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ABSTRACT

Examination of regime changes in Eastern Europe reveals significant insights into the development of post-communist politics of memory and commemoration. It also allows for meaningful conversations about events that had been historically ignored or redefined by state narratives during communism, including the active involvement of Eastern European countries in the Holocaust. The Elie Wiesel Memorial House in Sighetu Marmației (2002) and the Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest (2009), both in Romania, will be analyzed within the larger framework of a current decolonial conceptualization of former Eastern European state socialist regimes, and their cultural and political experiences at the periphery of Europe.

Introduction

The year 1989 represented a crucial turning point in the history, political reality and cultural existence of Europe. The anti-communist revolutions gave rise to new strategies for the creation of national identities through an active, and selective, engagement with the past. Official cultural memories constructed historical connections that extended across time, to periods seemingly unaltered by the countries' recent communist past. The tendency of returning to a seductively 'idyllic' past was manifested in the creation of national institutions (either of national remembrance or of commemorating communist oppression), which had as a main goal 'the orchestrated propagation of a specific vision of the nation's past'[1], often 'highly mythologized and invented'.[2]

The messiness of longing for an idealized past that somehow circumvents the communist period was reinforced by Jean Baudrillard's assessment that in the region, while 'things are in democratic order … they are in the worst confusion.'[3] There are many reasons for the confusion that Baudrillard alludes to, but this essay will focus on two central aspects. Firstly, it will explore the tensions between the decidedly un-idyllic realities of the rediscovered and reclaimed past and the need to construct valid and convincing post-communist national identities, which often have to be aligned with EU policies and moral values in order to legitimize the nations' 'Europeanness' and ensure their accession to an enlarged European Union. This process involved various revisionist

strategies and national-level soul searching, resulting in the appearance of the stereotypical Eastern European, 'who practices white supremacy in front of any non-Europeans, and resents being rejected by the Western society which does not see him as part of its racial sameness'.[4] Secondly, through a close analysis of two instances of post-communist commemoration in Romania, this essay will illustrate the contentious relationship between past and present in post-communist societies, by focusing on an event that had been historically ignored or revised by state narratives during communism: the active involvement of Eastern European countries in the Holocaust. The emphasis on specific circumstances in the politics of commemorating the Holocaust in Romania will offer wider insights into the complex relationship between national identity and European belonging in Eastern European countries.

Romania's marginal position within the European Union and the Balkans, and its specific internal fragmentation that responds to previous colonial interventions from both the East (the Ottoman Empire) and the West (the Austro-Hungarian Empire) allow for a nuanced analysis that reveals diverse political, cultural and psychological particularities transferable to the wider context of Eastern Europe. The Elie Wiesel Memorial House in Sighetu Marmației, unveiled in 2002, and the Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest, unveiled in 2009, will be analyzed within the larger framework of a current decolonial conceptualization of former Eastern and Central European state socialist regimes in a growing body of work by historians (Berend; Ranki), literary and cultural theorists (Tlostanova; Pârvulescu) and sociologists (Boatcă; Karkov; Valiavicharska).[5]

Eastern Europe as a decolonial space

Decoloniality denotes undoing. It invites a re-visioning of Western master narratives, a reconsideration of accepted, official historical accounts. As a fluid condition, decoloniality 'seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis and thought.'[6] There is a wide scope for the use of decolonial approaches in the study of contemporary Eastern European history, politics and culture. However, for the purposes of this essay, decolonial methodology will be utilized to examine examples of 'delinkings'[7] from what Aníbal Quijano called 'the colonial matrix of power'[8] within contemporary practices of memory making in Eastern Europe, by focusing on specific instances of Holocaust commemoration. Walter Mignolo's 'delinkings' refer to a necessary move against the homogeneity proposed by a Eurocentric matrix of power. Successful or not, they constitute actions that complicate and question official histories and move towards a heterogeneity of thinking and representation. The consistent othering of Eastern Europe in Western European narratives, its geographical positioning within the periphery of the European Union, and the rise of right-wing national political agendas in the region (in Hungary and Poland, for example), create conflicting environments that decolonial theory can help elucidate.

The history of decolonial thinking in relation to Eastern Europe is closely connected with a wider application of postcolonial approaches. Following Edward Said's firm inclusion of Ireland and other marginalized communities into the postcolonial/decolonial discussion,[9] and the dismantling of the USSR, scholars started to situate Eastern Europe within the framework of the postcolonial and the decolonial. The post-Soviet,

the postcolonial and the 'Balkanic' were discussed as ways of elucidating a geographical and historical zone that would not fully comply with Western European moral values, but would still, inconveniently, belong to the European continent and thus be impossible to be ignored. The inclusion of Eastern Europe into the discourse of postcolonial thinking was not a smooth process. Historians like Maria Todorova noted as early as 1997 that it was impossible 'to successfully "provincialize Europe" when speaking about the Balkans', because 'the Balkans are Europe, are part of Europe, although, admittedly, for the past several centuries its provincial part or periphery'.[10] Comparing the Balkans with Said's discussion of the 'Orient', Todorova observes that while the Orient appears to be a metaphor, a fluid term that seems to be 'relational, depending on the normative value set and the observation point',[11] the Balkans have a geographical materiality as part of the European continent, clearly, although at times contentiously, demarcated on maps. Thus, Todorova argues that Eastern European nations do not have 'the self-perception of being colonial' and that they have always exhibited a 'consciousness of a certain degree of autonomy', which does not lend itself to a useful inclusion within postcolonial and subaltern studies.[12] Nonetheless, what Todorova does recognize, is the marginal position of Eastern Europe at the intersection between various European and non-European spheres of influence. She describes the Balkans as 'a bridge between stages of growth' that is usually portrayed as 'semideveloped, semicolonial, semicivilized, semioriental'.[13]

As early as 1946, in his book *Color and Democracy*, W. E. B. DuBois advocated for a more fluid consideration of the meanings of colonial dominance and subordination, by including millions of disenfranchised, 'quasi-colonial' peoples from apparently free states into the discussion. He noted that 'In the Balkans are 60,000,000 persons in the "free states" of Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania, and Greece. They form in the mass an ignorant, poor, and sick people, over whom already Europe is planning "spheres of influence".[14] Madina Tlostanova agrees that 'East European countries were interpreted within the global neoliberal modernity/coloniality in a progressivist rather than Orientalist manner: they were considered to be reformable and eventually subject to European assimilation, yet always with an indelible difference'.[15] The ever-shifting ideological character of the Balkans, at the edge of 'civilized' Europe, created liminal spaces that allow for a complication of postcolonial discourses. Hence, decolonial thinking offers important tools to address the layering of colonial praxis in the region. Quijano's 'colonial matrix of power' reflects both on what the editors of this special issue call 'external structures of mnemonic colonization'[16] – the pressure to prescribe to EU-approved memorial narratives, for example, and on the internal influence of often state-sponsored national identity narratives. This terminology allows for an analysis that goes against the idea of a coherent Europe, what Manuela Boatcă calls 'Europe otherwise'[17], and tries to reinscribe subaltern histories and cultural experiences, in this case Romanian histories and cultural experiences, within the larger framework of decolonial cultural theory. By focusing on two instances of Holocaust commemoration in Romania, this essay will discuss 'the innovations and ruptures of historical becoming'[18] in a country where the active engagement with the past passes through the lens of more than four decades of communist dictatorship.

A decolonial discussion of Eastern Europe implies the need to explore the layered histories and cultural manifestations of memory and trauma in the region. Recent scholarly

works argue for a more nuanced exploration of trauma and an extension of trauma theory beyond the event-based conception of trauma which was at the basis of Cathy Caruth's seminal work in the 1990s. In the introduction to a 2014 collection of essays, entitled *The Future of Trauma Theory*, Michael Rothberg argues that the future of the field lies in widening the scope of theoretical analysis beyond the Eurocentric concept of event-centred accounts of violence: 'We need to broaden and differentiate our understanding of what trauma is. We need to trouble the West/non-West binary that is at the root of Eurocentric thinking.'[19] The shift proposed by Rothberg and other collaborators to the volume highlights a move towards an understanding of trauma informed by decolonial principles, connected to the enduring nature of colonial legacies.

The main texts of the field 'marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures; they tend to take for granted the universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity.'[20] In her survey of the past and prospective future(s) of trauma theory, Irene Visser observes that the event-based trauma model does not account for 'the sustained and long processes of the trauma of colonialism'[21] and, I would argue, neither does it account for the trauma of communism, described by Romanian philosopher Vasile Dem Zamfirescu, in his book *Nevroza balcanică*, as a sustained traumatic experience.[22] The more discrete trauma of communism, in comparison with the arguably more overt trauma of the Nazi regime, was achieved through similar methods, that included a constant process of humiliation through a long, gradual elimination of all basic human rights and liberties. This was happening in parallel with a heightened communist propaganda that devoted itself to the promotion of strong nationalist sentiments, creating an image of Romanian culture as avant-garde and unique. Uniquely European, that is, but not recognized as such because of the incapacity of the capitalist West to look beyond the Iron Curtain.

Romania a decolonial space

In the case of Romania, the trope of decolonial space can be applied both geographically and ideologically. Geographically, Romania is placed at the Northern edge of the Balkans (with pronounced disagreements about its Balkanism between the western region of Transylvania and the rest of the country) and at the eastern edge of the European Union. This position renders the country often neither Balkan enough nor European enough. These bordering sensibilities, the constant definition of the country and its people as existing at or within borders, situates Romania within decolonial frameworks. Mignolo notes: 'Border thinking and border epistemology emerge among *colonial subjects* who realize that their knowledge has been disavowed and denied. That realization is the starting point of *becoming decolonial subjects*'.[23] However, after 1989, the bordering discourse in Romania also highlighted attempts to redefine the country's pre-communist history as a panacea for all the ills caused by the totalitarian rule.

The period of Ion Antonescu's governments between 1940 and 1944 became of particular importance in recapturing the essence of a new Romanian identity. This was a period of Romanian territorial expansion, aided by its German allies, incorporating Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transnistria to the old Romanian 'Regat' (Kingdom) of Wallachia and Moldavia.[24] It also saw state-sponsored colonial practices, like the process of Romanianization which was aimed mainly at Romanian Jews, and the Hungarian and

Ukrainian minorities in the Old Kingdom and the newly annexed regions.[25] This time of perceived greatness came after the humiliation of the Second Vienna Award (or, as is most well known in Romanian history, the Vienna Diktat) on 30 August 1940, when Romania lost Northern Transylvania to Hungary, and of the lesser known Treaty of Craiova (7 September 1940), through which Romania lost Dobruja to Bulgaria.[26] In these circumstances, Romania's territorial expansion was seen as a re-birth of the nation through the force of arms and religious faith. Christianity in general and the Orthodox religion in particular, were a determining part of what Grant T. Harward calls 'Romania's Holy War', led by a dangerous ideology containing elements of anti-semitism, anticommunism, nationalism and religious fervor.[27] The return to this vision of a powerful Romania both within and without its borders provided a perfect opportunity for the creation of new right-wing nationalistic narratives, which were placed on a collision course with Romania's other post-communist ambition: becoming member of the European Union.

Thus, a decolonial exploration of contemporary Romanian commemoration practices in relation to the Holocaust, addresses the various tensions, ruptures and delinkings within the process of historical becoming. It also highlights the complexity of decolonial processes in a country where there are constant rearrangements between conflicting memories and traumas. One of the complications encountered by those trying to recapture Romania's greatness between 1940 and 1944, was a constant reminder of the country's role in the destruction of its own Jewish and Roma citizens. The complexity of Romania's role in the Holocaust merits an in-depth discussion which cannot be fully accommodated by this article. However, it is essential to understand the historical realities of the time, beyond more widely known events like the Iași pogrom. Radu Ioanid's comprehensive book, *The Holocaust in Romania*, relies on previous work by historians Raul Hilberg and Dora Litani, while more recent works, by Diana Dumitru and Mihai Poliec, probe the issue of civilian complicity in the state-sponsored persecution of Romanian and Ukrainian Jews in the country's 'borderlands' of Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transnistria.[28] Anti-Semitic attitudes have a long history in Romania, stretching back to the sixteenth century and a view of Jews as 'a non-Christian people with nebulous and often suspect external loyalties'.[29] At the beginning of the twentieth century however, as we move closer to the Second World War, Romanian politicians become increasingly vocal in their attempt to legally curtail the rights of Jewish citizens, stressing their non-Christianity and alleged close connections with Bolshevism. In 1938, the then Romanian Prime Minister, Octavian Goga noted that Romania can only accommodate 'the Jews of the pure Semitic type, with olive skin, black eyes, black hair, fairly fine features, and reasonably good looks', and not the 'barbaric Jews, with their reddish skin, slanted eyes, and flattened faces' who came from Poland and Russia.[30] Subsequently, in February 1938 a new constitutional law was adopted, defining members of the Romanian nation by blood, 'distinguishing between Romanians by race and by residence'.[31] According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, approximately 250,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews were murdered by Romanian and German authorities in Romania and its borderlands between 1941 and 1944. In 2005, the Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, concluded that 'between 280,000 and 380,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews were murdered or died during the Holocaust in Romania and the territories under its control. An additional 135,000

Romanian Jews living under Hungarian control in Northern Transylvania also perished in the Holocaust.'[32] The report also notes that there had been approximately 25,000 Romanian Roma deported to Transnistria, with almost half of them dying there.

While there were no gas chambers in Transnistria, the destruction of Jews and Roma under the Antonescu regime was ceaseless and varied: death marches, death trains, mass shooting and hangings, public executions, death by fire, starvation. Still, after 1989, the territorial expansion period between 1940 and 1944 is often appropriated by nationalist narratives, and many see Ion Antonescu as a hero who stood up to the Soviet communist invasion. The re-publication, in 1990, of Antonescu's book *Românii, originea, trecutul, sacrificiile si drepturile lor* (The Romanians: their origins, their past, their sacrifices and their rights – my translation), signaled the potential of finding a new national narrative of identity by delinking from communist re-writings of national history and looking to a period when state power and the Orthodox religion were providing a strong definition of what it meant to be Romanian.

Remembering the Holocaust in Romania

The process of historical becoming demands more than the creation of a new national narrative of self. It implies an exercise in making sense of the past, beyond official narratives, but it also needs to accommodate uncomfortable discoveries, tensions and conflicting situations. Romania's National Day of Commemorating the Holocaust, first held on 9 October 2004,[33] marked the first official step in the remembrance of an event that had been in constant conflict with another recent atrocity: the commemoration of the victims of communist oppression. Michael Shafir calls this process 'competitive martyrdom': 'the East Central European collective memory sought to attribute guilt rather than assume it, substituting a positive myth of anticommunist resistance for the negative myth of the Holocaust, which emphasized bystanding and collaboration'.[34] In Romania, 'competitive martyrdom' appears as a way of defining a new national identity through state-organized forgetting and historical manipulation. This process exculpated the Romanian nation from any guilt or shame that might have been connected to the historical context of the Second World War.

The first step in this process dates back to the period of communist rule and involved the 'de-Judaization of the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis and/or their local emulators or official allies',[35] in which victims of the Holocaust became Romanian, anti-fascist victims and not Jews or Romani. They were described as anti-fascist communist resistance fighters, whose demise was caused by non-Romanian collaborators with the Nazi regime (often exclusively Hungarian), continuing the national rancor against Romania's western neighbor, underpinned by Hungary's sustained claim for the western Romanian region of Transylvania.

After the revolution, this discourse was combined with a more targeted re-reading of the Holocaust that allows for the definition of three specific types of negationism: outright, selective and deflective. All these types work together to inform a relationship with the Holocaust that is very much defined by the decolonial space within which it was created. It highlights multiple spheres of influence – German, Austro-Hungarian, Soviet, and European – which have a pronounced impact on the ways in which post-

communist Romania constructs its own cultural memory and relates to the concept of commemoration.

The Greater Romania Party (PRM), founded in 1991 in Bucharest by Corneliu Vadim Tudor and Eugen Barbu, had representatives both in the Romanian parliament and later, after Romania's EU accension in 2007, in the European parliament. As a major political power, its ideology exemplifies some of the reasons for the sustained nationalism in the discourse of Romanian national identity.[36] The party leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, wrote in 1994 in the party's official newspaper, that he had 'learned that English and American scientists are contesting the Holocaust itself, providing documentation and logical arguments proving that the Germans could not gas six million Jews, this being technically and physically an impossibility'.[37] He added that the Holocaust was 'a Zionist scheme aimed at squeezing out from Germany about 100 billion Deutschmarks and to terrorize for more than forty years all those who do not acquiesce to the Jewish yoke'.[38]

A more subtle form of Holocaust denial, deflective negationism, argued for the victimization of the country. In the case of Romania the focus turned more generally to the Romanian victims of the Second World War, rather than the Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

Michael Shafir notes that 'the drive to transform the country into a victim, rather than a state sharing the antisemitic credo of the Nazis, and participating in the perpetration of massive crimes' started in communist times. 'In 1986, for instance, the Bucharest weekly *Luceafărul* was telling its readers that "the main feature of the Holocaust in northern Transylvania was anti-Romanian and not antisemitic."[39] Selective negationism is closely related to the deflective type. It recognizes that the Holocaust happened, but argues that it happened somewhere else and that the country had little to do with it. If it happened in the country, it was perpetrated by other people who had nothing to do with Romanians.

While these discourses found a rather fertile ground in Romania after the revolution, more moderate politicians quickly realized that the voicing of such beliefs would have a negative impact on Romania's attempt to join NATO and the EU. By 2000, Romanian politicians were increasingly aware of how they looked and sounded abroad and what they needed to do in order to access the institutions they wanted so desperately to be part of, in order to validate Romania's 'Europeanness'.[40] Part of this image adjustment was to ensure a better relationship with Jewish groups in the country and abroad. In April 2002, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency noted in the *Daily News Bulletin* that 'The country [Romania] hopes to join the NATO military alliance in November, and is stepping up its cooperation with Jewish groups and Western governments concerned about how Eastern European governments handle Jewish affairs.'[41] As a result, the Romanian government passed an emergency law on 13 March 2002,[42] prohibiting the erection of statues or monuments and the display of any symbols that were fascist, racist or xenophobe in character. The law also stipulated that public places and organizations should not be named after war criminals convicted for fascism or racism. While the law did not mention any specific cases, a clear connection can be drawn between the frequent use of Antonescu's name and image in commemorative processes dedicated to the Second World War throughout the country, the urgency felt by the Romanian government to distance itself from these events, and the external pressures that were

determining the conditions through which Romania could join both NATO and the EU. In addition, on 18 March 2003, the Center for Monitoring and Combating Antisemitism in Romania published its report on antisemitism in the country, reinforcing the argument that a clear legislation and an active state intervention against antisemitism were essential requirements for joining NATO and the EU, message that was reiterated by both US and EU officials.[43]

Ultimately, acknowledging Romania's support during the Balkan wars, NATO opened their doors in 2002, when, at the Prague Summit, it was decided that Romania would join NATO from March 2004, a first step in validating the country on the international stage. But the EU did not budge and Romania did not become part of the Union in 2004 during the first enlargement towards the East, when ten former communist countries joined (together with Malta and Cyprus). This was humiliating for Romanian politicians, although it was well known that ideologies needed to change or morph into something more acceptable in order to achieve the European goal.

Given the internal and external pressures, Vadim Tudor himself decided to present a more tolerant image to the public. He announced in an interview for *Haaretz* that he would not express any more views that were against Jews, Judaism or the Holocaust, and that he was a new man who was ready to make amends for his past beliefs.[44] Interestingly, he described himself as a philosemite and, together with a group of supporters organized a pilgrimage to Auschwitz and illegally erected a statue of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in the eastern Transylvanian city of Brașov. The statue caused an outcry both from the Israeli embassy in Bucharest and Rabin's children. *The Irish Times* noted that in his speech at the unveiling, Tudor said that the statue 'was a testament to his change of heart', arguing that 'You cannot be a Christian and hate Jews.' His supporters however, present at the unveiling, were less diplomatic. They passionately held the view that 'they did not believe their leader was anti-Jewish but an honest man who would fight the scourge of corruption. They also doubted the number of Romania's Second World War Jewish victims. "Nobody died in Romania," said Violeta Petrescu, an unemployed college graduate. "These numbers are exaggerated."[45] This change of heart, however, did not last. In a posting on his official Facebook page on 28 March 2013, Vadim Tudor remembered the death of Marshal Antonescu by firing squad, noting that it had a certain 'ancient greatness' about it. He argued that the Jews 'in their intolerance and ingratitude can say whatever they want'[46], but Antonescu died as an Orthodox martyr who should be canonized by the Romanian Orthodox Church.

The highly controversial views about the Holocaust held by mainstream political forces in Romania, testify to problematic attempts at disentangling the country's process of commemoration from the 'fault lines' encountered in the national exercise of historical becoming. The Holocaust and anti-communist commemoration coexist in an uneasy space acted upon by various centripetal forces that determine the country's narratives of identity. While anti-communist sentiment is more firmly established through almost half a century of authoritarian rule, the Holocaust triggers national emotions that often prompt defensive reactions of victimhood. Jelena Subotić argues that in addition to a feeling of resentment that the Holocaust 'had to be remembered' in order to comply with EU accession requirements, commemorating the Holocaust 'was threatening and destabilizing to these states, especially to conservative and populist forces for whom the introduction of liberal values to the region was unwelcome, but also

because it drowned out nationalist appeals to their own victimization and diluted it with appeals to memorialize past Jewish suffering.'[47]

The physical representations of Holocaust commemoration discussed in this essay testify to the difficult relationship between the two memorializing processes. The first, the Elie Wiesel Memorial House, attempts to speak for the entire Jewish community in Northern Transylvania, underlining Hungary's role in the destruction of Transylvanian Jews, and focusing on the domesticity of the house as a safe space from which the Wiesel family were violently removed by foreign forces. The second, the Holocaust Memorial in Bucharest, performs a combination of memory works by using Jewish, Roma and Romanian symbology to allude to a complicated past that is made sense of in the present. Both memorials are part of a process that moves beyond the external demands connected to the membership of international organizations. They are witness to a torturous narrative of identity making within the construction of a new national memory which involves bordering, uneasy fault lines and victimhood. This is a fluid process of delinking and relinking, of distancing and belonging.

Elie Wiesel, the quintessential Romanian Jew

Elie Wiesel's credentials as a writer, political activist, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize laureate in 1986, born in the Western Romanian city of Sighetu Marmației, made him the perfect candidate to represent Jewish remembrance in Romania. Pat Morrison of the *Los Angeles Times* described Wiesel as 'history's witness'[48] and Joseph Berger of the *New York Times* argued that he 'became an eloquent witness for the six million Jews slaughtered in World War II and who, more than anyone else, seared the memory of the Holocaust on the world's conscience'.[49] In the context of Romania's attempts at joining both NATO and the EU, many Romanian politicians were convinced that Wiesel would represent a great symbol for the country's improved moral ideologies. More importantly, Wiesel's childhood home in Sighet had already been transformed into a memorial house, physical testament to the changes of ideology that were afoot in the country Figures 1 and 2.

Opened in 2002, the memorial house also hosts the Maramureş County Museum of Jewish Culture. The house belongs to the County Maramureş Ethnographic Museum and represents part of the museum's engagement with Jewish life in the area from the seventeenth century to contemporary times. The private space of the Wiesel family house becomes the public representative of all Jewish communities in the region, connecting contemporary visitors not only to the local Jews who perished during the Holocaust but also creating diachronic links with local Jewish communities as far back as the seventeenth century. The Wiesel Memorial House becomes the archetypal Jewish home, but it is also part of the Romanian nation-building narrative, intended to offer a blueprint for a future based on cultural diversity.

In Sighet however, the Wiesel Memorial House was always in competition with the Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance, unveiled in 2000 just a few streets away, in a former communist prison. As a physical embodiment of anti-communist memory, the Sighet memorial is recognized as a space where history was made, a symbol of Romanian resistance against communism, a piece of national heritage. In comparison, the Wiesel Memorial House is associated with a memory narrative that

Figure 1. The Elie Wiesel Memorial House (Source: Idobi, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license).

Subotić calls 'performed', removed from the newly rediscovered national imaginary, and othered. This othering is in line with the antisemitic discourse voiced by state representatives just before the Second World War and continued by mainstream nationalist parties like the Greater Romania Party after 1989. The myth of anti-communist memory, Romanian and Orthodox, clashes with a view of Jews as 'non-Christian' and closely connected to Bolshevism. This artificial conflict goes beyond the radical nationalism of populist parties. Alianța Civică, a highly regarded Romanian NGO, founder of the anti-communist Sighet Memorial and a leading participant in the national and European discussions on memory, identity, heritage and citizenship,[50] took offence at the fact that Elie Wiesel did not respond to an invitation to visit the Memorial when he was in Sighet to officially open the Wiesel Memorial House in July 2002. The Report on Antisemitism in Romania (2002) noticed that this reaction from Alianța Civică furthered the artificial connection between Jews and communism, established by the Iron Guard in the period between the two world wars.[51]

The memorial house website notes that Elie Wiesel and his family were used as examples of what Jews were like in the city at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'through the themes presented in the house, we tried to highlight Elie Wiesel's personality as a son of Sighet, and a synthesis of Jewish life in the city of Sighet and county of Maramureș'.[52] Wiesel needed to become more Romanian, and through the exhibits in the house a story needed to be told that fitted the national discourse about Romania's role

Figure 2. Memorial plaque on the Elie Wiesel Memorial House (Source: Idobi, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license).

in the Holocaust and about the suffering of the Jews in the region almost exclusively at the hands of Miklos Horthy, who ruled Northern Transylvania after the Vienna Award in 1940. The museum is organized into five rooms that transform this typical family home into a microcosm of Jewish life, with a continuous link drawn between 'the son of Sighet' and his connections with Romania after the revolution. The hallway contains a number of wall panels that outline Elie Wiesel's life (mainly that he was born in the house and that he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986) and the story of the house and its transformation into a museum, the troubles faced by the group of writers and scholars who first put forward to the communist regime the idea of a memorial house immediately after Wiesel's Nobel Prize win in 1986.

The first exhibition room contains old furniture and paintings that belonged to Jews from Maramureș, giving a flavor of 'what would have been like for little Elie to live in the house'.[53] The second room focuses on Elie Wiesel's life and work, his books presented in glass cupboards, and posters documenting Wiesel's meetings with local and national leaders. The third room is significant in reinforcing the still widely used discourse that all the ills suffered by the local Jews were perpetrated by Horthy's Hungary. Through photographs, documents, personal items and written testimonies, this room re-constructs the history of the creation of local ghettos, and 'the great tragedy of the transportation of all Jews from Sighet and Maramureș to Nazi deathcamps'.[54] Yet again, Romania's position on its participation in the Holocaust and its aftermath is

obscured by a reinforced lack of recognition of guilt and a narrative of victimhood, where as a nation, Romanians were traumatized by both Hungarians and Germans, and were sharing the martyrdom of the Jews. Adding to this narrative, the fourth room in the Wiesel house contains a mixture of documents and objects that speak about the richness of Jewish life and experience in the Maramureş region from as early as the seventeenth century. These point towards an idyllic life in the bosom of the local Romanian community, with many Jews becoming pillars of the community and assimilating many aspects of local life. There is a pronounced discrepancy between the positive aspects displayed in this room and the previous one that outlines the extent of Jewish suffering. But what is clear to see is yet again a separation between the foreign perpetrators and the local victims. The memorial house exhibition is completed by a room that discusses other 'great Jewish sons' (Hari Maiorovici, Ludovic Bruckstein, Vasile Kazar) of the area and opens up into an interior garden, landscaped as a garden or remembrance and reflection, with a big star of David drawn in stone on the lawn.

Unfortunately, the idyllic acceptance of the Jews by the local community did not translate into the ways in which some responded to the creation of the memorial house. The external walls were often covered in anti-Semitic graffiti, the last example of which was in 2018, when 'Nazi Jew lying in hell with Hitler' and 'Public toilet, anti-Semite pedophile' were inscribed on the house Figure 3.

Figure 3. Antisemitic graffiti on the Elie Wiesel Memorial House (Source: Idobi, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license).

The police acted quickly and arrested a 37 year old man from another county and dismissed the incident as the actions of someone with mental health issues. However, this act of vandalism says much more about the ways in which ordinary Romanians relate to the Holocaust and the fresh debate about the country's role in it. The walls of the house become a public forum where various emotions are expressed. They reflect on the difficult negotiations between past and present in order to establish an acceptable national identity narrative for the future. However, the external pressures to comply with certain international standards reveal a split between the outward facing image of the nation and the struggles of the people to make sense of this new image. While what happened with the Wiesel Memorial House reinforces Madina Tlostanova's assessment of the stereotypical Eastern European as racist and unhappy about being rejected by the West, the vandalism also exposes Zamfirescu's 'Balkan neurosis' and the tension between national and European narratives. It is the tension between what Subotić calls 'the already established and solidified Western European narrative of the twentieth century'[55] or what Aleida Assmann terms 'the foundational story of the EU'[56], the regulated, institutionalized way to remember and commemorate the Holocaust in Western Europe, and the fragmented and often 'aphasic'[57] way of dealing with the past that is the legacy of decades of communist totalitarianism. The option of the decolonial allows for a more meaningful conversation between the two, for an awareness of the fragmented and an engagement with both the fragments and the whole. While the lack of easily definable colonialism poses theoretical problems for a decolonial reading of Eastern Europe, the framework offered by decolonial praxis acknowledges the existence of fractures within the monolithic matrix of Western European knowledge and invites an in-depth analysis of the place of diversity and multicultural engagement within a national narrative that is still searching for a unified identity. The second example of Romanian Holocaust remembrance discussed here, attempts to incorporate diversity in a material form by trying to bring together Jewish, Roma and Romanian experiences of the Holocaust in a cohesive memorial complex.

The national Holocaust memorial

In July 2003, the then Romanian president, Ion Iliescu, and the Minister of Culture, historian Razvan Theodorescu, made some highly controversial statements about Romanian culture and the country's past, minimizing the importance of the Holocaust and arguing that it did not happen in Romania. Iliescu declared in an interview with the *Haaretz* newspaper that 'The Holocaust was not unique to the Jewish population in Europe. Many others died in the same way.', while Theodorescu stated that 'within the borders of Romania between 1940 and 1945 there was no Holocaust'. The comments were met with a general international outcry at a time when Romania was expected to join NATO in March 2004. In response, the Chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate, Avner Shalev, decided to work towards the establishment of an international commission of inquiry consisting of historians who would investigate the Holocaust period in Romania. As mentioned in a Yad Vashem press release on 27 July 2003, Shalev sent a letter to the Romanian president, inviting him to appoint a committee of Romanian historians 'in order to research together the historical truth and bring the facts of the Holocaust in Romania to light'.[58] The Romanian government reacted by establishing the

International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania under the chairmanship of the same Nobel Peace prize laureate, Elie Wiesel. The government hoped that the Commission's findings will help reinforce the state's official position and their willingness to allow for such a scrutiny of the Romanian past would show them in a favorable light abroad.

On 11 November 2004, the final report of the commission was presented to Ion Iliescu, containing a sobering account of the historical realities that defined Romanian politics and society before and during the Second World War and a number of recommendations that focused on the ways in which Romania should publicly examine its role in the Holocaust. The report, published by the Polirom publishing house in late 2004, contained a critical evaluation of the past, assessing the difficult relationship Romania had with its Nazi connections and its communist legacy. In addition to various education projects, the Wiesel commission recommended that Romania should decide on a Holocaust Memorial Day and that a memorial to the Romanian victims of the Holocaust should be commissioned as a focal point for yearly commemoration and remembrance.[59]

The government decided to instate 9 October as Holocaust Remembrance Day in Romania, commemorating the day that started the massive deportations of Romanian Jews and Romani citizens to death camps in Transnistria by the Antonescu government in 1941 and 1942. While choosing the date for the national commemoration seemed to draw political consensus, the National Holocaust Memorial possessed and continues to possess a much more complicated narrative. The formal memorial to Romanian Jews and Roma who died in the Holocaust was unveiled on 8 October 2009 and constituted a first step in acknowledging Romania's part in the destruction of European Jews during the Second World War. At the unveiling ceremony, the then Romanian president, Traian Băsescu, noted that through the monument 'The Romanian state and Romanian society reaffirm their decision to assume the blame for the past and to uncover the historic memory in the spirit of truth.'[60] Created by Romanian-born German sculptor Peter Jacobi, the memorial stands on the site of the former Ministry of Internal Affairs, feared as a space of torture and state-ratified murder during Antonescu's National Legionary State, thus unavoidably engaging with the history of the space and with the frame within which it was placed.

After the Second World War, a newly communist Romanian society attempted to break definitively with the previous social order, embodying what Paul Connerton discusses in his seminal *How Societies Remember*: 'the more total the aspirations of the new regime, the more imperiously will it seek to introduce an era of forced forgetting.'[61] However, Connerton also notes that usually these attempts at total forgetting and definitive breaks encounter 'a kind of historical deposit' that threatens to founder them.[62] In Romania, the 'historical deposit', or what Visser calls historical 'fault lines', was mainly embodied in sites of memory, places and buildings associated with events of the past, systematically destroyed by the communist government. Notwithstanding the physical disappearance of these places, the deposit, although archaeological and of the memory, remains and it is with this deposit that, consciously or not, Jacobi's memorial engages Figure 4.

The memorial itself is conceptually complicated and laden with multiple meanings, a space that fits well into the decolonial framework within which the country is discussed. It seems that Jacobi wanted to incorporate the whole experience of the Holocaust and the

Figure 4. The Bucharest Holocaust Memorial (Source: Camelia.boban, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license).

diversity of its Romanian victims in the memorial. The Central Memorial Building, a rectangular space that resembles a gas chamber, with one wall allowing the light in through a series of columns is accessed through uneven, zigzagged marble stairs. They lead down into the chamber, which, in addition to containing the names of Romanian victims of the Holocaust inscribed on the walls, hosts de-sacralized Jewish gravestones originally from the Jewish cemetery in Bucharest, destroyed by Antonescu's men. The prominence of the pile of tombstones within the memorial brings to mind a commemorative tendency observed by James Young in Poland: 'Fragments of shattered Jewish tombstones have become the predominant iconographic figure by which public memory of the Shoah is constructed in Poland today. The fragments are not recuperated so much as reorganized around the theme of their own destruction'.[63] The collection of stones, arranged haphazardly but still behind a display glass and softly lit, recreate, albeit artificially, the metaphor of destruction but also represent a collective monument to all the Romanian victims of the Holocaust who did not get their own headstones. While the central memorial building stands out for its relative simplicity, what surrounds it are symbolic elements that make up a performance of superficial collective memory-making. The sculptural objects scattered around the memorial building engage with the Holocaust as a historical event, Jewish and Romani culture, Christian symbolism and Romanian culture, creating an eclectic collection of imagery that does not attempt to delve deep into the problematic issue of Romanian cultural memory. These objects

include a conceptual sculpture of the Star of David; the Romani symbol of the wheel, present on the international flag of the Romani people, representing itinerant tradition but also a homage to the flag of India; a representation of the Via Dolorosa as fragments of a train track; a metal container filled with stones cut by the artist himself; and a column of remembrance shaped out of rusty iron, connecting to both the atrocities of the Holocaust with its shape of an elongated chimney and to one of the most well-known Romanian artists, Constantin Brancusi, and his famous 'Endless Column'. Art historian Magda Predescu observes that the memorial as a sculptural ensemble and a spatial monument, proposes 'an architecture for collective memory', turning a tragic past into a conceptual and symbolic present. 'Intended as an interface between visual arts, sculpture, urban planning and social communication, this memorial offers the basis for a debate on assuming possession and transforming the public space.'[64]

While some of the cultural and religious symbols are relatively easy to decipher – the Star of David, the Roma wheel and the fragmentary train tracks, which allude not only to the tracks that led to Auschwitz but also to the death trains run by the Romanian Railways after the Iasi pogrom – others require contextual knowledge from the visitors. Sculptural intertextuality is at its best in the column of remembrance, alluding not only to Brancusi's 'Endless Column' but also to the essential principles of Romanian folk art on which Brancusi himself based his work. The metal container that holds the pile of stones sends one to the Jewish tradition of placing stones on graves but it is also an artificial element of remembrance, actively engaged with by the sculptor. Jacobi observes: 'It somehow resembles a catafalque where the stones acquire double meaning: weight/burden and large numbers standing for the bodies, for the piles of bodies carried away by excavators. Each stone has been cut with a saw, thus having suffered the intervention of the artist. The specific traits of the individual are to be found in the mass of rocks.'[65] The memorial ensemble becomes a palimpsest where past, present and a story for the future are uncovered in the layers of meaning. If the communist regime wanted to erase the memory of the Holocaust by rewriting Romanian history, this monument acts as a transhistorical bridge that attempts to address an actively forgotten time of Romanian existence by overlooking fifty years of communist rule.

However, the traces of communist spectacle are still clearly present in the way in which some visitors reacted to the memorial. As a public monument, the memorial was meant to be accessed freely by anyone wishing to do so. However, from its opening, the Mayor's Office in Bucharest has decided to employ a security company to guard the sculptural ensemble, with special focus on the central memorial building which was treated as a museum rather than public art. While entrance is free, the presence of guards creates the impression of an institutionalized space within which behavior is dictated not necessarily by the artist, but by the Romanian state in its attempt to create a new, more internationally acceptable version of Romanian history and of contemporary attitudes to it.

The open discussion about Romania's way of dealing with its past started happening only after various interactions with the monument appeared online. In 2015, Romanian hip hop group Șatra B.E.N.Z. released a music video filmed entirely inside the central memorial building. In 2017, another hip hop artist, The Watcher, released his video, *King Kong*, with parts filmed inside the memorial, and, in the same year, Australian

born Romanian pop singer Xonia published a sexually suggestive photo shoot on her Facebook page which clearly shows the background as being the interior of the central memorial building. While none of these groups mentions the Holocaust in their songs or photo blurbs or anything connected to the place where these works happened, these actions fed into the existing discussion about an official acknowledgment of Romania's role in the Holocaust. The vast majority of the comments termed the artists ignorant and disgusting, while others picked up on the corruption of the security company who would have allowed, for a certain price, exclusive access to a public memorial. While these discussions are a valid and useful way of understanding the complicated relationship Romanians have with their recent past, the comments from state institutions and from the Elie Wiesel National Institute for Studying the Holocaust in Romania, uncovered a more systemic problem that is clearly connected to Romania's communist legacy. Social Democrat MP Florin Manole issued a press release on Facebook, criticizing the band and its choice of location for their video, implying that more care should have been taken by the authorities (the Elie Wiesel Institute is the official custodian of the monument but the Mayor's Office employs the security company) to avoid such shameful events. Given Xonia's notoriety as an actress in the long running soap opera *Neighbors*, even the UK tabloid the *Daily Express* joined in the conversation, observing that any commercial activity at the memorial needs to be approved by the Elie Wiesel Institute and that while the Institute was approached for comments, they did not respond.[66] It also transpired that Manole worked for the Institute for a number of years and thus had inside knowledge about the ways in which approvals were given. Talking about the 'mind-set of people' formed under communism, the Wiesel Institute, through its director Alexandru Florian, noted that the lack of respect is a much larger issue that needs to be connected back to the past fifty years under communist and the tendency of both the communist authorities and the newly democratic ones after 1989 to contribute 'to the rewriting of history and the twisting of it'.[67] While the Institute did not actively seek to engage in this debate, it completed a research project between 2013 and 2015 analyzing the ways in which public memory of the Holocaust 'is reconstructed' in post-communist Romania. The fifty years of communist dictatorship are viewed as a void, a gap in the memorial process, which prompts a return to the beginning of the twentieth century in an attempt to meaningfully link the present with the past. Often, the communist period is seen as the dark ages which should be forgotten in order to recapture the country's national identity. But this active process of forgetting comes with its own dangers. The Institute's final report published in 2016 clearly states that the main obstacles for a meaningful remembrance of the Holocaust in post-communist Romania are the lack of education about the Holocaust and Romania's role in it after 1989 – the inclusion of Holocaust studies in the high school curricula for Year 10 pupils only happened in 2006, in what the researchers perceived as a continuation of the communist amnesia; and the rise of nationalist, right wing movements like the Greater Romania Party, which impacted on the ways in which the Romanian state presented the country's rather sanitized historical legacy to the wider world.[68] Notwithstanding the reasons behind these interactions with the Holocaust memorial, their importance is clearly notable in the discussions they prompted about memory and remembering in Romanian society in the twenty-first century. Their existence has to be read as a continuous testing

of societal, political and moral boundaries in a country that is still defining its image within a new democracy.

Conclusion

The discussion of these two physical embodiments of commemoration from within what Stuart Hall calls 'the supernationalism of the Soviet sphere of influence'[69] is set against new forms of local nationalisms that prompt countries to renegotiate their communist past, often through what Ann Stoler calls 'colonial aphasia'[70] – a highly selective combination of remembering and forgetting, and, in the process, establishing a much closer connection with their fascist past. All this happens against the background of a solid, well-established European cultural framework that the European Union encourages its members to embrace. This paper analyzed the role of specific cultural objects in the definition and implementation of both local identities and European narratives of belonging within the fluctuant space of the quasi-colonial. These spaces contain a wide array of narratives of identity and belonging that can reveal the intricate ways in which increasingly bordered and bordering 'new' European nations attempt to define themselves against supposedly borderless Western cultural, political and moral demands.

Notes

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2. Madina Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet? - Decolonial art from the ruins of the Soviet Empire,* p. 5.
3. Jean Baudrillard *The Illusion of the End*, p. 29.
4. Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet? - Decolonial art from the ruins of the Soviet Empire,* p. 34
5. For the discussion of decolonial practices in connection with Eastern and Central Europe, see: Iván T. Berend and György Ránki, *The European Periphery and Industrialization 1780–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Nikolay Karkov and Zhivka Valiavicharska, "Rethinking East-European Socialism: Notes Toward an Anti-Capitalist Decolonial Methodology" in *Interventions – International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 20, 2018, Issue 6, pp. 715-813; Manuela Boatcă and Anca Pârvulescu, "Creolizing Transylvania – Notes on Coloniality and Inter-imperiality" in *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*, 10:1, April 2020, Duke University Press, pp. 9-27.
6. Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, p. 17.
7. See Walter D. Mignolo, "Coloniality of Power and De-colonial Thinking" in *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 21, 2007, Issue 2-3, pp. 155-167.
8. For more on Quijano's discussion of the colonial matrix of power, see Aníbal Quijano and Michael Ennis, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America" in *Nepantla: Views from South*, Volume 1, Issue 3, 2000, pp. 533-580.
9. See Edward Said, "Yeats and Decolonization" in Terry Eagleton, *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature* (University of Minnesota Press, 1990), pp. 69-98.
10. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 16.
11. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 11.
12. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 16.
13. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 15.
14. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa and Colour and Democracy*, p. 283.

15. Tlostanova, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet? - Decolonial art from the ruins of the Soviet Empire*, p. 4.
16. See Emily-Rose Baker and Isabel Sawkins, *Introduction* to this Special Issue.
17. Manuela Boatcă, "Thinking Europe Otherwise: Lessons from the Caribbean" in *Current Sociology*, Vol. 69, Issue 3, 2021, p. 2.
18. Fernando Coronil quoted in Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, p. 27.
19. Michael Rothberg, "Beyond Tancred and Clorinda - trauma studies for implicated subjects" in *The Future of Trauma Theory* (ed by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone), p. xvii.
20. Stef Craps "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma theory in the global age" in *The Future of Trauma Theory* (ed by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone), p. 46.
21. Irene Visser, "Decolonising Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects" in *Humanities* 2015, 4, p. 252.
22. Vasile Dem Zamfirescu, *Nevroza Balcanica*, p. 27.
23. Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, p. 207.
24. For more information on this period in Romanian history, see, among others, Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania* (Chicago: Ivan Dee Publishing, 2000) or Dennis Deletant, Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–1944 (London: Palgrave, 2006).
25. See Dallas Michelbacher, *Jewish Forced Labor in Romania 1940–1944* (Indiana University Press, 2020)
26. For a good introduction to the complexities of Romanian history, see Keith Hitchins, *A Concise History of Romania* (Cambridge University Press, 2014)
27. Grant T. Harward, Romania's Holy War: Soldiers, Motivation, and the Holocaust (Cornell University Press, 2021)
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29. Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, p. 4.
30. Jean Ancel (ed.), *Documents Concerning the Fate of Romanian Jewry During the Holocaust*, vol. 1, p. 212.
31. Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania*, p. 19.
32. "Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania" http://www.inshr-ew.ro/ro/files/Raport%20Final/Final_Report.pdf
33. Date chosen to commemorate the beginning of Romanian deportations of Jews to Transnistria in 1941.
34. Michael Shafir, "Ideology, Memory and Religion in Post-communist East Central Europe: A Comparative Study Focused on Post-Holocaust", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 15, issue 44 (Summer 2016), pp. 52-110.
35. Shafir, "Denying the Shoah in Post-Communist Eastern Europe", p. 27.
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37. *România Mare*, 4 March 1994, quoted in Shafir, "Denying the Shoah in Post-Communist Eastern Europe", p. 35.
38. Quoted in Shafir, "Denying the Shoah in Post-Communist Eastern Europe", p. 35.
39. Shafir, "Denying the Shoah in Post-Communist Eastern Europe", p. 40.

40. See Michael Shafir, "Memory, Memorials, and Membership: Romanian Utilitarian Anti-Semitism and Marshal Antonescu," in *Romania Since 1989: Politics, Culture and Society* (ed. by Henry F. Carey) (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 67-96.

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51. Marco Maximillian Katz and Mariana Enache, Centrul de Monitorizare si Combatere a Antisemitismului in Romania *Antisemitism in Romania – Raport 2002*, p. 28.

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53. The Elie Wiesel Memorial House website: http://muzeulmaramuresului.ro/descopera/casa-memoriala-elie-wiesel/ [my translation]

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Disclosure statement

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