

## FRAGILE STRUCTURES OF ATTACHMENT IN CARMEN FIRAN'S *THE LOST SHADOW*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Relying on an interdisciplinary approach that blends Jungian criticism and cultural studies, this paper aims to analyze the Romanian writer's drama, registered through the double filter of exile (Aciman, 2000; Hirsch, 1996; Hoffman, 2000; Manea, 2012) and transnational approaches to literature and identity (Basch et al., 2003; Jay, 2021; Schultersmandl, 2021; Vertovec, 2009), as illustrated in the recent novel *Umbra pierdută* (2018) by Carmen Firan<sup>2</sup>. This book presents the evolution of a Romanian couple, Fred (a successful writer) and Mimi (an ambitious ballerina), relocated from communist Romania to France and eventually to the United States of America, where they are shaped differently by the values of the host country. Considering the fact that Firan settled in New York after 1989, when migration to the West was no longer prohibited, the paper aims to establish whether this novel, (first published in Romanian), advances a nostalgic perspective or a deterritorialized notion of the migrant's identity, filtered through the dilemma of the deracinated writer. The discussion investigates the fragmentation of Fred's subjectivity, an uprooted individual, divided by opposing forces that gradually consume him: on the one hand, the character acutely needs to express himself in Romanian, on the other hand, he is tragically constrained by the ideology of the American Dream and the logic of the market (Cullen, 2003). While Mimi is fascinated by American consumerist values, Fred seems to retreat more and more into an inner silence, a tangled thicket of feelings: nostalgia, guilt, fear, alienation. How can one interpret the character's withdrawal into a space devoid of creative urges, as opposed to his prolific writing before emigration? In order to decipher the valences of Fred's entrapment, the paper discusses his psychological decline through the grid of Jungian archetypes, especially persona and the shadow, whose connotations may serve to uncover the impact of exile on Fred's creative potential. Comparing the two protagonists' different reactions to the American realities, the discussion aims to answer a series of questions related to the status of Romanian literature and identity in the competitive context of American global capitalism. Can Fred's silence and flight be considered mechanisms of survival, resistance, or do they represent his unwillingness/inability to accept American consumerist ideologies? Can we say that *The Lost Shadow* outlines a diasporic or a transnational perspective on a Romanian (albeit fictional) case of transatlantic relocation? How does Carmen Firan, a writer coming from a minor culture, situate herself in the world republic of letters (Casanova, 2004) through her fictional heroes: through differentiation or assimilation?

**Keywords:** assimilation; diaspora; differentiation; exile; persona; shadow; transnationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Article History: Received: 31.12.2026. Accepted: 20.02.2026. Published: 15.05.2026. No funding was received either for the research presented in the article or for the creation of the article.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I have used the English translation of the novel, *The Lost Shadow*, published in 2022.

## 1. Introduction

The present article starts from the relevance of contemporary fiction written in Romanian by authors embedded in a transnational context. Carmen Firan is an example of an author who chose to settle in the United States in the early 2000's, enjoying the benefits of unrestricted mobility between the country of birth and her new home in New York. This paper considers Firan's novel *Umbra pierdută*, first published in Romanian at Polirom Publishing house (2018), and subsequently translated into English as *The Lost Shadow* (2022). Its recent publication accounts for the relatively reduced body of literary criticism, fact that leaves room for novel interpretations. For example, Pavnotescu (2024) builds a comparative perspective between Firan's *The Lost Shadow* and Mihai Eminescu's *Sărmanul Dionis* [Poor Dyonisus], analysing the shadow symbolism, while not considering the context of exile. Florin-Corneliu Popovici's critical essay (n.d.) situates the novel within literature of exile discussing its main themes, but without sufficiently developing the significance of the shadow. Relying on a cognitive-semiotic (semantic) paradigm, Moraru's study (2022) focuses on conceptual metaphors in the novel, highlighting how Fred's emotions, as an immigrant and a (previously accomplished) writer, reflect profound estrangement.

## 2. Theoretical Background and Methodology

Therefore, aiming for a new angle of interpretation, the present approach analyzes the *The Lost Shadow* considering both the implications of the characters exile/transnationalism and the shadow symbolism from a Jungian perspective, while correlating these aspects with Firan's own reflections from recent interviews<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, the thematic aspect of this novel renders it very suitable for discussing the status of contemporary Romanian literature in the world republic of letters (Casanova, 2004). The analysis operates with a close reading of the text, coupled with a body of theories that connect mobility across borders with transnational identity and literature of migration. In order to decipher Fred's complicated affiliations, the present argument blends theories regarding the writer's condition in exile (Aciman, 2000; Hoffman, 2000; Manea, 2012) shaped by facets of nostalgia (Boym, 2002; Hirsch and Miller, 2011). Another theoretical layer considers the main coordinates of transnationality (Basch et. al, 2003; Vertovec, 2009) in relation to features of transnational literature (Jay, 2021; Schultersmandl, 2021).

*The Lost Shadow* presents the trajectory of a Romanian immigrant couple— Fred, a successful writer in communist times, and Mimi— a goal-oriented ballerina determined to turn her emigration into a success story. After their separate departure from Romania, the two characters meet in Paris, and they continue their journey to America as a married couple. *The Lost Shadow* presents the unfolding of their lives in New York in an interval that historically overlaps with the fall of the communist regime in Romania. Therefore, the timeframe of their lives as immigrants grasps the transition from an exilic context that denies all possibilities of homecoming to a transnational regime that facilitates free travel. Considering Firan's own voluntary relocation and her fictional scenarios of Romanian immigration before and after 1989, the paper aims to establish the type of discourse(s) that seem supported by the novel: do the characters' identification illustrate an embrace of a transnational perspective that privileges a regime of multiple attachments or do their stories suggest an intersection with exilic nostalgia? Since the title of the novel is mostly connected with Fred's struggle to find his voice as a writer, the analysis focuses on this character, aiming to clarify the connotations of the

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<sup>3</sup> All the cited interviews are published in Romanian, and this paper uses my translations.

shadow in relation to his symbolic silence and psychological decline. To this end, the discussion also considers Mimi's antipodal evolution, foregrounding how it is processed by Fred's different system of values. Last but not least, an important research question is whether the novel illustrates the dilemma of a writer coming from a minor culture, by forging strategies of assimilation/differentiation (Casanova 2004, p. 179).

### 3. Fred and Mimi: Antipodal Reactions to the American world

The dynamics of the Mimi-Fred couple signals a strong opposition, a sense of duality that constructs antithesis as an underlying trope of *The Lost Shadow*. The idea of contrasting responses to the American environment is suggested from the very day of their arrival in New York. As they leave the airport, Mimi's and Fred's dissimilar postures anticipate their antagonistic evolution in the Big Apple: "While Fred sank in the back, Mimi's neck strained with curiosity. He grew *smaller* as she grew *taller*, as if they had both sipped from a miraculous drink that caused opposite effects" (Firan, 2022, p. 47) [emphasis added]. Therefore, Fred's pose expresses a sense of resignation and apprehension, while Mimi's embodies her confidence in the potential of the New World to fulfill her dreams. Mimi is determined to embrace the opportunities she expects from migration to America: "I want to make it. That's all. It doesn't matter how or in what field. I'm ready!" (Firan, 2022, p. 98) or "I struggled to get here and I won't let this good fortune go away. I'll be someone, mark my words." Mimi threatened him with her playful eyes, tearing up with ambition" (Firan, 2022, p. 46). Mimi's confidence in her future success reveals her trust in a version of the American dream that provides access to "upward mobility, a dream typically understood in terms of economic and/or social advancement" (Cullen, 2003, p. 80). Mimi's spectacular evolution demonstrates that she knows how to speculate the opportunities embedded in the American dream; starting from a humble position as a cosmetician, she becomes a successful entrepreneur (she starts her own beauty clinic *Mimosa* using Romanian ingredients such as Gerovital medicines, royal jelly, propolis and mud from a famous Romanian lake, Techirghiol). While Mimi's dazzling ascension is not the focus of this paper, the impact of her metamorphosis on Fred is relevant for understanding his frame of mind.

Although Fred enjoys the material benefits resulted from his wife's businesses, his reflections regarding her transformation express skepticism regarding the American strategies of acquiring success. More specifically, he regards Mimi's entrepreneurial triumph as an element that diminishes her femininity:

She went weekly to the Himalaya Center, where all sorts of people initiated in happiness and expert in matters of the soul strengthened her *self-esteem* and *confidence*, preparing her for *success* and *immortality*. She came home like a bomb of *energy and positivity*; which Fred couldn't run away from [...] She would stack three or four bricks atop each other on a chair, take some steps back, and hurling herself with a *warlike cry*, break them in two. Then she'd triumphantly show her arms to Fred, *her muscles still flexed* (Firan, 2022, p. 213) [emphasis added].

In the American context, Mimi's quest for success is perceived as imbued with aggressivity, the necessary tool that consolidates Mimi self-assurance and helps her navigate through the entrepreneurial jungle. However, while these instruments are definitely useful for Mimi's business career, they are considered a threat to the type of femininity appreciated by Fred, that his wife once possessed: "In the old days, he had also taught her how to defend her vulnerabilities and hide her strength. *A way to save her femininity* [...]. Their bedroom looked like a *battlefield now*. Weights, fitness balls, exercise bands and bricks" (Firan, 2022, pp. 215-

6) [emphasis added]. Fred experiences similar feelings as he observes his psychiatrist's secretary whose sad and resigned air triggers his ruminations regarding different versions of femininity. On the one hand, he cherishes his mother's ideal of "distinguished, healthy and elegant" womanhood (Firan, 2022, p. 2). On the other hand, the women he notices in the New York subway are associated with lack of sophistication and coquetry, attributes that Fred directly correlates with the American model considered to promote comfort over style: "Comfort has become a collective ideal, and it has never been better achieved than in America [...] Today no one cares any longer about style and how they look; femininity and elegance disappeared with the older generation" (Firan, 2022, p. 2).

By presenting the contorted dynamics of this couple when transplanted into the American soil, Firan may imply that migration is the trigger of identity changes that reverse and undermine the traditional approach to the male and female gender roles. Patriarchal gender frameworks are grounded in a binary logic that aligns men with the public sphere and women with the private domain (Ganser, 2009; Cattán, 2008; Creswell & Uteng, 2008). This division has also been theorized as a spatial-temporal opposition, in which masculinity is associated with time, movement, and progress, while femininity is linked to space, stasis, and immobility (Fay, 2008; Massey, 2001). Women's confinement to the domestic sphere thus functions as a mechanism of subordination through restricted mobility (Ganser, 2009). Conversely, access to mobility enables women to challenge patriarchal norms by developing new forms of subjectivity, destabilizing hegemonic discourses, and achieving greater social and sexual autonomy (Creswell & Uteng, 2008; Ganser, 2009; Kronlid, 2008). Considering these reflections, the next part of the paper aims to establish how *The Lost Shadow* configures the relation between mobility and gender, the public and private spheres in the context of migration.

Once Mimi becomes involved in her business routines, we notice a reverse of the traditional discourse in the sense that Fred appears (voluntarily) attached to the private space, while Mimi is in the city every day:

Fred spent his life mostly *in the apartment, and Mimi outside of it*. Sometimes he felt like a prisoner, sometimes a master in that space that he had gotten used to and had even come to like, but which lacked something to make him feel at home (Firan, 2022, p. 201) [emphasis added].

Mimi claims that her efforts to become financially strong are also justified by her intention to enable Fred to write freely, unburdened by quotidian worries. In a sense, she takes over the role of the provider, traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity, i.e., "being a breadwinner, taking risks" (Urdea, 2020, pp. 273-275). Discussing this process in Jungian terms, it seems that Mimi's enthusiastic pursuit of the American dream has a magnifying effect on her animus, the male image in her psyche (Cherry, 2024). If we couple this fact with Fred's perception of Mimi's transformation, it becomes clear that her alignment with the norms of American success is regarded as a process of masculinisation, which intimidates Fred. Overwhelmed by his wife's dynamism, Fred falls into a passive stance, which is interrupted only when Mimi has an accident that literally confines her to bed. It is only during this interval that Fred seems able to restore his fading (traditional) masculinity, becoming very active both at home and outside it:

Paradoxically, Fred was doing well. He was writing several hours a day while Mimi watched TV, read magazines or slept. He went grocery shopping, vacuumed, helped her wash dishes; he had suddenly become very busy and full of responsibilities, but still was inspired and in good spirits, strong and in control (Firan, 2022, pp. 158-159)

How can one account for Fred's revival in the context of Mimi's ebbing energy? Could it be just a coincidence or does his sudden transformation encode a more elaborate message about his reaction to Mimi's Americanisation? I would argue that Mimi's fast adherence to the conventions of the American business world is perceived as an aggressive change that seems to erode her femininity, while diluting Fred's own masculinity. Therefore, this fact partially explains why Fred cannot act, as he feels totally eclipsed by Mimi's entrepreneurial crusade. However, I consider that another justification for Fred's apathy in New York is represented by his incompatibility with certain norms of the American society that Mimi can manipulate in order to reach her goals, while he considers them unacceptable.

For example, Fred is critical of the American consumerist apparatus, associated with "American cultural control" (Stearns, 2001, p. 72), which creates fake needs by encouraging material accumulation via manipulating strategies used in advertising (Ljubičić & Vukasović, 2023; Michalak & Stypiński, 2023). For example, he condemns the American advertising industry for persuading consumers to purchase unhealthy food (macaroni and cheese) by idealizing the product as a guarantor of happiness:

One day he had come across a site on the Internet promoting a sort of food that was found to cure loneliness and depression: macaroni with cheese. Beneath a dish with yellowish pasta covered in butter, there were calls by *nutritionists and psychiatrists* enlisted by the advertising agency saying that macaroni with cheese makes you happy. *Fat and happy*. They'd even found out that thin people get depressed more easily than the overweight who are jovial and content, encouraged to be comfortable with their own bodies, free from any sort of complex. Consumption must be encouraged at any cost; a *joyful and prosperous society, in which pathological consumption combats the pathologies of the mind* (Firan, 2022, p. 39) [emphasis added].

This passage clearly illustrates the perceived complicity between the advertising industry and the scientific community, in this case, nutritionists and psychiatrists, whose expertise is relied upon in order to create persuasion by invoking the "rule of authority" (Michalak & Stypiński, 2023, p. 198). At the same time, by associating food with the ability to make one happy, the advertising message works with the principle of idealization where a product is presented in a manner that "that overrates its advantages and minimises its disadvantages" (Michalak & Stypiński, 2023, p. 201). Moreover, by apparently focusing on consumers' well-being, the ad clearly targets an emotional level, meant to further encourage one's decision to purchase. Fred's perceptive mind is sensitive to the bitter irony of the discourse that implicitly associates the unhealthy condition of being overweight with the psychological state of contentment. Along similar lines, another ad glorifies the therapeutic value of shopping, that is again supported by the authority of scientific arguments: "a Harvard professor with a gray beard and a white coat pompously confirmed the benefits of shopping for one's self-esteem and its positive influence on curing any sort of psychosis" (Firan, 2022, pp. 39-40) The complicity thus created between the American advertising industry and representatives of prestigious academic institutions is not exculpated by Fred. This nuance is also indicated by the manner adverbial "pompously", which undermines the reliability of the academic source of authority. These two examples illustrate the existence of a clash between Fred's ethical principles and the incongruities disseminated by the American advertising apparatus, in the name of capitalist consumption. Moreover, Fred's life in communist Romania has made him especially sensitive to mechanisms of propaganda, manipulation and censorship; hence, finding them operating in the Free World comes as a shock that hinders his adaptation:

People here aren't alert; they trust authority. And they're perfectly manipulated by mass media. Quiet and obedient. Commercials work like a virus. We were suspicious in Communist Romania; we detected, but tried to ignore any form of *propaganda* to stay sane. Here propaganda, it's called *promotion*, the difference being that it doesn't target the political, but relies on the commercial spheres. *One censorship replaced by another* (Firan, 2022, pp. 75-76) [emphasis added].

Therefore, the perceived American conformity shaped by consumerist ideologies is a notion rejected by Fred, who seems appalled by the possibility of having his freedom endangered by any form of censorship. Therefore, the character's understanding reframes the ideal of autonomy afforded by migration to the West into as a grand sense of disappointment (Elvireanu, 2017, p. 138). Fred's anguish is further aggravated as he registers Mimi's compliance with American norms of success:

Mimi's obsession was also to laugh as much as possible, as often as possible; she'd learned all the rules of this New World. She was crazy about *having fun*, chasing a poster of happiness and getting ready for never-ending youth. She liked jokes and jests, *superficial society* where all show off their teeth and ask each other exasperatedly how they're doing, only to have a chance to answer that they're doing great (Firan, 2022, p. 82) [emphasis added]

Fred perceives Mimi's exuberance as a strategy of entrepreneurial ascension that relies on her ability to emulate the behaviour of successful Americans. Her ostentatious manifestation of happiness is supposed to indicate her compliance with the norms of the consumerist paradise, where the act of consumption guarantees individuals' sense of hedonism and utilitarianism (Scarpi, 2020, p. 16). At the same time, her voluntary involvement in superfluous relations indicates her adherence to the neoliberal discourse that privileges "homo economicus – the view that people are isolated individuals whose actions reflect mostly their material self-interests" (Manfred & Roy, 2010, p. 3). Moreover, the idea of perfunctory human bonds indicates another implication of the capitalist competition that turns people into "self-interest actors responsible to the market" (Manfred & Roy, 2010, p. 12), who lose their ability to forge meaningful relationships. Mimi's ability to succeed as a woman in the American business world does indeed require her fruitful cultivation of neoliberal entrepreneurial values such as competitiveness, self-interest and individual empowerment (Manfred and Roy, 2010, p. 12). However, from Fred's perspective, Mimi's successful career is considered the result of a hypocritical endeavour, supported by endless compromises. Thus, she manages to extend her business, opening the second beauty clinic, *Mimosa II*, by glorifying the miraculous powers of Romanian ingredients that are guaranteed to maintain eternal youth:

'The body has to keep up with the soul', she decreed, citing the publicity slogan of the *Mimosa salons*. 'The business of plastic surgery will go bankrupt,' she foretold at the end of the article. [...] But she had gotten silicon breasts and injected Botox. These didn't impede her from adopting the *Pharisaical attitude of the American advertising industry*. To pretend means more than to be. A world that exists in images and appearances. What could be more convincing? (Firan, 2022, pp. 237-238) [emphasis added]

In order to succeed, Mimi appropriates the manipulative strategies of the American advertising, making fake promises to potential consumers. Her duality is suggested by the fact that she does not rely on the advertised products to maintain her looks but secretly resorts to the plastic surgery that she publicly condemns. Discussed in Jungian terms, one may say that Mimi's behaviour illustrates her ability to create a strong persona for the American world, the mask she chooses to wear in order to deal with the realities of the new context. From a philosophical

standpoint, the Jungian tension between the persona—understood as the “mask of the soul”—and the shadow, conceived as a form of counter-persona, corresponds to a dialectical opposition between appearance and essence, or, in existential terms, to the distinction between inauthenticity and authenticity (Bolea, 2016, p. 84). It follows that Mimi conceals her authentic self and adopts the strategy of falseness in order to create a space for herself in New York. Fred’s reflections regarding her transformation register the artificiality of her behaviour and clearly express his disapproval of this strategy.

As a deracinated writer in the United States, Fred himself must face the capitalist logic of the market that seems to govern the publishing industry, as well. Pressured by Mimi, Fred attempts to understand the mechanisms of writerly success in America and hence he agrees to seek advice from a prosperous Romanian writer in New York, Sebastian. To Fred’s disappointment, Sebastian praises the virtues of American capitalism that provides opportunities for success as long as one is willing to accept its values:

‘Why not go into a system that works instead of lamenting from the outside? After you answer the simple questions: What do I want to be, where do I want to go? It’s good to study the rules of the world you’ve entered. *A world built for champions*. The mechanisms of success are set. But it’s not all about accessing them; you also have to accept them afterward. You know how it is. The result is worth it even if you have to *anesthetize your conscience*. Are we talking about compromise? No, about *adaptation*. *A-dap-ta-tion*,’ Seby whispered bluntly, lowering his voice as if he’d just told him the greatest secret (Firan, 2022, p. 136) [emphasis added].

When Sebastian talks about Fred’s adaptation, he actually implies that Fred should accept the underlying values of American capitalism such as possessive individualism, economic power and inequality of possession (Weinberg, 2003, pp. 4-8). The premise of Sebastian’s discourse is that the condition of becoming a successful writer may contain elements that Fred may disapprove of. This fact is suggested by Sebastian’s allusion to Fred’s necessity to freeze his moral system as the price for becoming a visible presence in the American literary space. According to capitalist logic, human beings are motivated exclusively by “self-interest [...] not by social obligations, moral commitments or altruism” (Edsforth, 2012, p. 4). Therefore, if he were to act according to these values, Fred should publish his book at any costs, even if they involve the alteration of the manuscript according to the editors’ demands: “Only you know how it is, the book will sound more like *what my editor will want* than how I’d write it” (Firan, 2022, p. 135) [emphasis added]. Therefore, compromise seems to be the most important ingredient for artistic success, which is also confirmed by old Anita, a Romanian visual artist who has tasted glory in America. This woman deconstructs Fred idealistic expectations, as she shares Sebastian’s tactics of sacrificing the authenticity of a creator’s voice to the demands of the market:

‘*What freedom?* Just wait till you get an agent, and then an editor. They’ll teach you how and what to write. You either adopt the *formula for success that the market imposes* or you go play at home with crayons’ (Firan, 2022, p. 108) [emphasis added].

In her interviews, Carmen Firan also discusses the fine balance between opportunism, selfishness, failure and success, as conceived in America. Interestingly, she points out that in the cruel competition of America where everybody “bets on winning horses”<sup>4</sup> (Giodea, 2022, 26:37, my translation) understanding opportunity is not something to blame (Giodea 2022,

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<sup>4</sup> Original source text: “pariază pe cai câștigători”

19:14), but a matter of adaptation. In order to become acknowledged, a writer has to be flexible enough and accept the editors' guidelines for producing success (Giodea 2022, 25:14). These principles also surface in *The Lost Shadow*, through Fred's predicament which is created by the tension between the desire for recognition and his unwillingness to accept "a success recipe"<sup>5</sup> (Giodea, 2022, 24:29, my translation). As he consults with fellow Romanian artists in America, Fred draws the conclusion that in order to avoid failure, he has to succumb to the pressure of capitalist logic according to which "anything real or imagined can be constructed as a *commodity*" (Edsforth, 2012, p. 3) [original emphasis]. However, the price paid for turning his creations into profitable goods involves the acceptance of manuscript revision, which Fred resents:

Fred ran away, thinking about how much loss of energy, how much every book published under communism took out of him, with the political censorship on his heels. Yet he had never sold himself out to the censors, taking the risk of not being published in the end (Firan 2022, p. 136).

Well-acquainted with the mechanisms of communist control that he managed to defy, the deracinated writer is equally disturbed by the forces of capitalist authority that stifle his creativity in the name of market success. Even outside her fictional world, Carmen Firan is strongly aware of this paradox of the Free Word which provides opportunities for accomplishment, while exerting a double censorship, through the forces of the market and those of political correctness (Zeca Buzura, 2019, 8:22). Unlike Mimi, who swiftly adopts the capitalist logic of accumulation, Fred cannot prioritize the idea of market success, as it contradicts his belief in artistic freedom of expression. From a Jungian perspective, Fred's attitude reveals his refusal to construct a persona for the American context, more specifically, his rejection of a "compromise between individual and society as to what a man should appear to be" (Bolea, 2016, p. 4). At this point, we note the idea that the character's lack of persona is an indicator of his fragmented psyche. According to Jung, the psyche tends to become a harmonious whole, by maintaining a "a balance between opposing qualities while constantly striving for growth, a process Jung called *individuation*" ("The Jungian Model", n.d., np.) [original emphasis]. Fred's incapacity to build a persona as well as his obsession with the potential loss of the shadow will be further analyzed in relation to his deracination and inability to write in a foreign language.

#### **4. Between Transnationality and Exile: The Inability to Create in a Foreign Language?**

Fred illustrates a fictional example of an uprooted Romanian writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who experiences the transition from a world of restricted mobility behind the Iron Curtain to a transnational regime of travel, made possible by the fall of communism in 1989. Considering the fragmented temporality of the novel, it becomes challenging to discuss Fred in terms of distinct categories, i.e. as an exiled and/or a transnational writer. Exile is associated with "geographical dislocation but also cultural and psychological uprootedness" (Zeng, 2010, p. 1), a sense of unmitigable loss, triggered by one's separation from homeland (Said, 2000, p. 173). The disconnection from one's native space appears to be the greatest source of distress, as implied by "the orthodox understanding of exile as political banishment enforced by a geopolitical state or regime" (Allatson & McCormack, 2008, p. 22), initially experienced by Fred and Mimi. However, considering that their story continues well after 1989, the characters are portrayed in transition from an exilic to a transnational regime that enforces their possibility

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<sup>5</sup> Original source text: "formulă de succes"

of homeland connection. Transnationalism describes a mode of belonging defined by multiple affiliations and sustained cross-border ties, enabled by the fluidity of contemporary mobility (Vertovec, 2009; Basch et al., 2003). Despite mobility's normalization, exile continues to be debated as a condition of displacement, with scholars arguing that it remains a significant lived and critical experience in the twenty-first century (Hoffmann, 2000; Allatson & McCormack, 2008). Accordingly, this paper examines *The Lost Shadow* as a potential work of transnational literature and an expression of exilic consciousness. Recent scholarship situates transnational literature within a historical moment marked by the increasing permeability of the nation-state under the intertwined forces of decolonization and globalization (Jay, 2021). Works in this field foreground experiences of migration, displacement, exile, and cultural hybridity, and circulate across multiple literary systems rather than belonging to a single national tradition (Jay, 2021; Walkowitz, 2006). Accordingly, transnational literary analysis attends to both transnational modes of production and circulation and the diverse racial, ethnic, and religious communities they engage. Echoing this view, Hoffman (2000) conceptualizes transnational literature as an expression of "new nomadism," (p. 27) defined by the dynamic interplay of multiple cultural references.

Certain thematic aspects of *The Lost Shadow* certainly illustrate these transnational concerns, enabling its inclusion into the wide family of the "literature of mobility" (Dagnino, 2012, p. 6) while other themes allude to the challenges of exile. Carmen Firan herself may be considered a transcultural writer, immersed in a regime of transnational mobility that transcends the traumatic divisions of exile (Dagnino, 2012, pp. 1-2): "[...] they [the transcultural writers] find themselves less and less trapped in the traditional migrant/exile syndrome and become more apt instead to embrace the opportunities and the freedom that diversity and mobility bestow upon them" (Dagnino, 2012, pp. 1-2). Firan's biographical background certainly supports this hypothesis, as she moves freely and frequently between the United States and Romania, enjoying her nomadic status. Firan considers herself an "open door emigrant"<sup>6</sup> (Buciuta, 2022, 4:32, my translation), regarding contemporary emigration like a "hotel with open doors, where one arrives and leaves according to their disposition and, of course, financial status"<sup>7</sup> (Giodea, 2022, 13:03-13:11, my translation). The metaphor of "fluid doors"<sup>8</sup> (Giodea, 2023, 3:39, my translation) conveys the difference between an old notion of exile, before 1989 when the doors closed forever (Giodea 2022, 13:29) and the new condition of free travel that replaces exile's deracination with a choice to relocate (Zeca Buzura, 2019, 6:38). The idea of emigration as a controlled option seems to define Firan's understanding of her own transnational mobility (Zeca Buzura, 2019, 6:38) which she perceives as a condition devoid of nostalgia that affords repeated reconnection with Romania (Giodea, 2023, 4:09). At the same time, Firan's Romanian origins as well as her commitment to writing in her native language may also point to the lingering dilemma of writers from peripheral countries and their struggles to become visible within the international literary world (Casanova, 2004, pp. 20-21)

The centrality of the native language for the transplanted writer is an important topic for Carmen Firan. Thus, the author considers that for a writer, the process of emigration entails relocation to a different language (Giodea, 2022, 32:56), which she perceives as a frustrating circumstance. Having left Romania at a mature age, Firan considers English a foreign language (Giodea, 2023, 20:12), acquired late, in which she cannot properly render the nuances and the cultural complexity of the native tongue (Giodea, 2022, 30:56). Therefore, she argues that the native language is the most important dowry/ally (Branea, 2022), but also an impediment for a

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<sup>6</sup> Original source text: "emigrant cu uşile deschise"

<sup>7</sup> Original source text: "emigrația e un hotel cu uşile la perete în care intri și pleci după pofta inimii și ... după pungă, bineînțeles."

<sup>8</sup> Original source text: "uşile fluide"

displaced writer who aspires to become successful in a foreign language (Giodea, 2022, 17:03). This statement perfectly aligns with the credo of one of Firan's exiled writer characters, whom Fred meets in Paris: "An exiled writer has only this inheritance. The language of birth is his weakness, but also his strength. And, in the end, his only ally" (Firan, 2022, p. 45). In this context, Firan considers reliance on translation as the perfect solution (Giodea, 2022, 31:52), a proof of the writer's responsibility and their respect for the word.<sup>9</sup>At this point, Firan underscores the advantage of the transnational background of her migration that enables her reliance on a new generation of bilingual translators who have arrived very young in America. Firan is grateful for their contribution to the dissemination of Romanian literature in a global context (Buciuta, 2022, 28:10).

By creating Fred, Carmen Firan reflects upon the quandary of the uprooted writer confronted with the necessity to express themselves in a different language. From this perspective, even if one talks about a writer placed in a transnational context, Fred's position suggests that certain exilic mindsets continue to be relevant. In Fred's case, exile manifests itself as a dispossession of language that complicates the already sensitive condition of the writer:

The writer, always a 'suspect,' as Thomas Mann said, an exile par excellence, conquers his homeland, his placenta through language. To be exiled from even this last refuge represents a *multiple dispossession*, the most brutal and *irredeemable decentering of his being*, a tragic end (Manea, 2012, p. 8) [emphasis added].

Apart from his reluctance to embrace American values, Fred does not seem to display strong symptoms of homeland nostalgia, such as the urge to physically return to Romania. However, his constant vacillation between his Romanian past (via memories of his happy, successful youth) and the American (bitter) present do reveal "the creation of a bipolar personal world" (Hoffman, 2000, p. 21), an indication of exilic division. I would argue that the entire structure of *The Lost Shadow* relies on duality as an underlying trope, that indirectly points to exilic bipolarism. More specifically, the novel is built on tensions resulting from the interplay of opposite forces such as the past versus the present, male vs female, failure vs success, differentiation vs assimilation. Clearly, Fred experiences his transition to America as a weakening of his creative ability to make sense of the world, when transplanted into a foreign language:

Is it the subconscious fear that I can't get across exactly what I think and feel in a *foreign language*, despite a vocabulary that's probably richer than the average American's? Or that I can't make myself understood as I'd like to? Either one is possible ... Like these last years, here, where no one listened to me anymore. Perhaps that's why I have this feeling that I'm effectively and definitively *losing my voice*. I have a feeling that *silence* lurks around me. And it's not like in the old days, when my silences carried weight and meaning, said something, were listened to, minded, even awarded. My *silence* here is simple; it hides and pretends nothing (Firan, 2022, pp. 29-30) [emphasis added].

Fred's reflections resonate with Eva Hoffman's observations regarding the emigrants' supreme challenge of having to deal with the loss of language that generates the incapacity to properly

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<sup>9</sup>As a participant in a common interview, Firan's friend, the Romanian author Andrei Codrescu, a protagonist of classical exile (before 1989), also links exile with language, but it regards it as a rupture and rebirth in a different language (Giodea, 2023, 13:31).

understand and describe the (new) world: “*To lose an internal language* is to subside into an inarticulate darkness in which we become alien to ourselves” (Hoffman, 2000, p. 55) [emphasis added]. Following this line of argumentation, Fred’s fear of losing his voice echoes the awareness that he has lost his internal language, that also triggers his alienation from his own self as well as a sense of profound disconnection from everything familiar. Moreover, his reflections point to his nuanced understanding of silence, as a “layered form of expression” (Debbarma, 2024, p. 268), alluding to the possibility of both positive and negative connotations of the concept. Literary criticism and psychological studies on silence point out the multifaceted nature of this notion that may have “various nuanced meanings” (Bao, 2023, p. 1), such as: “psychological, emotional, ethical and political” (Guignery, 2009, p. 1). In this context, Fred’s silence has to be discussed in relation to the effects of deracination on his creative potential as a writer. At the same time, the character’s inability to relate to a sense of home and belonging is an expression of his utter estrangement that makes him feel a complete outsider both in America and in Romania. Hence, even his brief return to Bucharest for a book launch becomes a reminder of non-belonging and despair: “He felt like a stranger everywhere. A stranger in this strange city, whose every corner he had known; a stranger in the city he had emigrated to, where he’d thought he would find himself a warm home (Firan, 2022, p. 230).

## 5. Fred: The Exilic Silence of Writers from Minor Cultures

As previously noted, the condition of exile has been associated with a negative experience of rupture and loss (Said, 2000), “dislocation”, “transiency” (Aciman, 2000, p. 9), “disorientation, self-division” (Hoffman, 2000, p. 20). However, the postmodern paradigm, best represented by writers like Rushdie, has valorized precisely the features of exile that have traumatic connotations: “uncertainty, displacement, the fragmented identity ... instability, marginality, absence and outsidersness” (Hoffman, 2000, p. 20). For the exiled writer, the exilic condition is associated with the centrality of the concept of home, which translates through the attempts to “reinvent the concept with what they [the exiled writers] got, the way we reinvent love with what’s left of it each time” (Aciman, 2000, p. 8). The need to recreate a sense of belonging when confronted with a plurality of worlds places the deracinated writer in a position of “fertile detachment” (Hoffman, 2000, p. 24) which shapes a creative perspective that questions familiar assumptions: “This perhaps is the great advantage, for a writer, of exile, the compensation for the loss and the formal bonus—that it gives you a perspective, a vantage point” (Hoffman, 2000, p. 24). By allowing the writers to position themselves at a crossroads beyond cultures, the condition of exile shapes an enlarged cultural perspective that leaves room for inspiration: “exile can be a great impetus to thought and to creativity, which is why so many artists have actively chosen it” (Hoffman, 2000, p. 25).

Considering these reflections, the next part of the paper discusses the effects of exile on Fred’s destiny as a writer. Is Fred capable to transpose the challenges of his bicultural condition into fiction? Although there are hints that he is working on a manuscript, the book does not really come out, and we are presented with a depressed Fred, who seems unable to cope with the changes brought about his double relocation: from Romania via France to America. Caught up between staying at home, visiting the psychiatrist’s and psychologist’s office and meeting other fellow artists and friends, Fred experiences nostalgic trips down the memory lane. Yet these episodes are not impregnated with the character’s homesickness, but rather with nostalgia for a time of personal glory in the native space:

In his youth, he had only fought with censorship in an Eastern European Communist country where he had also tasted a bit of glory. Three books, three awards. It’s true that

this was in a *tiny closed-off country* that no one cared about, *without the chance he'd ever be translated or recognized internationally*, but he'd been still young then and national glory flattered him enough. He received elegiac reviews, a faithful public—a golden future that he wouldn't get to grasp there (Firan, 2022, p.18) [emphasis added].

I would say that apart from Fred's pining for his former (local) eminence, this attitude corresponds to Svetlana Boym's definition of nostalgia as "yearning for a different time" (Boym, 2001, p. 17), therefore a manifestation of "rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress" (p. 17). If we couple this understanding of nostalgia with Fred's unwillingness to create a persona for the American world, we may say that his reference to the Romanian past is an attempt to seek refuge from the Western vectors of modernity, exemplified by the forces of the American capitalist society (aggressive advertising, competition, the prevailing logic of the market).

At the same time, the character's reflections also point to an aspect related to the circulation of literature in the world literary space. According to Pascale Casanova (2004), writers coming from peripheral countries have a hard time trying to gain access in the space of literary capital, as they lack the prestige of cultures with established literary traditions (pp. 15-16). As a writer displaced from behind the Iron Curtain to the Free World, Fred experiences a rather brutal transition from a minor literary tradition to the consecrated space of the English language: "You're talented, but you come from a minor culture, an uncirculated language. You need large props. Or large compromises" (Firan, 2022, pp. 108-109). Therefore, his commitment to his native language comes at the high cost of his becoming invisible in the American literary space, which is part of his predicament. As previously discussed, Fred is unwilling to succumb to the pressure of the market by embracing recipes for success, and this reaction also generates his silent stance. This attitude may be read as Fred's refusal to build a hybrid cultural identity which would involve "openness to a different culture, getting closer to the Other, while accepting their difference and diversity"<sup>10</sup> (Elvireanu, 2017, p. 131, my translation). Considering the multifaceted nature of silence discussed above along with Fred's tragic evolution, how can one interpret the character's quiescence? Is it a case of "active silence" (Bao, 2023, p. 5), the result of Fred's choice to be silent or does it reflect an instance of "passive silence" (Bao, 2023, p. 5), the consequence of an inability or interdiction to express himself?

On the one hand, I think Fred's silence as a writer expresses his "willful decision" (Guignery, 2009, p. 2) to repudiate American values, therefore a form of resistance, a "radical form of agency" (Debbarma, 2024, p. 268). On the other hand, Fred's depression points to an unsettling dimension of his deracination, therefore expressing his "inability to capture experiences which have been psychologically and emotionally traumatic" (Guignery, 2009, p. 2). Relying on Debbarma's connection between suicide and silence, (2024, p. 269), I have also considered the possibility of interpreting Fred's suicide as an expression of silence; I would say that his final gesture of withdrawal has to be read as a reaction that blends active and passive connotations: it is a voluntary act of leaving a world that has paralyzed Fred's capacity to react, rendering him a passive spirit.

## 6. Deracination and the Shadow: Between Assimilation and Differentiation

Moreover, at some point in the novel, Fred must literally prove his fertility, by undergoing specific tests, when pressured by Mimi who decides she wants to become a mother. The fact that Mimi and Fred do not have offspring is indirectly correlated with Fred's

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<sup>10</sup> Original source text: "deschidere spre altă cultură și apropiere de celălalt, acceptând diferența și diversitatea."

barrenness; at a metaphorical level this condition overlaps with Fred's incapacity to access his creative potential when transplanted into a new language and culture. At this point, one may conclude that in Fred's case, exile does not function as a creative matrix, but rather as an endless source of anxiety. In this context, the shadow symbol, which also gives the title of the novel, can further elucidate the depth of Fred's torment. According to the Jungian conception of the psyche, the shadow represents "the dark aspects of personality" (Jung, 1959, p. 14). It is associated with sexual instincts, repressed ideas, desires, shortcomings and elements that are considered unacceptable to society and therefore often denied (Cherry, 2024). However, confronting one's shadow is an important part of the process of individuation that helps people come to terms with their inner personal world (Bolea, 2016, p. 90; Thurmond, 2012, pp. 4-5). Interestingly, the shadow archetype does not contain only negative parts of our unconscious, but also positive forces embedded in the structure of the human psyche: "[The shadow] does not consist only of morally reprehensible tendencies, but also displays a number of good qualities, such as normal instincts, appropriate reactions, realistic insights, *creative impulses*" (Jung, 1959, p. 266) [emphasis added]. Considering the layered symbolism of this archetype, how can one account for Fred's recurrent fear of losing his shadow that he mentions to his therapist?

Sometimes I dream of my own shadow. Dark, like any shadow. And simple. An outline. Sometimes indescribably long and skinny. Other times, absurdly stocky. I know it's still me. Only my outline changes. I make a step toward it, then another, and *my shadow runs away from me*. I need to try many times to get closer or further until I fit into my shadow exactly. But I can't complain; each time, it fits me perfectly; none of me is left on the outside. But I get up tired; *the effort of fitting into my shadow* seems to have exhausted me. And yet, luckily, I never lose my shadow; I always catch up to it one way or another (Firan, 2022, p. 35) [emphasis added].

In order to decipher Fred's dilemma, I think one should consider the creative potential ingrained in the shadow. As a counter-persona archetype, the shadow is associated with an authentic part of the self, which corresponds to a writer's creativity, in Fred's case. Relying on Mîrzea's discussion of Jung's psychological manners of artistic creation, one may argue that Fred experiences the destiny of the tormented artists, who display a strong desire to generate art. In such cases, the intensity of this visionary urge "may take over their entire human dimension, putting them at the service of their work in a complete way, even at the risk of losing their happiness or health"<sup>11</sup> (Mîrzea, 2018, p. 288, my translation). Therefore, Fred's obsession with the possibility of losing his shadow may express his worries regarding his (in)ability to be productive as a writer, when transplanted in a foreign language. Given the repetitive nature of Fred's nightmares, it seems that the challenges of Fred's uprootedness also manifest as a fragmented self that generates "grotesque [...] dreamlike projections"<sup>12</sup> (Elvireanu, 2017, p. 138, my translation). However, the character does not seem to consider the negative valences of the shadow, given that he is not reluctant to embrace it; on the contrary, Fred wishes to keep his shadow active and thus maintain permanent contact with his resourceful core. This is why the character's supreme apprehension is fueled by the scenario of a perpetual disconnection from his creative source:

The fear in the dream, more tangible than all lived fears, that I'm running after my own shadow and when I reach it, it disappears swallowed by sand, and I awake naked,

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<sup>11</sup> Original source text: "poate acapara întreaga dimensiune umană a acestora, punându-i în slujba operei într-un mod deplin, chiar cu riscul pierderii fericirii sau al sănătății."

<sup>12</sup> Original source text: "proiecții onirice [...] grotești"

sometimes bodiless, other times without a voice ... The fear that some morning I'll wake up as somebody else, in another room, without memories (Firan, 2022, p. 251).

As noted previously, the process of individuation through which the psyche strives to become whole relies on achieving a balance between persona and the shadow. However, Fred has not built a persona in order to adapt to American norms, which means that his self is incomplete, fractured. Interpreted through a Jungian grid, Fred's lack of persona entails the character's entire reliance on the shadow, manifested as nostalgia for what he considers representing his authentic side (that of a Romanian writer, attached to his mother tongue). In this context, the title of the novel, *The Lost Shadow*, expresses Fred's creative defeat in America where exile does not reveal its fertile potential for the writer. At the same time, the character is equally incapable of enjoying the advantages of his transnational condition that would enable the maintenance of simultaneous, culturally enriching attachments to different spaces: "Fred didn't like bridges. They made him feel unsure and dizzy, like all *suspended* things" (Firan, 2022, pp. 37-8) [emphasis added]. His fear of a pendulous status indicates a reluctance to fully embrace the opportunities offered by migration in a world devoid of constraints regarding cross-border interactions. At the other end of the spectrum we have Mimi, who upholds a strong persona that guarantees her spectacular integration into the American business world.

Coming back to one of our research questions regarding Firan's strategies of positioning herself in the world's republic of letters, I suggest that her fictional characters, Fred and Mimi, can be read as symbolic instances of the writer's choice to situate herself in the international literary space. More specifically, Mimi represents the scenario of "*assimilation* as integration within a dominant literary space through a dilution or erasing of original differences" (Casanova, 2004, p. 179) [original emphasis], while Fred illustrates the path to "*differentiation*, which is to say the assertion of difference, typically on the basis of a claim to national identity" (Casanova, 2004, p. 179) [original emphasis]. Indeed, Mimi displays neither a desire to return to Romania nor a deep attachment to her country of origins, both being stifled by her belief in the grandeur of the American dream: "I said 'our country' thinking about Romania. We need to be more careful about what we say, darling. Our country is America now!" (Firan, 2022, p. 164). While Fred does not blatantly celebrate his Romanianness, his nostalgic stance along with his attachment to language reveal an embrace of differentiation. If one accepts the idea that the exiled writer's transition from their maternal language to the language of the host country is an expression of identity hybridization (Elvireanu, 2017, p. 128), then Fred clearly refuses this process. Considering the different destinies of the two characters, the indirect message of the novel is that the strategy of assimilation is more likely to yield successful results, as suggested by Mimi's magnificent ascent. While allowing the preservation of a perceived authentic identity core, differentiation involves the price of inaction and ultimately self-elimination from the American space, as implied by Fred's tragic end. Maintaining the analogy between Firan's characters and her choice of positioning herself as an author, I would say that the author successfully blends both strategies as she celebrates her origins by writing in Romanian (differentiation), but also relies on translations of her fiction into English (assimilation), thus successfully integrating Romanian literature into the world republic of letters.

## 7. Conclusions

Mimi's and Fred's trajectories beyond the homeland illustrate divergent modes of negotiating exile and transnational affiliation, as well as possibilities of a writer's positioning in the global republic of letters. Mimi rejects exilic nostalgia in favor of assimilation, aligning

herself with American capitalist values through the construction of a stable persona. By contrast, Fred remains suspended between exilic alienation and transnational mobility, which allows return to homeland, yet fails to restore a sense of belonging. His rejection of American consumerism and refusal to adopt an adaptive persona underscore his inability to reconcile the multiplicity of transnational positions, a tension metaphorically reflected in his fear of bridges. In this context, the bridge functions as a signifier of transnationality, symbolizing a mode of multiple belonging that transcends fixed affiliations. Yet this floating condition of plurality provokes anxiety in Fred, who experiences it not as enrichment but as a source of unstable and insecure belonging.

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