

“I Was Told to Come Here in the forest to heal”

Healing Practices Through the Land in Transylvania

ÁGOTA ÁBRÁN

Introduction

DURING A period of 16 months, between May 2014 and August 2015, I embarked on my doctoral fieldwork in Transylvania, in an attempt to understand how plants become medicinal and part of healing processes. It was a research adventure that drew on the fragmented ethnography of Anna Tsing,¹ in order to understand the connections between the various sites involved in making medicines out of plants. Following a process rather than trying to understand one specific place, fragmentation and multi-sitedness² was unavoidable. Wild harvesters, cultivators, medicinal plant research centers, industrial factories making food supplements, conferences, and alternative healers were part of these different sites, loosely connected by plants and plant lore. In this paper I will explore my ethnographies that were built around alternative healers as they practice healing through the land of Transylvania. While I was following plant medicines, a whole array of healing practices unfolded for my inquiries, practices that were built up from a bricolage of alternative, folk, holistic and spiritual traditions. To showcase and understand some of these healing practices, in this article I will detail how land and landscapes become part of healing processes, how mountains and forests are seen as spaces for healing, how the spiritual becomes part of landscapes and thus of healing, and how interactions with an animistic land, its spiritual and material beings contribute to healing. I will argue that these practices are able to exist because their practitioners deconstruct Western dichotomies of nature/culture and natural/supernatural, critiquing human exceptionalism.

Alternative medicine

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE is an all-encompassing concept of eclectic methods and views that would not fit into biomedical practices.³ While the image of a widely accepted rational medicine could give the impression that other forms of healings are a new trend, the eclecticism of methods, practices, and views of healing is

a “well-established cultural strategy.”⁴ Subsequently I have witnessed healing, and conversations about healing with herbal teas and products (phytotherapy), derived from both traditional medicine, and new research; healing with bee products (apitherapy); Ayurveda; Chinese medicine; aura cleansing; massage; and religious prayer. Yet similar views and practices of healing can be observed despite the wide range of influence, as well as similar ways of being in and healing through the landscape. Even though healers were picking and choosing healing and spiritual practices from all over the world depending on what they were trained in, what they encountered on their spiritual paths, what they could feel in their bodies was true and would work, the openness to not separate the world into what was man-made and what was not, what was visible or invisible, was common. They were “concomitantly pluralistic and universalizing.”⁵

It need not be taken for granted that everyone involved with herbal medicines is also sympathetic to alternative healing practices. Nor that herbal medicine is part of alternative healing. It can be argued that modern biomedicine and pharmaceuticals have their roots in natural resources, while today 68% of anti-infective pharmaceuticals and 79.8% of pharmaceuticals used in cancer treatment are considered to be derived from natural origins.⁶ Natural products, plants and microbes are also increasingly acknowledged as essential sources for new pharmaceuticals.⁷ Medicinal plants were also widely used during the communist period of Romania, thanks to the state owned *Plafar Trust*, which organized the collection of wild harvested plants, cultivated plants, produced and marketed plant based remedies, such as teas and syrups. Networks of research centers were also established from 1975, with their basis at the Medicinal and Aromatic Plant Research Station in Fundulea (*Stațiunea de Cercetări de Plante Medicinale și Aromatice de la Fundulea*).⁸ These research centers developed, throughout the country, new medicinal plant cultivars with higher plant yields, containing increased amounts of active ingredients. They supplied *Plafar* with seeds for cultivation, but also provided pharmaceutical factories with raw materials (for example morphine from poppy). According to my interviewees, former directors and other employees of both *Plafar* and the research centers, the industry of medicinal plants was a flourishing one throughout the socialist regime, especially after the 1970s, dropping suddenly after the revolution, to be slowly rebuilt in later years. Nevertheless, the communist regime incorporated medicinal plant use into a biomedical healing rationale, while suppressing traditional healing practices.⁹ According to an interviewee, a well-known Transylvanian ethnobotanist, even researching folk healing practices was deemed unsuitable before 1989.

The fall of communism enabled the rise of traditional, alternative healing and new spiritual/religious practices, some of which relied on nationalistic histories to tap into purported ancient knowledge. The rise of these healing practices after the revolution of 1989 could be interpreted as “a holistic effort to redefine the self and the body in the absence of communist authority and a centralized biomedical hierarchy.”¹⁰ In an attempt to heal the souls and bodies of both the individual and the Romanian society, these movements tried “to reclaim a lost primordial state (of health, moral rectitude, and sociocultural well-being)” and a secure identity in Europe through “their quasi-nationalistic ethos, their voiced suspicion of money and profit, and their criticism of and

opposition to Western individualism and materialism.”¹¹ The healing practices I am going to talk about in this article too border on nationalistic imaginations and introduce alternative identities for Transylvanians, tied to living with the land. Through nationalistic images and histories different nations lay their symbolic claims on the land of Transylvania.¹² These histories and images rather than being suppressed were expanded upon by the socialist regime,¹³ and got entangled with healing practices in Transylvania as *our land* became part of healing.

Undoubtedly these healing practices attract radical nationalistic sentiments through tapping into a mythological history of nations with clear-cut boundaries.¹⁴ I have witnessed such essentialist nationalisms among both Hungarian and Romanian healers, which draw their views from simplified national histories that disallow for the possibility of nations being constructed or dynamic.¹⁵ In these images the land of Transylvania becomes the property of various nations, a commodity that can be stolen away by the *other*. However, in this article, I want to present a different view of land entangled in healing practices, seen not as property that humans have at hand to freely use and draw into nation-construction¹⁶ but as living, fluid, animistic landscapes. Therefore, rather than reapplying theories of nationalism to the Transylvanian land, I will draw on recent anthropological literature,¹⁷ to argue that this animism is not simply a metaphor in explaining social interactions between humans, but they are highlighting real encounters between humans and nonhumans, encounters that result in real (rather than symbolic) healing practices. This literature supports an ontology that does not separate nature from culture, but which sees humans, and human bodies as emerging from relations with other beings, emerging from being-in-the-world.¹⁸

Landscapes: mountains and forests

CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY has coined the term therapeutic landscape by analyzing spaces that contribute to human health¹⁹. The concept was developed by Wilbert Gesler, who suggested looking at the way “environmental, individual, and societal factors [...] interact to bring about healing in specific places.”²⁰ Many of these geographers emphasized the importance of landscape in spiritual and alternative healing practices,²¹ while medical anthropologists challenged the idea that hospitals and medical institutions allow for healing to take place, especially for “people who do not share the beliefs and assumptions of Western biomedicine.”²² In the wake of corruption charges against medical staff, and the image of underfunded medical institutions in Romania, many people claimed during my fieldwork that hospitals were *poisonous*, and one comes out sicker from there than when going in. But those interested in spirituality and alternative healing emphasized that medical institutions are also poisonous because of their biomedical view of the world. They explained to me that these institutions are treating only the bodies of people, with mixed results, instead of treating the whole person, as a psychological, social, and spiritual being. This latter, often called the holistic approach, was practiced by many healers interested in plant medicines. Instead of healing, med-

ical institutions and pharmaceuticals—they argued—*poison* people. If medical institutions are poisonous, which places are therapeutic? If landscapes are not only seen, but performed,²³ who/what is it that performs and how do they perform healing and therapeutic landscapes?

Transylvania is a highland bordered by the Carpathian Mountains, which harbor precious forests that provide space for the life of many species of animals, plants and fungi. The Carpathian Mountains in their totality provide a habitat for “over one third of all European plant species.”²⁴ I have met people complaining of headaches when driving through the mountains either towards Bucharest or Budapest, leaving the uneven skyline of the hills and mountains behind, and arriving at the monotonous, “boring” plain-lands. The love of “our mountains”^{25,26} invoked images of treasured natural resources, nostalgia for a better and less polluted world, and for an ancestral land that existed before, and will still exist after human life. Concerns for climate and biodiversity have given yet another dimension for Transylvanians to be delighted about the land that nurtures their life. Land was part of invoking an identity one could be proud of, opposing a Western Europe, better in everything else, which had sucked its environment dry.

The image of the mountains and forests in Romania as biodiversity-rich areas that grow plants, among them medicinal plants with chemical properties superior to the flora of Western European countries, was a prominent one. One Transylvanian conservationist explained at length that the Romanian Carpathians harbor ancient (virgin or old-growth) forests, forests that were never disturbed by human habitation, as opposed to those in Western European countries, giving rise to a regional identity, which contrasts with the over-modernized West that destroyed its wildlife.²⁷ Yet the image of the mountains and forests as untouched places was threatened by rumors of illegal, semi-legal, or legal but unwanted logging,²⁸ industrialization, and in general human handling of the world. In the discourses of the Transylvanian people whom I met, the virgin forest and the clean and healthy haven of the mountains were opposed to the polluted cities.²⁹ This image of the mountain as a healing landscape is one familiar to the European imagery, from such novels as Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain* or Johanna Spyri’s *Heidi*,³⁰ associating healing with the isolation and cleanliness of the mountains.

One of my earliest field experiences started with a mountain retreat in a healing camp, in a *cabană*,³¹ something that can be translated between a cabin and a chalet, a holiday house or an inn, situated in the mountains. The *cabană* was located next to a gritty road going up the mountain, indicating the end of the road on which cars could still drive safely, at the foot of the *Negoiu* Peak in the *Făgăraș* Mountains, in the Southern Carpathians. The camp was surrounded by forests, and participants would go every day for a walk to stretch their limbs, breathe in the clean and fresh air, and collect plants and pine shoots for making tea and throat syrup. Many came from all over Romania, not only to heal in the healing camp, but explicitly to come and heal in the mountains. The mountains had clean air, clean water, and wild plants to eat, all things that participants felt they lacked in cities like Bucharest, Constanța, Brașov, Cluj Napoca or Târgu Mureș.

I was taken to the camp by two women who were part of a group called *inforenergetică* (inforenergetics), from the Romanian equivalent of the words information and energy. But at the point in which we were going to the camp, I did not know much about

it, only that it was something to do with spirituality, and that some way or another it was linked to Orthodox Christianity. Later they told me that inforenergetics is trying to find its way back to the true Orthodox Christianity that was corrupted through time, while tapping into the ancient Dacian spirituality called Zalmoxism.³² They soon started explaining to me how, if not out loud, at least in my mind, I should ask for safe passage before we enter a new place, a village, or a new forest, or cross a bridge. Ask the entities, the guardians of the place, to let us through safely. They told me I could make an energetic cleansing on myself if, when we pass a river, I imagine taking my clothes off on one side, submerge in the cold water, and emerge on the other side free from negative energies.

We arrived late afternoon to the camp, a day earlier than most people. As nothing was ready yet, Elena, who was helping the organizers out in the kitchen, made us some potato salad with *păpădie* (common dandelion, L. *Taraxacum officinale*) in tomato sauce. “The sauce takes away the bitterness of the dandelion” she explained and recounted how her love affair with *păpădie* started. As a young girl she lived with her family in a village in the Eastern Carpathians. Her father was diagnosed with hepatitis and was about to give up on life when her grandfather suggested to his son to drink and eat dandelion. The plant was easy to come by on the pastures of the mountain, and they started eating dandelion salad every day. Her father eventually got better and lived well into his 70s. Since then Elena has been using dandelion in as many recipes as possible, never weeding them out of her garden. “When my children are away, I just gather some dandelion, and I make some salad from the shoots, the leaves, and even the flowers. For some it is too bitter, but I like it the way it is,” she concluded her story.

The camp had a strict schedule of exercises, vegan diet, and juices from lemon and berry to wheat shoots and charcoal mixed with water. The policy of the organizers was to bring the water from a nearby spring, and incorporate as many wild plants into our foods as possible. One of them was indeed the praised and loved *păpădie*, which we consumed daily in our salads and meals. This “common weed,” was also one of the show-cases of the Multispecies Salon³³—aiming at understanding the world without our nature/culture dichotomies. An artist highlighted the intimate bodily encounter between human and dandelion: the encounter between the artist suffering from hepatitis C, fertilizing the plant with her blood high in nitrogen; and plant, healing her human through being eaten and drank.³⁴

Mountains and forest were seen as therapeutic places because of their clean air, water and plants, uncorrupted by human industrial pollution. As assemblages of other beings and things,³⁵ some material and some spiritual, mountains and forests created possibilities for people to enter into interactions with these beings in order to heal. Through eating and tasting (the bitterness of *păpădie*), and harvesting for medicines, people got to know plants and entered into intimate relations with these other kinds of nonhuman beings.³⁶ Walking the forest with the participants of the healing camp, I have found not only plants but stories of ‘vegetable love,’³⁷ like Elena’s story of dandelions. But there were many such stories. Piri, an 80-year-old, frail looking lady who had more stamina walking up the mountain than I did, found some *crețisoană* (common lady’s mantel, L. *Alchemilla vulgaris*) and recounted to me with excitement how she used to

have terrible urinary tract infections when she was a young girl, and how no medicine could help her until a friend recommended the plant. Ever since, she goes every year to harvest herself enough *crețișoană* to last her the year, which she uses as tea for every ailment she has. These landscapes provided people with joyful (multispecies) encounters, in which plants empowered people (especially those who were failed by biomedicine) to care for themselves.³⁸ This led to many explaining at length that these plants are not weeds (*buruieni*), but are much more, they are medicinal plants. While encounters were oftentimes reserved between people and plants, as the example of inforenergetics shows, landscapes were also terrains of encounters between people and the spiritual world.

The sacred and the spiritual

ARRIVING TO the house of Erzsébet, a healer-woman, is not the easiest of tasks. With lengthy instructions one can find the church in a village off the main road between Miercurea Ciuc and Sfântu Gheorghe, and then take the almost invisible dirt-road, passing the last houses, driving out of the village and up the mountain. Erzsébet lives surrounded by forests and pastures, in a picturesque house on the mountain. She has a separate building for healing, a small plant garden, a sun panel, a small pool with sulphuric water, a spring with mineral water, and friendly dogs. She built it all out of her own resources and work. “I like sun and warmth, I don’t like cold and shade, but I was told to come here to the mountain forest to heal,” she explained. “By whom?” I asked naively, and she mischievously smiled and said “by them,” motioning with her hands to the empty space around us. Surrounded by trees and healing waters, she returned home from sunny California, to put her alternative healing expertise to use in Transylvania. Many came to visit her in the forest, seeking health, from all over Romania, Hungary and sometimes even Germany and Austria. “They go to Budapest to Professor X, and then to Berlin to Professor Y, and then they come back here to the forest.”

Western modernization practices have tried to divide healing and spiritual concerns, through “institutional differentiation” and rationalization, separating institutions concerned with the body and those concerned with the mind. The entwining of healing and spirituality is an old practice, which might see its revival in new alternative Western healing and spiritual practices.³⁹ Healing in Transylvania, likewise, was often an integral part of religious or other spiritual practices. Spiritual practices, just as healing practices, were usually eclectic, people piecing together different religious and non-religious practices, views, and traditions.⁴⁰ The eclecticism of the beliefs and practices of the people I have met could hardly fit into any religion or even spiritual group. As such, most did not even think as part of any such group, or when they did, they often engaged in practices and beliefs that did not comply with the present canons, just as inforenergetics practices were far from a canonical Orthodox religion.

During my fieldwork, Transylvania was time and again referred to as the *Garden of the Fairies* or the *Garden of the Holy Mother*. The concept of the *Fairy Garden* was pop-

ularized by the Hungarian writer Mórícz Zsigmond,⁴¹ who used it as the title for the first volume of his Transylvanian History novel trilogy. But the *Fairy Garden* in my field was used literally, both to name Transylvania as a whole, and to delineate certain sacred spaces in Transylvania. In these places the spiritual world was closer to us than in others. The *Garden of the Holy Mother* had a similar spiritual connotation. This title was used by Pope John Paul II to denote Romania, on his 1999 visit. It was the name given by Orthodox Christianity to the churches and monasteries from the sacred Mount Athos. I however, have heard it used to specifically designate Transylvania as the sacred garden.⁴² While both names could be part of nationalist imaginations of Transylvania belonging to the Hungarian or Romanian ancestry, most in my field viewed these concepts not as contrary to each other, not as fighting for different heritage, but as supporting each other, and supporting the sacredness of the land.

Ideas of health and healing, for most who were part of the process of making medicines from plants, were strongly related to religious and spiritual concerns. Certain places were more sacred, being filled with more healing energy than other places, an energy that seeped into the plants and waters growing or running through these lands. Erzsébet told me that mountains are harboring more spiritual energy than other places, containing the energy inside their bellies, slowly releasing it into the world, this being the reason behind her having to go to the mountain forest to heal. I also helped gather plants from a cultivated garden, in the mountains, fenced off from the forest that grew all around. The people I was helping, all spiritual healers, exclaimed in wonder how the energies of the place felt stronger, that being the reason why plants grew so beautifully there. They called the garden a fairy garden. Places where healing plants grew were the places that had more spirituality in them.

While I was visiting a family living in a small village in the Eastern Carpathians, to learn about their medicinal plant cultivations, teas, and creams they were making, I met three women, friends, who had come together from Budapest to visit the same family. The youngest member of the host family was learning to be a spiritual healer and had met the women during his training in Hungary. One of these women was Andrea, a shaman, who told me that she was initiated in South America, being left alone for a night in the rain in the forest to make fire. The other woman, Móni, a spiritual healer, was one day awakened and *told*, by spirit entities, that she should dig a hole in her garden, freeing an energy gate. While doing so she had woken up a giant, who was constantly helping her on her path. She communicated with the spirit world through her dreams and was told which spiritual groups to visit to learn from them. Thus she was initiated into many kinds of groups, some of them thought to be relying on ancient Hungarian knowledge.⁴³

Being with the family and the three healer women for several days, our hosts decided that we should go visit the town of Borsec, the name giver of the mineral water Borsec, entitled the “Queen of Mineral Waters,” title given in 1873 by the then Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria. The water has been bottled and exported to Vienna since the 18th century,⁴⁴ being first mentioned in the 16th century by an Italian doctor called Brucella.⁴⁵ This supposedly acclaimed resort was renowned even during socialism, but its run-down

state was a common sight in a post-socialist Romania, not (yet) overturned by a Romania that has access to EU funding. There are still many who visit Borsec for the abundant springs one can find next to the roads, each of them curing different diseases, and for the small pools of ice-cold healing mineral water, to bathe in. But we were going to Borsec for another reason as well.

Our host spoke of a meadow called the fairy garden, which the guests from Budapest had to visit, to advance on their spiritual paths. The fairy garden was a clearing on a hillside above Borsec, famous for the many spiritual entities caring for it. We were to take the path across the mountains to Borsec, a leisurely half day walk, which would take us to some scattered stones (possibly parts of a megalithic complex or a stone circle) that had signs of ancient runes on them. While the origins of the runes were unknown, most theories, as well as those of my hosts, tended to ascribe them a spiritual and sacred symbolism.⁴⁶ According to my hosts our ancestors knew better than us where to put these stones, where the spiritual energies of the land were most abundant. While most of the stones were kept in a museum in Gheorgheni, some were left spread around the mountain. We found the one stone our hosts knew about, hidden under tree branches and leaves, and took turns sitting on it, feeling, or trying to feel (in my case), the energy emanating from it, and heal through it.

Although I have talked predominantly about alternative spiritual practices, religion also plays an important role in healing on the mountains. There are numerous Orthodox Christian monasteries dispersed around Romania, a lot of them in the Carpathians. While there is a running joke that there are 18,300 churches and 425 hospitals in Romania (contrasting the dominance of the church with the inadequacy of government and public health infrastructure),⁴⁷ many monasteries have care-giving facilities. Some of these monasteries make herbal remedies, teas, creams and tinctures to support themselves. In the nun-Monastery where I stayed for a week during my fieldwork, it was clear that the land, the mountain forests and pastures, the holiness of the monastery and the constant prayers of the nuns are part of making better medicines. Monastic remedies were also gaining an ever increasing fame in Romania with medical doctors and alternative healers collecting monastic recipes and using them in their practice.⁴⁸ Some of these recipes came from *pustnic* (hermit) nuns and monks, who retreat and lived alone in the mountains.

Transylvania, and especially the mountains, according to many people I met, is a place replete with healing spaces because it is the Garden of Fairies, or the Holy Mother: from fairy gardens to monasteries, chapels and sacred rocks, it is dotted by thermal baths, some of which were already described in the 13th century⁴⁹; salt baths, natural mineral waters, carbon dioxide-rich mofette (fumaroles), for cardiovascular and circulatory diseases, and plants that can be used for healing. It is a blessed land, or a land that through its spiritual intensity creates healing. A spirituality that is acknowledged through the knowledge of ancestral spirituality, for some coming from the Dacians, for others coming from ancestral Hungarian (or Szekler) shamans. There is a nostalgia for knowledgeable healers, midwives, and witches, whose ability to interact directly and intimately with the land in order to heal is being forgotten.⁵⁰ Spiritual and sacred lands in practice are far from being abstract concepts. Spiritual lands are places where spirit entities dwell, spirituality meaning the practical performance of being attentive to, and interacting with

the spirit world, with beings that some of us cannot sense, but others engage with on a regular basis, both consciously and unconsciously. Land (as the mother-earth for instance) is itself acted upon as a living and sentient entity.

Interactions

I WAS HELPING to harvest *körömvirág* (Hungarian for marigold, *L. Calendula officinalis*) flowers with Andrea and Móni, asking questions about how plants heal when I was told that it was the souls (Hungarian: *lélek*) of the plants that heal, not only their bodies, that is, their physical part. Thus, they argued, medicinal plants can heal better than pharmaceuticals, or rather, they would say that they actually heal you instead of poison you, because they heal your soul through their souls. Andrea was explaining to me that you can ask plants to help you heal, and they will lend part of their souls to the flowers you pick. Erzsébet also mentioned that one can find out what illness people suffer from, by looking into what wild plants grow in their garden. Plants will gather around the person who has a disease they can heal. Plants had to be treated with care and respect when cultivated and picked, as they were beings of the world lending their healing potentials to people. This view recalls classic accounts of Amazonian and other Native American shamans who gain knowledge of healing by speaking to spirits of plants, animals and ancestors through dreams and visions.

Interacting with the spiritual and thus with the spirits of plants was not a straightforward practice and it involved collecting knowledge and being attentive to the world. Learning did not only mean reading in books or listening to teachers. While these were part of *spiritual paths*, more important was the embodied attentiveness to the world, a “bodily being-in-the-world.”⁵¹ Erzsébet would get goose bumps every time she said something that was true. True in the sense that her analysis about a situation, about a person, was to the point. She would go to nature shops and *feel* which products had stronger active compounds through her hands. Andrea and Móni could *feel* the fluctuating energies of places. The reality and truthfulness of books, words, and speeches was decided through a visceral feeling in the body, so were the lies. Knowledge had to come from knowing through feeling, not knowing in one’s mind. This resulted in a constant awareness and engagement with the world.

Communicating with spirit entities was possible because the distinctions between mind/body/spirit, natural/supernatural, and nature/culture did not exist for the people I met. Rendered irrelevant through the process of awakening, as many called it. Being *woken up*, for Móni meant that she became aware of the relations between her as more-than-body, more than a biological body, and the rest of the world, including the spirit entities we cannot see. This happened suddenly in her sleep one night. Beforehand, she revealed, she was never interested in anything spiritual. Dreaming, for her, and for many others in my field, just like dreaming for the Ojibwa, was part of the *waking life*, enabling the mobility of the self, and communicating with *other-than-human persons*.⁵² Andrea narrated a similar story of awakening, a more dramatic one, followed by her being able to see all the spiritual world, an overwhelming experience, after which she asked not

to be able to see everything anymore, but rather glimpses of parts of the spirit world. But it was through dreams that most communicated with the spirit world, and these dreams were the driving force behind where they had to go, for instance why Andrea and Móni decided to visit Transylvania.

Interactions with the spiritual when healing was not a new idea in Romania. According to Nicolae Leon, a Romanian biologist, who lived between 1862 and 1931, wise women in Romania claimed to acquire their knowledge not through learning from their ancestors or books, but through a severe illness, when their spirit was taken away and taught plant lore by the *Iele* (a type of fairy or spiritual being), or by the Holy Mother.⁵³ Similarly, folklorists talk about fairy cults and healing in South-Eastern Europe as preceding beliefs in sorcery and witchcraft.⁵⁴ Healing, likewise, for many with whom I talked, relied on interacting with the spirit world. Erzsébet explained that she is sometimes told by the spirit world what remedy to use. Like the time she was told to give someone the tea mixture for a healthy gut, but in a bag that was labelled: ‘for the stomach,’ creating a psychosomatic context in which the patient would heal better. I have also been told stories about a healer in Braşov, who was a musician, but realized he has an affinity to heal, he could feel what plants would heal whom, and started teaching himself. But it was his being finely attuned to understanding plants and people on a spiritual level that made him a great healer, according to his patients, who remembered him fondly after his death.

Knowing through the body and communicating with spirits was seen as an acquired skill or a gift. It could be acquired through dreaming, illness, or through years of experience, but not taken for granted, while interactions could be clumsy and uncertain at times, especially for novices. Much the same way as Stoller⁵⁵ was unable to hear the double of a man the Songhay Sorcerer freed (115), I have heard amusing anecdotes of people trying to feel the truth or the world around them but failing to do so. Feeling through the world, or simply talking to (nonhuman and nonmaterial) beings around, nevertheless, was a practice that many used to engage with the land they were walking through and its inhabitants. Getting to know a landscape and who is involved in making this landscape gave way to possibilities of healing and spiritual practices through the land. Those making up the land could help humans on their way to heal, but these lands could also be threatened by humans. In the tone of a world that is falling apart after human industrial progress⁵⁶ mountains and forests were seen by these people as safe havens of not just biological diversity, but of spirit entities.

Conclusion

THROUGH SPIRITUAL and religious concerns in Transylvania, healing and making remedies that heal become practices that emerge from the relationships that healers (and those who seek health) cultivate with the spiritual, with the spirits or with God. The remedies are not *ours*, but they are made through our dynamic and mutual engagement with others, and our affinity and openness to interactions with them. Our mountains, from this perspective, are not *ours* but become the mountains that are *one*

of us, thus opening up the possibility to interact with them. Landscape can be something we only look at or something we have a claim to, but through engagement it becomes a terrain that we are a part of. Landscapes therefore are terrains of interactions. Healing practices that involve going through or being in certain lands, especially mountains, forests and pastures, heal through the interactions between humans and nonhuman beings, plants and spirits.

These interactions have been widely researched in anthropology in non-Western hunter-gatherer and pastoralist societies,⁵⁷ and likewise, they have been explored in Western sites.⁵⁸ Applying these theories in Eastern Europe not only helps further dilute the boundaries between Western and non-Western ideas of nature/culture,⁵⁹ but conversely it reveals an Eastern Europe beneath nationalist and post-communist struggles and critiques. Therefore, rather than analyzing healing in the land through these concepts, I have tried to take healing practices at their face value and populate the land with the many human, nonhuman, material and nonmaterial actors that are part of healing. I see these practices not as symbols and metaphors of a post-communist society, but as the ‘intimate and fraught’ (and precarious) relations Transylvanians have with other lifeforms.⁶⁰ Although not a representative sample of all Transylvanians, I have encountered villagers roaming the mountains on foot or in horse-drawn carts to harvest plants; urban dwellers harvesting medicinal plants for self-care; traditional, folk, or alternative healers; chemists, engineers, pharmacologists and university lecturers, all whom are trying to enter into messy, but sometimes very real (like talking out loud) interactions with plants, spirits, or God, recurrent themes of healing and medicine making practices.



Notes

1. Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 271.
2. George E. Marcus, “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (January 1, 1995): 95–117.
3. Meredith B. McGuire, “Not All Alternatives Are Complementary,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 2002, 409–11.
4. Anamaria Iosif Ross, *The Anthropology of Alternative Medicine* (Berg, 2012), 1.
5. *Ibid.*, 31.
6. Gordon M. Cragg et al., “The Impact of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity on Natural Products Research,” *Natural Product Reports* 29, no. 12 (December 2012): 1407–23, doi: 10.1039/c2np20091k.
7. Linh T. Ngo, Joseph I. Okogun, and William R. Folk, “21st Century Natural Product Research and Drug Development and Traditional Medicines,” *Natural Product Reports* 30, no. 4 (April 2013): 584–92.
8. Leon Sorin Muntean, *Tratat de Plante Medicinale Cultivate și Spontane* (Cluj Napoca: Risoprint, 2007), 50.
9. Dorian Singh, “Attitudes and Praxis of Traditional Forms of Health Care in a Post-Communist Romanian Romani Community,” *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 29, no. 1 (June 5, 2011): 127–40.
10. Ross, *The Anthropology of Alternative Medicine*, 136.

11. Ibid., 71.
12. László Kürti, "Transylvania, Land beyond Reason: Toward an Anthropological Analysis of a Contested Terrain," *Dialectical Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (March 1, 1989): 21–52.
13. Katherine Verdery, "Nationalism and National Sentiment in Post-Socialist Romania," *Slavic Review* 52, no. 2 (July 1, 1993): 179–203.
14. István Povedák, "The Monk and the White Shaman," in *Religion, Culture, Society. Yearbook of the MTA-SZTE Research Group for the Study of Religious Culture*, ed. Gábor Barna (Szeged, 2014), 95–114, http://real.mtak.hu/20694/1/SZTE_Religion_Culture_Society_Povedak_I_u_120412.359035.pdf.
15. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London, New York: Verso, 1991).
16. Land as commodity can just as easily be drawn into supply chains for capitalist (or indeed socialist) economies. See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, "Supply Chains and the Human Condition," *Rethinking Marxism* 21, no. 2 (April 1, 2009).
17. Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2011); Maggie Bolton and Catherine Degnen, eds., *Animals and Science: From Colonial Encounters to the Biotech Industry* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010); Catherine Degnen, "On Vegetable Love: Gardening, Plants, and People in the North of England," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 1 (2009): 151–67; Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, "The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (November 2010): 545–76.
18. See Ingold's *The Perception of the Environment*. dwelling perspective.
19. Allison Williams, ed., "Introduction: The Continuing Maturation of the Therapeutic Landscape Concept," in *Therapeutic Landscapes* (Ashgate, 2007), 1–14.
20. Wilbert M. Gesler, "Therapeutic Landscapes: Medical Issues in Light of the New Cultural Geography," *Social Science & Medicine* 34, no. 7 (April 1, 1992): 735.
21. G. Perriam, "Sacred Spaces, Healing Places: Therapeutic Landscapes of Spiritual Significance," *Journal of Medical Humanities* 36, no. 1 (2015): 19–33; J. D. Dewsbury and Paul Cloke, "Spiritual Landscapes: Existence, Performance and Immanence," *Social & Cultural Geography* 10, no. 6 (September 1, 2009): 695–711, 10.1080/14649360903068118; Allison Williams, "Therapeutic Landscapes in Holistic Medicine," *Social Science & Medicine* 46, no. 9 (May 1, 1998): 1193–1203.
22. Julia Pranikoff and Setha Low, "Understanding Therapeutic Landscapes from the Perspectives of Medical Anthropology and Environmental Psychology," in *Therapeutic Landscapes*, ed. Allison M. Williams (Ashgate, 2007), 291.
23. Arnar Árnason et al., eds., "Introduction," in *Landscapes Beyond Land: Routes, Aesthetics, Narratives*, vol. 19, EASA (Berghahn Books, 2012), 1–14.
24. WWF, "Carpathian Montane Conifer Forests," *The Encyclopedia of Earth*, 2014, <http://www.eoearth.org/view/article/150938/>.
25. In Romanian *Munții Noștri*, title also born by a beloved tourist guide series of the Romanian mountain region printed between 1974 and 1992. It resembles the title of the famous novel *Give me back my mountains!* (in Hungarian: *Adjátok vissza a hegyeimet!*), written in 1949, by the Transylvanian Hungarian writer Wass Albert. He emigrated to Germany and then to the US rather than going back to the Transylvania assigned back to Romania in 1945, after the Hungarian occupation in 1940, and is one of the authors that Hungarian national groups like to have a claim on.

26. David A. Kideckel, *The Solitude of Collectivism: Romanian Villagers to the Revolution and beyond* (Cornell University Press, 1993), 11.
27. WWF, “WWF Acts to Save Europe’s Last Remaining Virgin Forests,” *WWF*, October 26, 2011, http://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/?202118/WWF-acts-to-save-Europes-last-remaining-virgin-forests.
28. According to WWF *ibid.* the majority of virgin, or old-growth forests (“untouched by humans, the last places where nature survives in its purest state”) in the Carpathians are to be found in Romania, 250 000 hectares out of the 322 000 hectares in the Carpathian Mountains. These, and other forests in Romania are threatened not just by illegal logging, but by the web of corruption that surrounds the selling and buying of forests. The relative cheap price of forests (1000–3000 Euros/hectare as opposed to 10 000 Euros in Austria) attracts foreign investors from countries in Germany, Austria and the United States, who are “only interested in exploiting the forests and exporting the wood and obtaining profit” Raluca Besliu, “Reclaiming the Forest: A Romanian Story,” *openDemocracy*, August 19, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/raluca-besliu/reclaiming-forest-romanian-story>.
A wave of protests against deforestations washed through Romania in May 2015, see Laurence Peter, “Romania Acts to Save Forests from Logging Spree,” news, *BBC News*, (May 21, 2015), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-32792314>; Marian Chiriac, “Romanians Protest Over Illegal Logging,” news, *Balkan Insight*, (November 5, 2015), <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/romanians-protest-over-ilegal-logging>. revealing the sentiments of many to whom I have talked to: the strong connection many from Romania feel towards *their* forests.
29. While in this article I am talking about and stressing the importance of mountains and forests, similar oppositions can be argued for between the view of rural areas versus cities. Indeed, the rural idyll, and the rural way of interacting with nature was sometimes seen as the way to achieve a healthy life. Nevertheless, even in villages, mountain areas and forests had a sense of being more sacred and spiritually charged.
30. Allison Williams, ed., “Healing Landscapes in the Alps: Heidi by Johanna Spyri,” in *Therapeutic Landscapes* (Ashgate, 2007), 65–73.
31. Unless stated otherwise non-English words are in Romanian.
32. Zalmoxis was a high-priest and deity of the Geto-Dacians. The idea of bringing Orthodox Christianity and Zalmoxism together has its own history: Ioan Coman, a theologian and classical philologist, proposed the theory of Geto-Dacian monotheism, and drew a parallel between Zalmoxis and Christ, he preached one single God and the immortality of the soul. Ioan Coman was close to the Romanian Iron Guard in the 1930s and his rhetoric had strong nationalistic overtones. See Tchavdar Marinov, “Ancient Thrace in the Modern Imagination: Ideological Aspects of the Construction of Thracian Studies in Southeast Europe (Romania, Greece, Bulgaria),” in *Entangled Histories of the Balkans - Volume Three: Shared Pasts, Disputed Legacies*, ed. Roumen Daskalov and Alexander Vezenkov, Brill (Leiden, Boston: BRILL, 2015), 35–36. The Iron Guard or the *Garda de fier* was a far right movement and political party between the 1920s and the early periods of WWII, it was an ultra-nationalist, anti-Semitic, anti-communist, anti-capitalist movement that promoted the Orthodox Christian faith. See Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (UCL Press, 1995), 277–289.
Often spiritual narratives are intermingled with nationalistic views in Transylvania, but this does not mean that they have to be so. While those who I met from the infoneuroenergetics group told me that some people, even from infoneuroenergetics, can fall into a nationalistic rhetoric, those who “truly know” what they are talking about and what spirituality, is would never fall into such traps. Spirituality, after all, should be comprehensive and all accommodating, they would point out.

33. Eben Kirksey, ed., *The Multispecies Salon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
34. Caitlin Berrigan, "The Life Cycle of a Common Weed: Viral Imaginings in Plant-Human Encounters," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2012): 97–116.
35. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 22–23; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (OUP Oxford, 2005).
36. Kohn, *How Forests Think Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human.*, 5.
37. Degnen, "On Vegetable Love."
38. Berrigan, "The Life Cycle of a Common Weed."
39. Meredith B. McGuire, "Health and Spirituality as Contemporary Concerns," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527 (May 1, 1993): 144–54.
40. Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton University Press, 2001); Dewsbury and Cloke, "Spiritual Landscapes."
41. Zsigmond Móricz, *Tündérkert*, vol. 1, 3 vols., Erdély-Trilógia (Unikornis, 1922).
42. While not mentioned by the people I have talked to, there is a theory—highly popularised on the Internet—claiming that the Romanian name of Transylvania, *Ardeal*, comes from the word *har-deal* (from the language of the people of Dacia), having a variety of meanings attributed to it, among them Magic Garden or Sacred Garden, the theory being associated with Artur Silvestri, a Romanian writer: Ștefan Hanciu and Melania Hanciu, *Scurte Observații Asupra Originii Unor Toponime*, *Revista Pangeea* 10 (2010): 77–80; Ioan Miclau, "Adevărul Strălucște ca Aurul," *Revista de Artă și Cultură, Iosif Vulcan*, accessed December 15, 2015, <https://revistaiosifvulcan.wordpress.com/about/editoriale/adevarul-straluceste-ca-aurul/>; Adrian Bucurescu, "Misterele Transilvaniei," *The Epoch Times România*, May 7, 2013, <http://epochtimes-romania.com/news/misterele-transilvaniei—196332>.
43. One of these is the Pauline Order (the Order of Saint Paul the First Hermit, *pálosok* in Hungarian), a hermit monk order, founded by the Hungarian Blessed Eusebius. However, "[i]n the past two decades a Hungarian neo-mythology appeared and is being shaped with amazing speed. It comprises partly neopagan and partly Christian, neo-nationalist elements and one of its prominent segments is the reinterpreted cult of Blessed Eusebius (c. 1200-1270). In this invented mythology, Blessed Eusebius and the Pauline Order he established becomes a white shaman and the guardian of the ancient Hungarian religion. The image of the Paulines in the invented mythology gained considerable popularity, mainly in non-Catholic circles." See Povedák, "The Monk and the White Shaman," 95. Similarities can be drawn from this order with the inforenergetics spirituality group, in that they both criticise the present Christian religious knowledge and practices to neo-nationalist elements, especially when considered that according to Móni, the Pauline is in no way a "neo-mythology," rather a secret circle that managed to keep the ancient knowledge as pure as possible. Although sometimes she would talk sceptically about this, and in general about being part of any order. For many of the people interested in spirituality in my field, being part of one group or an order was not an option anymore. In this changing world and times we are witnessing, they said, no one group holds the truth anymore.
44. M. Albu, David Banks, and Harriet Nash, *Mineral and Thermal Groundwater Resources* (Springer Science & Business Media, 1997), 16.
45. P. Enciu et al., "A Brief History of Romanian Hydrogeology," in *History of Hydrogeology*, ed. Nicholas Howden and John Mather (CRC Press, 2013), 230.
46. Gheorghe Lazarovici et al., "Megaliți în Carpații Răsăriteni. Căi Spre Sanctuarele Din Natură și Urmele Unor Așezări. Studiul de Etno-Arheologie și Etno-Religie," *Arheologia Moldovei* XXXIV (2011).

47. Mircea Reștea, “În România Sunt 18.300 de Biserici și Doar 425 de Spitale,” *Cotidianul.ro*, 2010, <http://www.cotidianul.ro/in-romania-sunt-18300-de-biserici-si-doar-425-de-spitale-121172/>.
48. Mariana Borloveanu, *Leacuri Mănăstirești: Terapii Pentru Trup și Suflet* (Bucharest: Editura Lumea Credinței, 2014); Ovidiu Bojor and Răducanu Dumitru, *Plante și Miresme Biblice: Hrană Pentru Suflet și Trup* (Bucharest: Fiat Lux, 2007).
49. Albu, Banks, and Nash, *Mineral and Thermal Groundwater Resources*, 8.
50. The nostalgia for the ancestral knowledge of sacredness is played upon by companies that make medicinal plant remedies, especially those with their headquarters in Transylvania. One such company has one of the oldest histories in commercial medicinal plant cultivation in Romania. Digitalis was founded in 1929 by the pharmacist Andrei Farago in Orăștie (German: Broos; Hungarian: Szászváros). Under communism it became part of Plafar, and was privatized after the revolution by the then board of directors under the name Fares. See Fares, “Istoric | Fares.ro,” accessed November 16, 2015, <http://fares.ro/despre-noi/istoric/>; Emilia Stancu, “Din Istoria Farmaciei Românești Interbelice,” *Noema VII* (2008): 61–71. Orăștie, situated next to Sarmizegetusa Regia, the old capital of Dacia, before the Roman conquest, was used as a reference on the products of the company. On their website, under the plant quality heading, it is written (own translations from Romanian): “The story of Fares starts in the times of our Dacian ancestors, who knew many wonders about plants, healing, and life.” See Fares, “Despre Calitatea Plantelor | Fares.ro,” accessed November 16, 2015, <http://fares.ro/despre-noi/despre-calitatea-plantelor/>.
51. Thomas J. Csordas, “Embodiment and Cultural Phenomenology,” in *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*, ed. Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 143.
52. Tim Ingold, “A Circumpolar Night’s Dream,” in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2011), 100–102.
53. Nicolae Leon, *Istoria Naturală Medicală a Poporului Român* (Bucharest: Academia Națională Română, 1903), 18.
54. Éva Pócs, *Tündérek, Démonok, Boszorkányok* (Budapest: Akadémia Kiadó, 1989).
55. Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).
56. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 1–14.
57. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*; Kohn, *How Forests Think Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*.
58. Degnen, “On Vegetable Love”; Stefan Helmreich, *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas* (University of California Press, 2009); Kirksey, *The Multispecies Salon*; Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
59. Degnen, “On Vegetable Love.”
60. Eduardo Kohn, “How Dogs Dream: Amazonian Natures and the Politics of Transspecies Engagement,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (February 1, 2007): 3–24.

Abstract

“I was told to come here in the forest to heal”: Healing Practices Through the Land in Transylvania

The paper explores alternative healing practices such as engaging with plants and spirit entities on the diverse landscapes of Transylvania. While plant medicines were an intrinsic part of communist Romania, traditional, alternative and spiritual healing practices have been suppressed, and only started to resurface after the revolution. In these practices mountains and forests acquire a significant role as landscapes that provide space for interactions between people, plants, and spirit entities. Through ethnographies with spiritual healers and people who use plant medicines for self-care practices, I will argue that healing is achieved through engagements between humans and nonhumans (land, plants and spirits), practices rooted in real and imagined ancestral knowledge. I will build on recent work on human and nonhuman interactions in anthropology to consider healing as deconstructing nature/culture dichotomies.

Keywords

healing, alternative medicine, spirituality, landscape, nature/culture, Transylvania