

6. Contorted Naturalisms

The Concept of Romanian Nationalist Mountains¹

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This chapter investigates how logics and claims of indigeneity work within Romanian social media to construct and authorise divides between insiders and outsiders. The analysis focuses on social and political discourses that permeate local understandings and experiences of neoliberalism, class, and race. The chapter analyses data from interactions and posts on Romanian social media groups. Here, the underlying trope reinforces a ‘pure’ Romanian identity that claims to be indigenous to the land and Christian Orthodoxy, with constantly having to defend the land and identity from outsiders—characteristics that are seemingly mirrored by the actions of a landscape understood as sentient and deliberative. This chapter delves into one aspect of current Romanian anti-Semitic imaginaries, by analysing how Romanian social media and the right-wing blogosphere blend esotericism with a xenophobic brand of nationalism. These e-spaces, particularly Facebook groups and pages, are important, as they have tens of thousands of followers, and their discourses, logics, and ideas have migrated more than once to mainstream media outlets.

The chapter unfolds as follows: first, some context is given for understanding the content of the blogs and social media pages chosen for analysis. This information introduces Romanian cosmologies and

1 This chapter is dedicated to Vintilă Mihăilescu, who left us with too many ethnographic questions to figure out all by ourselves, when he passed on 22 March 2020.

the political ecologies that these online spaces produce from disjointed fragments of national history, contemporary conspiracy theories, and revived far-right ideologies of the past century. Then, the chapter moves on to describe historical moments in Romania's state formation that have shaped the particular form of indigeneity analysed here. Further, the chapter focuses on the events interpreted by the right-wing blogosphere as evidence for a sentient landscape intent on fighting Western occupation, in an attempt to create a comprehensive cosmological understanding of contemporary events. Throughout the chapter, I use the term *occult* to signify hidden ways, intentional or not, to escape or side-step modern rationality and its logics, ranging from rituals that scholars often uncritically call *esoteric*, to logics invoked in contemporary conspiracy theories. Furthermore, until recently, the academic study of esotericism and the occult has mainly been an historical affair, meaning they have been treated as historical and discursive topics, rather than lived experience (Crockford and Aspren, 2018).

Analysing the blogs and social media pages *in toto* would be too vast a topic to fit within a book chapter. Instead, I focus on two moments interpreted very differently. One occurred in 2011, when an IDF helicopter crashed in the tall Romanian Carpathian Mountains and resulted in several fatalities of both Romanian and Israeli military personnel. While official government sources concluded that the crash was due to human error, the right-wing blogs and social media pages developed their own version of the incident, claiming that it was the mountain itself that was responsible for the crash. The blogs and social media pages maintained that the mountain materialised fog as old bearded men, who created a strong wind that crashed the IDF helicopter into the mountainside. The motivation of the mountains to do this was interpreted as a protest against Israelis, who are understood as a symbol of Western occupation. Even though it may seem that it is this very sentient landscape that works with the occult, if we turn our attention to how the Western 'dangerous other' is imagined, we quickly see that the occult is also imagined there, in the 'West'. The second moment stems from the winter of 2017, when over one hundred spiritual pilgrims were recovered by mountain rangers in an area not far from the 2011 IDF helicopter crash. They had arrived to observe the energetic pyramid of the rock formation called the Sphinx, which is said to only be visible

every year on the 28 November at 4:45 p.m. The tall snow and blizzard stopped the pilgrims on their way, yet these events were not interpreted on the same social media pages as the mountain attacking the spiritual pilgrims, despite the similar manifestation of the weather.

Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers (2011) think of practices of anti-capitalist protests as a form of militancy meant to achieve a certain type of imagined purity. Pignarre and Stengers' approach is a useful lens for this study, as their own theoretical reference to Marx serves as a double mirror for how a particular logic of the occult is constructed in the Romanian context. For Marx, in his analysis of capitalism, the bourgeoisie is "the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells" (Marx and Engels, 2017: 58). Simply put, Marx imagines capitalism in a Faustian sense, in that the bourgeoisie is sacrificed on the altar of their own pursuit of capitalism.

If the Carpathians are imagined as the walls surrounding a citadel, Romanians are imagined as a human wall defending Western civilisation from Eastern occupiers of all sorts, from empires to barbarian tribes. For the authors of schoolbooks in Romania, this becomes the explanation for Romania's inability to develop as much as its Western counterparts, but also the reason why the West has experienced such great accomplishments unhindered. This sacrificial destiny is meant to imbue students with a sense of pride, but also to ideologically externalise the causes of political failure.

Constructions and understandings of the occult available in the Romanian esoteric blogosphere suggest that the Carpathian Mountains have the power to morph into indigenous elders and to strike down an IDF helicopter. These interpretations could reveal much about the logics and claims of indigeneity currently at work in the mainstream political realm. The fact that this connection may not seem immediately apparent hints at the sorts of logics with which we usually operate. Modern rationality has a tendency not to engage with things it does not understand, including the occult in all its many forms, and thus fails to imagine the alternative worlds that their existence might create. The elements of which these worlds are made are what Stengers calls the "unknowns of modernity" (2011). It is one of these 'unknowns' that this chapter pursues in its analysis.

‘Nationalist’ Mountains

Doing research for this chapter allowed me to see *home* with completely different eyes. While some say that anthropology starts at home, in my case, anthropology made a full circle and came back home, as I was doing research on Romanian politics and its entanglements with esotericism and discourses of the occult, and discovered with new eyes the Carpathian Mountains, specifically the Bucegi Massif, very close to where I was born and raised. As often happens, I believed home was benign, too banal to provide material for research, and that research was to be found elsewhere.



Fig. 1. The Fangs (or Sharp Rocks) of the Buck, where the Israeli helicopter crashed. Photograph by Alexandra Cotofana (2010).

The reality proved to be different: by monitoring social media platforms for discourse analysis on esotericism and the occult, I found articles about both the 2011 helicopter crash and the 2017 rescue mission of the spiritual pilgrims. These articles had very different interpretations of meteorological events that caught humans in their wake. The basis for these interpretations seemed to be a form of digital ethnic nationalism, where the presence of the IDF in the mountains was considered colonial, occult, malevolent, and thus their sacrifice was cheered on through

invocations of anti-Semitism. On the other hand, when over a hundred people, mostly Romanian or sharing a certain understanding of the Bucegi Mountains as sacred, endangered their own lives by ignoring meteorological cautions, the same social media groups interpreted the events as just a meteorological misfortune, with no understanding or invocation of a vengeful, sentient landscape in sight. In short, the imaginary of a militarised, sentient landscape is only invoked when the trespasser is an ethnic Other who can be historically contextualised—in this case, by Romanian anti-Semitism.

Once my attention was redirected to a familiar place in an unfamiliar way, I started noticing more and more that people from home, including close family, distant relatives, neighbours I knew, and fellow Romanians I did not, were sharing links to the same articles related to these events on their Facebook pages. The articles were hosted by a few websites dedicated to esotericism and the occult and they embraced the latter theory, where the Bucegi Massif manifested elders that crashed the IDF helicopter, as punishment to the foreigners in it who were “trying to occupy ancestral land”.² Comments from several relatives and neighbours revealed that many of them believed the old men who manifested from steam or clouds were Dacians, a pre-Christian population generally accepted by local historians as indigenous to the lands that make up modern-day Romania (Boia, 2001).

Of the social media and blogs available, I focus here on two in particular, because of their following and the popularity of their articles in Facebook shares. One website, the name of which translates to “know the world” (www.cunoastelumea.ro), has a Facebook following of 66,391; the second, called www.efemeride.ro, has a Facebook following of 84,999³ people, and publishes highly trafficked articles starring Zalmoxis, a Dacian god, claiming that the Dacian culture is the oldest in the world, that they were the first inventors of an alphabet, that they had the only time-measuring tools for a certain historical period, that the great biblical flood took place in the west of the Black Sea, and finally, that Mount Olympus is actually Bucegi Massif, the mountain range

2 www.nationalisti.ro/2016/08/paranormal-un-elicopter-israelian-s-lichefiat-timpul-unui-experiment-secret-muntii-bucegi/.

3 Numbers valid for April 3, 2020.

in my hometown.⁴ The Bucegi Massif is also famously believed to be Mount Kogainon, the holy mountain of the Dacians (Damian, 2019), which would explain the wrath of the elders who materialised from the mountains to attack the IDF helicopter.

The belief that Zalmoxis and Dacians are the oldest, most sacred of people, is a neopagan spiritual movement called Zalmoxianism. The movement blends pseudo-historical assumptions about the Dacians and their sacred spaces, such as the Omu Peak in the Bucegi Mountains, considered to be the main sanctuary and the most important energetic centre of the planet; with imported right-wing conspiracies, which act as an explanation for why the secrets of their greatness are not revealed to the world. On these social media pages, the culprits are the New World Order, and the occult Jewish free-masons, led by figures like George Soros and the Rothschild family. Zalmoxianism is a form of heathen Reconstructionism of a presumed old tradition, yet the written sources that can be used to historicise Dacian rituals are few and far between. The ancient historians Strabo and Herodotus are important for Zalmoxianism, as they both mention that Zalmoxis used a cave to retreat after he met with the Thracian elites in his role as high priest (Damian, 2019). Meanwhile, alternative histories have focused profusely on the idea that there is a series of underground caves under Bucegi that are used by communists, global occult elites, or whoever is of interest at the moment.

It became important, through this new research, to learn to re-consider people I had known for decades. What had happened? Had there been a change that my time spent abroad for my doctorate prevented me from seeing? Had people from my hometown always had these beliefs, and was I just now noticing? These questions were even more pressing as most re-posts from occult and esoteric blogs were from people who were also long-time voters for PSD, the centre-left-wing party that has dominated Romanian politics since 1989. The dominant PSD is the largest party in Romanian Parliament, and has the largest number of mayors, local and regional administrators. From the point of view of a political anthropologist, it seemed strange and baffling, at first sight.

4 <https://www.efemeride.ro/un-mare-secret-mondial-ascuns-despre-romania-se-schimba-istoria-tarii-noastre>.

Yet after a quick review of political events in Romania through the last three decades, matters became a bit clearer. After 1989, interest in Christian Orthodoxy, the imagining of a pure Romanian nation and the Dacians, who were a pre-Christian population generally accepted by local historians as indigenous to the lands that make up modern-day Romania, was the subject of discourse for a few far-right politicians and sometimes appeared in the discourse of centre-right parties PNȚCD (*Partidul Național Țărănesc-Creștin Democrat*, The Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party) and PNL (*Partidul Național Liberal*, The National Liberal Party; Alexe 2015). This all changed in 2014, when the traditional left-wing party PSD's (*Partidul Social Democrat*, The Social Democratic Party) presidential candidate Victor Ponta employed Romanian-ness and Christian Orthodoxy as central to his campaign against PNL candidate Klaus Iohannis, a Lutheran Saxon from Transylvania. Even though Ponta did not win in 2014 (or perhaps because of that fact), PSD's voters echoed the candidate's ideological focus in trying to make sense of national and international political affairs.

These blogs represent the area where I grew up—the Carpathian Mountains—as embodying the will of an ethnocentric nation. Below, I explore the elements that underlie the logic of these blogs and what makes their discourses believable to the tens of thousands of Romanians who follow them. Romania's nationalism, in its current form, is constructed from elements of xenophobia, fear of ethnic and religious 'Others', programs of governing that have supported, throughout the twentieth and nineteenth centuries, understandings of a Christian Orthodox indigeneity versus its many dangerous 'Others'. In 1918, a series of international treaties allowed for the formation of Greater Romania. As a consequence, the country doubled in size, with much of its new population made up of ethnic minorities. The new country might have been sustainable if the existing logic of ethnic nationalism had shifted to civic nationalism. Instead, the state encouraged the Romanian peasantry, the majority of the population, to help the new nation-state's development, by becoming urbanised, educated, and forming the new middle class. In doing this, and increasingly overlapping Romanian identity with Christian Orthodoxy, the state displaced an already urbanised middle class, the majority of whom were Jewish (Oncioiu, 2016). Yet this was not the first or last time Romania placed religious others in opposition to its Christian Orthodox national identity.

The Nation as Sacred

Chronologically, the Romanian Orthodox Church has existed for longer, and in a far more consistent institutional form, than the Romanian state. In fact, out of all the elements that form the Romanian national and ethnic collective imaginary, the discourse around Christian Orthodoxy presents the faith as being the oldest identity element for the nation. The official position of the Romanian Orthodox Church recounts that after the apostolic synod from 49–50 AD, Andrew the Apostle had several missionary journeys. He started his fourth and final journey by preaching the gospel, travelling northward to Kyiv, Ukraine and then to Novgorod, Russia (Bandak and Jørgensen, 2012).



Fig. 2. St Andrew's Cave in Dobrogea, Southern Romania. Photograph by Statache Marian (2014), Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 3.0 RO, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pestera_Sf._Apostol_Andrei_1.jpg.

He later reached Scythia Minor (now Dobrogea, a province in south-eastern Romania), where he remained for twenty years. The clerics I

interviewed in the summer of 2017 claimed that the Apostle chose to remain on what later became Romanian territory for so long because of an affinity he developed towards the land and its people—a form of blessing in itself. Using this event to justify the discursive legitimisation of Romanianness in juxtaposition to all surrounding populations, Christian or not, serves to sacralise not only the space, but also the people, setting them apart from Slavic and Hungarian neighbours who were Christianised substantially later. This sacralised element of collective identity is centuries older than the first statist mention surrounding the formation of *Romanieness*. At the same time, the national myth is constructed around a number of purified pre-Romanian identity myths meant to offer cohesion and historical continuity to the historical self of the country.



Fig. 3. The Roman Empire in the first century AD. Photograph by Hpdeparture (2019), Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/45/Dacia.png>.

Historic accounts argue that the local Dacian population was conquered by the Roman Empire, and the newly formed province of Dacia Felix slowly morphed, linguistically and culturally, into today's Romania (Leuştean, 2007). The historical period of Dacia Felix is 106 to 274–75 AD (Boia, 2001), which means Romanians could claim they were Christian some fifty years before their national identity began to form, even by the earliest historical accounts. Together with a shared language, much of the Romanian national identity myth overlaps with Christian Orthodoxy (Stan and Turcescu, 2007). This discourse has historically been used as a grounds for claiming territories, forming the nation-state, and developing narratives of the collective self, showing endurance in the face of many religious colonial others.

Something that deserves particular attention here, for the purpose of our analysis, is the fact that several colonial Others have been identified by recent Romanian nationalist projects, before and after 1989, as either essential to the making of the Romanian collective identity, or, on the contrary, as intentionally delaying and sabotaging any projects of national unity. Romanian pupils before 1989, as well as in the decades after the revolution, learned through the country's public schools that the Roman Empire's conquest of Dacia, while essentially colonial, was fundamental to the making of the Romanian nation.

The same public-school system that has had a monopoly over Romania's K-12 curricula even after 1989, has maintained for decades that the Ottoman Empire's colonial project was the most destabilising to Romania's nation-making. As expected, this bias has been heavily used in recent anti-Muslim populist propaganda,⁵ from legitimising the presence of Romanian soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq, to justifying a political refusal to accept Syrian refugees as part of an EU member-set quota in recent years. A second rapacious, colonial Other in these discourses is the Austro-Hungarian Empire and their historical sovereignty over Transylvania,⁶ followed by the vilification of various Slavic state formations, traditionally in the north-east of Romania's current borders.

5 <https://www.dw.com/en/romanian-tabloids-incite-panic-over-refugees/a-40753654>.)

6 <https://hungarytoday.hu/angry-romanians-break-into-uzvolgye-ww1-memorial-site-attack-peaceful-hungarian-protesters/>.

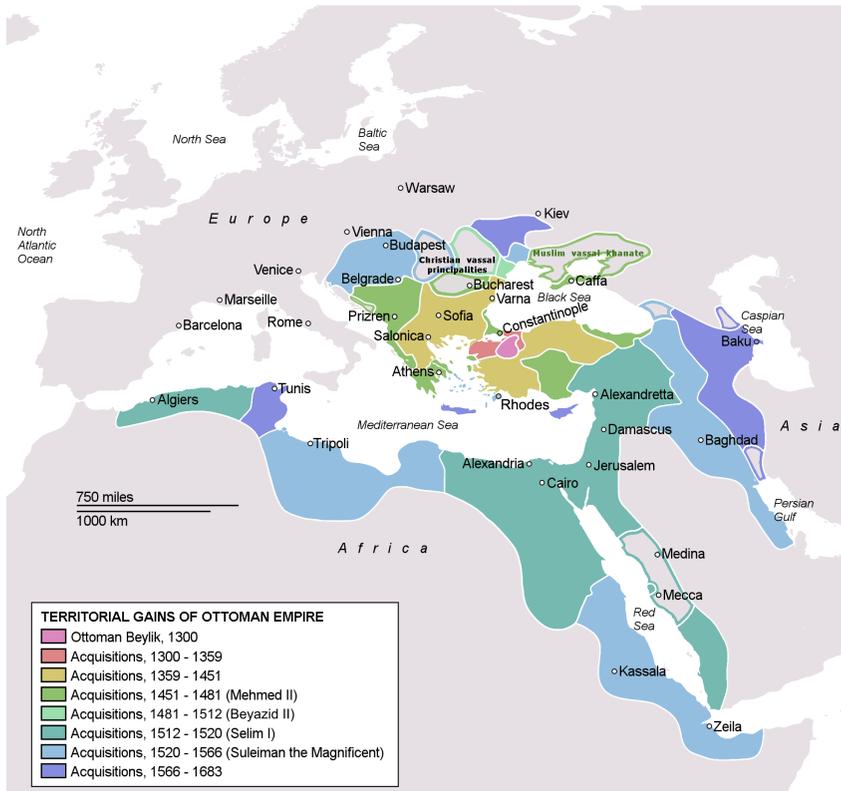


Fig. 4. The Ottoman Empire in 1683. Photograph by Atilim Gunes Baydin (2011), Wikimedia, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:OttomanEmpireIn1683.png>.

In the case of the Slavic state formations, the acidity of the discourse has been diluted by virtue of a shared Christian Orthodox identity, even while Romanian Orthodoxy is perceived as closer to Greek Orthodoxy than the Orthodoxy of the Slavic populations—at least when the colonial project was exported as atheistic, as in the case of the Soviet mode (Tismăneanu, 2003). Most of these hostilities are born as a result of (arguably imposed) international treaties that have allocated territories against one national interest or another, signed throughout the last two centuries. The undesirable colonial Others are depicted in Romanian nationalist discourse as having made illegitimate claims to Romanian territories since time immemorial.

Even though the history of the Ottoman Empire is extremely long and politically complex, Romanian pupils learn very early in their history classes that the Romanian principalities were the “gate of Christianity” (understood as a symbol of keeping intruders out) and that Romanian leaders were the “keepers of Christianity” (Boia, 2001: 67), with the Carpathians and the Bucegi Massif playing a central role in this discourse.⁷ This nationalist discourse relies on the narrative that Romanians, even in their earlier divided administrative forms, had to face the Ottoman threat alone—and somehow succeeded—without much aid from the Western Christian countries that they also, in effect, protected.

Lucian Boia’s clever analysis of the ideological pitfalls of the Romanian reconstruction of the past deserves to be quoted. His 2001 *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* and his 2004 *Romania (Topographies)* help deconstruct and explain some of the rather improbable stories that public Romanian education reproduces *ad infinitum*, without any seeming efforts to reform the system in order for pupils to learn a more nuanced history, which would better reflect historical complexities. Boia explains how the hyper-focus on a small number of victories against the Ottomans (and further others, legitimately or illegitimately perceived as colonial) has led to a construction of the past where Romanians managed time and again to defend their land, and the whole of Christianity, almost supernaturally, when everyone around was losing. In itself, this making of a superhuman past could be discussed as occult.

The Ottoman Empire is imagined as the longest-standing outside threat, and an unwelcome form of colonisation. It is the main focus of most history books available in Romanian K-12 education, while at the same time, a myriad other “invasions” of “migratory tribes” (Almaş, 1987) are all briefly mentioned and lumped together during primary and secondary education. This last move is in no way accidental—by treating the existence of Gepids, Huns, Avars, pechenegs, Cumans, Oghuz, Alans, or Tatars, to name just a few, as migratory tribes with brief and unimportant interventions on Romanian territory between the fourth and twelfth centuries BC, the public education system

7 https://adevarul.ro/locale/buzau/tunelurile-secrete-romaniei-aparut-triunghiul-aur-daciei-reteaua-bucegi-egipt-tunelul-piramida-paranormala-ceahlau-1_5515963-e448e03c0fdf87dad/index.html.

emphasises the main point of its national myth: *We* were already here, *They* were passing through.⁸ The image of the Ottoman conqueror is different to that of the Roman Empire: partly as a result of their shared, pre-1054 schism, Christian identity, the Romans have been depicted as an ‘accepted’ colonial other. They were imagined as the Western, civilising half to the Dacian, local half of language and identity that make up the nation (McGuckin, 2010). This myth of the ‘civilising West’ continues today, albeit in different forms.

Efforts to manipulate the past remind many of the cultural project started in the early 1970s by the Ceaușescu regime. This project intended to “purify” national identity, as part of a broader political project of sovereignty and independence from the USSR and other world powers (Boia, 2001). While the goal in itself sounds noble, and, as academics fluent in the language of postcolonialism, we are taught to support the plight of small countries attempting to rid themselves of the chains of domination, the example of Ceaușescu’s method has one major flaw. As I will discuss, one of the main tools for Ceaușescu’s project of producing historical purity was through academia. While many scholars were forced to obey new sets of rules and cultural policies, others enthusiastically joined in the making of the national myth.

This went as far as a team of archaeologists discovering human remains in the area where the dictator was born and advancing these findings as *Homo oltenicus* (named after the region, Oltenia), claiming that they were the oldest human remains in Europe (Abagiu, 2007). As a symbol of the way Ceaușescu’s cult of personality was built, the case of *Homo oltenicus* allows us to analyse complex subjectivities in the creation of the state and its mirroring in the human body. In no way historically central from an archaeological or political point of view, Oltenia is a region mostly remembered for having been the childhood home of Ceaușescu. Yet with the ideological creation of *Homo oltenicus*, Oltenia becomes, for its ideologists, equal to other important historical regions around the world, that lend their natural force to their most notable humans. In other words, this invented archaeological fact is meant to mimic some small-scale Egypt, Viking, or other racial myth that can later be successfully moulded into a populist project.

8 <https://www.descopera.ro/cultura/2753237-dacii-niste-barbari-va-inselati>.

Despite these contested forms of broad ethnogenesis, meant to construct the Romanian state in the collective memory as eternal, mono-ethnic and as legitimised by endurance, the state itself is fairly young, having only been formed in 1859 (Istodor, 2015). However, there is a different institutional agent that can act as a source of validation for this particular type of imaginary of indigeneity. The Romanian Orthodox Church has a longer history and has been both a source and object of significant argument in international political negotiations, involved in the redrawing of borders throughout history. It kept its privileged position, even under rule by the Romanian Communist Party (Kovacevik, 2008). The Church has maintained its importance as an element of national identity after 1989 (Racu, 2017), and even while some of its practices are publicly contested (Tismăneanu, 2003), it remains a core political, economic, and social actor in Romania. The Church is semiotically elastic in Romanian politics, as it has been used equally by the far-right Iron Guard during WWII, as a subtle but firm indicator of nationality in socialist history books, and by the centre-left PSD after 2014 (Racu, 2017).

Xenophobic Sentient Landscapes

From Pignarre and Stengers' point of view, the Carpathian incarnation of anti-capitalist protests that hit down an IDF helicopter as a symbol of Western domination, could be seen as militant, in service of a certain imagined purity (2011). In this case, the occult is used on both sides of the conflict: on the one hand, the Israeli military are portrayed as acting towards the fulfilment of plans set up by global elites, with a hidden political agenda, and at the same time, for attempting to enter Romanian national space secretly, by landing their military helicopter on the mountains, which is subsequently viewed and depicted as an act of capitalist sorcery, as Pignarre and Stengers would most likely agree.

Can landscapes be mobilised and re-imagined as defending national interests, and how would such a way of being be imagined? In Romania's case, the idea that the local Romanian ethnic population and the forest are 'brothers' has been capitalised on for the making of a unified ethnic nation since at least the creation of Greater Romania in 1918 (Mehedinți, 1927). Yet is the mountain imagined in this local ontology as *sentient*?

Does this *sōmaton* (bodied thing, thing with a material body) this being with a physical body, have life in it? In many ways, the mountain could be imagined as the exact opposite of the *daimōn* (spirited thing): while the mountain has a very dense body, we do not imagine him as possessing a soul. At the same time, while the *daimōn* is an *asōmaton* (thing without a physical body), we do consider it to be sentient, and to act according to its life source. In this theoretical analysis, it might be the very arrangement of landscapes as occult in the minds of the locals that aid in this project.

More than anything, the power of governing with the occult in Romania is kept alive by myths promulgated by politicians through social media outlets, which appeal to the masses and to some very specific anxieties. For example, some of the articles that received the most traffic on social media pages (and affiliated websites or blogs) imagine the Romanian national space in very specific ways. In trying to explain why the mountains may have attacked the helicopter, articles on these websites made note of the fact that the mountains were protecting a secret entrance in a complex system of tunnels within the mountain. Based on the source, these tunnels are either said to have served the Dacians or to have served the occult, hidden forces governing the world today. In this second sense, the mountain would lose any sentient quality within the local ontology.

Furthermore, the network of tunnels might be made by humans, be they forefathers or our contemporaries, or by aliens, according to some.⁹ This, once again, shows that the idea of governing with the occult is a conglomerate made up of many disparate pieces, which cannot be connected easily.

If anything can be illuminated, it is that most of these theories became popular particularly after an author, Radu Cinamar, started publishing books about the 'occult ways of governing' in Romania and their locales. According to some, Radu Cinamar is the pseudonym of a group of former secret agents. According to other theories, it is the pseudonym of a female writer called Dorina Chirilă, who lives in north-western Romania. Either way, the interest in the Bucegi Mountains as a space for occult governing spiked after Radu Cinamar's 2003 book,

9 <http://www.redescoperaistoria.ro/2015/03/29/tunelurile-secrete-ale-romaniei/>.



Fig. 5. The Sphinx, one of the many rock formations atop the Bucegi Massif, linked to occult beliefs. Photograph by Sorin Besnea (2013), Wikimedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/0/0e/Sfinx_-_Bucegi.jpg/800px-Sfinx_-_Bucegi.jpg.

Future with a Skull (Viitor cu cap de mort), which claims there is a secret entrance in the Bucegi Mountains protected by energetic walls.

One of the reasons why parts of this ontology may seem foreign to some readers stems from the fact that, as Phillippe Descola reminds us, categories of interiority and physicality tend to derive from the “universal experience of being an intentional subject with a body” (2007). As such, we can only envision bodies that are like ours, to be able to produce things that we imagine as unique to our consistency, such as emotions. As a consequence, we find it hard to believe that *sōmata* with a denser consistency than the fleshy body of mammals, such as rocks and mountains, might be able to experience life in similar ways to us. In an intellectual exercise similar to Descola’s observation around how technology moved reindeer herders from animism to analogism, could we think of the alleged tunnels in the Bucegi Mountains, assuming they exist, as a technological element that, regardless of who built them, help us to understand ways of being as a body of stone? Could we think through life (can we even imagine there being any?) as a stone *sōmata*? And if so, what would that look like? How do they manage to

materialise fog into elders, and how do they, at the same time, protect a hyper-technological centre from the knowledge of the many?

A useful term here comes from Elizabeth Povinelli, who coined the concept of 'geontologies'. Povinelli compares geontology to Foucault's biopolitics, and claims that geontology "does not operate through the governance of life and the tactics of death but is rather a set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife" (Povinelli, 2011). Overall, 'geontologies' as a term might have potential for displacing Western metaphysics and allow some room for other ways of containing Life or Nonlife definitions and ways of being as they are discussed and conceived in academic circles.

How we order what counts as Life and what counts as Nonlife is a matter of cultural perspective, and a study on the ontology of rock formations as sentient would be most welcome. So far, the cartographic features of eastern Europe, especially of its mountains, have received most attention during World War I and World War II, revealing struggles for power, political affinities and challenges to authenticity, yet never has attention focused on rock-life, creating instead what Yuliya Komska calls a "discontiguous eastern Europe" (2018). Komska says, when referring to eastern Europe: "The area's natives, we point out, have consistently forged links to discontiguous lands and populations, whether willingly or by force" (2018: 4). In this sense, Komska is using the term interchangeably—for land and politics alike, for tropes about a collective self, as well as for understanding historical eras.

In a 2017 edited volume, several Romanian journalists and social scientists published a series of essays critiquing historian Lucian Boia's 2012 book, *Why is Romania Different? (De ce este România altfel)*. The critical edited volume plays on the title of Boia's book, and is called *Why is Romania this way? (De ce este România astfel?)* (2017). Here, the morphological difference between "other" (*altfel*) and "this way" (*astfel*) is minimal, so it can be aptly used for the sort of intellectual exercise attempted here. The larger question revolved around why a renowned intellectual such as Boia, who has built a career on extremely valuable work that deconstructs the politically-driven manufacture of the Romanian past in the service of nationalism, would write a book that, in a sense, goes to disprove all of what came before? Why would one

imagine Romania as 'different'? Furthermore, what does this difference mean, what form does it take?

The title of Boia's book suggests an already assumed truth that Romania is different—rather than question whether or not this may be the case. The subject became a widespread topic of criticism as it signified that a preeminent analyst of populism had been seduced by a populist-related discourse of exceptionalism. Boia's critics reminded him that exceptionalism tends to create value judgments of social realities rather than describe them. Beyond this, to have this exceptionalism legitimated by the work of a historian such as Boia, who built a career on deconstructing nationalist discourse and practice in Romanian history, seemed a strange and perhaps dangerous direction.

This discourse of difference seems to serve a few purposes, all serving nationalism and certain brands of populism. On the one hand, it could easily be attached to discourses that claim Romania has been different *ab origine, illo tempore*, and that there is nothing the country can do about its perceived state of always lagging behind. And behind who? Behind the West, of course.

This question leads to a second goal—by claiming the assumed lagging in various economic, political and cultural aspects, this difference legitimises discourses that claim Romania is an internal 'primitive' of Europe, perpetually behind in terms of development (Mihăilescu, 2017). This, in turn, suggests a perpetual Romanian aspiration to become like the West, as well as giving rise to an apologist logic that suggests that the country is not headed in the 'right' direction (or quickly enough), due to the country's inherent difference. This apologism often eludes the speaker who, by virtue of their clear vision of the country's mentality, portrays themselves as a potential driving force, crippled by a national majority of internal European primitives.

The beginning of national identity-building for Romania began at a time when the two reference points were the 'West' and the 'East'. Rome, as an ideal Other, who rounds up the indigenous Dacian identity half with a civilised Western half, is at the core of the fabrication of the Romanian identity, a purified genealogy developed as a strategy and justification against eastern powers (Vasile Pârvan, 2018 [1919])—this was later completed with the autochthonous Dacian identity, which legitimised claims for a local continuity (Mihăilescu, 2017).

This coupling of West and East historically had two consequences—on the one hand, the denial of Oriental connections, especially in the context of the neighbouring, expanding Ottoman Empire, and on the other hand, a hyper-emphasis on Western genealogies. Ernest Renan observes that civic nations, such as France, require their myths and use “strategic amnesia” in order to be able to survive as a nation (1992 [1882]). These stories of the self are what Sorin Antohi calls “ethnic ontologies” (2002). Ethnic ontologies have myths that can receive both good and bad interpretations. The most unexpected example in this sense is that of Romanians using the concept of the Self as European internal primitive, either to account for corruption, belligerence, alcoholism, or, on the contrary, to legitimate the myth of the noble Dacian, where belligerence and alcoholism are seen as natural traits of the noble, pastoral tribe.

According to Vintilă Mihăilescu, collective identity specific to small peasant nations in eastern Europe and the Balkans that emerged as post-colonies of empires drove several waves of political movement for independence in Romania: it was not individual freedom that was sought, but the collective independence of the group (2017). This collective self is what I call the *body of bodies*, the understanding of the state through the entirety of its people, versus thinking of the state as a cumulus of institutions. A good example of how this distinction might prove relevant is Alain Badiou’s *Of an Obscure Disaster* (1991), where Badiou criticises Stalinism for having betrayed and perverted the ideal of communism by entrusting it to the state, instead of allowing what I call the *body of bodies* to remain the creative force.

This collective social body sought to differentiate itself from neighbouring nations by highlighting the uniqueness of its geography and of how ‘The Romanian’ (not one particular individual, but the mythical individual symbolically standing for the state) has always been at one with this nature, making sense of it in a way that only an autochthonous Self could.

In this sense, Romanians have a plethora of proverbs—the forest and the Romanian are brothers (*codru-i frate cu românul*), strong as a cliff (*tare ca stânca*), the forest whispered to someone (*i-a șoptit pădurea*), the man is like grass, his days are like flowers (*omul e ca iarba, zilele lui ca floarea*), the working man is like a tree giving fruit (*omul muncitor, ca*

pomu roditor). Furthermore, the Carpathian Mountains are imagined as the core of the national space, even as they separate the country in two, and have historically been an efficient metaphor for imagining the country as mono-lithic, united through a common geological body. The mountain-as-national-being can be an important analytical tool for understanding nationalist ontologies.

This connection between man and natural space seeks to give the sense of a long-lasting collective identity—according to some historians, the people inhabiting these lands are “some of the oldest peoples in Europe” (Mehedinți, 1927). However, this geography has also been used to create a discourse of inescapability for the body of bodies. Caught between mountains, rivers and the sea, the collective body had to constantly sacrifice and be crippled by invaders. Furthermore, this assumed identity of autochthonism, intentionally contrasted with the labelling of all other ethnic or national identities that have interacted with the physical space as migratory invaders, meant that the collective body had to learn how to selectively legitimise political behaviours and discourses (Naumescu, 2011).

As we have seen, tropes about indigeneity are a culturally-productive category that can reimagine militarised relationships with more-than-human agents, mountains included (Carey, 2016). What sorts of rhetoric are being used to legitimise the landscape to act in anger? In the case of the Bucegi, local, massive, illegal (and portrayed-as-legal) deforestations are taking a toll on the health of the mountain. In the wood industry, neoliberal logics of economic growth, employment, and cheap furniture enable industry giants like IKEA to benefit, almost in the absence of any protest, from the wood of Europe’s last old-growth forests, found in the Carpathians. This, together with the hidden, non-transparent business practices of local politicians, allows for the wood trade to remain dangerously unregulated.

To conclude, ethnographies of *sōmata*, as spirited, bodied non-humans have the potential to productively reconceptualise scholarship focusing on affective spaces, institutions (and implicitly, what we de-institutionalise), and theories of materiality and immateriality. Analysing their involvement with the occult could offer a critical outlook on the hierarchy of epistemic regimes at work in academia, as well as the possibility to re-think the porosity of conceptual borders. Comparing

modes of thinking and logics that create both individual *sōmata*, such as demons, spirits, and institutional ones, such as the state, the church, economy, and so on, is an important place to start.

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