

Dissertation Summary

Title:

‘Poetry’ as a Life

— Ștefan Baciu’s ‘nostalgia’ and ‘Intimate Sphere of Poetry’ —

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This dissertation is an exploration of poet Ștefan Baciu's literary activity and life. The purpose is to exhibit the cultural, historical, and literary value of the two fundamental nuclei of Ștefan Baciu's poetry activities, a "nostalgia and longing for the lost 'Patria'" and his "Intimate sphere of poetry."

Ștefan Baciu was born in Romania in 1918. In the time between the wars, he was a representative poet in his country. He even received a prestigious literary award from the cultural foundation of the Romanian Royal Family at the age of seventeen. However, he was forced to leave his country to escape from the emerging oppressive communist regime in 1946, moving from city to city, together with his beloved wife, Mira. First, he worked for the Romanian Embassy in Bern/Switzerland. The communist regime under Stalinism ordered him back to Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, he rejected the request and proceeded to Rio de Janeiro/Brazil as a refugee, where he became a very active poet in the Brazilian modernist scene. Furthermore, he worked for the influential newspaper *Tribuna da Imprensa* as a journalist for literature and international affairs. In this context, he visited all Latin-American countries. In 1963, he was invited to be a guest professor for Latin American literature and civilization at the University of Washington in Seattle/USA. After that, Baciu decided not to return to Rio de Janeiro, when General Branco's coup d'etat struck Brazil. He instead accepted an offer from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa to be appointed as a professor. Thus, he crossed the Pacific Ocean and settled in Honolulu for almost thirty years until the end of his life.

He published more than a hundred volumes of poetry, memoirs, literary and political essays, as well as over 5000 articles in various newspapers in Romania, Switzerland, Latin American countries and Hawai'i, written in six languages. Baciu's poetry and literary works are permeated with his memories of exile, telling the story of his longing and nostalgia for lost friends and places, which he had encountered and had to leave again during his life-long itinerancy. I call this critical aspect in his poetry "nostalgia and longing for the lost 'Patria.'"

This dissertation exhibits how Ștefan Baciu's life experience, as well as his work as a writer and editor, is vital today. It gives significant insight into how recent History has been forming lives, experiences, and the establishment of border-crossing creative networks. Nevertheless, his literary existence is almost ignored or forgotten, and very few research has been conducted so far. I argue that his poetry is exceptional in the sense that it is independent of and radically resistant to any political or cultural authority. Baciu attempted to create a sphere of expressiveness where he and his companions created a space for ignored, expelled, and forgotten poets and artists who defended the sphere of poetry in our lives. He did so outside of the market place of world literature, within a small, individual, daily-life-related format and reach, creating a network of solidarity through a devoted sphere of poetry. This study aims at elucidating his unknown poetry projects in which he attempted to unite poets over geographic, national, and linguistic boundaries, and to support them in their struggles to live while resisting the cursed histories of the 20th century. I call his vast and unique poetry network, "Intimate Sphere of Poetry."

This dissertation has two parts. Part 1, which concentrates on the aspect "nostalgia and longing for the lost 'Patria'" is titled "Biography of reminiscence: Ștefan Baciu's life of poetry and nostalgia." The title of Part 2 is "*MELE International Poetry Letter*" and explores "Ștefan Baciu's intimate sphere of poetry."

Part 1 is divided into seven chapters. They trace Baciu's exile journey from Brașov to Bucharest, Bern, Rio de Janeiro, Seattle, and finally, Honolulu. It is not a simple chronological depiction of his life events. In order to respect and reflect on his art of poetic reminiscence, descriptions of life events are interlaced with the poet's verses, extracts from memoirs, and other autobiographic texts in this part. Through this process of tracing and unsewing, I shed light on the poet's nostalgia and longings for his lost "Patria" during his exile itinerancy. "Patria" does not necessarily refer to his native country Romania, but an autonomous space of poetry generated in his spiritual geography. I attempt to exhibit how this sphere was woven by braiding intimate memories of beloved friends and places that he had encountered. Further, this part exhibits the embeddedness in local literary and political scenes of Baciu's life and work.

Part 2, "*MELE International Poetry Letter: Ștefan Baciu's intimate sphere of poetry*," is divided into seven chapters.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to Part 2. It outlines Ștefan Baciu's relations with poets and artists who were part of his "Intimate Sphere of Poetry" embodied in Baciu's literary magazine, *MELE – International Poetry Letter*. *MELE* was issued and published by Ștefan Baciu from Honolulu during ca. 30 years until 1994. It is an extraordinary magazine that, despite its small scale and its handmade craftwork, has a vast range of authors, styles, and themes. Following its subtitle "International Poetry Letter," Baciu exchanged letters and collected works from writers, poets, and artists from multiple places overseas, whom he had encountered during his exile journey. The magazine was contributed to by more than four hundred authors in the 90 issues, including, for example, world-renowned poets and artists Octavio Paz from Mexico, Ernst Cardenal and Antonio Quadra from Nicaragua, Manuel Bandeira and Carlos Drummond de Andrade from Brazil. Many distinguished poets and artists from Hawai'i also joined the magazine, which included the works of local writers, artists, students, and children.

What is more, *MELE* provided a platform for Romanian exile poets scattered around the world to share their diasporic identification. Some examples are thinker Emil Cioran, Eugene Ionesco, dramaturgist of absurd theater, Marcel Iancu, one of the founders of the DADA movement, or USA-based poet Andrei Codrescu. It also provided a platform for Romanian poets who remained in the country where they faced oppression and censorship. *MELE*'s significant contribution was to conserve and spread the voices of many poets and artists who were ignored, forgotten, or excluded from Histories, by discovering them and publishing their poems and artworks. *MELE* contains more than twenty-eight languages, including Romanian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, German, English, Japanese, Hawai'ian, Samoan, Vietnamese, Arabic, or Chinese. Through the gift exchange of the creation and distribution of this magazine with at most 200 copies for each issue, Baciú generated an "Intimate Sphere of Poetry."

The following chapters demonstrate *MELE*'s cultural, literary, and historical value by picking up a selection of *MELE*'s many contributors.

Chapter 2, "The descendants of Ovid," discusses a Romanian Exile Literature as sharing a common point of identification with Ovid as the archetype of exile, by explicitly applying this view to *MELE* contributions of Romanian exile poets, Stefan Baciú, Vintila Horia and Andrei Codrescu.

Chapter 3, "Under the *fable* of Urmuz," traces the poetics of resistance in *MELE* works of Romanian poets Mira Simian and Victor Valeriu Martinescu centering around Romanian writer Urmuz as the cult demiurge of Romanian avant-garde literature.

Chapter 4, "A time of communion between immigrant and indigenous poets and artists in Hawai'i," describes how *MELE* witnessed the mutual exchange of indigenous and immigrant artists. The chapter specifically focuses on the relationship between Jean Charlot and indigenous intellectuals, e.g., Mary Kawena Pukui, Dorothy Kahananui, or Daryll Kewola Cabacungan in Hawai'i. Their interplay is exhibited through the analysis of Charlot's drama play written in Hawai'ian language and one of his murals, which was realized with the support of indigenous intellectuals.

Chapter 5, "Poetry as a seed to sprout and revive a language," sheds light on art as a form of fundamental resistance. The chapter concentrates on Larry Kauanoe Kimura, an indigenous Hawai'ian poet, who is famous as a core member of the Hawai'ian Language Revival Movement from the 1970s. He contributed to *MELE* with his Hawai'ian poetry in an era when Hawai'ian culture and language were cruelly despised. Kimura wrote poems as seeds to spread his native language awaiting its flourishing rebirth.

Chapter 6, "Aloha to Rio de Janeiro, *Saudade* in a small stone on the road," focuses on Stefan Baciú's story with Bach Mai Pham Larsen. Pham Larsen was a talented student in Baciú's Spanish class at the University of Hawai'i and published Vietnamese translations of several works by Brazilian modernist poets like Manuel Bandeira and Carlos Drummond de Andrade in *MELE*. The story represents Baciú's poetic nostalgia about lost pasts, living in Andrade's poem "In the middle of the road," which was featured in several issues of *MELE*.

Chapter 7, "Letters circulating the archipelago," presents the conclusion to Part 2. I argue that the poetics of relations in *MELE* generated a form of solidarity, independent of "World Literature" based in the global market. Paul Celan's "Flaschenpost" (engl.: message in a drift bottle) provides a model to frame how Baciú's "poetry letters" stand as an anti-thesis to *the* "World Literature." The elaborations in part 2 further exhibited two points. First, it showed that the *topos* of the archipelago of Hawai'i, where the magazine's history unfolded, served as inspiration and foundation for *MELE*. It also shed light on how *MELE* mirrored the history of deracination, displacement, and migration.

The Conclusion to this dissertation is titled "'Poetry' as a life and 'Over one thousand quatrains.'" It describes Ștefan Baciu's spiritual geography woven from the poems of nostalgia (*dor, saudade, aloha*) in his last poetry book, "Over one thousand quatrains." In his later years of solitary life in Hawai'i, he wrote quatrains as a diary to persevere from day to day, reminiscing on the past precious moments in his youthful days, before his life journey came to an end. This book itself can be regarded as a conclusion of Baciu's poetry life. The dissertation exposed that Baciu's "Patria" is not a geographically or nationally fixed place but consists of an assemblage of poetry of his beloved friends and places. Opposite violence and conflicts caused by exclusive nationalism, ethnocentrism, or other ideological and ideational schematic understandings of the world, Ștefan Baciu disseminated archipelagos of hope by spreading "poems of life" to the world.