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Breaking in my Anthropological Shoes:
Reflections on my First Days of Fieldwork

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the first day of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by an M.A. student. Starting in a non-Roma community, and trying to reach the Roma, I describe the difficulty of conducting fieldwork for the first time. I discuss the day I introduced myself to the community, the awkward and unnatural behavior of teachers toward my future informants, and the confusion and shyness of the Roma students felt in my presence.

* I am deeply grateful for the host community who accepted me in their lives, especially my informants: the Roma students, Roma parents and non-Roma teachers from Vulturi's village in Romania. Without the support from the mayor Vasile Sava and the approval of the General Inspector Maria Moldovan, county Satu-Mare, the collaboration of the teachers, students and parents this project would have never happen. I understand that my presence in the village creating uncomfortable conversations, reactions and adjusting, that is why I feel forever indebted to the entire community. Even though I cannot use the real names of my informants and location I hope they know how important they are for me and how attached I feel towards them. I am also grateful for all the support that my mentor Nancy McKee offered during my first year of MA. Without her knowledge and advice, I couldn't have structure and working proposal. The Institutional Review Board forms were also challenging to complete, and professor McKee showed me the necessarily steps in order for these forms to be approved. Many thanks to Graduate and Professional Student Association from Washington State University, for the travel grant award, in order to travel to my field site.

The goal of this project is to glean the values and attitudes of Roma-Romanian parents and Romanian (non-Roma) teachers regarding childhood education in order to demonstrate that differences in expectations and practices of child socialization between parents and teachers contribute to the failure of Roma children in achieving the same level of academic success as their non-Roma counterparts in the village of Vulturii, Satu-Mare, Romania (Smith 1997). During my stay in the community I observed a great difference of economic, social status and interaction between Roma and non-Roma students, in school and outside classes. My field notes, which I will present in the next few pages, are mainly from my first day of the fieldwork with a brief introduction of the community.

Romania has 41 counties; I did my field work in the county of Satu-Mare. Each county has their own residential city which represents the county from an institutional, cultural and social perspective. The village of Vulturii is 37.5 km away from the city's county, with the same name as the county Satu-Mare. The school is under the jurisdiction of the district school Patraut. Per the comuna there is only one school principle Mrs. Maria Filip. The educational system in Romania is compulsory.

The school from Vulturii has: three classrooms, one computer laboratory (sponsored by Bill Gates), a kindergarten classroom, bathrooms in the building, and the teacher's room called *Cancelarie*. Two of the classes have two long rows: front and back. In the front row the Romanians had priority while in the back row Roma-Romanians were sitting.

Because of the limited space in the school, primary classes and middle school classes are divided. The primary school classes were scheduled from 8-12 am, and middle school classes met from 12-6 pm. Some classes are taught in the same room: 0-1, 2-4, 6-8. This had advantages for my research, since I could observe at least one hour per day in each class.

Class	No. Students	Romanian Students	Roma-Romanian students	Roma-Romanian informants	Simultaneous	If simultaneous, with which class?
0	4	2	2	2	Yes	I
I	14	6	7	1	Yes	0
II	10	6	3	1	Yes	IV
III	16	6	9	3	No	
IV	9	4	5	1	Yes	II
V	16	14	2	0	No	
VI	8	6	2	0	Yes	VIII
VII	7	5	2	2	No	
VIII	12	11	1	1	Yes	VI

Table 1. Enrollments rates for each class based on ethnicity

In Vulturii's school there are 92 students enrolled. The primary school has 49 students: 26 are Roma-Romanians and 23 are Romanians. In the middle school there are 43 students enrolled: 36 are non-Roma Romanians and seven are Roma-Romanians (see table 1). The school hired 19 teachers, but only seven spend more than three days per week at the school. The other teachers only came to teach one class per week so I did not collaborate with them, although they were willing and happy to work with me. I applied the technique of participant observation in classes, but only in the classes Roma students were attending at least two days per week.

Because of the significant economic differences between Roma and non-Roma in this area, Roma live in small houses, just one room and most of the time, not even an outhouse outside (Biro et al. 2009). I decided the very small size of Roma houses made it was impossible for me to rent a room from a Roma family, so I rented a house in the village, preferring to live by myself rather than with a non-Roma Romanian family. It was essential for me to have privacy so I could work on my data. Also, this decision was made with concern for my safety. Since Roma people are being labeled as dangerous, thieving, and untrustworthy, my landlord asked me not to allow Roma inside the yard; evidently she meant not to let them in the house. I agreed with the terms and started my research on the 13th of May, 2013.

Before I chose this village, I was in touch with the mayor Mr. Sava Vasile. We talked via email and I informed him of my intentions. He agreed to help me and approved my research in the area. I knew about Vulturii from some relatives, who put me in touch with the mayor. Mr. Sava had traveled in the United States in the past, and he was excited that someone with American experience was planning to observe and write about his community.

I moved into the village on the 10th of May 2013. Over the weekend, I acquainted myself with my neighbors, including the mayor's family. The mayor's 21-year-old daughter, Andra, asked me questions about my presence in her village. After she found out about my intentions of spending time in the Roma neighborhood, called "*La Țigani*" ("At the Gypsies") by the non-Roma Romanian community, she started telling me about the neighborhood. She knew nobody's name from *La Țigani*, arguing that "everybody looks the same there; I don't know how the mothers recognize their children." Andra was also impressed that some of the Roma would build houses atypical of the Roma style; "Didn't you see how some of them built their houses? They look like Romanian houses."

Following a few interactions with the villagers, I realized that Andra's attitude regarding Roma is a general sentiment of contempt, anger, and fear towards their Roma counterparts (Steward 2013). My research was welcomed most of the time with sarcasm and a feeling of xenophobia towards the Roma. Even though I was born and raised in Romania, under the same principles about Roma, studying in the United States changed the way I saw the Roma-Romanians. The hardest part in my two months of field work was not being able to argue with every sentence and observation that non-Roma Romanians would make about the Roma and also about other topics. Who can understand the human race and the divisions and enmities we erect among ourselves? Hopefully, anthropology can be an important component of solving and understanding these important issues, through patience, studying, grants, and collaborating with different disciplines that are interested in solving the issue of Roma in Europe and the situation of other oppressed minority communities.

Classes started at 8 am, and as I was walking towards the school on my first day of research, I saw students in front of the school waiting. I looked at the time; it was 7:56 am. I tried eagerly to see if I could recognize any Roma, I could not. I looked around and saw the teacher coordinator

hurrying towards the entrance with the keys. The children were staring, analyzing me. Some of them knew who I was and I was happy to see my neighbor Andrei, a second grade student, too shy to reciprocate my smile. Two teachers arrived after me: Mrs. Mariana and Mrs. Anca, and the educator. After I introduced myself, the teachers greeted me warmly, asking me many questions. Even if the time was past 8:00 am, nobody seemed to be in a rush. The teacher coordinator, Mrs. Diana Creanga, helped me understand the system in the school, as well as providing a schedule for the day.

Mrs. Diana welcomed me into her class, but told me that so far none of the Roma students had arrived. She informed me of how common it was for Roma students not to show up for days to school, but said I would definitely see them going with their parents in the village, begging. The other two teachers confirmed what the administrator had told me, but said I could wait a bit longer and that maybe someone would show up. At that point, I had IRB, mayoral, and Inspector¹ approval. This was my Master's thesis and I felt it got off to a bad start. The words my former professor, Dr. Amber Wutich from Arizona State University, came to mind, "Casiana, did you think that maybe the Roma really cannot be integrated?" Maybe I should have studied more, chosen another field, and perhaps I should have spent more time reflecting on my professor's question.

Despite these worries I asked Mrs. Diana if I could still follow the schedule we had made; discouraged, I followed her throughout the class. Seven Romanian students were waiting quietly in the first row. I briefly introduced myself to the class. Shortly after class began, someone knocked at the door. There were two Roma students, a boy and a girl. The teacher nodded at me so I would understand they were Roma. The boy no backpack, holes in his pants, and a dirty shirt. He looked at me as though he was trying to read my face, wondering what I was doing in his class. The girl was clean, with nicely braided long hair, wearing pink clothes and carrying a pink backpack. If the teacher had not indicated to me that she was Roma I would have never known she was not Romanian. The two went to their places, in the last row of the class.

The two Roma students were talking to each other, taking their seats close to one another. Some of the non-Roma Romanians would turn around and look but would not interact with them. The teacher was checking on the Roma paying close attention to them and after each interaction she would look at me. While doing this, I was not sure if she was seeking my approval or assessing my reaction. The doorbell rang announcing the break, while the Romanians were allowed to go out in the yard, the Roma-Romanians had to stay in the class with the teacher to work some more. Teachers told me that Roma are overly sensitive and they must be careful with the way they talk to them, otherwise they will get upset and not show up to school at all.

At the end of the class I approached the two Roma students and introduced myself, telling them briefly why I was there. In order to give them the forms for the students, I had to know their ages. They both told me they were 11-years-old but the Mrs. Diana, who gave me no privacy, brought an official paper² in order to confirm their responses. I gave them a Parental Form asking them to give this form to their parents and the form for Students between 11-14 years old. I told them I would come that afternoon to their neighborhood to introduce myself to their parents.

¹ Each county in Romania is under the jurisdiction

² Mrs. Diana told me not to believe their answers because probably they do not know their ages. The official document which I never had approval to see; she allowed me to see it anyway. The document confirmed what the students told me- they were 11-years-old. On the other hand I understood she wanted to help me and have the correct information so my project to be accurate.

The students were shy, barely responding to my questions just staring at me. As I was talking to them Mrs. Diana was sitting there, asking the boy, “Horatiu, did you wash your pants?” When she asked that question, I remembered the story she mentioned earlier in the *Cancelarie* about a Roma boy who never comes to school because his pants were dirty, but always promised he would wash his pants so he could attend classes. Mihaela was watching me with intensity, smiling when our eyes met. Mihaela was not paying to close attention in the class and not even working on the assigned. Mrs. Diana could not include the Roma students with the rest of the class because they were so behind. The non-Roma Romanians were engaging, going to the blackboard, raising their hands, and acting excited to be in class.

I stayed in that class for the second class. They had math. Mihaela did not have a pen, so the entire class stopped for someone to give her one. The teacher gave different tasks to Mihaela to Horatiu than the rest of the class, almost as though she had three simultaneous classes. Even in the third grade, Horatiu just had to write numbers from 1-10. Mihaela’s task was different from Horatiu’s: she had to make calculations, still easier than her class, but harder than Horatiu. In the middle of the class, someone knocked at the door. A small girl, without a uniform, entered. She apologized shyly for being late and she took her place in the last row next to me. Mrs. Diana did not say anything about Roma students lateness, probably being happy that at least they had shown up. Elena had a backpack, textbooks, a notebook and a pen. The teacher did not give Elena something different to do compare to her peers. Elena paid attention for the entire class and barely looked at me. At the end of the second class, I introduced myself to Elena and gave her the forms. Mrs. Diana was again next to me and asked Elena to read the form. Elena could read, slowly, but well. After a few sentences we thanked her and went in the *Cancelarie*. I was impressed with Elena; she was clean, she knew how to write, and she seemed to be at the same level with her Romanian classmates. Even Mrs. Diana was proud of her student, praising Elena and saying, “she is a success among Roma.”

I moved to the next classes, 0-I, which were taught simultaneously. Adriana and Mihai were the siblings of Elena from third grade. Adriana was in first grade while Mihai was in grade zero. Friendly and daring to move next to me, Adriana had her hand up for almost the entire class. Mihai had no notebook, backpack, or pen. He would sit up on his chair and find his notebook on top of the desk. The teacher, Mrs. Claudia explained to me that it was a deal between her and Mihai, in order for him not to lose or destroy his notebooks. Mihai was not as clean as Adriana. Despite the fact that Adriana was the most engaged Roma student I met, and seemed to be the most integrated and accepted by her collective, she was left to sit alone in the second row, even though there was one spot available in the first row next to a non-Roma Romanian. Adriana went to the blackboard several times along with her classmates. After she did one correct exercise, a Romanian classmate said to her, “Bravo.” Adriana was keeping up with her classmates, doing well at all the tasks that her teacher required. The Romanians were working amongst themselves; Adriana had no collaborators in her row. While Adriana was doing well in class, Mihai was sitting quietly and shyly at his table, in his part of the class. The teacher asked class zero to draw their toys (there were only three students). While Mihai was drawing, one of his classmates in front of him got up and pushed his desk closer to the wall, arguing she did not have enough space for her desk. Mihai did not react in any way and moved his desk.

During the breaks, the teachers would “assault” me with questions about myself, my family, my life in the United States, and what had I observed so far (after just three hours in the school). Also, stories about Roma community from their village arose almost every few minutes. It was tiring and intense hearing all these negative stories, which made me trust my future informants

(the Roma) less and less, without knowing them. It was hard to keep a positive attitude and want to go on the field at *La Tigani*, without even stepping foot there.

At my last class in primary school, I went to the second through fourth grade classroom. I did not know who the Roma were, even though the teachers told me there was one in the class. I looked around and nobody seemed to match what I had observed so far. In the last row was my neighbor Andrei, and I knew he was not Roma. In the first row I saw two blue-eyed boys dressed in clean clothing. I kept looking around until the teacher Mr. George introduced me to Darius. The class started and Darius seemed to be a problem-student. He was looking around, ignoring Mr. George, intentionally dropping a handout, and refusing to pick it up. Darius would often look at me but not give anything away in his facial expression. The teacher asked all the students to take their notebooks out and start writing. Darius refused “I have a notebook but I am not writing in it, I have everything.” Though his teacher nicely asked him to behave, he still refused. The teacher told him “We’ll see Darius, we’ll see.” Darius seemed not to be affected by this threat. I found out later that Darius was used to be threatened but without consequences. The teacher asked the class to color on the distributed paper. The teacher picked up the drawing which Darius dropped, while asking a classmate to share his colored pencils with Darius. The classmate refused, arguing, “I don’t want to share with him, he beats me.” The teacher made Darius promise he would not beat his classmate. Darius promised, and his classmate shared his colored pencils with him. Darius was an interesting informant; he sat in the first row, next to a Romanian, and was vocal compared with the shyness I met so far among Roma students. At the end of the class, I gave Darius the forms and asked him to give it to his parents. He took it and put it in his notebook, not asking me questions. He looked as though he was in control.

While the majority of students had uniforms with the school emblem, none of the Roma students seemed to wear them. I asked a teacher about the uniforms and she told me that it costs 54RON³ a uniform and the Roma cannot afford to pay this amount of money. So far, I observed that none of the Roma students had uniforms or textbooks—excluding Adriana—, sat in the back of the class, and most of the time they attended classes without pens or pencils (Vivian & Dundes, 2004).

The second part of my day in school started at 12 pm, when the primary school students went home and the middle school students arrived. I spent my first class in the seventh grade, where there were two Roma students. When Amalia came in, the teacher, Miss. Narcisa nodded at me indicating that she was Roma. Amalia, dressed in uniform, wore makeup and had dirty nails, and long hair. She was sitting in the second row close to the door; I was sitting next to her. Another student, came in, Petrica. He looked at me and his classmates told me I had taken his place, forcing him to move to the first row. I asked Amalia if he was RomA. She confirmed that he was. He had no pens, pencils, or textbooks. What was interesting about him was that he was interacted with his classmates, laughing and collaborating. He never turned his face towards Amalia, as I saw with Mihaela and Horatiu and as I would observe for my entire time in the field: the Roma will seek familiarity from any other Roma member in the class. Petrica was well integrated which intrigued me and I wanted to understand how this significant difference had developed.. He knew an answer to a math problem while Amalia did not talk at all for the entire class. Amalia stood quietly, not asking questions, as her classmate shared his notebook and explained the exercise. At the end of the class I talked to Amalia, give her my forms, and asked her again whether or not Petrica was Roma. Amalia did not understand the meaning of “Roma” so I used the word “gypsy.” Upon hearing this, she told me Petrica was not Roma. Now my

³ \$15USD

dilemma was solved, and I realized that my initial assumption about Gheorghita's ethnicity had been based entirely on his unkempt appearance.

The next class I spent it again with seventh grade. The teacher, Miss Elena, asked Amalia how come she came to school and expressed her happiness at seeing Amalia there. Maybe because of my presence, Miss Elena started asking Amalia too many questions. Amalia was answered in a very low voice so nobody could hear her. The same classmate, who had helped her with the textbook in the previous class, would repeat her responses with in a louder voice so the entire class could hear. The teacher asked her easy questions, almost questions to which she could guess the answers, and after each answer, Miss. Elena would encourage Amalia with "bravo." To one of the questions, Miss Elena asks everybody in the class to show their handkerchiefs. Amalia did not have one; unlike the non-Roma girls (none of the boys had one). Miss Elena gave her packet of tissues to Amalia and said, "I have two, I can share with you." As Amalia, looking at the blackboard, did not reach for the napkins as Miss Elena placed them at her desk. Amalia's face was inexpressible and did not show any feeling of gratitude for her teacher's gift. She did not pick up the napkins while I was in class. In front of the class, Miss Elena started asking Amalia personal questions about her Easter – the Holiday Easter was 2 weeks ago prior, so it is unclear if Amalia did not show up to school for a week or if my presence affected Miss Elena's concern towards her Roma student.

Miss. Elena moved the focus from Amalia and asked her students to open the textbook to page 161. Amalia looked lost; she seemed not to know big numbers with hundreds. Miss Elena started writing on the blackboard and Amalia was copying quietly. Despite the fact that it was almost the end of the semester, Amalia had a new notebook with just a few lectures written down from other classes. The teacher came to checked on her, and just her. She took Amalia's notebook, checked her spelling, then affirmed, "You need to learn the alphabet first of all, that's where you must start." More advice followed during the middle of the class "you need to come every day to school and then you will learn how to write and read. You see [pointing at the entire class] they come every day to school and they still don't know how to write and read." The entire class started laughing, including me; I recognized it was a good joke. But a Romanian student argued, "But we know how to read and write." It was an uncomfortable class for Amalia and me, but mostly for Amalia since she was the "victim" here.

After each interaction with Amalia, Miss Elena, as well as the other teachers, looked at me to see my reaction, approval, or facial expression or maybe she wanted to show how she is not discriminating against Roma students. I just hoped at that moment I was unexpressive. The question, "How is your project going to affect your informants?" from IRB forms came to mind. At that point in time, I could not see any harm in my project, but seeing Amalia in this situation, because of my project, left me feeling guilty and inexperienced. How could I think I could come in this community without affecting my future informants? Amalia never got as close to me as her siblings or her peers. I am not sure if Amalia saw me as an intruder the entire time I was "hanging out" in her community or if was because my presence increased the attention she usually gets in school from teachers.

Amalia's sister, Carmen, would also be affected by my presence in the next couple of months. Carmen became my key informant and one of my closest friends from the Roma community. I came across two teachers who refused to sign my forms. Though Miss Doina let me assist her classes, she was afraid to sign the forms. While her other colleagues could not stand Miss Doina, I found her charming and refreshing; however, this took a while. Miss Doina, governed by her own rules, dressed a bit weird as compared to the other women from Cancelarie.

She always spoke her mind, saying what she believed, good and bad. Sometimes, she could be painfully straightforward, making it hard to keep up with her. Diplomacy was not her best feature. I followed her to the class. Miss Doina did not let me introduce myself but she asked loudly, "Are there any Roma in this class?" All I wanted was to silence her; I could not believe she asked. I was so careful in the way I introduced myself to all the classes, trying hard to make everybody, both Roma and Romanian, comfortable with my presence. I observed the Romanian students as well, even if I was not focusing on them. After the other students pointed to Carmen, who was sitting in the last row on the parallel side of her classmates, Miss Doina walked towards her. I stood in front of the class with a big question mark above my head. Miss Doina told me to find a spot. On my forms, I stated that I would stay in the back of the class. The only spot left in the back of the class was next to Carmen. When I ask if the spot was available, she look oblivious,, then moved her stuff from the chair to make room for me. Miss Doina checked her notebook and asked her if she knew how to write after dictation. Carmen responded affirmatively. Then another Romanian girl asked Carmen if she needed help and if she wanted her to move next to her in order to help her. I was speechless; it seemed that this Roma girl, Carmen, was getting all the help she needed from all directions, so the question was: why was Carmen not at the same level with her classmates and sitting invisibly in the last row opposite to her class?

Miss Doina was not paying such close attention to Carmen as Miss Elena did with, Amalia. She would check on Carmen regularly during class but not so emphatically as the previous class I attended. Miss Doina did not ask Carmen any questions; she just took Carmen's notebook and checked to see what she was writing, making corrections if necessary. Compared to Amalia, Carmen had more pages written down in her notebook and also had more nerve than her sister. Carmen would answer any observations with confidence and clarity: "I hope you are not getting upset that I am making all this corrections?" Miss Doina told Carmen apologetically. Carmen smiled and answered, "It's no problem, professor." At the end of the class, I went to Carmen and introduced myself. Her first question after I made my introduction was, "Who are you and why is everybody acting so weird today with me?"

As you will read in ethnographies, during the first few weeks of any anthropological fieldwork, the entire community will play a role, acting almost unnaturally. This is happened in my host community. My advantage was that I was from this region; I am Romanian and studied in an educational system with classmates who were Roma. The first day was the hardest, not just for me but also for my informants. They were confused and had no idea how to react to these abrupt changes and increased the attention they received during my presence in school. Some of my informants told me later that they felt protected by my presence, because the school staff would act differently when I was in the area. I remember Elena asking if my position was more powerful than Mrs. Diana. I laughed at her question but I also realized they thought I would come to "save" them. I stayed for two months in their village, mingling with them, affecting their lives; maybe even giving them false hope without saying or doing anything intentional to produce that effect: —just being there.

It's been a month since I left my field site and I question the fairness of the future career that I have chosen: anthropology. These feelings of unrest may never truly evaporate, but after my first fieldwork experience, I believe and trust that the balance between the pros and cons of being an anthropologist and becoming involved in other people's lives has more advantages for the explored community, especially if the anthropologist, in addition to her education and training, is able to learn about herself and the implications of her work as it progresses.

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