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Romania for Beginners: Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender

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As citizens in an increasingly globalized world, faculty members and students alike can benefit from acquiring knowledge about cultures outside of their own. According to the AAC&U's Intercultural Knowledge and Value Rubric, in addition to demonstrating sophisticated understanding of other cultures, intercultural competence includes the ability to initiate and develop interactions with culturally different individuals (AAC&U n/d). Each year, Kennesaw State University (KSU) implements a "Year of (Country)" program, where the campus community is offered multiple opportunities to develop such skills. In addition to lectures, films, art exhibits, and musical events, the capstone of the yearlong program is the opportunity to visit the region.

KSU's 2010-2011 academic was devoted to the Year of Romania. During that time, I attended fifteen different events and was able to meet with a wide variety of scholars and authors. For example, I met Jim Rosapepe (the former US ambassador to Romania) and journalist Sheilah Kast, co-authors of *Dracula is Dead*. They discussed the aftermath of communism and resultant social changes there. Author Domnica Radulescu read aloud from her coming of age novel, *Train to Trieste* (2008). I danced in the aisles to the music of *Mahala Rai Banda*, a self-designated gypsy band during one of several musical events on campus. And, as part of the KSU faculty group, I spent two weeks in Romania. The experience helped add a global perspective not only to my courses, but also to my general outlook.

Importance of Standpoint

How a traveler sees Romania and its people for the first time depends, in part, on personal biography and history. Therefore, the first piece of advice I offer students as they seek to become more globally aware is to take an inventory of their own values, views, and any preconceived notions they might have. Before launching a yearlong study, I followed my own advice by reflecting on just how little I really knew about Romania.

Like many in the United States, I had previously thought of Romania as an exotic land of castles and vampires with a long history of oppression under communist rule. My knowledge was limited to sound bites and stereotypes. The other faculty members who traveled to Romania for the FLC trip represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds, religions, and global experiences. But of them, I was perhaps the least cosmopolitan. This is because I had spent the first 40 years of my life within the borders of the United States. "You should see the USA first," was offered as standard advice in my small Midwestern hometown. I grew up in a socially and racially homogeneous place. It was not until I went to college that I encountered people who were vastly different from my family and friends.

Racial Formations

Perhaps it was not surprising that race was one of the first things I noticed in Romania. Ostensibly, there were no black or Asian faces in the streets, shops, restaurants, theaters, or museums in cities large or small. As a white person, I was probably slower to recognize the lack of diversity than if I were in the racial minority. But once identified, it seemed that whiteness was ubiquitous in Romania. Looking out at the assembly of high school students on our visit to a prestigious high school, I saw not only the skeptical faces of youth, but also overwhelming racial homogeneity.

In my course on race and ethnicity, I introduce students to the idea that race is a social construction that continually undergoes the process of change. Given America's history of slavery, the legacy of the "one-drop" rule still lingers here in the extremes of a black-white dichotomous classification. Similarly, labels such as "Asian" and "Hispanic" lump together diverse peoples for the sake of census efficiency. As in the US, there are complex gradations of whiteness and privilege in Romania. Learning about the differential status of the Roma people, commonly known as "gypsies" helped me better understand these processes.

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins described interlocking systems of privilege as a "matrix of domination" (1990). In many ways, the Roma embody the intersection of race and social class extremes. Many majority group Romanians claim that they can tell the difference between themselves and the Roma on sight. Whether or not this is accurate does not really matter. The point is that such beliefs can have vital consequences.

Our visit to a Roma village was unforgettable. Activist Leslie Hawke, founder of *Ovidiu Rom*, a non-governmental organization, explained that the Roma have been excluded and shunned for centuries and were once held as slaves. *Ovidiu Rom* sponsors an intervention program that includes an elementary school and programs for the children's parents, some of whom could neither read nor write. During our school visit (much to our delight) the children serenaded us with international and local songs, thus providing some evidence of programmatic success in enhancing cultural capital.

While Leslie Hawke's school was a bright spot, it still lacked basic resources. For example, there were no toilets, not even the most primitive of outhouses, for student use. While touring, we saw several young girls squatting to urinate in a muddy corner of the schoolyard, pulling down their pants and lifting their skirts in full view of anybody who happened to look in their direction. Embarrassed, I averted my gaze.

We then walked up the hill toward the Roma homes. Here, the mud, gray skies, and general sense of despair coexisted with the disregarded symbols of western excess. Paradoxically, satellite TV dishes were perched atop daub and

wattle houses with no indoor plumbing. People were wearing cast-off clothing donated by charities emblazoned with European and American brand logos. We were surprised to see a young man with Georgia's "Clayton State University" on his t-shirt. I took a photo of him arm-in-arm with my colleague.

As our group posed for countless pictures with the Roma, I became uncomfortable. Our participation in the westerner meets the deprived trope seemed to affect a kind of benign exploitation. I cynically wondered if these photo opportunities were little more than staple fodder for academics' evidence of "global engagement" and would ultimately grace their social media sites.

Doing Gender Romanian Style

Although race and poverty issues were obvious to me, gender differences seemed subtler. Yet, if one paid attention, intersections appeared. For example, in Bucharest, many well-to-do women wore fur coats. Mink. Fox. Sable. Not something you see much of anymore in the US where the wearing of animal hides has become politically incorrect. Yet in urban Romania, this type of conspicuous consumption was everywhere. I also noted physical differences between women of different social classes. In the rural areas, women were often physically heavier and covered their heads with scarves. In the city, it was a chic hat, perched on top of colored hair that usually was the fashion.

On March 1st I received a gift of a tiny four-leaf clover charm dangling from tasseled, variegated string, red and white like a peppermint stick. I also acquired a lucky horseshoe charm and even my zodiac sign tied up in similar fashion. My female colleagues and I received approximately six different gifts like this over the course of our trip in honor of the Romanian custom of *Martie*, which roughly translated means the "little" or "dear March." Romanian women don *Martie* pins and charms during the first days of March as symbols of spring and rebirth. "It's for International Women's Day, March 8," or "It's the Romanian version of Valentine's Day," or "It celebrates the first day of spring," were some of varied reasons for the custom given by locals.

According to the printed page accompanying one of these gifts presented by Professor Lucica Matei, it is believed that the one who wears the red and white string will be powerful and healthy for the year to come. But, far from being egalitarian, such promises seemed to be for women only. In an impromptu deviance experiment, a male colleague pinned a *Martie* charm on his lapel. Our taxi driver noticed and shook his head in disapproval, perhaps for our benefit. "Girl," he said, acknowledging the pin, "For girl."

I wore my *Martie* pins proudly, noting their ability to confer local legitimacy. Once home, I was able to provide a show and tell example of this novel way of doing gender. I was quite taken with the custom. In terms of

comparison, International Women's Day passes in America with little to no fanfare. Our Mother's Day celebration is based on the delivery of the goods, so to speak, rather than simply the promise. And Valentine's Day can be downright hurtful if you are not someone's sweetheart. So, I really liked *Martie* for its woman-centric sentiments as if in tribute to the great earth goddess. But, in capitalist Romania, such traditions have become a commercial boon to greeting card makers, florists, jewelers, and those entrepreneurs who weave and sell red and white strings. Like Valentine's Day and Mother's Day, *Martie* sells.

Medical Care and Health

In addition to courses on race and gender, I also teach medical sociology. As someone who studies medical mistakes in the US, I wanted to learn more about the Romanian system in terms of its problems and successes. In response to my questions about medical care in Romania, several people recommended the film, *The Death of Mr. Lazarescu*, a dark comedy about medical errors and patient neglect.

"That happened to my family," a young woman told me. She then outlined a scenario of delayed patient care similar to that in the film, which ultimately resulted in her father's death. "I can't watch the movie," she said. "We don't find it funny because it happened here." Medical errors in Romania, I was told, "are a way of life."

Another issue was the lack of supplies available for use during medical and surgical procedures in this system of universal health care. "You go in for a surgery and the doctor comes out and says there aren't enough supplies...we ran out of this or that drug or need more bandages," another person said. It was clear that one had to be prepared to quickly make up the deficits.

I was told that a system of gift-giving influences the quality of medical care as well. In essence, Romanians are expected give gifts to doctors to assure they get good care. When things go wrong, people often question themselves, leading to self-doubt and guilt. "Maybe I didn't give a good enough gift...you second guess yourself," said a woman discussing a bad outcome.

As an added bonus, I was able to tour a Bucharest hospital. My colleague and I met administrators and physicians while being shown around this state of the art facility. A conversation ensued regarding their desire to better understand patient and provider roles in the US health care system in hopes of being able to pursue a type of "medical tourism." Americans could thus travel to Romania for elective procedures as a possible capitalist venture.

It is no secret that Americans are becoming increasingly overweight, due in some measure to our fast food diets. As Romania becomes more capitalist, will obesity become more prevalent? I saw only approximately five McDonald's, one

Burger King, and two Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants during our two-week trip across the country. During the visit we sampled all sorts of local fare. Particularly in the rural areas, the food was heavy on meat and starch. But it was homemade, a point of pride in a country where cooking for the family is often equated with love.

In summary, the FLC for the Year of Romania exceeded my expectations. I was able to see health care, poverty, social class, gender, and race in new ways and have incorporated a more international perspective into my teaching. I also anticipate learning more about Romania and its culture as I move from a beginner to someone who knows much more.

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