

# The Problematic Decision to Live Irish-Romanian Home-making and the Anthropology of Uncertainty

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*Freewill has to be experienced, not debated, like colour or the taste of potatoes.*

WILLIAM GOLDING, 1959, P. 5

## Introduction

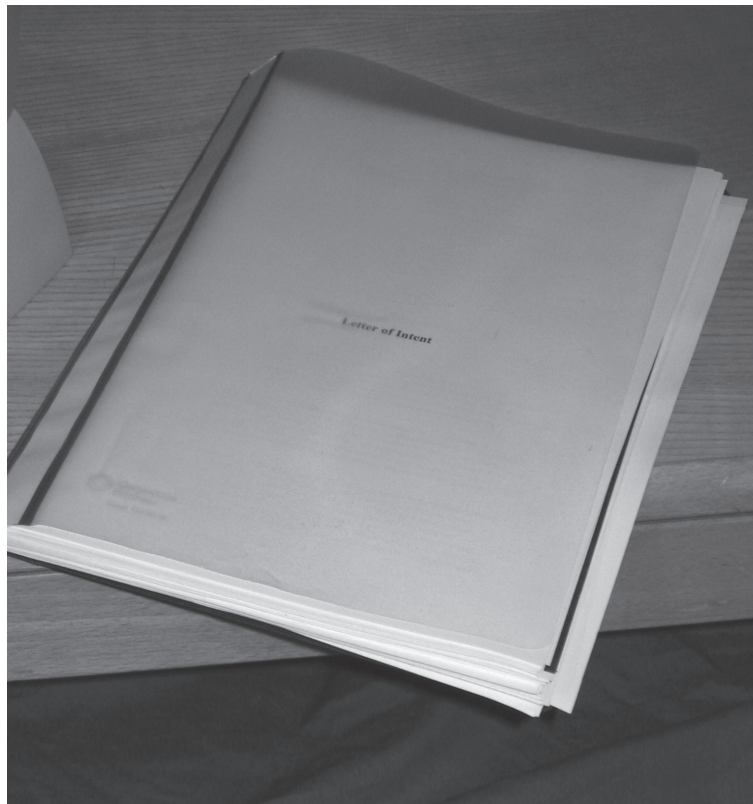
Much of the work on home-making sees people as engaged inevitably in a quest for social certainty. My work among Irish-Romanians reveals something of the multiple dimensions of the notions of certainty and uncertainty in social life. Among people who have moved from Romania to Ireland – a diverse group, whose politico-economic situation in Europe has changed immensely over the last 10 years or so – the material home is not so much an expression of emotion as a negotiation of it. In the engagement with domestic material culture, emotionality seems displaced in time, either evidenced retrospectively or anticipated. A longer-term participatory engagement with people's unfolding lives in this situation comes to be crucial.

While some ethnographic research proceeds in holistically exploring a site such as a community which has a coherence, with different people being connected by social ties or place, in this work I was surprised by the lack of interconnection between very comparable households, which was very different from my previous experience in Romania. In Ireland, my ethnographic journey moved through many different homes, and small groups, making decisions as households or families. It seemed to me as though there was an absolute divide between research among different households. While among some people, the attempt to talk about specific objects in the home absolutely failed, and was incomprehensible, in other households, there was clearly a lot of attention given to decor, building and other aspects of the home. Some people come to Ireland on a particular scheme to work in their vocation, such as software or engineering. This means

buying a house, stocking it with furniture, and so on. The decision to live in Ireland involves making friends, socializing, pubs, developing hobbies and learning about Ireland. My argument is that, firstly, domestic material objects here are ways in which to deal with futures and possibilities in a situation where people are placed under the impossible expectation of knowing their own mind about the future. Secondly, the movement of objects from being simple indices of possibilities (as a bunch of flowers indicates romance, although not necessarily that you yourself are actively romantic), to intentional manifestations of responsibilities and purposes, is significant for *feelings*. Love and ways of being purposive are not necessarily wholly separate, nor wholly integrated, and different materialities can show us a range of ways in which they are being articulated, by people and families such as Irish-Romanians.

### Katrina's 'Letter of Intent'

The moment when Katrina and Ion decided to invite me to their home was an important one. On the desk upstairs in Katrina's house next to the computer was a big stack of papers with the striking title on the front 'Letter of Intent' (see Figure 11.1). This 300-page document set out for



**FIGURE 11.1** *Katrina's Letter of Intent. Photograph by Adam Drazin.*

the Irish Government Katrina's intentions in life, for the purposes of applying for a work and residency visa. While Romania joined the EU in 2007, the right to work only occurred in 2011. She had already been in Ireland for nearly four years. She moved when her boyfriend, Ion, was recruited from Romania for a job as a software engineer, by one of Dublin's hi-tech companies. So Katrina switched from a degree course in Romania to one in Ireland. Upon graduating, after three years of study and part-time journalism work, her student visa finished and she had to apply for another. In her 'Letter of Intent' in fact only a small portion expressed her own intentions on her own behalf. For the purposes of the document, her intentions amounted to the testimony of others: references from the people and companies who had employed her, the taxes she had paid, her salary, her first-class degree, information about her residence and landlord showing she had been resident in Ireland during this time, evidence of her boyfriend's secure job, the money they held in the bank, indicating she could support herself, and so on. In short, a mass of information – especially about home and money – was officially taken as things through which the State could indexically read her 'intent'.

Katrina and Ion lived in a two-bedroom terraced house in a relatively well-off area of Dublin near to the beach, a poorly-insulated 1980s house where, in the winter, ice formed on the inside of the kitchen window. At the back near the sliding French windows, a scattering of pebbles, shells and sticks adorned the fireplace, from their many walks beside the sea and from different locations exploring Ireland (see Fig. 11.2). A bunch of dried and withered roses stood near to them, not gathered from nature but a gift between the two of them that they never threw away. Beside the sofa were photo albums, with three years of pictures of Katrina, Ion, Ion's sister and his brother-in-law, on various holidays around Ireland, taken in the soft light characteristic of the Irish landscape. Upstairs in the main bedroom were other mementoes and objects, mirrors, Katrina's grandmother's purse alongside 1920s-style artefacts. A cabinet held a range of cuddly toys from Romania – where these were, she commented, that was her home. Above the bed, on the ceiling, a series of luminous plastic stars spelled out their mutual pet name for one another.

At the time of my visit, Katrina's application had just been turned down. Quantitatively, she had a mass of supporting information, but qualitatively there was no individual instance among it all to set her apart from anyone else from Romania: for example, Irish family or one of the government's indispensable priority 'skills' areas.

What was clear was that if Katrina and Ion were to get married, she would automatically gain residence rights in Ireland. This was a double-bind. Obviously, they were not going to get



**FIGURE 11.2** *Decoration in Katrina and Ion's home. Photograph by Adam Drazin.*

married because of this kind of issue. However, if they did marry, at that time or in the indeterminate future, they would risk the appearance of getting married for residence. Their marriage would risk appearing as something from which they clearly benefited, appearing as if it might have been done in a spirit of self-seeking or calculation.

Katrina does not think of herself as a ‘migrant’, but the State in some sense does. When people are migrants, they are often under intense pressure for self-knowledge, and to hold their intentions clearly in their minds. The poet Nick Laird lampoons this pressure in his poem ‘The Immigration Form’, in which the State asks a prospective ‘immigrant’, ‘How intimate are you with breathing?’ (Laird, 2007). It is not only the State however which is the source of this pressure – a person must justify their intentions to parents, family and children. To be a migrant without a clear plan is not socially acceptable, nor is sentiment an acceptable justification. Because of the complicated Foucauldian bind which both extorts and creates un-affective individual intentions in these types of instance, it is not clear who is necessarily making the decisions. Self-knowledge as a migrant can emerge from an engagement with authority, rather than from simple choice.

Anthropology has also long been aware of the ways that agency, including the locus of intentionality, is distributed. Decisions are made and negotiated in groups or relationships, rather than by isolated Robinson Crusoe figures. What is important is that the group, family or relationship is the legitimate and appropriate one for the intention.

In situations of distributed agency, the material world assumes increased importance. Objects have the capacity to manifest in some sense a relationship or group (Douglas and Isherwood, 1978, pp. 71–90; Mauss, 1990), to express a quality of mind (Gell, 1997), and to do so in ways which appear as legitimate, unquestionable and accepted (Miller and Woodward, 1987, pp. 85–109). In this instance, many of the objects appear to express future trajectories, not to be confused with the conscious intentions of Ion and Katrina. In the eyes of the ethnographer, there is a story of love going on here, which is expressed in the particular objects I have singled out and described, objects which seem to embed nature into the home and express the naturalness of the wellsprings of emotion involved. Yet it is a story which would be demeaned if it were made too explicit.

Problematically, however, these objects’ materiality is challenged. Thinking of the previous three years of Ion and Katrina building a life together, there is a process of social construction at work which appears as an inevitable movement towards social certainty about who they are and where they stand. I read their domestic interior in terms of emotion and time, as a love story. Yet of what value is the materialization process in the event, the moment when I spoke with them? The records of their walks together, the photo albums, the arrangement of the bedroom, the dried roses, these appear at one moment permanent emotional fixtures, and in the next as ephemeral junk. The quality of materiality possessed by an object can seem permanent or transient (Buchli and Lucas, 2001; Miller, 2005). Houses can seem like natural features of the landscape and then suddenly like paper before the bulldozer, and often we choose them to be so and decide what is permanent and what is not.

By contrast with the spoken or written word (for example Katrina’s Letter of Intent), the material futures we read into objects offer more subtle possibilities for expression and interpretation, much more grey, subjective and open to infinite degrees of negotiation. At the same time, Katrina’s letter makes the future more abstract and evidently uncertain, in the sense of being unmaterialized, because the letter exists in the here-and-now; while the objects manifest certainty. As an ethnographer I must admit that I privilege the subjective materiality of intentions above words.

## Home-making as relating to future

Irish-Romanian homes commonly unmask the notion of a simple relationship between a warm home and a warm emotional feeling inside a person. The pressure to self-construct through self-knowledge is intense and artificial, revealing instead the disjunctures between knowledge and feeling, interior and exterior landscapes.

Studies of post-socialist Europe have commonly tackled these issues, of how home-making becomes a type of project in which identities are both *ascribed* from outside ‘readers’, and also apparently *intended* by home-makers. Caroline Humphrey (2002) offers one of the most subtle propositions of how this project has proceeded, has been challenged, and has (arguably) failed under the burden of its own presumption. Trying to become ‘new Russians’ through house-building, people draw from two wholly different resources of identity – European bourgeois modernity, as well as feudal Russian aristocracy. Monstrous concrete Frankensteins appear whose material form is testimony of experimentation more than ‘transcendent’ identities which will last:

This reveals the unintended aspects of identity creation, the heaps and bits and pieces that have somehow ended up on the site, which of course are at the same time visible and ‘readable’ by everyone else. The slippage may be unintended but is no accident, since it reflects the general post-Soviet condition, which is characterized by uncertainty or irony toward any grand mythic projects.

Humphrey, 2002, p. 176

Herein lie some of the difficulties of a material culture of emotion, in its dependence upon how one knows oneself, because it is dependent upon an anthropology of *uncertainty*. Social life is prefigured as a quest for certainty. The person who has culture is presumed to be in a drive to create meanings which are somehow transcendent mythologies. There is a certain seductiveness here in the notion of the narrative. It is pleasant to think of our informants romantically, caught up in a story which is theirs.

However, when it comes to the material culture of the home, reading future stories into objects can be deceptive. Some objects manifest what Miller calls the ‘blindingly obvious’ (Miller and Woodward, 2007), the oracular quality of the object which in the words of Evans-Pritchard ‘does not err’:

Azande often say ‘the poison oracle does not err, it is our paper. What your paper is to you, the poison oracle is to us,’ for they see in the art of writing the European’s source of knowledge, accuracy, memory of events, and predictions of the future. The oracle tells Azande what to do at every crisis of life.

Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 261

On the other hand, in a situation where someone has an identity as a ‘migrant’, they may be made to feel obliged to demonstrate that their future is a space of open possibility for them to make use of, in which certainty must be evidentially a quality of mind. The compulsion from this perspective is for the object world to be ‘merely’ an extension of self. Domestic objects would be expected to reflect intentions, but not to independently realize any meaningful qualities of their own.

## Carmen on stereotypical Romanians and their homes

The State is not always a significant audience for Irish-Romanians in thinking about what one knows, intends or feels. For many people, it is a Romanian diasporic context which is more important, and domestic forms come to signify what sort of Romanian one is. Take Petru and Betty. They sold their small farmstead in Romania in order to finance moving to Ireland. What was their initial aim? Earning enough to build a house in Romania, to replace the one they had sold. After two years of living in a barely-furnished flat in Dublin, during which time they went out socially once, to the pub, they had managed to build a house in Romania and were purchasing things to furnish it. Were they intending to ever go back to Romania? No. Were they ever intending to buy a house in Ireland or start socializing? No. '*Asta e prostia*', Petru told me: 'That's the idiocy. The Romanian works like a fool. He builds a house and then he dies.' What was the house for? For their two children back in Romania. The physical home, present or absent, assumes great importance in these instances.

'We are not typical as Romanians', I was told by Carmen and by a friend of hers, as we sat in her flat. They told me how the typical Romanian spends nothing in Ireland at all, but saves up all their money. Their entire existence in Ireland is about saving and an ethic of saving, in order to build a life back in Romania. They also buy good quality goods and send them to Romania, to the home they intend to live in. They buy a towel from ALDI to use here, and a good one from Marks & Spencer they send back unopened to Romania. They buy good jeans, and Nikes, and send them unworn to Romania; while in Ireland they wear second-hand clothes and 'adidas' (i.e. trainers) from LIDL.

This means that for this brand of 'typical' Romanian, the home is very minimalist. Life in Ireland comprises of attempting to spend as little money as possible – even if they are in fact spending money, the value of that money goes to Romania. They therefore do not invest their financial resources in Ireland. They go out rarely, if at all, to the pub, as a night out in Dublin can soak up a lot of money. Working hours are maximized, getting as many jobs or as much overtime as possible, so people can work a 60-hour week or more. People supposedly live in bare, spartan rented accommodation and eat and socialize at home as much as possible in front of the TV (see Figure 11.3). An avoidance of actually making social contacts is implied, along with the risk of spending money on them.

The second 'Romanian stereotype' whom I was told during research I might well be interested in meeting was a family who have bought a place, and are engaged in setting up home. The reason why I might want to meet them would be to witness their pride in feathering their nest. The ways in which this second form of 'typical Romanian' is reported as different from oneself varies. Maybe they are Irish citizens, or at least have very certain forms of documentation, in their own names. Maybe they are married or have children. Maybe they are from a town or city rather than a rural area, went to university, have friends of all nationalities, not just Romanian, go out in the evenings, spend money in restaurants, shop at Marks & Spencer rather than ALDI or LIDL, shop in Dublin's Grafton Street on the south side of the river, not in Henry Street on the north side.

For people born in Romania meanwhile, the two stereotypical home forms above offer ways of negotiating something of the wide variety of people from Romania. There is an immense variety, and it is debateable whether anyone has much in common with anyone else at all. Certainly many people are very explicit that they do not want to socialize with other Romanians. Through stereotypical 'other' Romanians, different elements of identity can be negotiated – rural and urban people, less educated or more, different ethnicities, different religions (Orthodox





**FIGURE 11.3** *Lack of home-making and intentions in Dublin flat. Photograph by Adam Drazin.*

or Protestant), different senses of class, people from Moldova in the East or Transylvania in the West, clever (*deștept*) people and idiots (*fraiere*), farmers, factory workers and office workers, English speakers and monoglots, Irish citizens and non-Irish, Romanian speakers from inside the EU and those from outside it, Romanians who grew up in Romania and Romanians who grew up in Ireland. Most importantly, this broad canvas enables differentiation between good and bad Romanians – the bad Romanians being those other Romanians who are materialistic in one way or another, unlike oneself, who is not. In the particular instance of Irish-Romanians, materialistic stereotypes seem to be laid on thick and fast, while every person's experience and life is profoundly different.

Carmen, as many people, did not herself conform to either of the stereotypes, but wished to introduce me to others who fitted the bill. In her own case, she shifted in her conversation

between talking about stereotypical friends who corresponded to one type or another, and talking about two alternative strategies in her own life. When I asked her why she was not a 'typical' Romanian, she said '*eu am hotarit cu sotul meu sa traim aici*' – 'I decided with my husband to live here'. In order to understand, we have to understand the specific meaning which she is ascribing to the word 'live' in this comment, in the context of the conversation. Living in Ireland implies not rigorously saving money with the intention of living in Romania, but rather engaging in social life in Ireland with the aim of settling. To live implies spending money on oneself now, having a *place* to live, and so on. To live implies a particular strategy, or rationalization, of living now and here.

Carmen moved to Ireland fully legally in the late 1990s, recruited in Romania to work for a cleaning company in Dublin. She already had a long CV of assorted professional jobs in Romania and elsewhere, and had travelled extensively. She was an au-pair in France and in Sweden. She had for several years run a small manufacturing company in Romania, exporting to France; and she had worked for nearly two years as a translator for a clothes company which exported from Romania to Italy. When a company turned up recruiting in Bucharest for work in Ireland, she went along speculatively, at a time when she was sick of the pitfalls and wheeler-dealer nature of working in Romania. The people who interviewed her gave her very little impression of what on earth it was that she would be doing, beyond promising a surprisingly generous salary of IR£250 a fortnight, minus rent. She knew nothing about Ireland, so she got out an atlas with her father to check where Ireland was on the map, and she got out some guide books from the library.

Upon arrival, it transpired that the employer was a cleaning company. She lived at first in a huge house with nine other women, mostly Russians, in a nice, peaceful area of Dublin called Beaumont. She worked fully legally as a Romanian with her visa, PPS number and so on. There was a small amount, IR£70, which disappeared from their pay packets each month, which the Irish managers never explained – she's not quite certain why she never asked about that. After a sequence of assorted dramas, job shifts, shifts in accommodation and so on, she was promoted within the company. She also found a job for her husband, one paid better than hers, and he came over to join her.

For several years she and her husband lived together in Dublin. As she said, they made the decision to *live* in Ireland. She moved job from being a supervisor in the cleaning company to being a supervisor in a hotel. They rented a nice flat near to the seafront in north-east Dublin, a peaceful townhouse converted into five apartments, mostly occupied by professional couples. They made friends and went out with work colleagues socially.

During their time in Dublin, however, they came to 'live different lives'. Much of this was concerned with work, as their social lives came to be organized with work colleagues, who did not overlap. The decision to 'live' in Ireland proved fatal for their 13-year marriage, and they decided to divorce. Taking stock of their situation, they had not managed to save much, nor to buy a house. They decided to move back to Romania to divorce and, having closed all their accounts in Ireland, said goodbye to everyone.

The process of separation and divorce however was very traumatic for Carmen, as ever more details about their past lives emerged. Carmen decided that actually, she wanted a new start. She moved to Italy, then found out from friends in Ireland that her old job was still available. At this point, therefore, she made a decision to come back to Ireland, and do things differently this time around.

When I talked to Carmen, she was intending to implement the other type of strategy of living. She did not intend to socialize, spend money, live in a nice area and so on. She intended to work



hard, save money and build up capital in order to be able to buy a house, have a family, probably back in Romania, and so on. It was not 100 per cent certain that she would manage to do this. As we talked, her friend commented that Carmen would not manage to do this. Carmen countered that she would do and she had to. Saving up capital takes a lot of self-discipline and is very difficult. It is exceptionally tricky, the suggestion was, when you are used to living in a 'normal' fashion.

In her second life in Dublin, Carmen was living in a rented bedsit in a converted Georgian house, inherited from another Romanian tenant. The main part of the room was occupied by a bed, table and single chair. In a corner was a sink and small kitchen area, where she cooked on a set of rings. In the other corner, partition walls enclosed a cramped shower and toilet. Above the fireplace was a map of Romania and the Romanian national anthem, which begins 'Wake up Romanian' (*Desteapta te Romanule*) (see Figure 11.4). These belonged to the previous tenant, and she purposely left them there to remind her to 'wake up'. Likewise, she also hung an



**FIGURE 11.4** *In Carmen's Flat: her map of Romania. Photograph by Adam Drazin.*

expensive watch by her door as a reminder. Carmen does not wear a watch. On her last visit to Romania, she bought an expensive one to wear to show people she had made something of herself. She keeps the watch on view to remind herself of the façade she used to give herself. Her intention was not to ‘live’ in Dublin, as before. Rather, she was going to suspend living in that sense, have a spartan existence and save money to return to Romania to live on.

The use of the term ‘to live in Ireland’ (in Romanian ‘*a trai in Irlanda*’) has a number of characteristics here. Clearly, the term has a number of connotations which are different from simply existing and breathing, or being on Irish soil. The connotations of the term ‘to live’ are rendered clearer by contrast with the alternative mode of being in Ireland. To ‘live in Ireland’ implies a measure of intent. One is living now with the intention of living and being in Ireland in the future. In fact, of course, both the person who has decided not to live in Ireland, and the person who has, may still be in Ireland next year. Many people who have decided not to live in Ireland can exist in Ireland for years. The main difference is intention. Secondly, however, this is manifested in objects in the present, with implications for social relationships. Thus intention, material home and household are being expressed and elided in this simple phrase ‘to live’.

## Conclusion: walls of the mind, walls of the home

Emotion, such as the phenomenon of love, exists not so much in direct relationships, for example with objects, but in the achievements and the slippages, and hence it exists in time and in social networks. The enduring, unquestionable drive behind a lot of Irish-Romanian life is an aspiration to build a trilogy: a material home, a (heterosexual) marriage, and to have children. This triple ideology, rooted in growing up in Romania, seems unquestionable and hegemonic. Different people may relate to it in different ways: while some may declare their commitment to these kinds of projects directly and consciously, others (for example, university-educated people) may talk about it from a distance through the stereotypes described above, or by outlining the ideas they have ‘inherited’ from parents. Yet the package of these three projects is always present somehow.

In describing the lives of certain of my informants, I have situated the emotions engendered in relationships and marriage within wider networks which support or defy this triple ideological aspiration. The exact material constitution of a home, and simple things such as how one shops or consumes, have profound implications for senses of love and mutual engagement between people. If ‘to live’ in Carmen’s sense is to feel in the here-and-now, then objects in the home come to be ways of negotiating certainties of feelings, in the past, now, and in the future.

Simmell comments that the purest material expression of purposiveness is to be found in money, revealing the cultural and material situatedness of purpose (2004, p. 232). Futures here do not comprise only in knowing, but feeling. Objects are a medium through which futures unfold, much as relationships with pasts emerge through archaeological contexts.

The temporal dislocation or assertion of love, its evacuation from the present into future or past, or the absolute assertion of the here-and-now, is facilitated through objects. Through objects, we negotiate our relationships with the future, and these relationships are not uniform and singular, but varied and plural. Certain objects – money, or the written word – manifest purpose, certainty of mind and contemporaneity. Red roses or undecorated walls both can be creative in the emotional rhythms of Irish-Romanian life. Paints, televisions, carpets, mattresses, washing machines, even the physical home or house itself, indicate the ways in which it is not as simple as *whether* and *where* emotion is present or absent, but *when* it is present. The unpainted

wall or the painted wall are both ways to locate ontologies of emotion in time. This is because feeling love, and knowing love, can be two different things. In conclusion, the material culture of emotion needs to explore better the ways in which uncertainty is materialized, because of the varied dimensions of materiality, certainty, intention and emotion in the lives of people such as Irish-Romanians.

