

BOOK REVIEW

WILEY

P. Berta***Materializing Difference: Consumer Culture, Politics, and Ethnicity among Romanian Roma.***

University of Toronto Press, 2019. 399 pp. £67.99 (hardback) £23.99 (paperback).

Building on over 20 years of research with the Gabor and Cărhar Roma, Péter Berta's *Materializing Difference* is one of the most remarkable books in consumption studies to date. The book is concerned with the second-hand trade of beakers and roofed tankards. If you, like me, associate beakers with what chemists use and have never heard of a roofed tankard, they are like beer steins. Or rather, they are like beer steins as long you are not talking to somebody who knows what they are, because in that case they most certainly are *not* beer steins. The joke is dumb because as Berta so engagingly and expertly shows, for the Gabor Roma, the right antique roofed tankard could go for £300,000 in the "ethnicized" economy for such things. That same roofed tankard might only go for £8,500 in the "mainstream" market, which is, to say the least, somewhat of a discrepancy in value which is wrapped up in a perceived discrepancy in values. As is usually the case with these types of discrepancies, it is never quite clear which of the two is the motorcycle and which is the sidecar, as they are always traveling at around the same speed and in the same direction.

If this all seems a little bit strange, that might be because Berta is doing a particular type of social science about a particular type of social phenomenon that only makes sense if you embrace the real world as your starting point. For Berta, a trained anthropologist appointed to the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies at University College London, what can be somewhat mushy concepts in less sure hands like meaning, materiality, and authenticity send both people and objects into motion, rather than being relegated to just being part of the error term. Across 13 chapters and 3 substantive subsections, *Materializing Difference* is a transnational case of post-socialist economies in motion at the intersection of materiality, authenticity, honor, masculinity, status, belonging, culture, economy, and power. If that sounds like a lot, it is, but it is a rewarding lot indeed.

In the first of three parts, Berta highlights the duality of status between prestige objects and their owners. In this arrangement, objects increase in value as their owners increase in status, just as owners increase in status as their objects increase in value. Those statuses traverse different spheres of power, be they economic, political, or social, and can grease the wheels for the types of marriage alliances found among the Medici in Florence during the Renaissance. It is a story of capital conversions, but not of the bumper sticker variety you would find in straightforward Bourdieusian analyses.

In the second part of the book, Berta shifts to looking at the Gabor in relation to the Cărhar Roma. As is typically the case, most of the within-population homogeneity assumed by outsiders gives way to heterogeneity between groups of insiders. And like all subtle group divisions, claims of identity are also claims of moral worth, and with moral hierarchies also comes hierarchical treatments in relational exchange. The traded prestige objects themselves are also imbued with beliefs of moral righteousness. This all plays out through fabricating the authenticity of objects in interethnic trade, sometimes subtly, and sometimes throughout outright fraud. At stake is not just ownership, but also what it means to consume prestige goods and be a person of high standing.

The third part of the book shifts gears to present something like the £300,000 roofed tankard of a methodological and theoretical appendices. Berta advocates for studying the social lives of objects. Perhaps out of force of habit given the history of ethnography as method, ethnographic works tend to center around particular places,

rather than moving around with objects of study as they hurdle through time and space. Having myself also ethnographically followed an object as it changes hands across multiple domains, I quite agree with Berta's pitch, but then again, of course I do. Perhaps simply for accounting—Berta by this point has covered practically every social configuration and social relation through objects—the book closes with a bird's eye view of macro-level level historical change. Here, he temporally situates his analysis within a particular generation in a particular time and place; the prestige objects of post-Socialist Gabor Roma children trend more to the standardly globalized ones, rather than the tankards of generations past.

In total, *Materializing Difference* is wildly and impressively interdisciplinary, and this is no small feat. Interdisciplinarity is, in my experience, sometimes better in theory than it is in practice. Too frequently once you really take a look under the hood, as Gertrude Stein famously said of her hometown of Oakland, California, "there's no there there." It is from this curmudgeonly spirit that I say *Materializing Difference* is exceptional, in that it is *all* there. Regarding audience and that dreaded word "fit," it is a challenging but rewarding book that readers from a variety of fields and substantive interests will benefit from reading. Which reminds me that for full disclosure I should mention it is an awarded book too, and that I was on the committee for the 2019 Consumers & Consumption section of the American Sociological Association that recognized *Materializing Difference* with our book award. Though the section's award plaque is by no evaluative measure as precious as the roofed tankards at the heart of Berta's book, the book itself is nearly priceless indeed.

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