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Xenophobic Mountains

Landscape Sentience Reconsidered in the Romanian Carpathians

Alexandra Cotofana

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ISBN 978-3-031-13111-0 ISBN 978-3-031-13112-7 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13112-7>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this manuscript took a village, and I will never be able to thank each and every person who helped enough. My deepest gratitude goes to the team at Palgrave Pivot for their support, kindness, and patience. To Alireza Doostdar, Adrian Deoancă, and Cheryl Klimaszewski for thorough and thoughtful comments on Chap. 2. To Jason Vincz at Vincz Philology for editing several chapters and for providing inspiration (and friendship) throughout this entire process.

Chapter 3 was initially published in *Sentient Ecologies. Xenophobic Imaginaries of Landscape* (Eds. Alexandra Coțofană and Hikmet Kuran), Environmental Anthropology and Ethnobiology Series, Volume 31, Berghahn Books. I wish to thank all the authors in this volume for our productive exchanges during a workshop in January 2021, when we met to prepare the manuscript and to offer feedback on each other's chapters. Special thanks to my co-editor, Hikmet Kuran, who has been an incredible conversation partner, fellow intellectual, and friend.

Thank you to Raluca Cernahoschi and Enikő DácZ for their constructive edits and comments on Chap. 5, for their patience and encouragement.

Parts of the manuscript were imagined during the summer of 2021, when I was an Environmental Humanities Fellow at the University of Edinburgh's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. The intellectual exchanges I had there were vital to my writing process. I would like to acknowledge Professor Steve Yearley, IASH Director; Dr. Ben Fletcher-Watson, Administrative Manager; and Pauline Clark, the IASH administrator, for their incredible generosity and for making me feel at home. To David Farrier and Michelle Bastien for their mentorship, to Nicole

Seymour and Cristina Richie for their friendship, and to Shy Zvoloun and Lucien Staddon Foster for renewing my faith in young scholars.

In Abu Dhabi, I have benefitted from an incredible amount of support from colleagues, friends, and family. Ladan Affi and Ximena Cordova have been incredibly supportive every step of the way, providing editorial support, critical questions, and friendship.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my partner for all the editorial help, German translations, cups of tea, and for always supporting me.

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Introduction

Abstract The introduction traces the logic of a xenophobic sentient landscape for the reader, and some of the ways in which Romania is a good context to study this concept. Hiking in the Carpathians one November day reveals the complexities of how the mountain is understood as recognizing and punishing ethno-religious others. The Bucegi Massif in the Carpathians, long understood as sacred to several communities, both past and present, becomes a locale fit for thinking about the anti-Semitism of sentient landscapes. The introduction then traces theoretical lines through the concept of sentient landscapes to reveal academic explorations of the animated lithic, as well as what we might be missing, and what gaps an ethnographic study of the Carpathians may fill.

Keywords Xenophobic sentient landscapes • Sacred sites • Mountains • Romania • Carpathians

“Bună searaaa,” Corina greeted our table playfully as we entered the Green Hours Jazz Club in downtown Bucharest. The party of four greeted us back cheerfully, and Corina proceeded to introduce each person while we were taking off our coats and scarfs: Marian, an actor with one of Bucharest’s state theaters, and his wife Livia, a pediatric doctor, Aneta, a political scientist, and her older brother Francisc, a retired geographer who Corina had met during a workshop on mindfulness she had organized, in her practice as

a licensed psychotherapist. Corina then introduced me as “the girl from Bușteni” (*fata din Bușteni*). “Oooh!” the group exclaimed. I smiled sheepishly and took a seat in the only available spot next to Francisc. He continued, “I thought I saw something *luminous* (he gestured around my head and shoulders) about you when you came in. People from Bușteni are special (*deosebiți*)—you can’t be otherwise when you live at the foothills of the Bucegi massif.” The concert started soon after his remark on my mountain origins, and our conversation was postponed till after the artists left the stage.

As we continued to talk, Corina and her friends invited me to join them on a weekend one-day hike to Colții Țapului in the Bucegi massif. “Why there?” I asked. My question produced grimaces on Corina and Francisc’s faces, a mix of confusion and disappointment. I felt particularly bad, as this seemed to be information I should have known, as someone who lives in the mountain town of Bușteni. “The peak of Colții Țapului is one of the strongest energetic centers in the world, one of the pores through which the mountain breathes goodness onto us,” Francisc explained. I quickly nodded in agreement, not fully sure I understood what a pore of a mountain means as I focused on trying to minimize my earlier lack of knowledge. We agreed to meet in the Sinaia train station on Sunday morning, as I left for my hometown of Bușteni the next day, while the rest of them had to wait for the workweek to end.

Sunday morning, I woke up at 6 am, packed a couple of extra layers, as it was late November and I knew that even though the snow was melting in Bușteni, the peaks and valleys of the Bucegi kept the snow for much longer. I took the train from Bușteni to the next town of Sinaia, met the group, and drove up to Cabana Padina to save as much time as possible, since everyone but me needed to return to Bucharest in the evening, and go to work the next day. We drove in the dark for some of the route and arrived to the Padina Chalet by 10 am. The hike to Colții Țapului and back usually takes around five hours in the summer, but the snow was abundant, and we were accompanied by Marian and Livia’s 12-year-old daughter who was not as enthused as the adults about this whole plan. In her defense, despite the beautiful view along the hike, the trip was difficult, and the altitude led to all of us breathing heavily across the icy path.

The view from the peak of Colții Țapului was spectacular; the only thing interrupting the landscape was a frosted, solitary cross, motionless in the howling wind (Fig. 1.1). A red-cheeked, heavy-breathing Francisc uttered with admiration: “You’ll never see anything like this anywhere else. This is woodland Christianity (*creștinism pădुरatic*) manifested,



Fig. 1.1 The cross at the top of Colții Țapului

ours, just ours.” Francisc continued, walking me to the edge of the peak, where we could see down into one of the valleys, to which he pointed: “Come back with us in the summer, and I’ll show you what happens to people who try to take all this away from us. This mountain will pulverize them (*ii face muntele ăsta praf și pulbere*).”

His pointed finger directed my attention to what seemed to be metal scraps peeking from under the snow. What we were looking at was the crash site of an Israeli Defense Forces helicopter, which hit the side of Colții Țapului in July of 2010, an accident which was fatal to all seven people inside the aircraft. There had been much speculation about the cause of the crash, and I was curious to know more about what Francisc thought of the whole ordeal, but I was equally curious about the term he used, *woodland Christianity*. After making a joke about how my American education has been devastating for my knowledge of Romanian traditions, Francisc promised to lend me a book next time we meet, which would help me understand the term and find my way back to forms of knowledge that he deemed essential for any Romanian.

Francisc and I never met again, but he kept his promise and lent me the book through Corina. The book was a Mehedinți and Mezdrea (1995) edition of *The Romanian Christianity (Creștinismul românesc)* by

nineteenth-century geographer Simion Mehedinți, ¹ widely considered the founding father of the discipline of geography in the country. The term woodland Christianity (*creștinism pădurețic*) appears in this book and is used by Mehedinți to define a type of Christianity specific to Romanians, marked by purity and incorruptibility.

Francisc had left a bookmark on page 102, where one particular paragraph drew my attention:

Our people have been placed in harm's way, meaning in the way of all the invasions, and the worst of them all was the invasion of the Jewish element of the 19th century. From a quantitative, but also qualitative point of view, the Jewish invasion exceeds all the barbarian raids of the Middle Ages. We were able to defend ourselves from the latter by sheltering ourselves in the forests of our mountains, of our hills, of our plains and in the meadows of our rivers. The barbarians were few, poor, uncivilized, uncultured. (...) The first ones who were able to lodge themselves in everywhere (all the ways to the depths of the mountains) were the Jews. Why? Because they are numerous (almost two million), and because they came supported by capital, by the solidarity of the Israeli Alliance, the rabbinic organization (the rabbi acting more as a political leader than a religious one), by a daring press, and by all the means of corrupting the upper class. (1995: 102)

Had Francisc left the bookmark on this page by mistake? Or was he trying to clarify the point he made about the IDF helicopter in November? As my research continued, I came to understand that neither Mehedinți's anti-Semitism nor Francisc's understanding that the mountain had punished the Israelis for trespassing was unique. In fact, tens of thousands of people reacted positively on social media to an anonymous account claiming that it was the mountain itself causing the crash of the Israeli helicopter, punishing the foreigners for trying to trespass on sacred land. This book investigates some of the ontological intricacies of the Carpathians to find out what makes the mountains an appropriate site for exploring the concept of xenophobic sentient mountains. The intervention of the data I present in the book is twofold: first, it asks readers to take the concept of

¹In 1895, Mehedinți goes to the University of Leipzig to work on his doctoral thesis which he finalizes in 1899. He is mentored by Friedrich Ratzel who much like Mehedinți blends geography and ethnography and who is the first known scholar to use the term *Lebensraum* ("living space") in the sense that the National Socialists later would (Tuathail, 1996).