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Exploring Language and Culture in Romania

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As I return to campus from my second Faculty Development Seminar, I cannot help but to reflect upon my experiences, particularly on how they have and will benefit my teaching of Spanish. Being a native speaker of the language I teach can have benefits and disadvantages. For example, I endeavor every day to bring my native culture into the classroom, and my identity serves as a filter for the quality of materials I present to my students. This approach defines me as the subject expert in their eyes, but to them I am an expert who did not have to struggle to reach language proficiency or cultural understanding. Even though I have experiences learning a second language (English) and living in another culture longer than in my native Puerto Rico, students sometimes feel that I do not understand their struggles learning Spanish.

Another mission I have adopted in my teaching of Spanish is to emphasize Hispanic culture in the United States. In the last three decades, the Latino population in the Southeast has grown exponentially, so Spanish is increasingly becoming a second language in many communities. The reality of this new minority group is that it is disproportionately working class; therefore it is difficult to paint a picture of culture in its entirety when the most common manifestation is that of its popular products. The picture is further complicated by negative stereotypes broadcast by the media and politicians who want to scapegoat the newcomers as a societal problem that needs to be eradicated. The result is that teaching Spanish carries an extra burden that is not shared by other languages that are perceived to be spoken in faraway lands, or are languages of strategic economic or political importance. Therefore, I am frequently cognizant of stereotypes that my students bring to the classroom; especially when at their age many adopt the views from their parents or other community leaders.

Unfortunately, stereotypes are insidious and are casually applied as blanket statements that deny individuality. In my own experience, I have been labeled with some of the most common stereotypes adjudicated to Latinos: lack of punctuality and laziness. When I relate this to my students, they become angry at the injustice, but yet I find comments on my course evaluations referring to the same issues. Still, I must confront my own biases before I can teach my students how to battle their own. One way to achieve this is to have an encounter with a language and culture that I had limited experience with. This was one of the primary motivations to join the Year of Romania (YoR) Faculty Learning Community in 2010-2011.

The Faculty Learning Community is part of the larger Country of Study Program promoted by the Institute for Global Initiatives at Kennesaw State University. The objective of this program, now in its 28th year, is to facilitate the breaking down of stereotypes while connecting with other cultures through a multidisciplinary approach to the study of a specific country or region from its early history to the present. To be selected, faculty members submit proposals explaining the relevant issues that will be researched or explored in credit-earning general education and special topics courses. The Country Study Program

undoubtedly provides multiple opportunities for community outreach as the university develops networks with consular officials, business leaders, and expatriates from the targeted country.

The YoR Faculty Learning Community required that, during a whole academic year, a group of eight participating faculty members from across the university, meet to discuss relevant reading materials that had been previously selected by members of the YoR Organizing Committee. Each member of the learning community developed ways to incorporate the country of study in their courses and committed to bring their students to a number of lectures offered twice a month on campus. The lecture series is the cornerstone of the Year of... program; it brings to campus scholars from a variety of disciplines, from political science, history, and literature, to religion, art, and sociology.

My topic-specific focus in the YoR Faculty Learning Community was to explore the presence of the Roma in Romania and to draw parallels to their presence in Spain and Latin America, as well as to research why so many decide to emigrate. I looked for materials to create a teaching module about Roma migration in which students were instructed to draw comparisons between Roma migration to Europe and Latin America with Latino migration to the United States. This analytical and comparative approach was achieved by watching immigration films in the classroom. This film genre allows for the study of topics such as culture shock, culture clash/divide, discrimination, xenophobia, language acquisition and bilingualism, fracturing of families, marginality, and processes of acculturation/assimilation. The Roma (commonly called *gitanos* in Spanish) have a long historical presence in southern Spain and their artistic contributions to Spanish culture are recognized worldwide in flamenco music and dance.

Two documentary films were selected for the teaching module: *Gitanos sin carpa* (2002), by Iván Tziboulka; and *Granada–Maya Family* (2009), by Katalin Bársony. *Gitanos...* focuses on two Roma families in Chile as they try to maintain their culture in the face of discrimination, generational differences, and financial instability. Throughout the film, it is clear that many Romani are ambivalent about the concept of assimilation, preferring to maintain their own culture while adapting to the necessities of life in Chile. Included in that feeling of ambivalence is the pursuit of education, which presents both opportunities for advancement and threats to their cultural identity. This clash is also presented in *Granada...* a film that narrates the story of the Maya family, with its head Mario Maya, one of the world's most influential flamenco dancers. Members of the Maya family narrate the little-known history of flamenco, an art form of the marginalized Roma, which is inspired by centuries of persecution that eventually led the Spanish Roma to lose their language.

The highlight of the YoR Faculty Learning Community was a two-week Faculty Development Seminar in which participating faculty members traveled to Romania to build professional contacts and to expand on their factual knowledge acquired during the preceding months of studying Romanian history and culture. I

considered this trip my own study abroad experience, and for its duration I intended to reflect on my experiences as a speaker of a different language who comes from a different culture.

During the Faculty Development Seminar in Romania, we explored a number of topics pertaining to the Roma. We visited a village, with its pre-school and elementary school in Sibiu, and attended a lecture about Roma issues in the Sociology Department at the University of Bucharest. The difficulties faced by the Roma seem almost insurmountable, but it also appeared that one of the keys to improve their place in Romanian society was through education. Ovidiu Rom is an NGO that has promoted programs to improve pre-school enrollment by Roma children. In the school we visited, mothers attended along with their children to ease the transition and, in many cases, to become literate themselves.

One issue I was confronted with was how to gauge the severity of a problem based on academic study alone. Throughout the YoR, I attended lectures about the Roma and their emigration to Spain and Italy. Among them were: "Literary Representations of Roma Women," "Naturalized Woman: Gender and the Trauma of Immigration," "From American Dream to Ethnic Hate: A Comparison of Romanian Immigration to the United States and the European Union," and "The Gypsy Problem: Human Rights and Ethnic Minorities in Romania." In these lectures I heard that in European countries there were challenges experienced by the Roma on account of being an ethnic minority. But I was not wholly prepared for the experience of seeing the Roma segregated in Romania, since by all accounts many claim the country as their own. The Roma experience housing segregation, dismal access to education, and most importantly, extreme negative attitudes that make them the scapegoat in a fairly homogeneous society. This is especially troublesome since Romania itself is trying to find its place in the European community after a long period of dictatorship.

To point these attitudes, I would like to share a conversation I had around the dinner table of a middle-class Romanian family, where a member of the family, who worked as a police officer, proceeded to tell me about her experiences with the Roma: how criminality almost came "natural" to them; how through criminal activity or through remittances from abroad they built palatial homes but refused to install in them sewer pipes; how they could not be trusted because they frequently lied about their activities. This tirade from a middle-class female in her early 30s ensued after my story about our group's visit to a Roma village and how impacted I was by how differently they lived from other Romanians: the village lacked paved roads or potable water, and the closest school was one founded by an international NGO. Her reaction saddened me because I had shared my story about the village hoping that this woman, who worked as a public servant, would show some empathy or an admission of the history of neglect experienced by the Roma in Romania; instead, she showed utter contempt toward her fellow citizens.

These societal attitudes toward the Roma were disturbingly negative and I

was struck by how very similar they were to the stereotypical attitudes many average U.S. citizens hold against Latino immigrants. To be sure, they have become more evident after laws were passed in 2007 deputizing police officers as immigration agents. Although the similarities between these two ethnic minority groups are unfortunate, they provided me with a case to present for class discussion that would have less of an emotional charge since students would not feel under attack when discussing a society that they are unfamiliar with. A presentation and discussion of the marginalization and discrimination of the Roma by average Romanians would serve as the springboard for comparisons with the treatment of Latinos (for example in terms of access to education or as the targets of law enforcement) in some regions of the United States.

My observations and reflections on language and culture continued when I visited the Spanish faculty at the University of Bucharest. In a session with Spanish students, they demonstrated a love for the language and a strong desire to visit Spain. Students were also yearning for an updated curriculum that fostered the practical applications of language instead of an extensive study of literature and linguistics. Their desire was echoed by a younger faculty member, who felt frustrated as a result of the rigidity of the curriculum, which is becoming a real challenge in trying to attract more students to pursue a major in Spanish.

I was impressed by the high aptitude Romanians have toward learning other languages. Students at universities were majoring in more than one language. Spanish is a popular language in Romania as many Romanians emigrate to Spain, and in many encounters with locals, I spoke Spanish instead of English or (my very poor) Romanian. When asked where they had learned Spanish, they almost invariably replied: "From *telenovelas* (soap-operas)!" At the same time, Romanians hold their native language as a badge of identity. In bookstores you can find translations of Western literary classics next to science and math textbooks, all in Romanian. Surprisingly, there was an absence of influence from English in written advertisements or on street signage.

Throughout the trip, I felt an apparent cultural connection with another "Latin" culture. As soon as the locals learned where I was from, they would share their knowledge of music, television, or cinema from Spain and Latin America. A huge billboard announcing an upcoming concert by Colombian superstar Shakira was prominently displayed in one of the busiest areas of Bucharest. In an effort to understand this fascination with Latin culture, I went to a dance club in Sighi oara, where I danced for hours to the sounds of Romani-influenced *manele* alternating with those of *salsa* and *reguetón* from my native Caribbean. And, days later, after eating platefuls of home-cooked Romanian dishes, one of our hostesses grabbed me by the hand to join her in a vigorous folk dance because, as she pointed her finger back and forth between us: "You're Latin, I'm Latin". At that point, I could not refuse the connections between the cultures; I had to go along.

And that is precisely what I continuously ask my students to do when encountering Hispanic culture: to go along, to find commonalities; but

furthermore, to notice what is unique about both their native and Latin cultures, and attempt to be comfortable with those differences. As a result of my experiences, I have become aware that the goal of intercultural competence can be achieved by being intentional and motivated while traveling, and I am grateful to have had that opportunity in Romania, facilitated by my participation in this Faculty Learning Community.