# TEACHING ROMANI LITERATURES IN A GLOBAL CLASSROOM

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## Abstract

This presentation focuses on the challenges and key takeaways from teaching Romani literatures in a global classroom open to enrollment to students from diverse academic backgrounds across the network. *The Literatures of the Roma* course was designed to explore works written by Romani authors in national and transnational contexts, while also examining the interrelationship between representations of "Gypsies" by non-Romani authors and questions of identity and self-representation in Romani writers' works. The course builds on the diverse perspectives and cultural capital of the students by inviting them to co-create content in the form of a class book, through activities such translating and adapting original works, as well as comparing different translations of the same text. In this presentation, I aim to illustrate a conceptual framework and approach for teaching the complex and underexplored literary output of Romani authors, alongside innovative, student-centered, project-based methods for engagement in the liberal arts classroom.

*Keywords: Romani, literature, teaching, Roma, Gypsy.*

## 1. Context

*The Literatures of the Roma (Gypsies)* course was conceived with the mission to explore works by Romani authors in national and transnational contexts and to reflect on the interrelationship between representations of "Gypsies" by non-Romani authors and questions of identity and self-representation in Romani writers' work. The course generated significant interest during its pilot phase in fall 2024. To meet growing demand, it was re-offered in Spring 2025, and will continue to play an essential role in Bard College's global network curriculum.

Part of the Open Society University Network (OSUN) curriculum, the course is open to students from across the network. Participants come from diverse academic disciplines and member institutions, with demographic makeup and institutional representation varying each semester. Over two semesters, students have joined from eight institutions, including the American University of Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan), Bard College (US), Bard College Berlin (Germany), Bard Early College in New Orleans (US), Bard Early College in Baltimore (US), Bard College at Simon's Rock (US), Central European University (Austria), and Parami University (Myanmar).

Students' academic backgrounds are broad, spanning disciplines such as liberal arts, chemistry, biology, human rights, environmental and urban studies, politics, philosophy, Middle Eastern studies, and more. Some students major in literature, while others may have never taken a literature course before. Academic levels also vary widely: students at Bard Early Colleges in 11th or 12th grade learn alongside graduating college seniors and graduate students.

## 2. Course definition and learning objectives

Fascination with the Roma has resulted in a large body of works produced over centuries by non-Roma authors. These works, in turn, have shaped societal perceptions and norms of engagement, playing a central role in the fictitious and exceedingly negative stereotyping and persecution of the Roma. Meanwhile, little attention has been paid to the literature and art created by Romani authors themselves—works that counter exoticized and often dehumanizing images and allow for authentic self-representation. This course provides students with the opportunity to examine stereotypes associated with the Roma and engage directly with primary sources—poetry, prose, essays, and art—produced by Romani authors, as well as collective forms of Romani art such as fairy tales and songs. Students explore themes of "the other," identity, class, race, gender, location (and dislocation), belonging, and the often-overlooked experiences of Romani slavery and the Holocaust, among others.

The course's learning objectives are to:
1. Develop the capacity to think critically about portrayals of the Roma (Gypsies) in literature and the arts created by non-Roma authors, and understand the personal, social, and ethical implications of such characterizations.
2. Acquire essential introductory translation skills.
3. Learn to work collaboratively and manage projects effectively.
4. Recognize key themes in the literatures of the Roma and place these themes in social, historical, and cultural contexts.
5. Reflect on one's own cultural conditioning and biases toward people perceived as "others", fostering a better understanding of others.
6. Apply the knowledge and skills gained in the course to broader discourses.

## 3. Methodology and core activities

Building on the students' diverse cultural (including linguistic), academic, and geographic backgrounds, they are given a choice of: 1) translating a text by a Romani author or a non-Romani author engaging with themes related to the representation of "Gypsies" 2) adapting such a text, or 3) comparing two different translations of the same text.

The two anthologies produced during the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 courses reflect the diversity of the students and their choices. They include translations from Spanish, Slovak, Hungarian, Tajik, Uzbek, Burmese, Russian, French, Italian, and Arabic, representing a range of authors—many of whom are of Romani (Roma, Sinti) or Dom descent—writing across national borders.

In addition to their individual projects (translation, adaptation, or comparison), students team up in pairs to illustrate and write a one- to two-paragraph introduction to each other's work. These introductions together form the chapter titled "Introduction." By the end of the course, each student has collaborated closely with several partners by: 1) illustrating another student's work, 2) introducing another student's work, 3) working with a peer who illustrates their own work, and 4) working with another peer who writes their introduction. In other words, each student is part of four different pairs centered on producing their own content as well as two additional pieces—one introduction and one illustration—for other students' works.

This pairing system greatly increases student engagement with each other's work and fosters deeper familiarity, understanding, and appreciation of each other's choices, perspectives, and cultural contexts. Students present their projects in pairs (the creators of the written content together with their illustrators) at the end of the course. The content produced by students will be compiled into a student anthology, with the editorial decisions (title, sequence of works, layout) determined collectively.

## 4. Book layout and editorial choices

The book consists of four main sections: 1. a "Preface" written by the instructor, 2. an "Introduction" co-written by the students, with each student introducing another's work, 3. Individual contributions–translations, adaptations, and comparative analyses– alongside original illustrations created by the students, and 4. an "Afterword" written by the instructor. The layout of the book is determined by the students and represents the culmination of a semester-long conversation on how best curate and present the story they want the anthology to tell–through their works and based on their classroom discussions. These curatorial decisions can change from semester to semester. In Fall 2024, students opted to organize the content based on the nature of the contributions, dividing the book into three sections: 1. Translation, 2. Adaptation, and 3. Comparative Analyses, and listed the works in that sequence.

In contrast, during the Spring 2025 semester, students decided against dividing the collection by activity type or by authors' ethnic identities (e.g., Roma vs. non-Roma). Over the course of the semester, class discussions underscored the fluidity of categories such as identity, belonging, representation, and self-representation. As a result, students were cautious not to impose artificial divisions or reinforce binaries that could undermine the complexity of the texts.

Although they considered a randomized juxtaposition of texts, they ultimately rejected this approach. Such randomness, they realized, might inadvertently diminish the impact of certain works—for example, placing a poem about the Romani Holocaust by a Roma author directly beside a lighthearted pop song by a non-Roma Burmese artist likening their own life experience to the "aimlessness" of the "Gypsy" lifestyle could unintentionally trivialize the former.

The group ultimately agreed on one organizing principle that felt more neutral and less imposing: a loosely interpreted chronological order, based on the authors' lifespans. Still, they acknowledged that chronology alone does not construct a cohesive thematic narrative. Therefore, they also chose to introduce

original works (translations and comparative analyses) before adaptations, believing that adaptations have the capacity to extend and transform the original texts. As such, adaptations are placed at the end of the anthology to signal their role in sustaining and reimagining the original works.

## 5. Learning benefits and challenges

Centering the course content and learning process around the creation of a course book has proven to be highly motivating for students. The prospect of having their work "published" excites them, and they are inspired by the idea of seeing their texts illustrated by peers. This collaborative project not only fosters engagement but also ensures that the course content remains relevant to the students' geographic, cultural, and academic contexts. By offering students multiple options—translation, adaptation, or comparative analysis—to engage with texts, the course design accommodates diverse student backgrounds, interests, and academic strengths.

Because the student cohort varies each semester, inviting students to co-create course content ensures that the readings remain representative of their lived experiences and cultural contexts. In doing so, the course facilitates the discovery and inclusion of literary works that may not be widely known or previously translated into English, enriching the available body of Romani literature along with reinvigorating through new translations discussions of texts that engage with the Gypsy theme.

Project-based learning of this kind equips students with a variety of practical and academic skills. Regardless of whether they choose to translate, adapt, or compare texts, students are required to engage deeply with the source material. Translators must consider word choice, rhyme and rhythm, formal characteristics, emotional nuances, to name a few. Adaptors reflect on the transformation of meaning when making decisions about their word choices or adapting the text to a new medium—whether poetry, prose, song or musical arrangement. To list a few examples, students have adapted a short story to a film script, an origin myth to a sci-fi short story, a song to a musical arrangement, a poem to a coming-of-age story and a graphic novel. Those comparing two translations must analyze subtle differences in word choices, tone, and form, intended audience…and begin to appreciate the translator's creative role. The result is a richer, more immersive engagement with the text across languages and contexts.

This course design is particularly well-suited for the teaching of Romani literatures, a body of work that is inherently transnational. It allows for the inclusion of national contexts that are meaningful to the students themselves, thereby broadening the scope of the course and increasing its global relevance.

While the benefits of this model far outweigh its challenges, there are a few difficulties worth noting. One logistical challenge is that not all students are equally prepared to work effectively in teams. Because the final product—the anthology—is so interconnected, delays by a single student can affect others. Illustrators cannot begin without finalized texts; introductory pieces cannot be written until those texts are submitted; and the overall layout cannot be determined until all content is in place. This interdependence requires the instructor to monitor student progress closely and intervene when necessary to prevent bottlenecks.

A more nuanced challenge lies in the different ways Roma and non-Roma students relate to the course material. Many works by Romani authors contain traces of generational trauma, which Roma students often recognize and viscerally experience. For some Roma students, this course represents their first academic encounter with their own culture. That experience can elicit complex emotions: a renewed pride in cultural heritage, but also a painful confrontation with systemic marginalization and personal or familial trauma.

In emotionally charged moments, the classroom can become a space of vulnerability. Non-Roma students, aware of the weight of these experiences, may become cautious—sometimes overly so—in contributing to discussions. They may fear offending or misrepresenting their Roma peers or questioning lived experiences that they cannot fully comprehend. As a result, they may participate less, leading to an imbalance in dialogue. In such moments, the instructor plays a critical role in fostering a space of trust and mutual respect. It is important to acknowledge the emotional dimensions that Roma students bring into the classroom while also encouraging open, respectful, and reflective participation from all students. Careful facilitation can help ensure that the class remains both intellectually rigorous and emotionally supportive, enabling all students to learn from one another's experiences and perspectives.

Lastly, the very question whether there exists a transnational literary phenomenon that can be called *Romani literature,* or whether it is more accurate to speak of *Romani literatures* informed primarily by the authors' national contexts, remains open to debate. Regarding questions of authorial identity, some writers take pride in being identified as Romani author and actively promote writing in Romani as a means of establishing a transnational Romani literary tradition. Others, however, assert that their literary work should be considered within the framework of their national literary canon or as part of the literature of the linguistic community whose language they write in, independent from their Romani ethnic origins. The

course acknowledges the diversity of these perspectives and positions and intentionally cultivates an awareness of the heterogeneity that defines its subject matter.

## 6. Conclusion

*The Literatures of the Roma* course invites students to explore a transnational literary tradition that remains significantly underrepresented in academic discourses. By engaging students in the production of course content—through translation, adaptation, or comparative analysis—the course not only addresses the limited availability of Romani texts in English but also leverages students' cultural and linguistic capital to enrich the curriculum. This participatory model reinvigorates discussions surrounding literary representations of Gypsies and promotes the creation of otherwise inaccessible content which becomes a valuable asset for both the course and broader scholarly engagement.

While originally designed for a global classroom, the course structure is equally adaptable to local contexts, particularly in light of increasingly diverse student populations. Through its project-based approach, the course mirrors the heterogeneity of Romani literary output and the diverse traditions of literary representations of Gypsies, while encouraging students to draw from their own cultural and geographical backgrounds. This fosters deeper personal investment and more meaningful collaboration.

Although the anthology produced through the course centers on representations and self-representations of the Romani experience—or perceptions thereof—the course design offers a replicable model for engaging with the literary voices of other historically marginalized, silenced, or "othered" communities.