interacting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Canada, for others it has meant years of intentional responses to issues affecting Belarusians. The establishment of the Canadian Relief Fund for Victims of Chernobyl in Belarus achieved much in addition to its original mandate. It made Belarus a reality for many Canadian families who opened their homes to Belarusian children affected by the disaster, and by virtue of its eventual national profile, it made Belarus a real policy destination for those tasked with considering policies towards Belarus. Here success is measured by having a voice. Belarus has gained that voice partly due to such efforts. Advocacy is also partly a watchdog effort. Making sure the media is aware of Belarus, critiquing mainstream representation of the country when necessary, and writing letters to government to make sure Belarus has a place on their radar. Authenticity (as a negotiation of identity), Outreach, and Policy formation are parts of a broader snapshot. These categories for cultural construction continue to be connected to the homeland as a place, but also as a cultural space. The strength of Diasporas can then be considered according to categories of engagement, the kinds of "capital" already mentioned at the beginning of this presentation.

Capital is understood as resources. These enrich the community at the same time that they contribute to the broader environments in which Diaspora members find themselves. The four working categories include human, social, economic, and cultural capitals. Briefly, human capital pertains to the skills that immigrants bring with them to their new environment. The idea is that these skills can "circulate" and in so doing can benefit the broader environment. The Belarusian Diaspora is wealthy with human capital. The levels of education and professional expertise, as well as the focus on education are significant characteristics of this community. For example, Belarusians and their children were considered the most educated cultural group amongst all immigrant communities in the United States into the 1990s. Human capital is also implied in the kinds of activities pursued by immigrants even under the stress of migration and war. I am astounded by, for example, the ability to organize, to produce, and to publish throughout the processes of migration, even if that meant doing so in the midst of refugee camps in, for example post-WWII Germany and Denmark. We belong to a rather astounding legacy that values intellectual products and the contributions these can make to those within and outside our communities. Social capital amplifies these efforts by virtue of connection with others, whether we are in professional spheres, or in family environments. We are also well versed in cultural capital. We see this category illustrated in the participation of those gathered here, in the wealth of artists and writers and others who produce culture and take creativity and ingenuity to the level of product and business. The potential of Diasporas is seen then not only according to how communities contribute to their own stability, but according to how these categories of activity can potentially contribute to global development.[5] The final category is that of economic capital. One way of understanding this category is to consider the ways in which community members expand the possibility for transnational trade, invest in their new countries, or contribute to initiatives in their countries of origin. Economic capital can also be understood as the economic sustainability of the community itself. The purchasing of buildings, the financial support of projects dependent on volunteer time, the support of political, cultural, and scholarly efforts. This importance of economic contribution is understood by many members of our communities, but the level of buy-in has changed. The breadth of our community potential is no longer sustainable through a "pass the hat" mentality. Belarusian initiatives are now part of mainstream efforts. This means that we compete for grant monies and resources at federal levels with groups that have strongly established presence in our institutions.

[5] Agunias, Dovelyn Rannveig, and Kathleen Newland. Developing a Road Map for Engaging Diasporas in Development: A Handbook for Policymakers and Practitioners in Home and Host Countries. Geneva, Switzerland: IOM/MPI, 2012: 4).

Often we fail as a result of our lower visibility not as a result of the value of those initiatives. Though we may no longer face that romanticized context of having to decide between purchasing a book in Belarusian or our next meal, there is still a tremendous need for grass-roots economic support of community life and efforts. It is in terms of this "capital" that we do not compete well with other Diaspora groups. Without such support, we risk losing not only our community institutions, but the motivation of those who have worked for their survival and for their continued relevance. In considering our place as a Diaspora, it is worth pursuing a dialogue about how all of these capitals can be celebrated and satisfied in this broader Belarusian space. Who else will sustain the concrete and the experiential archives of our Diaspora legacies, the work, the disappointments, the efforts and joys of those who defined their identities in the midst of these communities, and, by extension the continuing contributions of those now engaged in Diaspora life.

Clearly, all of these categories contribute to a practical model of how Diasporas function and how they develop a global relevance. We know that immigrants in Canadian and American environment landed in the midst of particular world-views. We know that we respond in very personal ways to our identities, and we know that the continuing development of our Diaspora requires engagement. Added to this is the very messy component of human relationships and negotiations about how things "should" work: the desire to participate, to facilitate, and for some to gain prestige and power. In this space that is both personal and public, memory holds tremendous influence. The older generations may not have first hand knowledge of urban life in Miensk, the younger may not know the realities of other migrant journeys. However, the persistence of memory remains a powerful and moving element in the ways in which we all see ourselves. When my father returned to Belarus after a 50 year absence I was living in Miensk and stood by him as he visited his village, his aging uncle who he remembered as reciting for hours on the works of Jakub Kolas, where his school had been (by the way, he was the young man who still lived with the hope of seeing his mother though she had died). The Belarus of his early life was no longer recognizable, but the location of that Belarus in his memory remained powerful and resonant. He had access to what author Salman Rushdie has called the "imaginary homelands of the mind." Whether concrete or remembered, these constructions of cultural space and of belonging legitimately draw on those long-developing imaginations. Those constructions are not naive or passé, but rather part of a messy, tragic, and beautiful narrative of cultural experience, our Belarusian Diaspora experience.

Not too long ago, one member of our Diaspora was sent a rather critical comment about the nature of her homeland of the mind. The writer dismissed her by comparing her views to "Little House on the Prairie," a celebrated and highly romanticized view of pioneer life in the midwest of the U.S. There is no question that it was meant as an insult. I would

argue that those moments of romanticism are reflections of how cultural iconographies can function to anchor our sentiments and to embody, even if abstractly, those ideals of cultural connection that nurture our sense of identity. I would like to end with a final story.

It is 1945. A young Belarusian family has fled Belarus, walked across northern Europe, survived starvation, and illness, and finally finds themselves in a refugee camp in Denmark. Having no access to medical treatment, their youngest child, Pradslava, dies in the camp at the age of two. A young Danish nurse steps in to ensure the survival of the middle child, a son, and eventually befriends the family. Having nothing to give, the father, an engineer and an artist by training, decides to offer a homemade gift. The materials are cardboard and grass clippings, the object an icon of identity and loss, as well as of deep gratitude. The structure is a traditional Belarusian house, with hearth, and family spaces, with the objects of an everyday life, left behind, surviving now in memory and the strength of identity. The object itself is moving, but the conditions under which it was created, the loss of a child, the trauma of migration, the presence of some hope, make it resonate with meaning.

Figures 3-5: Interior Details of Traditional Belarusian Home Model (photos by the author)

The little house was left behind as the family eventually moved on and took their place in adopted countries and in Diaspora spaces. Fifty years later, the family of that nurse, who had carefully kept the house over 5 decades returned it to the eldest daughter of that family. It now sits in my mother's living room, a testament to family and to cultural memory. I love this story. It, like Dali's painting serves to bring into focus the complexities of memory and identity, and offers one example of many narratives that have contributed to the wealth of our Diaspora. We are tasked with honoring these histories, with recognizing the richly varied, and at times contradictory expectations about experience and homeland. We are also tasked with engaging in the support of who we are becoming, with our time, our curiosity, our respect, and yes, with our financial commitments. This Conference has offered the opportunity to explore the facets of those identities and hopefully we have gained a sense of the wealth of an unexpected membership in an unexpected history that asks who we will become in this unique and challenging space that is now our Belarusian space.

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Understanding of the Belarusian identity among Diaspora is discussed.