In September 2004, I was debriefed on the task of American Studies in former Communist Europe. At the in-country Fulbright orientation for Romania, several representatives from the U.S. Embassy in Bucharest spoke to a room of grantees. One provided a useful update on poverty, political corruption, the treatment of ethnic and national minorities, and other social matters, and another gave practical information on living in Romania, such as how to evade pickpockets. One man introduced himself as a historian, and then enlightened the small assembly with a protracted outline of Romanian history. Almost all of the information he recited could be found in the back pages of my Rough Guide to Romania, but the man’s observations about the role of American Studies in post-transition Europe held my attention. The state historian’s narrative informed us of how American Studies played a vital part in Reaganism’s storied triumph over Marxism in Eastern Europe. American Studies was plain old American history; no familiarity with the cultural, much less the post-nationalist,² turn in American Studies surfaced in his talk. The historian’s address laid bare more than merely an embarrassing lack of knowledge about what has been taking place in American Studies over the past ten years, however. The post-9/11 aim of Fulbright, I was notified, is to continue to disseminate “American values,” to promote and foster democracy abroad, to continue manifesting the American cultural destiny, in particular in Muslim Middle Eastern and former Communist countries. It is probably unnecessary to say that American values and democracy may be translated as “free-market” capitalism, as this is a missionary project whose worth is beyond inquiry. In that now meta-month of September, the thirty-day phase on the American calendar that marks the bloody new birth of a nation, I learned that it was my turn to play a part in history. Pickpockets are a paltry matter when faced with the real menace. By teaching American Studies in Romania I would be contributing to the War on Terror.

I acknowledge Hardt and Negri’s persuasive third-stage Marxist theory of panoptic global sovereignty, or Empire, as now “a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule” (xii). Due to

---

globalization, in other words, isolated forms of nationalism – the concept that autonomous nations acting according to policies of self-determination – are obsolete. Hardt and Negri are unquestionably on to something, but this doesn’t mean that the American Hegemon is extinct. Indeed, the ordeal of 9/11 has provided new momentum to the schemes of American intercession, and the new hegemony is evident in former Communist Central Europe. The American post-9/11 cultural imperialist exceptionalism has been displayed insistently in the distinctly non-Deleuzian re-territorialization of Romania, facilitated by the country’s uncanny receptiveness toward the establishment of U.S. military sites, strategic launching pads for acts of “humanitarian interventionism” to Iraq. As the State Department historian suggested, going back to the 1960s and winding up with the coup d’état in Bucharest in 1989, American Studies in Romania represented a kind of vanguard for the propagation of Western capitalism and American nationalism. Americans teaching American Studies found an eager reception. For Romanian students, American Studies offered a sexy appeal, as America was antithetic to everything Romanian. As for Americans who taught American Studies, their mere presence in a Communist country all but personified the U.S. dissemination of anticommunist ideology. Now, under the current state of global affairs, the dissemination of Americanism arises from a different motivation than that of the Cold War period.

When I applied for my second Fulbright, I had not been to Romania since I’d left in 1999, and during the hiatus friends and former students told me that the society was experiencing brisk change, including educational reform in the academic culture. So in my application to return to Romania I expressed an interest in observing how the academic culture, and specifically American Studies, had progressed since my last posting in the late nineties. My return to Romania therefore was motivated by an interest in seeing how American Studies had developed since the late transition period there. Also, I needed to write a draft of a book, and having a Fulbright would give me the time to compose. In other words, though he would insert me, interpellate me, as an emissary of the new American state objectives, the state historian’s conscripting of me as a New Warrior against Terror exhibited perfectly my position as an outsider. Nevertheless, though situated as an outsider in the Romanian academic culture, I was paradoxically in a position to observe how the Fulbright American Studies exceptionalist ideology collides with the New American Studies post-nationalist movement. My outsider status was both an impediment and something of an advantage. I should advise here therefore that my comments are mostly anecdotal and speculative – my views derive from being merely a spectator of the new Romania. Unlike the state historian I cannot claim to be an authority on the Old. I can only essay a rough guide to Romanian academic culture.
New Negro, New American Studies

During my year in Romania the subject of the book I was writing was the Jamaican Harlem Renaissance author Claude McKay. I decided that it would be interesting for Romanian upper-level students to learn about my research and speculative analysis, so I taught a class I called Black Modernism. I thought that it would be instructive for the students to contemplate the inception of black literature at the moment when it both helped to shape while at the same time stage a confrontation with the cultural expressions of Modernism and the ideological manifestations of modernity. In addition, as a native ambassador of American Studies, I thought it would be a good way to articulate a few points about what has been taking place in its U.S. form over the last few years – an intelligence update from my office of homeland study.

As my subject is the intersection of Modernist literature and the historiography of the New American Studies, I start with Michael Denning’s The Cultural Front: The Laboring of Culture in the Twentieth Century (1996). Denning traces the emergence of the New American Studies to the Popular Front of the 1930s, thereby rescuing the naissance of American Studies from the Cold War nationalist exceptionalist model. His work suggests that the allied developments of American Studies and populist leftism were made up of compound materializations. Alan Wald’s work validates this assertion. According to Wald, in dramatic contrast to the New Left attenuation of the “Old” interwar Left as a line-toeing congress of Orwellian prole automatons, Marxism and the Popular Front of the between-the-wars phase were composed of something like what Hardt and Negri would identify as Deleuzian multiplicities, incessantly adapting in order to struggle against ideology. Though Cary Nelson describes North American poetry of the 1930s in terms of a chorale effect, moreover, the chorus is anything but a bland Coca-Cola harmony. Nelson’s between-the-wars American poetry is a polyphony of countervoices, a version of the interwar Left that shatters the New Left attenuation of its antecedent as a homogeneous, kowtowing Old Left Marxism. Having placed Denning’s rearticulation of American Studies in the central position, I would complicate his claim now by interposing William J. Maxwell’s scholarship in New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars (1999). The scholarly work of New Negro, Old Left suggests that the twin advents of the New Negro movement and the Communist Party of the USA at the beginning of the 1920s pushes the point of origin for the cultures-of-impe-

rialism model of American Studies back a decade further than Denning’s mid-thirties derivation. Tracing American Studies to the Popular Front, or its intellectual expression the Cultural Front – a compound mode of leftist politics that is more easily translatable to and more comfortable for the New Left culture of multiplicity – tends to bypass the uncomfortable fact that party Communism played the central role in articulating American Studies at its birth, a point of departure that Maxwell’s work won’t leave alone. While teaching my class on Black Modernism in Romania I talked about how I see the sources for American Studies as represented in such preliminary acts as McKay’s cultural analysis, memoir, and journalism, and even more forcefully in his fiction and poetry. As a means for approaching the difficulties posed by reading the 1930s writings of authors like Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Richard Wright through the bête-noir of Black Marxism, the class traced McKay’s often dissonant mingling of black nationalism, diaspora transnationalism, Communist and Trotskyist internationalism, and sexual dissidence in the 1920s.

Teaching black Marxist writers presents difficulties in both the U.S. as well as in a former Communist totalitarian country, especially when one suggests that American Studies traces its dust tracks in the road to Marxist theory and practice. That is to say, within the critical field of American Studies, to paraphrase Derrida, no phenomenological outside to historical materialism exists. A knowledge of the esoteric origins of American Studies, sources that are essential and ineffaceable, presents a radical challenge to changes taking place in the Romanian academic culture. A becoming-EU nation, Romania is swiftly and frantically moving toward implementing the capitalist model in the university. This means that the Romanian university must adopt EU policies, including, a bit ironically, moving toward adapting to the standard American-style signs of public college “conversion”: the funding of professional training programs at the expense of academic studies, promoting the idea that university colleges and programs should seek privatized financing, and so on. Because of its multinational collective formation, the EU may appear to be refashioning a kind of leftist pluralism, a European version of multicultural, transnational politics. But the truth is, the European Union is a form of multinational corporate incursion; the EU’s variety of transnationalism is invested in expanding corporate, late capitalist borders, a fact that can be observed in the western European labor and resources grab taking place in post-transition economies like Romania’s. The relationship between the spread of EU economics to former Communist countries and the difficulties of teaching American Studies in Romania may seem indistinct. But I think that the association is crucial for the New American Studies as it advances an academic mode of internationalism. In countries like Romania, can the field of American Studies enter the
higher educational domain of translating the New while at the same time re-collecting the lived modern, remembering the Old (Left) when it was new?

Remembering the New

By way of articulating the importance of politics and history as such matters intersect with race and nationalism, I found it useful to discuss with my class McKay’s FBI file, available through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Fetching the black author’s Red bones from the rightwing closet and inspecting the skeleton close up helped me articulate my view of the ethical task of U.S. ethnic literary study. Writing at the frontiers of the modern, McKay acted in material contest with capitalist and imperialist ideology. His 119-page Bureau of Investigation file demonstrates this with a vengeance. The dossier shows that the State Department began its rigorous surveillance of the black author when he went to Russia in the early 1920s to participate in the Fourth Congress of the Third International Soviet. The bureau agents identify their black subject as a member of Communist front groups, a picturesque term now, a bit moldy around the edges, but in its time a lethal indication that the U.S. government believed it had the right to investigate anyone belonging to a suspicious cell, to update the terminology. The bureau archivists were right. Among such groups were the underground African Blood Brotherhood and the radical, racially integrated, and just as secretive Industrial Workers of the World. The substance of the bureau’s anxiety was that McKay would return and indoctrinate impressionable black laborers into joining the Communist Party of the USA, formed around the time when he was in Russia. When McKay was believed to be returning from Russia to the U.S. in 1923, the file shows, agents kept up anxious sentinels at key national contact points, exchanging fretful memoranda with intelligence on his movements. McKay, code name Sasha, is omnipresent, lurking at every port-of-call entry – in one communiqué entering from Canada, in another from the Caribbean. McKay is a one-man

3 The U.S. state’s obsessive interest in McKay’s radical doings led to agents becoming interested in, then amassing information about McKay prior to his visit to the Soviet Union, and probably through British Intelligence, another state-run organization that assembled a fat file on McKay, the bureau agents learned of his activities in London in 1921. Agents portray McKay as a special operative for Sylvia Pankhurst, publisher of the maverick radical socialist periodical the Workers’ Dreadnought. Identifying a journalist like McKay as a subversive agent is one way of describing a correspondent for a radical periodical, and in McKay’s case this is not an unmerited representation.
political tempest, an ominous force crossing the wide Black Atlantic Sea and bearing straight for America.

Along with the depiction of McKay as a bohemian reprobate – he was queer – a noteworthy feature of the file is the portrayal of the black author’s interaction with Leon Trotsky. Trotsky submitted to an interview with McKay in Moscow; then the Bolshevik leader himself, stimulated by his meeting with the black intellectual worker, wrote an *Izvestia* piece titled “Answers to Comrade Claude MacKay” [sic], published in February 1923 – a bureau operative translated the article into English and placed it in the file, where I found it. In effect the doomed commissar formulates the concept of a Bolshevik-sponsored black Leninist vanguard, articulating the need “to have a small number of class-conscious negroes, young and devoted [who are] capable of connecting morally ... with the fate of the international working class.” The influence of Trotsky from the mid-twenties up until the mid-thirties on McKay cannot be understated, a sway that the black revolutionary author’s twenties writings visibly demonstrates. In Russia Trotsky gave McKay a new logic for how blacks could employ and indeed extend Marxist practice. It is critical that Trotsky, Commissar of War in the early twenties, supplied McKay with the assurance that Russia would support blacks in Africa and the Diaspora in their revolutionary aims. Indeed, the purpose for McKay’s attending the Fourth Soviet Congress in the first place, as an envoy, as a representative, of the African Blood Brotherhood, was to attain this kind of pledge of support.

Trotsky was expelled from Russian Communist Party in 1927, then forced to flee Russia the following year. A significant memorandum of history rests in the fact that while McKay lived as an émigré in Morocco in the late twenties, Trotsky lived in exile on the Turkish island of Prinkipo. Two years later the French colonial administration in Morocco would purloin McKay’s passport, and then when the author was called to explain why he was residing in Tangier without identification, the British counselor authority had an excuse to remove his right to travel in British territory. Prevented from returning to the U.S. because of his reputation as a notorious black Red, McKay, now an exile in a way he had never been before, found himself a colonial without a country. While in his exile, Trotsky articulated the “permanent revolution” theory, a scheme that was passionately critical of the Stalinist move toward consolidating power through a brutal Soviet state nationalism. My point was to clarify for my students the historical materialist act at work in McKay’s writings of the period. The date of *Permanent Revolution*’s publication, 1928, is crucial, as this theory is performed, adjusted through the idiom of Négritude, and merged with a kind of sexually dissident subterranean bohemianism, in McKay’s three consecutive novels of the late twenties: *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and the yet-
to-be published *Romance in Marseille* (c. 1929–1932), a novel he composed in Morocco. All three novels stage the theory of permanent revolution, the idea that anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist revolution must voyage beyond the boundaries of Russia to both the metropolitan core of capitalism, the Western nations, as well as their colonial territories in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. McKay’s adaptation of Trotskyist internationalism is the pluralistic political articulation of his Black Atlantic transnationalism. Here is where the challenge lies. On one hand, McKay’s Trotskyism represents a critique of state Communism, a resistance against the kind of psychotic totalitarianism Romania experienced. But translating McKay’s permanent revolution in the Romanian American Studies classroom means dredging up from the bottom of the Black Atlantic the very past that Romanians would like to see pitched indefinitely into the shadowy depths of the Black Sea.

Yet even in U.S. American Studies little historical memory of the kind of radicalism McKay agitated for remains. I believe that one may trace a link between this loss of memory and post-9/11 political culture. The Right’s confidence that history in its materialist form has achieved mortality is demonstrated vividly by a section of the FBI homepage set aside to release files made available through the FOIA. The FBI website prominently displays an FOIA “Library,” with an electronic “Reading Room.” Enacted in 1966, the FOIA lurched along toothless for a decade until the tumultuous Watergate era in the mid-1970s, when Ralph Nader headed an effort forcing legislation that enabled the law (Foerstel 48–49). In the late 1970s the bureau was finally constrained to release files on figures like McKay. The agency had dragged its heals because they claimed that the FOIA files contained still sensitive material, and declassification would jeopardize national security (an argument the state of course still counts on, as other parts of the FBI website make clear). The FBI was justifiably worried about being revealed as an organization of Stasi-like fanatics, persecuting anyone who did not toe the line of narrow ideological beliefs – in other words, that the chief danger to the American public was, after all, not Communism but the U.S. State’s policing of Communism within.

During the present time of obsession with international terrorism, however, the FBI is apparently no longer anxious about divulging classified information in the form of surveillance dossiers from the interwar period and even after. In fact, the FBI website readily avails the Internet surfer with formerly sensitive files through easy-access portable document format downloads, a prominent part of the bureau’s site being devoted to easy access to many dossiers, including McKay’s. Because of the relative lengthiness of the file, the McKay PDF “file” download is separated into two parts. The accessibility of the file isn’t surprising because the FBI has nothing to lose, as the threat posed by formerly dangerous radicals like McKay is no longer
viable. I suppose I might be grateful to the FBI for making the files so easily accessible, considering that only a few years ago obtaining such files, as Claire Culleton relates in her introduction to *Joyce and the G-Men* (2004), was such a grueling undertaking – as late as the late 1990s, the FBI placed mind-boggling barriers in the way of the legal right to use when it came to objects of surveillance during the interwar period. Culleton also talks about the fact that when she finally received the documents, most of the papers in Joyce’s file were almost completely lined out. So I guess I might also show some sign of gratefulness that, unlike Joyce’s twenty-page FOIA file, McKay’s is legible. But I don’t include a note of thanks to the FBI and State Department in the acknowledgments page of my book on McKay. One reason I have no gratitude toward the bureau is because the FBI site indicates no sense that the agency regrets the mayhem and malevolence of its past (or its present, it is almost unnecessary to say). On the contrary, the web page conveys an impression of the bureau being exceedingly pleased with itself – the evildoers were after all crushed and thereby silenced.

Perhaps this demonstration of the certainty that material *history* is finished is best exhibited by the agency’s separate section devoted to “Famous Persons,” a celebrity files link to records kept on luminary targets of observation like Pablo Picasso and John Lennon. Beyond the general self-satisfaction of the FOIA notables page, with its collection of classified intelligence on such nefarious characters as Albert Einstein, César Chávez, and Martin Luther King, the celebrity files communicate a sense of titillation, of pornographic thrill: the promise of access to the boudoir of JFK and Marilyn Monroe. It is noteworthy that Richard Wright – second only to Paul Robeson, the most famous black Communist of the 1930s – succeeds in getting onto the site set aside for celebrated if disreputable personalities (as does Robeson). However, McKay, the most notorious black Red of the 1920s, does not make it onto the celebrity pages. Agents Brennan and Hurley, the feds responsible for collecting most of McKay’s file, would be no doubt simultaneously pleased and disappointed.

Despite McKay’s historical disappearance, the file itself contains evidence of the black author’s creative powers, and one may see why the U.S., British, and French intelligence communities expended so much energy persecuting him. Even more than “If We Must Die,” the filers are captivated with McKay’s “America” (1921); the file contains a typed copy of the complete poem. Evidently the agents see in the sonnet all that is immoral and illicit about McKay. The date of the poem is vitally important. In 1921, while still in the U.S. and getting ready to make his way to Communist Russia – and a year before T.S. Eliot published *The Waste Land* – McKay penned a sonnet that lyricized the black radical poet’s rendering of twentieth-century angst, though a manifestly different kind of existential agony than the anxiety
expressed by Eliot’s fragmented, ghostly voices of yearning for more stable times. Like black abolitionist James M. Whitfield’s 1853 169-line poem with the same title, McKay’s “America” is a piercing critique of the conventional allegory of mother country as fostering freedom. The sonnet alleges America to be the feral, pitiless jungle big cat mother: “Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,/And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,/Stealing my breath of life, I will confess/I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!” (ll.1–4, Complete Poems 153). Distinguishing the maternal wild animal imagery throughout the poem is crucial. Written during a period of lynching mania, the poem’s upending of received sex/gender conditions invalidates the racist representation of the uncontrollable black male, characterized by the blackfaced Gus in The Birth of a Nation (1915), whose single-minded desire is to assault patriarchal America’s most valued possession, the white woman. The poem undoes the racist sexual certitude by making the white female the antagonist. The primal jungle beast, America, is a creature that retains absolute control over the black son. In the discourses of nationalism, race, and sexuality, America is represented as female according to the convention of the white goddess Columbia, America’s alias popularly identifiable in the shape of the Statue of Liberty, the statuesque, stony-eyed, rather imposing lady in New York Harbor whose lamp lights the way for her Atlantic-crossing immigrants. In a left-wing toppling of the hegemonic verticality, capsizing the positions of the righteous Palmer agent and Anarchist infiltrator suspected of plotting to overthrow the government, America is obliged to sit in the hot seat, as McKay rotates the harsh light of interrogation in the direction of Columbia’s countenance, forcing the truth torch to shed its light on the impassive face of America. McKay’s little black bomb of a poem illuminates America as the animal mother whose instinctual violence takes the shape of exclusionist, ironically tribal nationalism. Charily portioning out her passions, America nourishes her fair-haired children with the sweetest morsels, but to her despised brood, her lesser offspring, she spoons out the “bread of bitterness,” effectively starving the black minority. A maternal creature that consumes the flesh of her own unwanted young, moreover, America is ironically a savage cannibal, the embodiment of darkest Africa in the Western Imaginary. In this way the poet versifies what it means for the black subject both to taste from the fruits of America and at the same time be devoured alive by her. That is, from the point of view of her abject black foundling, Mother America, the loving nurturer of all, is a cold-blooded wild animal, ripping into the flesh of the African American minority.

Although in McKay’s “America” black people are refugees in the pays natal, the poem’s ambivalence is shaped by the fact that the child who has been grudgingly taken in nonetheless is devoted to his or her unwilling
guardian: “I will confess / I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.”
The lost, abused “youth” cannot refrain from adoring the adoptive mother because America after all presents the possibility of ameliorative change, as she embodies the promise of the new, of birth. While the masses of the black minority must reconstruct an obliterated past, retrieve their disregarded, buried black history and try to build a culture in the teeth of a sadistic social order, racism – in other words, achieve the paramount aim of the Negro Renaissance – blacks must simultaneously, paradoxically embrace the New, the promise of the future. The speaker is still in his formative years of American literary history because the Harlem Renaissance’s New Negro, the photonegative unintended issue of modernity, is a being who has risen from the ashes of blackface minstrels Uncle Tom and Jim Crow, figures who have been made extinct by the collective African American defiance to racist hegemony. With its headlong surge toward the modern, America is the collective performance of phenomenological becoming itself, and is therefore the stage for revolution. Although, like the New Negro, America is a figuration of the New, the form that the transformation may take is yet unknown. America’s modernity, in other words, is both the solution as well as the problem for its hard-pressed black underclass, as the modern, American-style, is the kissing cousin of capitalism and imperialism, the close ideological relations of nationalism and racism. A resolute survivor of the early twentieth-century lynching frenzy, the budding black offspring has no alternative but to act as revolutionary, as justly disobedient child.

The next six lines continue to evoke the image of America as the cannibalistic animal mother, as the youth, locked in a cage with her, is compelled to perform the act of big-cat tamer, cornered by the vicious beast. Yet ironically, Mother America feeds existence to her newborn. That is to say, mother country America, through a biological, inexorable regurgitation of the scraps of freedom – an act of nature that America, in her “vigor” and abundance, naturally cannot refrain from performing – supplies sustenance. Consequently, she supplies the sexually “erect” potency that is vital for regenerating the revolution that will effect her own downfall:

Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer. (ll.5–10)

The final quatrain puns on the darkness of the black speaker, the besieged dissenter, as he darkly gazes – as in Corinthians’ child who must finally grow up – into the future. The black son foresees America’s masterful experiment in modernity ultimately collapsing, its Lady Liberty granite
promise ultimately going the way of Shelley’s nearly obliterated “Ozymandias” (1818), “king of kings.” And though one might think that this would cause the insurgent to exult, to look forward to dancing on America’s grave, it has the opposite effect: “Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,/And see her might and granite wonders there,/Beneath the touch of Time’s unerring hand,/Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand” (ll.11–14). In the future, all that will be left of Lady Liberty is the pedestal. The idea of America’s annihilation makes the black anarchist mournful because America, distinguishing the horizons of Whitman’s lyrical democratic vistas, holds the promise of fulfillment. Nonetheless, its course, invested in capitalism, imperialism, and state nationalism – the combined cultural imaginary that jointly produces racism – seems destined, in a world engaged in bitter conflict, for disintegration. It is crucial that McKay generated “America” while planning to travel to Communist Russia, America’s dark Other, because it is necessary to understand that his existence in the Leninist Bolshevik nation, something of a second adopted country, helped shape his thoughts on his previously adoptive motherland. As he hesitantly consents to the prospect of Whitman’s optimism for America (an optimism Whitman nearly lost for the same reasons McKay verbalizes, as the black poet knows), he is also ambivalent about the sort of millenarian vision of modernity Eliot and his advocates are sure of. McKay’s signing of modern America does not evoke the image of a desolate zone, a cultural waste, where alienated human subjects live fragmentary existences. Particularly for the politically disenfranchised and socially alienated, America has the potential to give birth to Whitman’s ideal. A constituent of McKay’s post-nationalist critique is an interrogation of Whitman’s sanguine patriotism, radical though the “Good Gray” American poet’s democratizing verse vision was. But the genuine critique is directed at the kind of longing for a more refined age Eliot’s poetry performs. Though the black queer poet envisions a wasteland, the atrophy is localized in the nation, antithetic to the Eliotic Modernist general (non-national) and paradoxically ageless angst. The prospect of America’s dissipation, its waste of possibility being inherent in its action – becoming a wasteland is written onto capitalist, imperialist America’s future – is, that is, a revolutionary Marxist view.

Translating the Vernacular of the New

The difference between Romania in the late nineties, when I was first posted as a Fulbright lecturer, and the country as it is today is the historical borderland between the remains of the pathological bipolarity of the late Cold War and the surfaced of the pandemic of globalization. And the futures of
American Studies are situated at the center of this historical transformation. With the Bologna plan, a standardization of curricular implementation and objectives throughout Europe, young Romanians have no choice but to become EU students. As a result, as America’s star appears to be in position to fall and the European constellation seems poised to rise, students in countries like Romania, motivated by material incentives, may conclude that it is in their best interest to shift from North American to European study. In the age of standardization and globalization, what can American Studies offer to a becoming-EU student? This question bangs hard against the granite façade of Romanian academic culture. When they let me know that they liked my classes because I held open discussions of the material, my graduate students also told me that courses in the Romanian university habitually are taught in a vertical format. Since their end of term exams must reproduce the information that their professors have fed them, the students don’t engage in verbal exchanges about study materials. This means that they don’t generally take part in speculative discussions; students are thereby not given the opportunity to build the class knowledge base. The students informed me that the native style of teaching reflects a characteristic of the national identity, moreover, in that Romanians are discouraged from speaking out, from offering their opinions. This all may be somewhat subject to overstatement, but I could see that for Romanian students writing a seminar paper was more agonizing than it is for American students. There seemed to be three related, tangled reasons for the reticence to engage in class: (1) the society was conventionally reserved; (2) each student was afraid of being revealed as inadequate in front of peers; and (3) totalitarianism had punished expressions of individual thinking – and this disposition has lingered. Bright, well-trained Romanian students who were anything but docile commonly told me that Romanians are sheep, and blindly following Ceausescu was a characteristic demonstration of this problem.

I would add to this that a contemporary byproduct of absolutist domination was that Romanians were prevented from building civil structures of progressive social action. The result was to generate not just omnipresent corruption but, in its way worse, also universal cynicism, a feeling that any kind of civic action is futile – and this frame of mind also lingers. In other words, the very rhetoric of progressive politics, where citizens form collectively in order to generate reform outside of formal political structures, is intrinsically a corrupted set of inherited discourses. An element of this way of thinking, as I understood it, is a residue of totalitarianism; for Romanians the language of progressivism is a dialect of Communism and therefore a degraded idiom. Romania’s nineties phase post-transition state was a structure of feeling that articulated the national discourse almost totally in terms of divesting itself of totalitarianism. Ceaselessly saying goodbye Lenin,
post-transition was a postcommunist conception of national identity that continually checked in the rearview mirror to locate the national trajectory in relation to the signposts in history’s road. The post positionality is currently being replaced by the EU conversion culture, a condition that looks to a singular, stable future. Romanians are now in a position where they may speak their minds if they are of a mind to, but (like Americans), their national imaginary is – once again – under siege.

The predicament with Romanian academics and students does reflect a deficiency of language, and maybe this is where Americans and Romanians have something in common. The deficiency of the language of progressivism is immanent in the very structures of making political meaning itself: in Romania’s case a language of reform that is as corrupted as state institutions. At a time when extensive corporatization and massive financial cutbacks hold sway in American universities, Romanian universities want to follow the American model. At a time when Colorado’s legislature, in a surreal, red-state misappropriation of affirmative action principles, threatened to refuse to pass the higher education budget until the state’s colleges could prove that they had hired a prescribed number of conservative professors, the Romanian state sees the U.S. as a partner in the War on Terror. What is happening in the U.S. reflects the loss of the very language of collective reform. If the language of progressive transformation may be written off in a country like the U.S., how can those positioned beyond the post in a country like Romania generate a new language, after Hardt and Negri, who follow Deleuze and Guattari, of the clued-in multitude?

Like the state’s historian, I am convinced now that teaching American Studies in countries like Romania is essential. That is, I do want to do my part in a war on terror. My Romanian students were in or planned on entering potentially influential professions in fields like education and news media. I suggested to them that even if they did not head toward a profession where they did any scholarly work, current approaches in American Studies could provide useful critical equipment for engaging in popular action, both within and outside the university, the kind of intellectual work that would be crucial as the country turns from post-transition to becoming-EU Romania. My students made up tomorrow’s intellectual vanguard, to adjust Leninist terminology. In 1921, shortly before meeting Trotsky and seven years before starting the novel trilogy that would enact a literary form of black Trotskyism, McKay wrote “America”: “as a rebel fronts a king in state,/I stand within her walls with not a shred/Of terror…” (emphasis added; Complete Poems, ll.5–10). As the embassy historian said, American Studies can materially awaken Romanians and other becoming students of America to history. American Studies can participate in the war on terror.
Works Cited


