

## Touristing home: muddy fields in native anthropology

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“So, I think my problem, and “our” problem, is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own “semiotic technologies” for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, an limited happiness.”  
(Haraway 1988:579)

*I'm trying to take apart the threads of my excitement, that first day I spent in Sighisoara doing 'fieldwork.' I am trying to relive it, with all its contradictions, to get close to it, and it's so hard; I miss home, and writing about it as a 'field' is a painful attempt to distance myself from it while keeping it close, in ways that right now seem, to me, absurd.<sup>1</sup>*

*You see, being home, after six years spent mostly in the US, was a gift to myself and my parents. Fifteen months, spent continuously within 60 kilometers of the place where I grew up, from the people that I love most and that I miss, even now, when I am writing these words. Allowing myself to be myself as I used to be, smart and funny, in Romanian, with my sweet ardelean accent that means absolutely nothing here in the US, with all the gossip and incessant talking, with all the little things of the everyday, brushing against people on the street, and walking everywhere, and buying bread daily on my way home. Now, grown up, I could see how life could have been, suspending myself from my life as a student in a seemingly endless graduate career and also from my parents' expectations of their only twenty-eight year old, formerly brilliant, daughter. I could live home, finally, if only for a little while.*

*This is what I felt when I first stepped into the main square of the citadel, that morning. I was so happy. And this is why it pained me so much to write about*

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<sup>1</sup> I am using italics to indicate paragraphs quoted (edited down and rearranged) from my notes or my dissertation draft.

*Sighișoara. Because fieldnotes, and interviews and everything that I gathered are, ultimately, memories of home, of myself at home. Because they are all wrapped in my love for that place and my sorrow for having to distance myself from it through writing. Because trying to get close to it as a field becomes sinking, painfully, in my loss.*

Scraping against this nostalgic engagement with the field/home were expectations about the ethnographic research and writing I was to produce. These expectations located the possibility for useful theorizing (theorizing that counts) in a process of partially removing my home from my own affective geography, and attaching it through objective analysis to the larger disciplinary field and its careful collection of ‘fields’ where, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1995), “our Trobriands, our Nuerland, our Tepoztlan” continue to be. My home was to speak to theory X, Y, and Z, and be like field A and B and certainly very different from field C and D. Theory M does not seem to work, which makes me think N might. My disorienting subjectivities were to resurface as *locations*, stable enough under my own gaze to allow for that kind of useful and careful theorizing.

Instead of being able to make the ‘I was there’ move towards authority, I withdrew into a paralyzing ‘I am not there and everybody else still is.’ Authority became for me intimately connected to affective allegiance, and made any sense of authorial, theoretical mastery a preposterous and disrespectful gesture.

I wallowed at the edge of this troubled space for months, powerless and despaired, until out of exhaustion and in a caricatured zen-like state of mind I stepped right into it. It turned out that I was partially conceding the battle with the institution of anthropology, but I was making, as well, an agential and satisfying move, a compromise that allowed me to access particular kinds of truths that I deemed important. I pacified myself through finally writing, responding to yet another set of expectations (this time coming from the home) that I will finish my dissertation and finally start my life.

I hoped I would write from spaces of love and sweet yearning. I worked, instead, from other spaces, spaces of anger and disappointment, around the points where I could easily see my affective and analytical engagements with the field articulate. These were, on the one hand, spaces of temporary separation and removal, of splitting my allegiance along lines that would become clearer later, and on the other hand, fertile, generative

spaces. Their richness was located both in my analytical vision (recognizing familiar analytical possibilities) and in my redemptive affective relationship to what, by now, had become the ‘material.’

In writing one dissertation chapter about the transformations of the public spaces in the Sighișoara citadel, I built part of it around a series of moments of frustration, irritation, and even anger. These moments were implicated in the politics of my everyday life there, and connected to my extended experience growing up and living in the area, as well as the experience of people around me. These moments were also drawn in and seeping into the social and emotional intimacies I developed with what I came to see as my ‘allies.’ My attempts to establish a neutral, de-politicized presence in the ‘field’ became a ridiculous, and, after a couple of months, disabling exercise in futility. I chose sincerity—to hijack the term as proposed by John L. Jackson Jr. (Jackson 2005)—as my compass for sanity, managing my social persona, and conducting research.

The truth is that *I hated drinking*, and this is not to say I don’t drink alcohol myself, like most people that I know. *Drinking* conjures for me the practice of drinking alcohol, centered on public male sociality, with everything that seems to be connected to. It was not my intention to write about it or even think about it. My first day of explicit ‘fieldwork’ in Sighișoara, I looked for a job (I had no funding for my research but I had labor) and got to talk to Martin, who was running an NGO, ‘The Center,’ right in the heart of the historical citadel. For self-financing purposes, the Center owned a restaurant and a hostel with a courtyard and a patio in the central square of the citadel. My first encounter with Martin was on the patio around noon—he was drinking beer. I met him a couple of hours later, in the courtyard, when I discussed the details of my employment. He was still drinking, and we were joined by a second man, Ghiță, larger, in his fifties, sweating profusely, and also involved in the NGO. Ghiță was not drinking beer, but he had a smaller glass filled with a clear liquid, from which he was sipping noisily every now and then. I guessed vodka, and the next fifteen months proved me right. I was going to work for the ethnic cultures festival they were organizing, and after that they would see if they needed me anymore.

*I didn't think much of their sitting and drinking at the time. If anything, it brought some excitement, some bohemian flavor to the place. Everybody seemed to be sitting and drinking, either in the main square patios or on the more private patios or courtyards in the back. I sat down with Rareș and Vera (two high school friends of mine) for a coffee that first day. And I continued to sit and have teas and coffees and beers (in the evening), not as often as others, mainly with Janice, a Peace Corps volunteer working for my NGO. As the time went by, my sitting and drinking became more rare, replaced by the routine of the everyday work.*

*But the space always felt full, and smooth, and homogeneous, and inclusive, in a way. There was also a sense that the boundaries between work and leisure, labor and consumption, and even professional and personal were somewhat fluid and irrelevant.*

*Martin and Ghiță would mainly sit and talk and drink, sometimes coming late and staying late into the night, with friends/fellow drinkers and artists. It was hard for me to tell when they were on the job and when not, if they were paying for their drinks, getting them on the house or charging them to their mounting accounts. Rumors had it that Ghiță's debt to the Center was so large that he would not get paid anything at the end of the month.*

*It didn't bother me that much for the first couple of weeks. I soon became some kind of glorified secretary—I have to thank my friend J. A. for this term—able to write well and translate quickly and give efficient solutions to various problems, but having absolutely no executive power. I wasn't alone in this, the other three women I worked with shared my situation. I had to get higher approval for every little thing. I would go and check with Martin, but I soon learnt that he couldn't be bothered with any details and would refer me to Ghiță, and this was terribly inconvenient. The world outside Sighișoara, and actually outside the citadel, started business at eight or nine in the morning and was not interested in waiting for Ghiță to wake up and walk to work from his house across the street, two doors down from the Center. He would eventually show up around eleven, and sit out on the patio, smoking, waiting for noon, when the place could start serving hard liquor. Right after noon, he would start drinking, and soon other men would start appearing from nowhere and drink with him.*

*One week into my job, I decided to take matters into my own hands and I wrote without higher consultation my first document, a media partnership agreement. I printed it out and took it downstairs for him, in the courtyard, to read over and approve. Of course, he was sitting outside and drinking. I approached the table and I addressed him, holding the paper up, an invitation for him to look. He didn't even acknowledge my presence. I got closer to him—which I didn't really want to do, with all his sweating and panting—and meekly spoke into his ear, "Can you please read this?" He turned towards me, "not now, can't you see I'm busy?" I was completely frozen and I just couldn't move. He was sitting, with friends, in the middle of the day, talking politics or what not, too busy to do his own work that he was getting paid for. All I felt was frustrated, steaming anger. I left the printout on the table, next to his vodka glass, and I went upstairs, into my office, to calm down. But, the anger stayed there, smoldering, and I can feel it even now, rereading my notes and reminiscing about those moments. It took me weeks and long commiserating talks with other women (who had their own stories) to start pulling out the threads in my anger and see, in good old feminist fashion, the political in the personal. That experience got repeated, over and over, in many other ways, with the same sense of exclusion, and less worth. And that experience wasn't mine only.*

*I obviously hadn't entered this particular plane of interpretation without baggage. For the past fifteen years I had witnessed in my own neighborhood in Tg. Mureș all the drinking establishments—which we called "crâșme"—sprouting and thriving, when many other businesses failed. Just within two blocks of my home there were seven of them. The pubs, mere holes in the wall, would always be full with working men, particularly in the evening. They were vital spaces of male sociality, conveniently harboring men away from their home chores, and wives, and children. It would be gratuitous, maybe, to rant about the deep-seeded misogyny in Romania which has survived despite the socialist promises for gender equality and equivalence. The socialist state had mostly left the family alone<sup>2</sup> (and memories of the family as "the basic cell of society" are still pounding in my head, residues from my first fourteen years of life, and*

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion, see Gal, S., and G. Kligman. 2000a. *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*: Princeton University Press. Gal, S., and G. Kligman. Editors. 2000b. *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism*: Princeton University Press.

*textbooks, newspapers, and the TV). So men have left women to do their 'job' at home and have retreated into public spaces, drinking and talking. Many people in Romania have lately become more ambivalent about drinking, recognizing it as indexing some kind of problem, but unwilling to clearly relate it to structural, gendered inequalities. Between two jokes about men beating up wives that deserve it, people would admit that domestic violence is bad and exists because abused, the alcohol "takes your mind," especially if you're poor.*

*In Sighișoara, all the sitting and drinking pointed for me to the fact that the current spatial, economic, and political transformations were incredibly accommodating to these gender arrangements. Male sociality, time consuming and relying heavily on public consumption of alcohol or just public consumption, was central in many ways to the transformation of the citadel, and the citadel square in particular, into a tourist space, to be consumed and to consume in. Over the past four years, the square had been almost completely covered with terase (patios) and vendor stands, drawing most of their sales from alcohol.*

*Drinking seemed to be about taking time away from all kinds of labor, paid or domestic. Martin and Ghiță were sitting and drinking, and I have seen Rareș (who was running a small hotel) and his friends drinking in the square, during the day but especially in the evening, while I knew his wife, Vera, was at home alone with their son.*

*But this didn't mean that all men working there would drink, especially when it came to working hours. Nea' András and nea' Dorel, two handymen hired by the Center, had unsurprisingly a drinking habit, as well. They would arrive, punctually, at 7 AM every day to do their work. I would bump into them downstairs in the bar while I was getting my coffee, where they would often purchase a "déci," the Hungarian short for 100 ml, of the cheap cumin liquor "Rachiu Secuiesc." Sometimes, they would bring their own alcohol. They would diligently go in the other downstairs, where the central water heater was, sit quietly for an hour or so, sipping their liquor. Despite my growing aversion for men's drinking, I almost found that endearing. When I went home to Tg. Mureș, my parents would always want to hear more stories about the two, and couldn't get enough of András and Dorel's disappearing and drinking act. But, this act didn't last that long. As soon as Martin figured out what they were doing, midway through the fall,*

*made them come in at 8, since they were starting to work at 8 anyway, and ordered them not to drink while on the job. Thus, drinking was, in a way, implicated in drawing boundaries between work and leisure that were not only gendered, but also classed.*

*During my stay in Sighișoara I worked with another NGO, SD, which was started as a way to stop the Dracula Park project. Work might be too pretentious a term. We would actually meet and talk every week, Tuesday afternoons and late into the evenings. The people in the organization, mostly men, were very concerned with high moral standards, which ranged confusingly from progressive politics to very conservative Christian views. They didn't like Martin, and his drinking, and any extensive public drinking. They didn't like the local administration and all the big and small corruption that everybody seemed to be involved with. One February Tuesday, we decided to hold our weekly meeting at the International Café, owned by a foreign missionary organization also located in the citadel. The café served no alcohol, but rather pricy coffee and locally made and American recipe-ed sweets. We had teas and cookies and talked for about two hours about the past, present, and future of Sighișoara, as usual. I imagine that if it had been summer, we would have sat on the café's patio in the square, a few meters away from the other, alcohol-serving, establishments.*

*It occurred to me, then, that this tea drinking (and the meetings every Tuesday) is just like drinking alcohol, touching elbows with Martin, and Ghiță, and all the other men. It wasn't all about alcohol, or drinking, it was about being able to take this time to sit and do absolutely nothing, away from home, its chores, wives, and children. It was a space that I had access to because I was young, and single, and financially independent, and doing research. (The other woman that attended regularly was also young, single, and financially independent, and would be the meeting's "secretary," taking notes.) Male sociality, alcohol or no alcohol, was pleating well with the commercialization of these spaces.*

*About three months into my 'tenure' at the Center, a new character entered the scene: Marga, who later also became a really good friend of mine. A southern transplant to Sighișoara, she was a Sociology doctoral student looking for some interesting work in this small town where she was stuck after marrying her local husband. Marga was bold, articulate, and self-assured. And, boy, she knew how to drink. I was working at the time*

*with a graphic designer on a brochure for the organization and for its hostel, playing the same frustrating ‘take it to Ghiță for approval’ game. We thought we were done, and I excitedly brought the final printed proofs downstairs, slightly cut off at the bottom by the printer’s settings. Marga, who was about to be hired by the NGO, was in the courtyard, drinking vodka shots and smoking with Ghiță and Martin. She gave fairly bold and uncensored (and malicious, I thought) advice on the brochure, joining Ghiță in taking apart the whole thing: this is not poetic enough, this is too poetic, I don’t like the pictures, oh, and there is no bottom part. I felt like I was going to lose my mind seeing my work of days of thinking and writing being thoughtlessly trampled on between sips of vodka and distracted bits of loud conversation. I remember thinking later that this whole fieldwork thing might turn me into an alcoholic, if I ever want to have full access to those decision spaces. Marga was in the end hired and put to work, just like the other nice women in the organization. And, once she got pregnant, her gender transgressing days were over. She was soon on the other side, plowing away through piles of work and frustration, grants and reports to write, slack to pick up from Martin and Ghiță.*

*So drinking was not only gendered and classed. It was also about decision making, about arrangements of power, about defining, performing, and enforcing hierarchies. And, as it turned out, it was about shaping politics, and particular kinds of access to the public sphere, all related to consumption and leisure.*

*As small and sometimes inconsequential as it is, SD still participates in the local politics, and its members are inserting themselves, and their issues, in the local political scene. Their feminized participation—both as an NGO/feminized politics and tea-sippers/cookie-eaters—was balanced out by their access to leisure in this space as well as by their assertion that they are doing politics. They were timidly shaping themselves into political actors, into people that matter, and thinking of them I am reminded that doing politics is a practical issue, it takes time, and only those that are able to take time for themselves are able to participate.*

*The citadel square was literally a space where politics happened and connected to the local economy. The Center’s patio, as well as the other public or semi-public ones in the square and the courtyards, would often be frequented by local business owners and managers, in particular the tourist ones. They all seemed to be friends, and would spend*



*long hours talking and drinking, probably discussing national politics, and sports, and local politics and business. One of the two tourist associations in town, and the most powerful, was made up of people that I would often see sitting together, even late into the evening. Some of them would be elected in the Local Council, frequently voting on issues related to public and city owned spaces, preparing them for tourism and consumption.*

I had set out to write about capitalism, attempting to find ways to talk about it and understand its workings, in particular those related to the transformations of public spaces in Sighișoara. My venting as theorizing significantly detoured my analysis and I ended up feeling that I couldn't talk about capitalism without explicitly linking it to gendered arrangements of power, consumption, leisure and labor. Rather than being a central object of my project, tourism and tourist development became more of a mode of articulating all these, above-mentioned, issues.

I wrote—out of intellectual laziness, some might say—from the inside of this troubled space of intersecting subjectivities and unashamed, self-serving affective curiosity. My self-reflexive theorizing and writing allowed me access to truths that I can be at peace with and I can ally myself with comfortably. I was, in a way, settling for soft, weak authority, centered on my experience, my self-awareness, as well as a disciplinary-wide, shared paranoia about the limits and politics of representation.

But, I ask, what kind of anthropology is this? What kind of ethnography is this? How far is it from something that, as Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen aptly put it, “seems devoid of the capacity to empower anyone but the writer and the reader for whom it serves as academic collateral or therapy” (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen 1989)? In trying to resolve the ethical issues that have historically plagued the ethnographic process, how far is self-reflexive writing (mine, in this particular case) from, simply put, impressionistic, self-absorbed travel writing? How much redemptive weight can I put on my own bitter-sweet affective engagement with my own home, on my conviction that my partial truths, truths that emerge out of particular situations, are truths that matter?

The only solid (but not unproblematic) ground from where I can ultimately speak is my feminist politics, which articulate, partially and often on an affective level, with the lived experiences of the many women I worked with in Sighișoara. My politics (in their

abstract but mostly in their lived incarnations) helped me see how my allegiance to my beloved home can split along lines that can both privilege the women's experience and be grounded in my problematic, colonizing presence. Few of the women I worked with would recognize themselves in any account of my feminist politics, and this makes me suspicious (as it should make anyone) of the possibility for a feminist ethnography, or activist anthropology for that matter. This doesn't mean that the possibility does not exist—we should be all making room for it by recognizing the limits of trying to represent other people's experiences, and by striving instead to provide something closer to a modest and sincere testimony.

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