

ESCAPING TOXICITY: HEALTH AND CARE IN A CLUJ FULL OF CHEMICALS

BY

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Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa
in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts in Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

Based on two months of ethnographic fieldwork in Cluj, Romania, this thesis explores the themes of health, care, vitality, toxicity and violence through the following question: How do notions of health and toxicity emerge through daily acts of care in Cluj, Romania?

For my collaborators, health is a question of maintenance and food is what enables people to maintain their health. However, there is a problem with food when it comes to health: chemicals are always in the mix. Chemicals were described by my collaborators as toxic synthetic substances that often, if not always, also play a large part in environmental pollution. This leads to a contradiction: food is what keeps you healthy, but it is also what makes you ill.

This thesis departs from such contradictions that arise from living in a world that is permeated with toxic elements and discusses health and toxicity are notions which go beyond materiality, and which highlight the interconnectedness of beings, things and processes that compose the world through space and through time. It shows how care and violence are often two sides of the same coin as well as how capitalism contributes to the near inescapability of today's scariest forms of toxicity.

Overall, this thesis aims to offer a better understanding of how humans grapple with health and toxicity as it relates to food, medicine, the environment at large and the relation we foster with other beings and things by writing about people's doubts, fears, frustrations, disappointments, and outrage, but also about their hopes and solutions as they relate to our toxic world. Ultimately, this thesis is an ethical discussion on "the good life" and the toxic elements that prevent us from living it as my collaborators understand it.

To Jojo



and to the Field.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Le mulțumesc celor care au participat la această cercetare în calitate de colaboratori și care mi-au transmis și împărtășit mult mai mult decât „date etnografice”. Această teză nu ar fi avut loc niciodată fără voi.

I thank my thesis supervisor, Professor David Jaclin, for accompanying me throughout this long, but (I hope) fruitful journey. Merci énormément d’avoir cru en moi; ainsi que pour l’espace et le “carburant” que vous donnez à ma créativité.

I thank my committee members, professors Julie Laplante and Ari Gandsman, for their guidance, counsel, and patience.

I thank Professor Hope MacLean for showing me the importance of my research and inspiring me not to give up; Professeure Carmen Silvia Fullin pour avoir fait débloquer tout l’argument de cette thèse avec une simple conversation; professors Deniz Duruiz and Gregg Hetherington for convincing me my research was not so boring after all through the enthusiasm they showed for it; and the administrative staff of the School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies who have always helped me throughout my academic journey.

Le mulțumesc părinților mei, bunicilor mei și restului familiei mele, precum și nașilor mei și prietenilor mei pentru iubirea și grija lor nemuritoare. În fine, putem să sărbătorim că am terminat!

Je remercie mon meilleur ami, partenaire de vie, et collègue, Manuel Charette, pour son amour, son écoute, ses conseils, son appui et son encouragement sans relâche. Sans toi, j’aurais abandonné cette thèse il y a des lustres.

Je remercie mes précieuses amies de longue date, Judith Derome, Béa Trudel et Arielle Milot pour leur soutien, leur encouragement, et pour s’être assurées que je finirai cette thèse en un seul morceau.

Je remercie mes collègues de travail à Relations Couronne-Autochtones Canada, en particulier Jean-Sébastien “Maurice” Potvin, Marie-Andrée Thériault et Bruno Marion. Cette thèse n’aurait assurément *jamais* terminé sans votre appui, empathie et encouragement sans égal.

I thank my fellow students and friends at the University of Ottawa and elsewhere for sharing this experience with me throughout its highs and lows and for their encouragement and their advice (as well as the occasional references). I especially thank Charlotte Gagnon-Lewis, who has almost acted as my pseudo-supervisor throughout her careful proofreading.

Lastly, I thank Rain, Bandit, Storm, Chewie (R.I.P.), and Sputnik – the cars who have kept me sane throughout this tiring and perilous journey. Now, I will finally be able to take care of you the way you took care of me.

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1 Genesis

2 AM

I step inside the apartment, only slightly out of breath from the flight of stairs we have just climbed. It smells just like I remember – slightly dusty, the scent of old books and naphthalene hanging in the air. My grandmother shoots for the kitchen, laying bread on the table.

“*Ce să îți dea bunica?*” she asks. – “What should grandmother give you?”

I crack a little smile. Of course, the first item of discussion would be what I would like to eat. That is how it has always been. I am not sure if there exists a Romanian grandmother who will ask you *anything* else before she asks you about food. Only, I am not hungry at all. I am bloated and tired from the trip.

That is when my grandmother opens the pantry, and I instantly spy the mint tea. Well, *that* will fix my problem for certain. I tell my grandmother that I do not want to eat, but that I would have some mint tea. I point at the box inside the pantry. I tell her it is my favorite, just as my grandfather comes up from behind in the kitchen, surprised. Mint tea is his favorite too.

Both my grandparents head for the cabinet storing the stovetop pots. My grandmother reaches for a pot in metal, and my grandfather instantly intervenes: We cannot use that one. It is in metal. She should use the enameled one. My grandmother shakes her head: We cannot use the enameled one. It is old and broken. The metal one will be fine. It is in stainless steel. It is just for boiling water, anyway.

As the water starts to heat over the stove, the discussion derives on tea – starting with the one I am having. It is packed in little tea bags – something my grandmother is not fond of. She has heard of the harmful effects of tea in bags. She prefers tea in bulk.

My grandmother proceeds with showing me her teas and how they are packed. The leaves are loose in paper bags, the paper bags tucked their original cardboard boxes. She explains the medicinal properties of each plant as she goes. She says she often drinks hawthorn tea for her heart palpitations. “*Tocmai, așa i spune: planta inimii.*” – “Precisely, that's what they call it: the plant of the heart”.

Nearby, the water boils, the bubbles shaking the pot over the flame. My grandmother grabs the pot by the handle with a rag and pours the water over the mint tea bag in my cup. The water sizzles as it passes on the dry parts of the metal.

My grandfather takes the opportunity to ask me about my thesis as the tea cools down, the three of us seated around the small table in the kitchen. Actually, he asks me what I came here to do. He admits anthropology is somewhat of an obscure discipline to him since he cannot clearly pinpoint its topic of study.

I begin to explain my project with the help of my project proposal, but slowly move away from the document itself, speaking more to my interest in the use of medicinal plants rather the project itself, and the conversation departs on a dozen subjects.

We speak about plants for over an hour, my brain constantly buzzing about in the background telling me I should be recording this conversation. We pass by all the topics I had outlined in my interview guide without me even needing to ask questions – health, plant use and preparation, the problem of allopathic medicine¹, our ancestor’s knowledge of plants...

From the beginning, all the pertinent topics were at the rendez-vous. It told me one thing, as one of my Romanian friends put it a few days later:

“În orice caz, ai venit la locul bun.”
“In any case, you came to the right place”.

This project finds its roots in 2018, during one of my visits to Romania. I went back to Romania to visit family, but – as most immigrants² – also took the opportunity to stock up on things I could not easily find in Canada, among which over-the-counter antibiotics. It led me to tour numerous pharmacies, and consequently to the idea I would pursue for the next few years in the context of my future master’s degree.

Pharmacies in Romania are small spaces, usually big enough only to accommodate about three to five people. They mostly, if not solely, sell medicine. People walk in, speak their troubles to the pharmacist (which is usually a woman), then hopefully, receive something to ease their suffering. This makes pharmacies extremely fertile places for what Larisa Jasarevic (2017) calls

¹ For clarity, “allopathic medicine” refers to medicine which usually relies on the biomedical model. This includes what most people consider to be “modern medicine”. I have chosen to use this term as it is the same my collaborators used on the field.

² For clarification, my parents and I immigrated to Canada in 2004 when I was five years old. We have gone back to visit family every couple of years.

collective examination. Everyone can hear the interaction between the patient and the pharmacist – everyone can intervene.

During one of my visits to those pharmacies, I overheard a conversation between a patient and a pharmacist that stuck with me. The patient came complaining about leg pain, to which the pharmacist suggested *herbal tea*. This mostly stuck with me by contrast with my experience in Canada. Per Canadian regulations, pharmacists may not recommend remedies or therapies that have not been proven to work in clinical trials. This includes most, if not all, medicinal plants, making this type of exchange extremely unlikely in Canadian pharmacies. In turn, this contrast led me to ask myself, “What is this Romanian thing about tea?”.

This simple question slowly tuned my attention to other instances in which medicinal plants came into play. I recalled memories I had in which I was healed with plants as a child – memories in which my paternal grandmother calmed my anxiety with linden flowers; memories in which my mother and I were hidden under a towel in the kitchen, inhaling the water vapour of mint boiling in water to clear my breathing; and more. I also began mapping out the field by asking questions, having conversations, and documenting the positions of the Romanian government and corporations with regard to medicinal plants by collecting an array of policies, news articles, and blog posts, especially through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Investigating Romania’s response to the pandemic led me to important discoveries in which doctors and entire pharmacy chains recommended plants and vitamins to prevent and treat the virus in the absence of obvious treatment for COVID-19. These important discoveries made me realize the instances about medicinal plants I collected were not isolated incidents, and I became convinced I was onto something. I spent four months concretizing this intuition into a full project proposal.

Originally, this project intended to explore how the use of medicinal plants in the pharmacies and medical clinics of Cluj-Napoca, Romania (re)articulated biomedical notions of care. The project was thus supposed to be interested in the practice of healing, in the medical event and in possible “Romanian” medical cosmologies; and to engage itself along questions such as: How do we heal in Cluj-Napoca? How does the role of medical personnel relate to medicinal plants? Why do pharmacists and doctors in Cluj-Napoca suggest that their customers turn to herbal remedies? Why do customers choose to opt for herbal products? What are the conceptions of health, disease, care, and plants associated with the practice of healing?

I had chosen the city of Cluj-Napoca for my project and fieldwork for three reasons. The first reason was because this was where I overheard the conversation which sparked the idea for my master's project. The second reason was due to a gap in the literature: I found no studies on the use of medicinal plants in Romanian urban centers. The third was because Cluj-Napoca is my birthplace, so I was somewhat familiar with the city, and I still had my room in my grandparents' apartment which made it an ideal destination for a student with limited financial means.

However, my original project never took place. There were multiple reasons for this, but the most important was that solely investigating medicinal plants proved to be rather difficult. People working in pharmacies refused to talk to me for various reasons which made investigating the topic impossible in these environments; and people that *did* speak to me always brought the conversation somewhere else no matter how I started it. In other words, the field constantly pushed me in another direction than the one I had initially mapped out. If I wanted to stay true to the field and the lived experiences of my collaborators, I could not, in all good conscience, insist on staying on my initial path.

This thesis is about this change of direction. It is about why an inquiry into medicinal plants became impossible without discussing food, the environmental crisis, capitalism, and history; and about how medical anthropology became environmental anthropology in the really broad sense of the term. Ultimately, it is an ethical discussion on “the good life” and the toxic elements that prevent us from living it as my collaborators understand it.

1.1 Research problem

As I mentioned above, my original project investigated notions of health through the use of medicinal plants. However, the people I worked with on the field always brought the conversations we had on health and medicinal plants towards *food*. In fact, food, health, and medicine revealed themselves to be inextricably linked. As I will explain in further details later, this was because, for my collaborators, health is a question of maintenance and food is what enables them to maintain their health. However, there is a problem with food when it comes to health: chemicals are always in the mix.

Chemicals were described by my collaborators as poisonous substances and referred to a wide range of laboratory-made molecules that often, if not always, play a large part in environmental pollution. Examples of chemicals include synthetic pesticides and synthetic

medicines, but also artificial flavors and colorants. Chemicals are notably present in our food, and harm us as we ingest it. Obviously, this leads to a contradiction: food is what keeps you healthy, but it is also what makes you ill.

Since I was fundamentally interested in the daily act of caring for one's health, I found this constant shift my collaborators made towards food and the contradictions that arise from living in a world that is permeated with toxic elements much more worthy of attention. As such, whereas my thesis still shares some elements with my original project, it now intends to delve into the following question: **How do notions of health and toxicity emerge through daily acts of care in Cluj, Romania?**

In this thesis, I argue that the daily acts of care of my collaborators in Cluj, Romania embody historical, metaphysical, and capitalist narratives and dynamics which inform and are informed by notions of health and toxicity. Health and toxicity thus emerge as notions which cannot be understood separately from these narratives and dynamics.

Indeed, my collaborators often rooted their arguments and ideas in Romanian ancestral knowledge and practices. In Section 3, I discuss this ancestral knowledge and these ancestral practices and argue that it is necessary to understand them (and part of Romanian history) in order to understand health and toxicity as they manifested themselves on the field. In other words, I argue that health and toxicity must be discussed as historicized elements. Furthermore, my collaborators discussed environmental toxicity as a problem that goes beyond the material world. As they explained it to me, chemicals and their surrounding processes are toxic because they disturb what my collaborators identified as the “vitality” of most beings, things, and processes on this planet. Section 4 expands on this idea and demonstrates the impossibility to properly grasp notions of health and toxicity without discussing other-than-human beings, things, and processes which sometimes pertain to metaphysical understandings of the world. Lastly, Section 5 addresses systemic and institutional causalities of disturbed “vitality” as identified by my collaborators. Starting from important arguments they have made during my fieldwork, I posit that the ongoing disturbance of “vitality” not only feeds capitalist ideals, but is also fed by them, creating a nearly inescapable vicious circle where toxicity is the norm rather than the exception.

This thesis is thus interested in the practice of caring, in toxic flows and in possible “Romanian” vital cosmologies. Following Joan Tronto's definition of care as “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (1993,

p.103), it engages itself along questions such as: How do people in Cluj care about their health? How do they compose with environmental toxicity (in the broad sense of the term)? What are the conceptions of vitality, toxicity and health associated with daily acts of care? How are these conceptions articulated *in* and articulated *by* daily acts of care in a toxic world? Why is it impossible to address healthcare without addressing environmental toxicity (in the broad sense of the term)?

These questions are important to address in a world in which satisfying our most basic needs has either become dangerous or impossible due to the poisoning of our food and our environment by capitalist imperatives. The worldwide food crisis keeps taking horrifying proportions due to the increased quantity and severity of climate shocks; corporate control over seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and lands (as well as their increased prices); and the depletion of soils due to harmful agricultural practices, such as monoculture and spraying, all imposed by those same corporations.

Yet, even when food is on the table it generates anxiety. Ingredient lists sound like foreign languages; nearly anything on a shelf contains carcinogens; mobile applications that evaluate the “healthiness” of food are downloaded across the world, and “clean” food labels multiply incessantly, all while new studies emerge on their empty promises.

My research aims to offer a better understanding of such problems and of the relation humans foster with their food and environment by writing about the lived experience of my collaborators in this toxic and anxiogenic world. I write about these people’s doubts, fears, frustrations, disappointments, and outrage, but also about their hopes and solutions with regard to the near inescapability of today’s scariest forms of toxicity.

Yet, in order to address these problems and the questions I have enumerated above, it is first and foremost necessary to understand the context in which they are asked.

1.2 Context³

Romania is a geographically diverse country that generally displays a temperate climate located in Eastern Europe. It houses about 19 million people (Institutul Național de Statistică,

³ This section is composed of information I know and have known for a long time as a Romanian citizen, but also of information I acquired from my collaborators on the field as well as certain written materials (such as statistical reports).

2021). I dare say almost all of them know about Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Nicolae Ceaușescu ascended to power of the Romanian Communist Party⁴ in 1965 after his predecessor's death, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. He perpetuated the ongoing communist rule implemented in 1945 until his execution during the Christmas Revolution (*Revoluția de Crăciun*) in 1989. After his death, Romania was plunged in its current post-communist era. The Romanian Communist Party was never revived, but its time in power marked Romanians in more ways than one. As the joke would have it, it is not a Romanian gathering if you do not hear “*pe vremea lui Ceaușescu*”⁵ at least once. Even those who have not lived through communism have experienced its effects and aftermath through intergenerational trauma.

This is not to redo the whole communist history of Romania. It is to set the post-communist tone in which fieldwork took place. Throughout my time in the country, I have only interacted with people that have lived through communism, or with people whose parents have lived through communism. I, myself, am part of the latter category. This had a direct impact on the data I collected, especially because those who have lived through communism fostered a different kind of relation to plants, whether medicinal or culinary (that is, food), from those who have not. I will come back to this at certain moments throughout the thesis for further explanation, but it is important to understand that while the Romanian Communist Party was never revived, certain approaches to life, attitudes and behaviors that have stemmed from its rule remain and continue to be passed down. Just to name one: people (myself included) are still wary of signing documents as signing something in communist times could be dangerous.

The more specific location where my fieldwork took place was the county of Cluj. It is located on the edge of Transylvania and the Ardeal region, towards the north-western part of Romania. During the last census in 2021, 636 016 people resided in Cluj (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2021).

Something to know about Cluj is that, in 2024, the Cluj division of the College of Pharmacists of Romania counted 312 pharmacies in the county, out of which 157 pharmacies alone are in the city of Cluj-Napoca (Colegiul Farmaciștilor din Romania, 2024). This is the approximate equivalent of one pharmacy per 2 177 people in the county of Cluj and one pharmacy per 1 930

⁴ The Romanian Communist Party was the only party in the country during communism. It underwent various name changes throughout the years.

⁵ Literally translating to “on the time/weather of Ceaușescu”, this expression means “during the time of Ceaușescu”.

people in the city of Cluj-Napoca. This high number of pharmacies is often the norm in cities and towns throughout the country. Even small villages can be assured to have at least one pharmacy if not two or three. This high number of pharmacies in Romania is notably justified by the fact that the pharmaceutical industry is one of the most lucrative in the country. In 2020, the pharmaceutical industry in Romania reached a new record in their annual sales, amounting to over 20 billion lei (5 841 660 Canadian dollars) (Oprea, 2020).

Licensed pharmacists are the only ones that may work in pharmacies and the profession is highly dominated by women. In 2018, 90% of Romanian pharmacists were women (Ionița et al., 2019, p.34). The situation was similar throughout the Romanian healthcare field which was composed at 84% by women in 2018 (Ionița et al., 2019, p.34 et 45).

As I mentioned earlier, pharmacies in Romania are usually very small places manned by one or two employees. The accessible area inside can only host a few clients at a time: about three to five people standing less than a meter apart. Larger pharmacies also exist, but they are not increasingly larger. Romanian pharmacies usually only offer products directly related to healthcare, i.e., various remedies and drugs. Other products related to health, such as pregnancy tests and thermometers, are also sold. However, some pharmacies are beginning to diversify their product range to include cosmetics, for example.

Patients of medical clinics and hospitals are sent to pharmacies to pick up prescriptions, but individuals also present themselves in pharmacies to obtain medical advice and prescriptions without the opinion of a medical doctor. Sometimes, people will call these pharmacies “usual” or “normal” pharmacies.

This is because, in Romania, there is also another kind of pharmacy. They resemble a normal pharmacy: they are small spaces that can only welcome a few clients, manned by one or two employees – usually women – clad in laboratory coats and ready to offer expert advice on their products which they know like the back of their hand. The main observable difference is that the products in question are plants and minerals.

“Naturist” pharmacies⁶, as people call them, are specialized in selling remedies based on plants and minerals, but especially plants⁷. They can be teas, oils, essential oils, syrups, tinctures, extracts, creams, balms, crushed powders enclosed in a capsule, or others, but plants and/or

⁶ “*Farmacii naturiste*” in Romanian.

⁷ For clarification, “naturist” pharmacies and their employees are not counted in the statistics presented above.

minerals remain the main active ingredients in them. Vitamins also constitute another one of their specialties.

It is mandatory⁸ for those working in a “naturist” pharmacy or any other store specialized in selling “naturist” products to have followed and succeeded a course related to the occupational classification “Seller of naturist products” (*Vânzător produse naturiste*) or COR 522305⁹. The course needs to be accredited by the National Authority for Qualifications (*Autoritatea Națională pentru Calificări*), the Ministry of Labour (*Ministerul Muncii*) and the Ministry of Education (*Ministerul Educației*).

A consultation in one of these pharmacies occurs very much like one in a “normal” pharmacy. Clients describe their problem to the person behind the counter and then they exchange questions and clarifications. Once they settle on a remedy together, the person behind the counter will state the indications and counter-indications of the product that is about to be bought, exactly like a pharmacist that is about to hand you a drug. Remedies, no matter their nature, will often come with medicine package inserts¹⁰ which details this information as well.

These types of pharmacies are less common than “normal” pharmacies, but they are not uncommon nor hard to find. When I stayed in urban areas, there were always two or three of them within less than a 20-minute walking distance from where I was staying. Interestingly, I have more often come across old people inside them, employees excluded.

It is important to mention the sale of “naturist” products is not limited to those “naturist” pharmacies, but other suppliers of plant-based medicines usually limit themselves to tea. Supermarkets, for example, usually have a whole section of medicinal teas (that is placed in the tea and coffee section), and some “normal” pharmacies may also sell four or five common medicinal teas. Otherwise, the seasonal markets can be a place to buy raw medicinal plants or homemade syrups, tinctures, and balms, but because of their unpredictability, the best place to buy plant-based remedies remains the “naturist” pharmacy. Of course, that is if one limits themselves to *buying* – a common practice in urban areas, it is a little less useful in rural areas where the plants in question grow in or around one’s backyard. Medicinal plants per se are rarely cultivated and

⁸ This is per the Ordinance 99 of August 29, 2000, and Law 650 of December 7, 2002 on the sale of market products and services, last updated in 2015.

⁹ Each professional occupation in Romania is related to a COR code. COR stands for *Clasificarea ocupațiilor din România*, or the Classification of the Occupations of Romania.

¹⁰ In Romanian, these are called a “*prospect*”.

largely remain part of what is called the “spontaneous flora”, but they are a common sight, especially in rural areas.



Figure 1: Aisle of medicinal teas in a Romanian supermarket.

Overall, there are two elements one must retain in regard to medicinal plants in Romania. The first element is that they are *accessible*. They can be found nearly anywhere; they are either free in the wild or low in price in stores; and if knowledge on their properties and use cannot be acquired from family members, friends, or acquaintances – which is rather rare – it can be readily acquired from a local “naturist” pharmacy.

The second element is that their use is *normalized*. Using medicinal plants is still widespread in the country, notably among older people who live in rural areas and who have relied on plants to heal themselves throughout their lifetime due to certain geographic and economic conditions. Younger generations, although less knowledgeable of the medicinal properties of the local flora, also tend to choose a plant-based remedy over a synthetic medicine to prevent illnesses or to tend to certain ailments such as insomnia. Even “normal” pharmacies do not shy away from recommending plant-based or mineral-based medicines as demonstrated above through my

examples; and a notable tendency of “normal” medicine brands is to combine vegetal and/or mineral powders and/or extracts with synthetic molecules into a single remedy.

Leaving the purely medicinal aside, plants and their derivatives in *general* are easily accessible in Romania due to the widespread persistence of “ancestral modes of subsistence” despite Romania’s industrialization. In the warm months, it is practically impossible not to spot herders and their herds out in the fields outside cities. Similarly, nearly every household in rural areas has a garden in their yard, if not an entire field of growing plants. Within families, it is nearly inconceivable for people who live in the city to visit their relatives in the countryside and to leave without entire bags of fruits, vegetables, and other produce.

When a crop yield exceeds immediate needs, people also “put for winter”¹¹. Putting produce for winter means to transform fresh produce into something else that will be sealed into a mason jar and put aside until the colder months hit. For instance, bell peppers can be simply “canned” or turned into bell pepper paste, *zacuscă*¹², and more. This means homegrown produce can be consumed throughout the year, although winter often leads certain individuals to buy “fresh” imported produce from the supermarket.

If one does not have any relatives living at the countryside, there are always the seasonal markets that remain active in the city for most of the year. People set up a stall there to sell the produce they grow at home to city folk. This can include fruits, vegetables, flowers, herbs, honey, and more. Those who sell meat usually have a permanent shop set up somewhere near these temporary stalls.

This context puts Romanian people in a position in which they can often compare food sold in supermarkets which results from foreign intensive agriculture to food which results from small-scale local horticulture or agriculture; as well as compare synthetic medicines to “natural” remedies. As I will discuss in this thesis, the notions of health and toxicity my collaborators put forward is largely due to this particular position they have with regard to food and medicine.

1.3 Methodology

The data I have gathered and that I write about in this thesis is extracted from the daily

¹¹ “*A pune pe iarnă*”, in Romanian.

¹² One of many Romanian vegetable spreads made using ingredients such as eggplants and red peppers.

lives of a handful of people, myself included¹³. More specifically, this fieldwork adopted an inductive ethnographic approach, and data was gathered from three sources: participant observation, interviews, and written materials.

Participant observation took place, as I mentioned earlier, in the county of Cluj. Throughout my stay, I was always housed by family members or family friends. I spent most of my time in the city of Cluj-Napoca, but I also spent considerable time in Gherla, Fizeșul Gherlii and Câmpenești. These places respectively counted 267 308 residents, 19 023 residents and 2 104 residents, but the village of Câmpenești was not included in the last census¹⁴ (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2021). Generally, I wandered the county of Cluj, searching for ethnographic data from late July until early September of 2022.

Expanding the fieldwork to the county of Cluj rather than to limit it to the city of Cluj-Napoca as originally planned in my project proposal resulted from a lack of participants in Cluj-Napoca. Instead, people living elsewhere in the county manifested their interest to talk to me, so I followed the field's lead.

To be more precise, my attempts to directly recruit participants were only successful once¹⁵: I suspect this was due to something I call “post-communist mistrust”. People seemed to be wary of the fact I was affiliated to a Canadian institution¹⁶ and they became very reluctant to engage in the research as soon as I mentioned consent forms, despite the fact that I emphasized signing was optional and verbal consent was acceptable. As such, I mostly came across interested people through a “snowball effect”: family members – and later collaborators – knew someone who might be interested (or interesting, as they put it) and passed along my contact information or directly brought me to their house to introduce me¹⁷.

¹³ Fieldwork was conducted with the approbation of the Research Ethics Boards of the University of Ottawa. A certificate of ethics approval was obtained before travelling to Romania and is still in effect as this thesis is written. Research was conducted respectfully at all times.

¹⁴ The village of Câmpenești is part of the commune of Apahida and is too small to have its number of residents included in the census independently from the commune. Apahida counts 15 294 residents.

¹⁵ The first successful instance was when I contacted a naturopath by email with details on my research, and she later called me saying she was interested in meeting with me for an interview.

¹⁶ As part of my recruitment strategy, I distributed flyers in various naturist pharmacies. I was met with suspicion and my flyers were immediately put aside or trashed. I spoke about this to people on this field and one of my collaborators explained to me people were likely thinking I was lying about my intentions and sent by rival corporations in order to “spy” on them.

¹⁷ Aside of the naturopath I managed to recruit through email, there was a single other exception to this “snowball effect”. I became a regular at a flower shop and the florist and I eventually got to know each other. She volunteered for an interview after I updated her on my fieldwork and spoke about the difficulties I had with recruitment.

While I frequented several markets, supermarkets, and pharmacies as part of my collaborators' and my own daily life in Romania, I have never gone plant-picking during my fieldwork. I was often shown plants people had found or planted in their backyards, but my rural collaborators were in no need to go plant-picking further away and were too concerned about my safety to let me wander alone in the plains and forests surrounding their homes. They were worried I would get lost or attacked by the local wildlife which is often described both as “naughty” (*obraznic*) and “endearingly funny” (*nostim*).

Being familiar with Romanian wildlife myself, I was persuaded the worst thing I could run into in the forest this close to civilization was a lost cow, but as a Romanian child, you also learn to never go against the advice of locals, so participant observation in rural areas mainly stuck to the homes and backyards of two families. In urban areas, participant observation mainly took place in the homes of two other families. As hinted above, I also visited certain pertinent public spaces such as pharmacies, supermarkets, and seasonal markets as part of my collaborators' or my own daily business, but drawn-out observations did not take place in these locations. The observations were analyzed upon my return in Canada using a thematic approach.

To complement observations, I conducted and recorded a total of eight **interviews** that lasted between one and two hours. They were planned to be individual and semi-directed, however, most of them manifested as lengthy, informal conversations in which my interview guide was more or less useful. I had interviews in which I regularly intervened and others in which I barely did. Five interviews were private, one was attended by curious family members of the participant and two took place in public venues, more specifically a tea house and a flower shop. In each case, I left the participants the choice as to where, when, and how they would like to be ‘interviewed’. All participants were residents of the county of Cluj; all were women except one; three were aged between 20 and 40 years old, three were aged between 40 and 60 years old and two were aged between 60 and 90 years old. The interviews were replayed upon my return in Canada and the parts that were relevant for the thesis were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic approach.

Lastly, I collected a variety of **written materials** either in their physical form or as pictures to preserve as ethnographic data such as journals, magazines, tea boxes and medicine package inserts, including those of plant-based remedies. They were used to support existing elements of analysis.

2 Theoretical Context

Le monde ne suffit plus.

The purpose of the following section is to situate my thesis in a wider theoretical *context*. The emphasis on context is important to understand the objective of this section is not to inscribe the thesis in a specific theoretical framework or approach, but to present the “sandboxes” in which this thesis will add or remove a piece of the sandcastle, sometimes at the same time, in the subsequent chapters.

This section of the thesis is thus meant to be read as a quick and incomplete literature review – a short and simple overview of the current state of anthropological discussions on the “sandboxes” in which I intend to play. It does not delve into extensive discussion on theoretical approaches and their areas of consensus or controversy; neither does not attempt to justify the existence of this thesis by identifying literature gaps. The literature gap is already clear as there have been no anthropological studies on the specific topic, time, and place at hand in this thesis.

The structure of this section is divided in three subsections which summarizes the current state of anthropological discussions on 1) the anthropological turn in which the thesis situates itself, 2) the main concept of this thesis and 3) the epistemological approach with which this thesis connects the most. Each subsection will have a short explanation on how this thesis takes its place in these “sandboxes” as a precursor to the discussions that will take place in sections 3, 4 and 5.

2.1 Anthropological Turns: Darkness, Goodness and Resistance

Since the 1980s, “questions of power and inequality have come to dominate the theoretical landscape” and “the [...] subjects of contemporary research (colonialism, neoliberalism, patriarchy, racial inequality, etc.)” in anthropology (Ortner, 2016, p.49). Anthropologists have become increasingly attuned to violence and suffering; and inclined to produce theory and ethnography on colonial violence, economic violence, environmental violence, anthropocentric violence, and various other forms of violent conditions.

Sherry Ortner describes this turn as “dark anthropology” – an anthropology that “emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them” (2016, p.49) – and explains its rise is, in part, due “to the increasingly problematic conditions of the real world under neoliberalism” (2016, p.50).

Despite its merits, this turn has generated some debates among scholars. As Michael Lambek explains:

“Ethnographers commonly find that the people they encounter are trying to do what they consider right or good, are being evaluated according to criteria of what is right and good, or are in some debate about what constitutes the human good. Yet anthropological theory tends to overlook all this in favor of analyses that emphasize structure, power, and interest.”

(Lambek, 2010a, p. 1 in Ortner, 2016, p.59)

In response to this common oversight in dark theory and ethnography, certain anthropologists have developed what Ortner labels as “good anthropology” or “anthropology of the good”. This theoretical and ethnographical counterpart of dark anthropology focuses on “topics such as value, morality, well-being, imagination, empathy, care, the gift, hope, time, and change” (Robbins, 2013, p.448 in Ortner, p.58). Ethics are also major topic of research under the umbrella of good anthropology (Ortner, 2016, p.59).

Further authors have also aimed at filling the gaps of dark anthropology by giving rise to a wider body of literature in the “anthropology of resistance”, which Ortner separates into three main branches:

“(1) ‘[C]ultural critique’ [...], which includes critical ethnographic writings about conditions of inequality, power, and violence in various parts of the world; (2) a range of mostly theoretical work addressed to rethinking capitalism as a system; and finally (3) a body of work on social movements that have taken shape in the neoliberal period.”

(Ortner, 2016, p.61)

The reason I write about these anthropological “turns” (dark anthropology, good anthropology and the anthropology of resistance) resides, as I have written above, in an attempt to situate my thesis in a wider theoretical context. In my introduction, I wrote this thesis is an ethical discussion on “the good life” and the toxic elements that prevent us from living it as my collaborators understand it; and explained the point of entry into this discussion found itself in the presence of poisonous substances in our food, which my collaborators referred to as “chemicals” – without them, my thesis would not exist. I have also expressed this thesis is about the lived experience of my collaborators in a toxic and anxiogenic world, including their envisioned solutions to resist or break away from what they identified as a vicious toxic cycle.

As violence, ethics, and resistance are all topics I address, my thesis effectively situates itself at the crossroads of the three turns I have quickly touched upon above. However, I have chosen to allocate as much attention to each turn as my collaborators have allocated to them on the field to remain as faithful as possible to their lived experience. The topics I predominantly discuss below are also those which my collaborators predominantly discussed with me – topics mainly related to care, well-being, and ethics. In turn, I find this thesis lends itself better to good anthropology than any of its related turns.

Despite this, I tend to draw upon a body of literature that spans various other subdisciplines and turns of anthropology as the concepts my collaborators and I mobilize have been discussed and developed across the discipline. One of those concepts is “toxicity”.

In the chapters below, toxicity is omnipresent. It constitutes the main concept of this thesis and is, in large part, what strings it together. The following subsection aims to map out anthropological work on this concept and better situate the thesis in its theoretical context.

2.2 Main Concept: Toxicity

In recent decades, anthropology has been paying an increased attention to the notion of toxicity, especially in subdisciplines such as medical and environmental anthropology. The short review below builds upon previous reviews of this concept (Nading, 2020; Geissler and Prince, 2020) and aims to tackle it in three parts – three ways in which toxicity has been theorized in anthropology: as violence, as a condition, and as a methodology.

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon theorizes environmental toxicity **as a form of slow violence**. As he explains, slow violence is “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all (2011, p.2). He draws attention to the absence of representation slow violence in the media and to the necessity of addressing slow violence “as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but also over time” (Nixon, 2011, p.7-8).

Certain anthropologists have drawn upon Nixon’s work and used the concept of slow violence to analyze toxicity’s effects and affects, yielding anthropological work which exposes the relations of environmental toxicity with sexism, racism, colonialism, nationalism, and capitalism; but also to bring up important nuances and debates.

Lidström et al. have added to Nixon's argument "by drawing attention to the inverse of the representational bias he describes, namely the ways that 'arresting stories' about environmental change can also reduce complexity in unhelpful and even misleading ways, often exacerbating rather than solving the environmental 'problems' they seek to ameliorate" (2015, p.3). Other authors such as Michelle Murphy (2017) have also made similar arguments and cautioned against research which places a focus on the damage or violence chemicals and toxins can do.

Murphy writes that such research tends to render lives and environments pathological, and "resuscitat[e] racist, misogynist, and homophobic portraits of poor, Black, Indigenous, female, and queer lives and communities as damaged and doomed, as inhabiting irreparable states that are not just unwanted but less than fully human" (2017, p.496).

Her argument situates itself along a growing scholarship which has argued for theorizing toxicity as "**a condition of modern life** and the substance of ethical engagement" (Langwick, 2018, p.420), departing from the premise that "[i]n the twenty-first century, humans are chemically transformed beings" (Murphy, 2008, p.696). This approach to toxicity draws upon various works challenging the notion of individualized subjects and objects (such as bodies) and proposes to attend to chemical *relations* (rather than individuals).

Acknowledging toxicity as a condition of modern life does not mean accepting, dismissing, or diminishing toxic harm. Rather it leaves the door open to a wide range of theoretical and ethnographical engagement which reminds us that the practices of purification which have been developed against toxicity "have justified violence and dispossession" (Langwick, 2018, p.421) through "a long chain of ontological distinctions between us and them, subjects and objects, and science and culture [which] has proven critical to the formations of contemporary hierarchy and privilege and the notions of contamination, corruption, and contagion that justify their maintenance" (Langwick, 2018, p. 420-421).

Strengthening this theory in which toxicity is conceptualized as the counterpart of purity, some authors such as Alexis Shotwell (2016) have argued against purity and brought attention to the necessity to recognize that "the people who benefit from the lie of purism are the ones who reiterate it" (Shotwell, 2016, p.19). In her work, Shotwell reframes "Bruno Latour's (1993) argument about the practices of purification that have been central to the project of modernity" (Langwick, 2018, p.421) to assert that "we have never been pure" (Langwick, 2018, p.421) and explains that:

“[Being] against purity is, again, not to be for pollution, harm, sickness, or premature death. It is to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous.”
(Shotwell, 2016, p.15)

In the same vein, Murphy proposes the concept of alterlife – “life already altered, which is also life open to alteration” (Murphy, 2017, p.497) to work against the delineation and delimitation of the beings, things and the world.

Alterlife “indexes collectivities of life recomposed by the molecular productions of capitalism” (Murphy, 2017, p.497) in the past and in the future. It is a concept which seeks to “[burst] open categories of organism, individual, and body to acknowledge a shared, entangling, and extensive condition of being with capitalism and its racist colonial manifestations” (Murphy, 2017, p.498) without falling into the extreme of considering life as composed by “clusters of nonindividual symbiotic beings” (Murphy, 2017, p.497). Murphy reminds that:

“Forms of alterlife are systematically and brutally harmed and even exterminated in chemical relations; at the same time, alterlife includes being in the mess of consumption, subsistence, and side effect, being in the contradictions of existing in worlds that demand chemical exposures as the conditions for eating, drinking, breathing.”

(Murphy, 2017, p.497).

On a similar note, approaching toxicity as a condition has also blurred or expanded the definition of the concept. For certain authors, such as Stacey Langwick, toxicity remains “that which attenuates and diminishes [vital] forces over time” (Langwick, 2018, p.432) whether “that” is social or environmental. It is also “a way to think about the conditions under which life becomes attenuated, diminished, depleted, exhausted, drained away” (Langwick, 2018, p.434). Yet, other scholars such as Mel Chen urge “to release toxicity from its own stalwart anti-ness, its ready definition as an unwelcome guest” (Chen, 2012, p.218). This way, toxicity has “the possibility to intervene into the binary between the segregated fields of “life” and “death,” vitality and morbidity. [For Chen,] [t]oxicity straddles boundaries of “life” and “nonlife,” as well as the literal bounds of bodies [...] in ways that introduce a certain complexity to the presumption of integrity of either lively or deathly subjects” (Chen, 2012, p.218)¹⁸.

¹⁸ It is important to mention that in Chen’s view, the notion of toxicity is indissociable from the one of immunity (as in the immune system) and it is the “internalization, even privatization, of immunity helps to explain the particular

Despite considering that “[t]here is [...] something “unworlding” that might be said to take place in the cultural production of toxic notions [as a] “normal” world’s order is lost when, for instance, things that can harm you permanently are not even visible to the naked eye” (Chen, 2012, p.203), Chen considers toxicity in a symbiotic light which would enable us not only to “captur[e] some toxic affectivity but [also] to shift modes of approach (Chen, 2012, p.205-206).

This approach implies a stretched and ambivalent (or queer) definition of toxicity – one which does not merely attenuate, diminish, deplete, exhaust, or drain life, but also one which produces it. Chen explains they are “reluctant to deny the queer productivity of toxins and toxicity, [...] or to neglect (or, indeed, ask after) the pleasures, the loves, the rehabilitations, the affections, the assets that toxic conditions induce” (2012, p.211). Thus, they conclude “toxicity, as a queer thing or affect, both is and is more than horizon, which is unpredictable and, furthermore, synchronically traceable only to the extent that we not remain ontologically faithful” (2012, p.221).

Chen has considered what toxic exposure “offers to thinking about bodies and affect” through the use of their posture as someone with conditions labeled as “heavy metal poisoning” or “multiple chemical sensitivity” (Chen, 2012, p.197 in Shapiro and Kirksey, 2017, p.483), effectively situating herself in a growing body of scholarship which has engaged with toxicity **as a methodology**.

Anthropologists have pursued chemical ethnography or chemo-ethnography in the effort of “thinking chemically—channeling attention to nonliving entities through the instruments and rubrics of science” (Shapiro and Kirksey, 2017. p.482). Chemo-ethnography has paid special attention to “chemosociality—the longstanding relationships and emergent social forms that arise from chemical exposures and dependencies” (Shapiro and Kirksey, 2017. p.484); and comprises the scholars who have sought out “chemical encounters [such as recreative drugs] to alter their sensoria” (Shapiro and Kirksey, 2017. p.482), but also those who are unable to escape chemical toxic exposure and who have used their “altered state of being as a starting point for a toxic methodology” like Chen (Shapiro and Kirksey, 2017. p.483).

Approaching toxicity as a form of slow violence, a condition of modern life or as a methodology are not mutually exclusive things. As I have attempted to demonstrate above, these ways of thinking about toxicity are often interlinked and tend to build upon each other, expanding

indignation that toxicity evokes, since it is understood as an unnaturally external force that violates (rather than informs) an integral and bounded self” (2012, p.194).

anthropological engagement with this concept. In the following chapters, I continue to draw bridges between these approaches, but also to bring forward important distinctions and nuances.

The ethnographical data I have gathered on the field has revealed that environmental toxicity can be theorized both as a condition of modern life and a form of slow violence. Chemicals were described by my collaborators as nearly unavoidable toxins present in everyday practices which diminish or erase vitalities in insidious or “slowly violent” ways.

Thus, while I understand Chen’s argument and recognize the life that can arise from chemical encounters, my research does not match well with her theoretical proposition. My collaborators focused on discussing toxicity’s abilities to diminish life forces and its harmful effects and discussing the opposite would not only mean basing myself off inexistent ethnographic material, but also propel the harmful conditions that my collaborators talk about under the cover that they also bring positive effects.

Similarly, this thesis is also detached from “chemical ethnography”. Drawing attention to toxic conditions on the field meant my fieldwork was spotted with instances in which I was encouraged by my collaborators to notice how “not-so-toxic” aliments were different from toxic ones. However, rather than engage in a “toxic methodology” in order to pay attention to that which *arises* from toxic chemical exposures, I engaged in a “de-toxic methodology” where I avoided my usual toxic chemical exposure in order to “make visible” that which is *diminished* by it. In fact, as I will show in Section 4, the epistemological approach I have taken is closer to “sensory anthropology”.

2.3 Epistemological Approach: Sensory Anthropology

According to Sarah Pink, “sensory anthropology” finds its roots in the subdiscipline of the “anthropology of the senses” that emerged in the 1990s as anthropologists began exploring “how the patterning of sense experience varies from one culture to the next in accordance with the meaning and emphasis attached to each of the modalities of perception” (Howes, 1991, p.3 in Howes & Pink, 2010, p.332). The anthropology of the senses was pioneered by authors such as David Howes, whose comparative approach was criticized by authors such as Tim Ingold (2022 [2000]) (Howes and Pink, 2010, p.332).

In 1991, David Howes and Constance Classen had proposed “a programme of comparison of the varying hierarchies or sensory ‘orders’ found in different cultures” (Howes and Classen

1991, p.257 in Howes and Pink, 2010, p.332). In response, Ingold called for “a re-focusing of a sensory anthropology on experience and perception” and suggested that Howes’ and Classsen’s approach was “incompatible with an anthropology that understands learning and knowing as situated in embodied practice and movement” as it separated sensory modalities, situating them “in disembodied culture” (Howes and Pink, 2010, p.332).

However, this distinction Pink makes between “the anthropology of the senses”, which would be a subdiscipline interested in studying sense experience, and “sensory anthropology” which would be interested in using the senses as methodological tools has been debated by authors such as Howes who consider both to be the same thing.

Howes concedes that the term “‘sensory anthropology’ may seem to better convey the notion of a sensuous approach to anthropological research than ‘the anthropology of the senses’; however, as suggested by [Constance] Classen (1997), the anthropology of the senses has always been concerned with the senses as a means of inquiry and not solely as an object of study” (Howes and Pink, 2010, p.334). In other words, for Howes, there would be no real distinction to speak of between “sensory anthropology” and “the anthropology of the senses” because Pink’s conception of sensory anthropology “refers to a number of practices and principles that are already operative within the anthropology of the senses” (Howes and Pink, 2010, p.335). He also adds that while the anthropology of the senses may have begun with a comparative approach, recent work in the subdiscipline has focused on the relationship among the senses (Howes and Pink, 2010, p.334).

Howes has continuously argued for an anthropology in which the main “principle is to attend to and respect indigenous experiences and understandings of perception” (Howes and Pink, 2010, p.335) and has proposed that the field of “sensory anthropology” and the “anthropology of the senses” be called “sensorial anthropology “[i]n order to underline the sensuous nature of the project” (Howes 1991 in Howes and Pink, 2010, p.334). “Paul Stoller [1997], similarly, coined the phrase ‘sensuous scholarship’ to indicate the importance of embodied experience in ethnographic work” (Howes and Pink, 2010, p.334). Howes also reminds us that:

“Whereas the anthropology of the senses may have once been taken by some to be a narrow field, this is no longer the case. We have reached a point where the senses are understood to have a wide-reaching relevance across anthropological fields. [...] The significance of this development will be recognised by those aware of how close perception came to being erased from anthropology in the 1980s – as exemplified in the statement by Stephen Tyler that ‘perception has nothing to do

with [ethnography].”

(Howes and Pink, 2010, p.339, citing Tyler 1986, p.137)

This thesis does not attend to the senses as an object of study and does not seek to “understand how people perceive the world around them, and how and why these perceptions differ” which are fundamental questions of this subdiscipline according to Tim Ingold (Ingold and Howes, 2011, p.323). However, it does attend to them as ethnographical tools and furthers this anthropological movement with argues for ethnography as an embodied practice which “attends to and respects [people’s] experiences and understanding of perception” as Howes suggests (Howes and Pink, 2010, p.335).

As I will explain later, the notions of health and toxicity my collaborators have put forward on the field are closely tied to their sensory experience of the world and, in most instances, the senses played a larger part in their epistemological approach to the world than any other modalities of “knowing the world”. On the field, I was often invited to make use of my senses to fully understand the meaning of their words, or rather, to comprehend their experience of the world and share it with them. As a result, I both attended to my collaborator’s sensorium and delved into an ethnographical approach by adopting a similar sensuous approach as my collaborators taught me - a sensuous approach which is not solely bodily as I will discuss later. In this sense (pun intended), this thesis effectively situates itself in what Pink describes as “sensory anthropology” or what Howes proposes to call “sensorial anthropology”, perhaps even going slightly beyond it.

2.4 Recapitulation

In this section, I attempted to situate my thesis in a wider theoretical context and to present the “sandboxes” in which this thesis will add or remove a piece of the sandcastle, sometimes at the same time, in the subsequent chapters.

In the first subsection, I provided a quick overview of the interaction between the turns of “dark anthropology”, “good anthropology” and “the anthropology of resistance”. I situated this thesis in the anthropological turn of “good anthropology”, reiterating that it is ultimately a discussion on care, well-being, and ethics despite the fact it also discusses violence and resistance.

In the second subsection I discussed the concept of toxicity – the main concept of this thesis – and put forward three ways in which the concept has been theorized in anthropology: as a form of slow violence, as a condition of modern life and as a methodology. I have explained that in the

following chapters, I would engage with toxicity both as a form of slow violence and as a condition of modern life, and that I did not engage with chemical ethnography and toxic methodology nor with theories which focus on releasing toxicity from its negative aspects.

Lastly, in the third subsection, I quickly introduced the field(s) of sensory anthropology and the anthropology of the senses. I stated that the epistemological approach I have adopted on the field draws on an experience which makes use of the senses and that such an approach can be linked with sensory or sensorial anthropology.

3 Ancestors

“Îl cunoști pe Decebal?”¹⁹

In this thesis, I argue that the daily acts of care of my collaborators in Cluj, Romania embody historical, metaphysical, and capitalist narratives and dynamics which inform and are informed by notions of health and toxicity. Health and toxicity thus emerge as notions which cannot be understood separately from these narratives and dynamics.

In the following chapter, I will discuss how my collaborators often rooted their arguments and ideas in Romanian ancestral knowledge and practices. This knowledge and these practices must be understood as the defining parts of a historicized medical model. In turn, this medical model must be addressed to understand the notions of health and toxicity that arose from the field. The chapter is divided in two main subsections. The first subsection mostly discusses knowledge, while the second subsection mostly discusses care practices, but both subsections address both elements in different ways. I will focus on the notion of health throughout the chapter to better examine the notion of toxicity later in this thesis. In other words, this chapter expands on the context in which fieldwork took place by presenting crucial details without which Sections 4 and 5 would make little sense to a stranger of Romania.

In 1949, the Romanian state established a company “having as its object of activity the acquisition of plants from the spontaneous flora, the contracting of those from crops with production units, the conditioning, the primary processing of the raw materials and the beginning of the valorization in the form of pharmaceutical products, but not only” (Plafar, 2018, free translation). This company, at the time named “Întreprinderea Comerciale de Stat PLAFAR” and under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health, was subject to numerous name changes in the following decades to finally become “Societatea Națională Plafar S.A”. Today, the company is owned by the Ministry of Economy and is often simply called Plafar. (Plafar, 2018)²⁰.

¹⁹ Do you know Decebal?

²⁰ Quickly, it is important to note the lack of academic papers on Plafar. Published academic articles on this State-owned company are mostly economic and consist especially of market research.

I write about Plafar, because among the collaborators I met on the field, those who taught biology and those who were raised during Ceaușescu's rule fostered a unique relation with medicinal plants due to the existence of this state company. One of these collaborators is Ileana.

Ileana began teaching biology in schools in 1966, during the communist era of Romania. In one of the many discussions we had in her living room, surrounded by books and the warm colors of her old furniture, she revealed that although she first came in contact with medicinal plants in her childhood at home, she came in contact with them the most during her years as a biology professor. She related how, during Ceaușescu's rule, gathering medicinal plants used to be a mandatory activity in biology class, and how it was her responsibility as a biology professor to bring the gathered plants in a collection center before being sent off to Plafar, where they would be transformed into various teas, tinctures, balms, ointments, and other remedies.

Some of my collaborators have recounted the other side of this situation, that is, their experience as children going out on school trips to gather plants, berries, nuts, and other produce recognized for their medicinal properties. They explained to me these outings taught them how to identify plants in the wild as well as their medicinal use. Children, however, were not always the only ones learning in these outings.

Ileana explained to me that although she documented herself on plants very early on in her career in order to be able to fulfill her role as a biology professor, her knowledge on medicinal plants she had not used herself at home mainly limited itself to being able to identify them in the wild. This, however, changed as she began her career.

Ileana was first assigned to a school located in a village near Cluj-Napoca. She taught there for thirteen years before being assigned another position in the city of Cluj-Napoca itself, where she continues to reside. As she explained, it was during those thirteen years she had taught children in the countryside that she had learned the most about medicinal plants.

“In the countryside, children know a lot of things because they... Their parents work in – how should I say this – fields that are related to nature. The shepherd, for example, is... They go with the sheep, with the cows, in the fields, in the forest. Fishing is also a job related to nature. And they knew. In the countryside, children know a lot of things related to nature. They know the plants. I used to go on trips with them in the forest, even in the fields, and being in the countryside at that time, we, biology teachers, were obligated to collect medicinal plants with the children. And we collected. [...] We gathered yarrow, filed horsetail, marigold – because there were a lot of marigolds in the school yard. And we would put them to dry

them on paper in the attic of the school. After they dried, I put them in paper bags – and the collection center was in Turda – and I went there with those bags of plants and took them to Turda and it was [a] very good [thing] because we contributed to... to... how can I say this, to the increase in the production of medicinal plants - teas and what else was done.”

Throughout her career, Ileana has taught children, but has also learned from them, especially during their outings in the fields. As they gathered plants, children also taught her the medicinal properties of the plants and how they were being used at home. Ileana put a particular emphasis on the importance of the children’s experience – experience that they derived from their parents – and how this was what enabled them to be so knowledgeable about their environment.

Today, Ileana has retired, but she continues to inform herself on plants by reading journals and magazines with a focus on plant medicine. Her home is in fact filled with various atlases, books, journals, magazines, notebooks, and other written works on plants. Her knowledge on plants is impressively comprehensive and she actively uses it in her daily life to help herself and her husband along with the health difficulties they face as elderly people.

Ileana’s example is useful to note Ceaușescu’s rule has sensitized a large number of the current Romanian population to medicinal plants and encouraged their usage through official education programs. This partly explains why knowledge on medicinal plants and related ideas are still widespread in contemporary Romania. Yet, it is also important to note, as Ileana and other collaborators pointed out, that communism has merely furthered pre-existing epistemologies and care practices.

As I hinted above, Ileana had been closely acquainted with the medicinal properties of plants in her childhood, years before she became a biology teacher. She recounted picking plants with her sister in the field outside their childhood home and the way her mother and grandmother often used plant-based remedies to take care of them. These practices find their roots in a much more ancient history than communism.

3.1 Experience as an Epistemic Tool

It was a hot summer afternoon in Fizeșul Gherlii. Four women were seated around a kitchen table indoors, spotted with plates of meat, cheese, and garden vegetables. I had been invited to Adina's home to talk about my research and we were having a lengthy discussion about plants

while her two daughters kept busy on their mobile phones, lifting their heads from time to time as interesting bits popped out from the conversation.

Adina was born and raised during Ceaușescu's rule, the revolution taking place only in her late teens. She has spent most of her life living in towns or cities but has also known the countryside during visits to her grandparents' house. A few years before my fieldwork took place, Adina decided to forsake the urban lifestyle and moved with her family to the countryside. She moved to Fizeșul Gherlii, a village close to the town of Gherla where the rest of her family resides and where she continues her career in nursing.

I had just asked Adina about the source of her knowledge on medicinal plants, and she replied as if it were obvious: "From my own experience!"

"But who told you [these things]? You told me [earlier that you had heard things] from your grandmother, from a friend..." I asked further.

She nodded, replying to me: "Yes, yes. From... Practically, these circulate from word of mouth. From my grandmother. She learned it from her mother. She learned. She saw. You know? And it is inherited, and it is passed down from [the] ancestors."

It is important to mention that, here, "saw" is taken almost literally. Days earlier, when I asked Maria, Adina's mother, how she learned these "things about plants", she told me it was something she had *heard* from old women as a child, but that it was not something someone had *told* her. In her words:

"Where did I learn about plants? From... from... I have heard since I was a child. From old women. I heard. [...] Eh... From my mother, from those [women] who are older - they knew. Or from... I was picking [...] rose hips. You know? *No*²¹, from those we would make rose hip jam."

She proceeded with doing a quick overview of how she used to make rose hip jam, starting from how she picked the fruits from a place alongside a pathway, all the way through how she

²¹ This expression is specific to the region of Ardeal in Romania. It can mean or express an extremely wide range of things and finds no equivalent in English. As such, I have chosen to leave it as is in transcription and forego translations where the lack of it has little impact on understanding.

made the preparation on the stove, passing by how her mother-in-law had somewhat of a different method “although those were cornelian cherries”. Then, we came back to the old women.

“So, how did you hear [this] from old women²²?” I asked. “More precisely.”

“I listened. So, nobody told me. They were talking [among them saying]: ‘Hey, look, I collected some chamomile for myself to have it for winter’; that ‘It’s good.’ ‘Let me make myself a chamomile tea’. ‘I would drink it in the evening before going to bed’. ‘I would drink a tea’, or... So, there are many fruits, many plants from which teas are made, and I... [was thinking] let’s take some and make some myself.”

“And you heard [these things] when you were a child, or...”

“Of course. I was a child. My mother used to make some [plant remedies] for us at home, then we made them ourselves. Me, at home, for my daughters.

“So, it was transmitted, like this, from...”

“Of course, that from generation to gene- So, from the old people until today.”

In this excerpt, Maria explains that she did not learn how to use medicinal plants because someone *told* her how to use them, but because she listened in on the conversations of older women, observed others like her mother making remedies, and then decided to try the healing practices she heard or observed herself. This is what she referred to when she spoke about learning through “hearing” or “listening” as well as through “going to pick rose hips” or “taking some and making some herself”. This is also the type of learning Adina referred to when she said: “From my grandmother. She learned it from her mother. She learned. She saw.” “Saw”, “heard” and practicing plant medicine refer to a type of learning that occurs through an *experience* passed down generations.

This idea that plant knowledge is/was passed down from generation to generation seemed to create unanimity among my collaborators. The answer came back to me in every interview just with a few variations of words and was also demonstrated in the things people told me about themselves. The most interesting thing I found about this knowledge transmission, however, was this emphasis on experience.

²² The word Maria used here was *babe*, plural of *babă*, which means an elderly woman.

When I first asked people about plants during my interviews, I did not begin with knowledge transmission. I began with a question that went along the lines of “How did you happen upon medicinal plants?” It might have been because of the way I formulated my question, but the answer was never formulated in one sentence. It was somewhat like those Internet recipes: a dozen introductory paragraphs, the list of ingredients and the instructions. It was always a story – a story and a recipe – a memory.

Recalling one's first encounters with medicinal plants in Romania has to do with recalling childhood memories. It has to do with a child being sick and a parent taking care of them with the help of plants. It has to do with the heat of a medicinal brew or meal, the smell of vinegar, and the odd feeling of slices of potatoes in your socks²³. In other words, recalling one's first encounters with medicinal plants in Romania has less to do with “happening upon plants” and more with “plants happening upon you”.



Figure 2: Issue of Formula As. On the left page, there is the section "Readers Ask". On the right page, there is the section "Readers Answer".

²³ It is used to make fever go down.

Childhood memories point towards this transmission of knowledge which does not begin with words, but with experience – both in the sense of *feeling* as in the sense of *experimenting*. The curative properties of plants may be *felt* by an individual in childhood before they are understood; and the continued use of plants throughout life often has to do with *experiencing* or *experimenting* with plants, most often than not by attempting to reproduce the experiences of a childhood self or the experiences of other people in order to take care of oneself or others, as Maria's example demonstrates.

This is not to say that Romanians do not transmit their knowledge of plants with words – if there were no words, there would be nothing for Maria to hear and listen – but even when people speak or write about medicinal plants directly, experience often precedes those words. For example, when contributors share remedies in *Formula As*, a Romanian magazine dedicated to healthcare, in particular plant medicine, their written recipe is often preceded with one or two sentences recounting an experience with the remedy they are about to share.

Experience retains a fundamental value in the transmission of knowledge on plants, no matter the vehicle. It is *because* a certain remedy has worked for them or others that people recommend plants. Unless the remedy or plant in question has proven itself in action, its efficacy is not trusted. Experience is the pillar on which people place the value of a plant remedy, and the more a plant has been experienced positively, the more it is recognized as an efficient remedy. During a late afternoon on the front porch of Adina's house, this became clear.

I was surrounded by Maria, her husband, Adina, Adina's youngest daughter and the shy singing of crickets. It was some time after Adina's interview and in the middle of the conversation, everyone suddenly regained an interest in what exactly I was looking for in Romania. I spoke about my topic and some of the questions I was interested in, among which “How is knowledge on plants acquired, how it is passed on, where does it come from...” At this point, Maria's husband interjected.

“Do you know Decebal?” he asked me. I nodded. “*No*, from Decebal until now,” he says. “From word of mouth. From the ancestors,” he emphasized, weighing his words with his hands.



Figure 3: View from Adina's backyard.

He explained to me that it is from the age of the Dacian king Decebal²⁴, or rather from the age of the Dacians²⁵ (also called Thracians by the Greeks) – ancestors of the Romanian people – that this knowledge comes from, that it was passed down *viva voce* from the ancestors²⁶. It was not the first time Dacians ancestors came up in discussions related to plants. It also came up in other discussions, like one I had with Ileana, weeks earlier:

“And you think what we know now comes from the Dacians?” I asked.

“Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely from the Dacians, and Zamolxis who was...”

²⁴ r. 87 – AD 106

²⁵ Which find their roots in the Bronze Age (3,300–3,000 BC).

²⁶ Dacians are considered to be the ancestors of Romanians due to geographical, cultural, and genetic factors I will not expand on here.

“Their god.”

“The god of the Traco-Dacians. Like Zeus, except... Zamol. Zamol, Earth. He was the god of the earth and life. And Gebeleizis. He was the god of lightning, of light.²⁷ Yes, from them.”

Interestingly, Dacians came up at the store on the boxes of medicinal teas. Two of the most prominent Romanian brands of herbal medicine, Fares and Dacia Plant, draw on them for branding. The brand Fares chose “Health from the heart of Dacia”²⁸ as its slogan, whereas Dacia Plant chose to integrate the name of the Dacians’ kingdom right into its name.

Up until I arrived on the field, the fact that Dacians played a role in Romanian care practices was mostly a speculation of mine; or rather, it was something I knew as a Romanian myself, but that I did not want to consider as valid ethnographic data until someone on the field told me. The interactions I had with my collaborators made it apparent to me that if these brands chose to draw on Dacians for their marketing, it was not without reason. It was because the experiences that define a plant’s value are not limited to those of living people. They also expand to those that have died – those whose experience has been integrated into a larger collective memory called “history”. One of my exchanges with Nadia, a retired military woman who now holds residence in the village of Câmpenești with her husband after moving away from Cluj-Napoca, demonstrates this well:

“And now, you know how it is? A drug appears after [a few] years of research. Mint tea, it probably appeared [as a remedy] 2000 years ago, or before Christ. We have no way of knowing, but in any case, mint tea is older than drugs for stomach pain.”

“It’s better established,” I said.

“Yes.”

Another one of my exchanges with Ileana was just as significant in this sense:

“So, you, so to say, give a lot of importance to the experience of [other] people?” I asked.

²⁷ Some believe Zamolxis and Gebeleizis might have been the same divine being. It is also unclear if Zamolxis was a man or a ‘god’ per the occidental meaning. He is most often defined as a divine being in a larger sense.

²⁸ “*Sanatate din inima Daciei*” in Romanian.

“Yes. Yes. It is very important. Because this experience – how can I say this – it was practiced *din moși, strămoși*²⁹, from generation to generation, so you cannot say that they made a mistake.”

In the same line of thought as “you cannot say they made a mistake”, Nadia used bilberries to prove the same point: “Bilberry jam in diarrhea, for example. It’s an old people’s remedy³⁰ that is *guaranteed*. It’s not that ‘I’m eating a bit of bilberry jam and *maybe* my diarrhea will pass’. It’s not ‘maybe’. For *sure*, it will pass.”

Remedies that have been known and used for ages, like mint tea and bilberry jam, are the most trusted and the least questioned because, as my collaborators would have it, if they are still used today, it is because they have proved their efficacy over hundreds of years and countless generations. Otherwise, people would have stopped using them, and they would have never made their way to the present day.

Thus, associating one’s brand with Dacians implies associating one’s brand with the countless of positive experiences a plant remedy must have generated in order to survive to this day as a tried and trusted treatment. It implies charging products with an experiential value that stretches across extremely long periods of time and also inspires the confidence to use them by drawing on Dacians’ experience as historically trusted experts of Dacian/Romanian botany.

While most Romanian knowledge on medicinal plants comes from Dacian ancestors, this ancestral knowledge is not always passed from old people to young people although it usually begins this way. It may sometimes be the opposite, as I have explained with Ileana’s example earlier. It may also be passed among people of the same age and in a wide variety of settings – at home, at school, at work... For instance, Nadia’s husband, Lucian, first came in contact with medicinal plants during his childhood like the rest of my collaborators, but he learned the most about them during his military service:

²⁹ Literally, this translates as “from old people to great-old people”. Great, here, is the same one as in “great-grandmother”. Throughout the thesis, I have mostly translated this expression as “from the ancestors”, however, this translation did not work in this specific sentence.

³⁰ Originally, “*leac băbesc*” in Romanian, “old people’s remedy” is the closest translation I could find. It would be the equivalent of the expression “old woman’s cure” in English.

“I had a chief when I was younger and then when we would go on controls or inspections, we would go in the field with the troops and he would tell me: ‘Look, this, this. this, this.’ *No*, we would collect [the plants], bring them to the office and put them above the stove and keep them there, on paper or on newspapers and we would put them to dry. He also had some stomach ailments like most of the military with ulcers, gastritis and I don’t know what. Stress”, he shrugged. “And with the liver. You eat when you eat, when you eat, you eat what you are given. Fatty livers, gall bladder problems... and then he would put plants and we would make tea out of them – plants which were picked by us and dried by us.”

“So, you would pick plants to take care of yourselves, right?” I asked

“Yes. We would put them to dry and every morning, the chief was responsible – sometimes we were as well – he was responsible to make the tea and he would take artichoke, [and] I don’t know what other plants. This, I know well that artichoke was used for the liver. *Pooh!* Some of those bitter *zămuri*³¹... Without sugar. *No*, if we still caught honey, then [we used] the honey too – [like] that saying “[it is] also from flowers”.”

Today, Lucian is retired like his wife, but he still draws upon the knowledge he gathered from his former chief and his other family members to help with some of the drawbacks of military service.

Sometimes, there are instances in which people in Romania do not rely at all on Dacian/Romanian ancestral knowledge of plants, and draw on other sources, but the value given to experience remains even when ancestors are not in the picture. As long as a plant comes recommended, it is worth a try. For instance, Ioana, the daughter of Nadia and Lucian – a young woman my age who has specialized in her career as an orthodontic doctor – has adopted the habit of making herself a turmeric³² latte every morning after she saw people recommend turmeric on Instagram to decrease inflammation in daily life. Similarly, after years of attempting to resolve her menstrual irregularities without success, she has turned to plants. More specifically, she wished to try raspberry extract after coming in contact with women online who recommended this plant for menstrual problems. In these instances, Ioana did not turn to these plants because of ancestral

³¹ *Zămuri* is the rural plural of *zeamă* which is used to encompass almost any liquid food, such as soups and stews. It may also refer to liquid extract from fruits, vegetables, and plants. For example, we would say “*zeamă de lămâie*” for lemon juice.

³² Turmeric is not native to Romania and was probably not a plant known by Romanian ancestors.

knowledge, but simply because someone else out there had it that they were potent in helping her with certain struggles.

The point with all these ethnographic fragments is not to make an overview of how knowledge on plants may be transmitted in Romania, or to say that ‘from generation to generation’ should be understood as a mess of spacio-temporal entanglements, although this too is quite important. It is to say that, for my collaborators in Cluj, these discussions on knowledge are first and foremost discussions on practices. When my collaborators discuss what they know, they discuss what they do or did and how it made them feel. Practices – as experiential tools – are valued as epistemic and empirical tools and are not merely the result of something, such as tradition, but they also produce things in and of themselves, such as knowledge. This is notably why I chose to focus on *acts* of daily care in this thesis.

How people *know* medicine – how they determine what constitutes medicine and why it constitutes medicine – is intimately related to how people know health, and, in turn, what is harmful to it, but how people *practice* medicine is just as pertinent, if not more. Medical anthropologists who have adopted an ontological approach have particularly insisted on this last point. Ontological work in medical anthropology has made visible how different practices create different realities, focusing on world-making rather than world-viewing (Cohn and Lynch, 2017, p.136). In medical anthropology, this focus is particularly useful for analysis because it suggests worlds are co-constituted in practice: human ontologies *make* worlds as much as they *make sense* of them; and if worlds are made by practices, then concepts such as health are as well (Cohn and Lynch, 2017, p.136). While this thesis does not situate itself in the ontological turn, the ethnographical data it presents still supports this theoretical statement: different practices indeed create different concepts of health and care.

How my collaborators in Cluj conceptualize health emerges from a collection of life experiences (and associated practices) that is built across time, space, and generations – like the knowledge my collaborators have of plants. The value accorded to life experiences may seem somewhat surprising because of the picture statistics paint of Romania’s medical landscape. As demonstrated by the high number of pharmacies in the country and their impressive annual sales, Romanians are high consumers of allopathic drugs³³ – or, at least, high buyers. Logically, then,

³³ For clarification, “allopathic drugs” refers to drugs which are, for the most part, man-made in laboratories and used as treatment in allopathic medicine. This term is interchangeable with “synthetic drugs”.

someone might assume that Romanians entertain a notion of health that resembles those of the biomedical model to which “modern” or “allopathic” medicine supposedly adheres.

Put simply, the biomedical model has three main characteristics. The first is an idea of health as an absence of disease located in the body. The second is an idea of the body as a machine mainly independent of its environment. The healthy body is therefore the one that functions “normally”, and the sick body is the one whose mechanisms are dysfunctional. The third characteristic is a mind-body dualism, that is, a separation of the body and the mind into two distinct entities – which was inspired by the ideas put forward by René Descartes (1596-1650) in the 17th century³⁴. (Russell, 2013, p.7-12)

However, the knowledge and understanding of medicine, health, and toxicity my collaborators put forward had little to do with the biomedical model, or its preference for clinical trials based on quantitative methods. In the following subsection of this chapter, I develop this observation while focusing on how my collaborators’ daily acts of care create a concept of health which differs from the biomedical model, but the next chapter will also address how my collaborators’ practices create a different concept of toxicity.

3.2 Health as Defined in Practice

During interviews, I would ask my collaborators outright: "How do you define health?" This (difficult) question intended to set some sort of common ground, to make sure we were talking about the same thing. The definition of health has not always been the same through time and space and I wanted to know what it was for my collaborators.

They all had different things to say. Some of my collaborators spoke of health as a biochemical balance, others as a gift from God, yet others as a form of energy... No definition was entirely the same. There was, however, something that bound them all together: *Duty*.

All my participants spoke of health as something that must be maintained. “*Trebuie să păstrezi*,” they explained to me. “You must keep/preserve/conserve³⁵.” This maintenance

³⁴ According to Descartes, the body and the mind are two different entities, although they are connected. The body was relegated by Descartes to the physical world and represented the place where illness was located, while the mind and soul were relegated to the spiritual world. (Russell, 2013, p.7-9)

³⁵ The verb *a păstra* (conjugated as *păstrezi* in the sentence) means to keep, to preserve and to conserve at the same time. Romanian also has distinct verbs for to preserve (*a prezerva*) and to conserve (*a conserva*) as well as many other verbs which can be translated as “to keep” in English depending on the context.

presented itself as a form of care that did not rely on affection, but on duty and respect. In short: Health is about maintenance. Maintenance is about care. Care is about *duty*.

Healthcare thus revealed itself to be a daily process, not a sporadic event that may stretch out over a few days. It also revealed itself to be intimately tied to one's mind, heart, and soul, not just one's body. For instance, Ileana had first defined health as a biochemical balance, putting an emphasis on the proper function of organs and glands – the closest definition to the biomedical model I had encountered on the field – but when I asked her whether care meant to maintain this balance, she added interesting elements related to one's state of mind and one's relation with the environment:

“This, yes. You have to preserve, how do I say this, certain rules of hygiene and, of course, to also preserve a balance in the way you behave. That is, how you eat, how you rest... This is very important. Even in the countryside, people led a life linked to the calendar cycle. That is, a certain kind of behavior during spring, autumn, winter, and so on. A cycle about, how do I say this, everyday life. So how do I ensure your living during a day for every day. For example, a cycle – a calendar cycle by seasons, by year. This is important.”

During my stay in Romania, she kept reminding me I should be careful not to do too much of the same thing every day when I go back home – not too much reading, not too much writing, not too much worrying. “*Trebuie să îți mai și aerisești creierii*,” she would tell me. “You also need to air your brains”, per the Romanian expression. She was deploring the lack of balanced diversity in modern lives, something that is part of what she described as “life hygiene”³⁶.

In one of our numerous conversations, she had also asked whether I prayed after showing me a little altar she had made in her home. After I replied that I did not, she shook her head and told me: “You should know that it isn't healthy not to believe in something. You must believe in *something*.” Otherwise, one's spirit strays. It becomes disconnected, leaving the heart and body to fester.

Thus, Ileana may have first defined health as a “biochemical balance”, but when I asked for details on this definition and spent more time with her, she put forward the importance of one's

³⁶ I would like to note how, here, Ileana is somewhat “fighting fire with fire”. She insists on the necessity to break away from the rigidity which comes with work-focused lifestyles, but she does so by privileging another kind of rigidity where lifestyles become focused on variety. This is a good example of what I explained earlier about care and its association with duty rather than affection. One may like to do something all the time, but it is also one's duty to do *other* things in order to remain healthy.

state of mind and one's state of soul, insisting on the necessity of discipline in maintaining health. In other words, health for Ileana is not just related to the body.



Figure 4: Issue of the magazine "Leacuri și terapii pentru suflet și trup".

This echoed my other collaborators' words and actions, but also what I found in popular media such as newspapers and magazines. On the field, Ileana often tended to hand me issues of newspapers and magazines, opened onto articles on healthcare she thought I should read. These articles explored topics from medicinal plants to relaxation techniques, but I distinctly remember scoffing with a smile when I turned one of these issues onto the main page and seeing the name of the magazine: "*Leacuri și terapii pentru suflet și trup*" – roughly: "*Cures and therapies for the soul and the body*". "*Leacuri*" which I translated here to "cures" is in fact the plural form of "*leac*": a means or set of means, used to treat a physical, psychological and/or spiritual

ailment. It is a word which already incorporates several dimensions to healthcare in itself. This was one of the magazines she handed me most often to read, sometimes pulling out older issues from her collection.

Just to cite another example – another person this time: Maria heavily insisted on how important it was to connect with people in order to remain healthy. She defined care as "opening one's heart" and put emphasis on how important it was to pay attention to people, using the story of her granddaughter as an example.

Maria's granddaughter was born with a disease which impairs her motor functions. She is able to do most things on her own, but sometimes needs assistance. In her daily routine, walking is the most difficult thing for her, and while she can walk on her own feet, she needs assistance in order to do so which restricts her from simply "going out with friends". Throughout her life, her

main caretakers have been Maria and her husband who have dedicated their elderly years to her. Maria explained to me that despite her issues, her granddaughter is a healthy young woman who knows how to take care of herself. However, without contact, without someone with whom to exchange, her granddaughter closes within herself and becomes sick. She used this example to explain to me that healthy human contact was essential for people's health, and often reminded me that "it is not good to stay alone.

In daily life, Maria is engaged in her community through her local church, and often visits people who live by themselves, bringing food and a good conversation. As she explained, she does these things out of the goodness of her heart, but also because she considers it to be her duty towards fellow humans and towards making the world a better place – duty she reminds her faith in God has made easier for her to accomplish. She strives to never leave anyone to fend for themselves or to wallow in loneliness, and despite her community engagement, I found this is most visible in one little thing she does every single day at home: In the morning, Maria and her granddaughter wait for each other to wake up before either of them have their coffee, so neither of them have to drink it alone. They use this time to wake up together, exchange words and laughs; and when I stayed in their home, they also waited for me, including me in their morning ritual, effectively taking responsibility for a part of my health.

In addition to human contact, Maria also brought forward willpower as a necessary element to preserve or restore health, using the example of the time when her husband and her had caught COVID-19. Maria's husband caught COVID-19 before her, and his state rapidly deteriorated. He was brought to the hospital and stayed there until he declared he wanted *out* – or the hospital's bleak atmosphere and the mask upon his nose would kill him before the virus. His family broke him out of the hospital before his discharge was signed, bringing him home.

During this time, Maria had gotten progressively worse, and by the time her husband had been brought home, she was barely able to make a few steps without running out of air. She told me how she had even asked the police to stop checking on them to make sure they were fine because making the trip from her room to the intercom besides the entrance was too difficult and frustrating. Despite this, Maria refused to go to the hospital for herself because she wanted to take care of her husband and not leave him alone. Instead, she bought an oxygen tank, and remained active, sometimes pushing beyond her capabilities. Once, her daughter even found her lifting the

sofa-bed to vacuum underneath it. Somehow, she had seen dust underneath it and it had started to *really* bother her.

This kind of behavior would seem dangerous, especially for someone afflicted with COVID-19, but Maria told me this was precisely why the disease had not affected her as much as her husband who was bedridden for two weeks. “I was better because I did not give up myself to the bed. I did not give up,” she told me.

In Maria’s understanding, the body follows the mind’s lead. As such, refusing to give up is one of the most important things for a successful recovery; and if willpower ever hides oneself, then others can help us find it. For instance, after Maria noticed her husband was well enough to move, she encouraged and helped him to sit up, then to wash, and so on until he made a full recovery, effectively helping build himself back up.

However, I find Maria’s daughter, Adina, explained this idea of health that goes beyond the body, tying to the social, mental and emotional, in the simplest and most efficient way:

“Health means life. If you are not healthy, you do not live. [...] And I am not necessarily talking about myself. I am talking about those close to me. Meaning, it is sufficient that those next to you, those who are dear to you - parents, children... - that they are not healthy. Do you understand? Because [...] they induce a state of sadness/anger/grief³⁷ and of discomfort to you as well. Purely and simply³⁸, you do not feel like living anymore. Your will [to live] disappears. So, you cannot be happy anymore. I can also say that health means happiness. If you are not healthy, you are not happy. You can’t be happy about anything if you are not healthy.”

The emphasis Ileana, Maria and Adina put on health’s ties to one’s state of mind, state of heart and state of soul are not isolated cases, nor are they new ones. This mode of caring and knowing one’s health is visible in old, common expressions such as “*A murit de inimă rea*” (“He/She died from a bad heart.”), meaning someone died of an emotional affliction; and is informed by the same historical characters who were invoked in people’s knowledge on plants: Dacians.

During fieldwork, some people notably relied on Dacians to further the importance of holistic healthcare, using expressions such as “even our ancestors” or “even the Dacians” did this

³⁷ The word Adina used here is “*supărare*” which encompasses a range of negative feelings such as sadness, anger and grief.

³⁸ This is a literal translation of the Romanian expression “*pur și simplu*” which essentially means “simply”.

or said this. Ileana (and her son) even outright paraphrased me part of Plato's writings³⁹ which I had brought up in my project proposal and bring up again below:

“Such, Charmides, I said, is the nature of the charm, which I learned when serving with the army from one of the physicians of the Thracian king Zamolxis, who are said to be so skilful [*sic*] that they can even give immortality. This Thracian told me that in these notions of theirs, which I was just now mentioning, the Greek physicians are quite right as far as they go; but Zamolxis, he added, our king, who is also a god, says further, 'that as you ought not to attempt to cure the eyes without the head, or the head without the body, so neither ought you to attempt to cure the body without the soul; and this,' he said, 'is the reason why the cure of many diseases is unknown to the physicians of Hellas, because they are ignorant of the whole, which ought to be studied also; for the part can never be well unless the whole is well.' For all good and evil, whether in the body or in human nature, originates, as he declared, in the soul, and overflows from thence, as if from the head into the eyes. And therefore if the head and body are to be well, you must begin by curing the soul; that is the first thing. And the cure, my dear youth, has to be effected by the use of certain charms, and these charms are fair words; and by them temperance is implanted in the soul, and where temperance is, there health is speedily imparted, not only to the head, but to the whole body. And he who taught me the cure and the charm at the same time added a special direction: 'Let no one,' he said, 'persuade you to cure the head, until he has first given you his soul to be cured by the charm. For this,' he said, 'is the great error of our day in the treatment of the human body, that physicians separate the soul from the body.' And he added with emphasis, at the same time making me swear to his words, 'Let no one, however rich, or noble, or fair, persuade you to give him the cure, without the charm.' Now I have sworn, and I must keep my oath, and therefore if you will allow me to apply the Thracian charm first to your soul, as the stranger directed, I will afterwards proceed to apply the cure to your head. But if not, I do not know what I am to do with you, my dear Charmides.”

(Plato, in Jowett, s.d, p.82-83)

In the excerpt above, Plato writes that Dacians had a holistic medical model in which caring for the body without caring for the mind and the soul was considered a *mistake*. This approach goes directly against the biomedical model's body-mind dualism and also seems to be the historical root of the notions of health my collaborators put forward.

Indeed, as the examples of Ileana and Maria demonstrate (and as I will continue to discuss in this thesis), daily acts of care in Romania put forward an idea of health which is not limited to

³⁹ Ileana and her son had paraphrased the following phrase: “[Y]ou ought not to attempt to cure the eyes without the head, or the head without the body, so neither ought you to attempt to cure the body without the soul.”

the absence of disease or to the body as a machine. On the contrary, they put forward the idea that health is something which must be maintained on a daily basis with equal attention to the body, the mind, the heart and the soul, as one cannot be healthy if the others are not either. Furthermore, this notion of health requires an attention to the qualitative, to people's *experience* of the world, as the heart, the soul and parts of the mind are not accessible through quantitative methods such as clinical trials.

This is not to say that people I worked with in Cluj *reject* allopathic medicine altogether. Romania's pharmaceutical industry still booms every year, and my collaborators are the first to recognize they are all too often one of the people they judge for taking pills at the first sign of trouble instead of pursuing other solutions to their problems. They also recognize allopathic medicine's benefits and its necessity, especially when it comes to the remedies it has developed – as Nadia would say, plants can't cure cancer – but they *are* frustrated with the biomedical model because it ignores a number of things which seem obvious to them and fails them in the process. In fact, sometimes, I got the impression the biomedical model for my collaborators is somewhat like the portrait of a political leader in someone's house. It is not because it is there that the occupants agree with his policies. Mostly, it is there because they have no other choice. I will expand on this in Section 5. *This* is to bring attention to three things:

- 1) The epistemological and empirical relations people I worked with in Cluj foster with the world are informed by what Anna Tsing et al. call "ghosts": "the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present" (2017, p.G1); "the traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade" (2017, p.G1).
- 2) The value accorded to *experience* in my collaborators' epistemologies – whether this experience is centuries or days old.
- 3) Thing 1 and Thing 2 are inseparable. It is because people value experience that the experiences of ghosts matter; and it is also because ghosts matter that people still value experience. Afterall, what would experiences be for those who do not value them empirically but stories? This highlights how relations to tradition are also relations to contemporaneity and vice-versa.

This is also to answer some of the questions I had presented in the introduction – How do people in Cluj care about their health? What are the conceptions of care and health associated with daily acts of care? – especially: Why is it impossible to address healthcare without addressing environmental toxicity (in the broad sense of the term)? Well, partly, it is because the people I have worked with in Cluj adhere to a medical model in which the environment and its state are considered to play a part in our human health, especially in our ability to maintain it. This chapter aimed to present this medical model and some of its characteristics – characteristics which are essential to grasp in order to understand why my collaborators even addressed the environment in their discussions on health – and, in turn, furthers some of the points anthropology has made on the topic in the past.

For a long time, medical anthropology in particular has questioned the existence of the body-machine and the idea that all bodies are the same (as the biomedical model would have it) in order to increase anthropological understanding of healthcare and the medical experience (Gibbon, 2017 p.185-186). At first, this led authors such as Mary Douglas, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock to propose different models of the body which question dichotomies such as nature-culture and body-mind (Douglas, 1970; Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987). Margaret Lock in particular has underlined the importance of examining the *embodied* experiences of health and disease, bringing attention to how the biological and social may intertwine in different contexts (Lock 2001; Lock and Nguyen 2010). However, other anthropologists, such as Emily Yates-Doerr, have recently urged to move beyond clinical, embodied spaces and worked against the tendency of medical anthropology to focus on the body (Yates-Doerr, 2017, p.154).

Yates-Doerr explains that while clinical medicine adopts ideas of health and disease as embodied, present *in* the body, anthropology should not necessarily do the same. She argues anthropologists should pay attention to health both inside and outside the clinic, “leaving open the possibility that bodies may not always be relevant to health” (Yates-Doerr, 2017, p.144); and demonstrate how biomedical logics “supplement, change, or fall short of the kinds of health people actively work towards outside of clinical spaces” (Yates-Doerr, 2017, p.146).

The point of Yates-Doerr is not to dismiss the biomedical model or bodies, but to encourage an attention “to the varied practices through which health comes to matter” (Yates-Doerr, 2017, p.154) and to interrogate “how – and even if – bodies [and other subjects of interest for medical anthropologist] materialize in practice” (Yates-Doerr, 2017, p.144-145). To address this analytical

concern, she proposes an ontological approach which focuses on practices as theorized by Annemarie Mol (2002) and uses her work on chronic illnesses in Guatemala to demonstrate how, outside of the clinic, bodies do not always have their place in discussions related to health (Yates-Doerr, 2017, p.144-145).

She writes of her fieldwork as being filled with discussions about health which have nothing to do with bodies, but with history and the environment. For instance, one of her informants explained that for her, being unwell and sickness is not located in the body, but in the inability to care for one's family. The author notes similar explanations of health throughout her fieldwork: if the community suffers from an “epidemic” of cardiac arrests, it is because “their ancestors warned them that if they ceased caring for the mountains surrounding the community, many would die” (Yates-Doerr, 2017, p.148). Disease is therefore not found in the body, but in threatened landscapes and health is no longer something that can be achieved through good bodily lifestyle habits, but a negotiation between different kinds of good and bad; putting forward a notion of health which is linked to hospitality (Yates-Doerr, 2017, p.147-149).

Further authors such as Sahra Gibbon have also made arguments in favor of a similar analytical approach and put forward notions of health which are both corporeal and incorporeal. In her work on cancer, Gibbon identifies inequalities in the way healthcare is provided (depending on the type of insurance), stress, negative emotions and family trauma as factors which become embodied and influence one's health (Gibbon, 2017, p.178-179).

It goes without saying that the idea of health my collaborators put forward echoes the argument of Yates-Doerr's and other authors such as Gibbon. For my collaborators in Cluj, health is not something that can simply be achieved through good bodily lifestyle habits. It *is* a bodily affair, *but not only*, as the mind, the heart and the soul are also elements which must be cared for if one hopes to be healthy. Furthermore, this idea of health finds ties in history, but also in the environment – for similar reasons given by Yates-Doerr's informants, as I will explain throughout this thesis.

3.3 Recapitulation

This chapter served to answer some of the questions I had presented in the introduction: How do people in Cluj care about their health? What are the conceptions of care and health associated with daily acts of care? It also served to present the unavoidable elements to begin

addressing this question: Why is it impossible to address healthcare without addressing environmental toxicity (in the broad sense of the term)?

As I have begun to address here, it is because my collaborators in Cluj adhere to a historicized medical model in which health is not merely a bodily affair. This chapter presented some characteristics of this medical model – characteristics I argue are essential to grasp in order to understand why my collaborators even addressed the environment in the next chapters – and furthered some anthropological theories in two subsections.

The first subsection detailed various ethnographic fragments which presented how medicinal knowledge on plants is transmitted in order to demonstrate that these discussions on knowledge are first and foremost discussions on practices. I wrote that practices – as experiential tools – are valued as epistemic and empirical tools and are not merely the result of something, such as tradition, but they also produce things in and of themselves, such as knowledge. I have used this to support previous theoretical claims that practices and concepts are co-constituted, but also to support analytical approaches (which find their roots in the ontological turn) which study different practices in order to better comprehend how people come to different conceptualizations of health and care.

The second subsection expanded on this argument by demonstrating that the care practices of my collaborators in Cluj create a different concept of health as the one supported by the biomedical model. I explained health for them is not simply a bodily affair as the mind, the heart and the soul are elements deemed essential to consider in healthcare. I have used this subsection to argue like other anthropologists that anthropology should pay attention to health both inside and outside the clinic and consider the possibility that bodies do not always have their place in discussions related to health.

Both these subsections have demonstrated that 1) the epistemological and empirical relations people I worked with in Cluj foster with the world are informed by what Anna Tsing et al. call “ghosts”: “the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present” (2017, p.61), more specifically the ghosts of Dacians; and 2) that there is a significant value accorded to *experience* in my collaborators’ epistemologies – whether this experience is centuries or days old. In other words, how people conceptualize health are informed by these ghosts and experience. Thus, notions such as health and toxicity must be discussed as historicized elements in a larger

sense: the daily acts of care which embody these notions are informed – and continue to be informed – not only by ancient “collective” life experiences, but also by recent and personal ones.

So far, I have made this point solely by discussing health, as it is necessary to understand how people conceptualize health in order to understand how they conceptualize what is harmful or toxic to it. In the following chapters, I will expand on my collaborators’ notion of health and begin defining the notion of toxicity. I will demonstrate how, for them, one’s environment (at large) and its state are also considered to play a part in our human health and how our ability to maintain health is compromised by environmental toxicity. In fact, the point of entry in this discussion on the ties of health and toxicity with the environment begins with a simple daily act of care: feeding.

4 Chemicals

*“Otravă.”*⁴⁰

In this thesis, I argue that the daily acts of care of my collaborators in Cluj, Romania embody historical, metaphysical, and capitalist narratives and dynamics which inform and are informed by notions of health and toxicity. Health and toxicity thus emerge as notions which cannot be understood separately from these narratives and dynamics.

In the last chapter, I explained that for my collaborators in Cluj, health is not merely a bodily affair and presented some characteristics of their medical model – characteristics I argue are essential to grasp in order to understand why my collaborators even addressed the environment in their discussions on health.

In the following chapter, I will expand on my collaborators’ notion of health and begin defining the notion of toxicity. I will demonstrate how, for my collaborators in Cluj, one’s environment (at large) and its state are also considered to play a part in our human health; and how our ability to maintain health is compromised by environmental toxicity. I will also address how my collaborators discussed environmental toxicity as a problem that goes beyond the material world and the impossibility to properly grasp notions of health and toxicity without discussing other-than-human beings, things, and processes which sometimes pertain to metaphysical understandings of the world. This discussion begins with a simple daily act of care: feeding.

On the field, attending to the daily act of feeding oneself revealed that the distinctions between the categories of food and medicine as well as their good and bad connotations are blurry, as I will explain in beginning of this chapter and in the first subsection. In the second subsection, I discuss how this ambiguity puts ethics at the heart of the subject; and in the third subsection, I explain how, in the context of environmental toxicity, ethics are related to something called “vitality”. This latter concept is essential to grasp in order to understand how my collaborators articulate daily acts of care, thus bringing the discussion full circle.

⁴⁰ Poison.

One afternoon, I was sitting around the table with my grandmother and grandfather. We were eating chicken, and potatoes garnished with parsley. Freshly cut tomatoes were sitting in the middle of the table, up for grabs. It was the fifth day of my stay in Romania and the fifth day I was having tomatoes for breakfast, lunch *and* dinner. I remember thinking that was *a lot* of tomatoes, but did not comment on it, because I knew the tomato was a staple of Romanian cuisine and figured the recurrence at which we ate them was one of the things I had forgotten as an immigrant child. That was when my grandfather said: “I haven’t eaten so many tomatoes all year.” So, it was *not* usual after all. I jumped on the occasion:

“Yes, why are we eating so many tomatoes?” I asked.

My grandmother replied: “The tomato contains lycopene, which has an anti-carcinogenic character.”

The next day, my grandmother added to what she had said about the tomato. She explained to me that lycopene was a pigment contained in the biggest quantities in tomatoes. It is an antioxidant and soluble in fat. She put emphasis on the fact that it had a beneficial action on the organism. Better yet! “And when you are cooking, it doesn’t deteriorate during processing.” In short, the tomato is a plant that helps maintain health.

It was not the sole culinary plant which I found to have health-maintaining properties during my fieldwork. Slowly, I discovered that every plant I ate was a health-maintaining plant. The parsley on my potatoes, the amaranth in my borsch, the sea buckthorn in my yogurt... They *all* did something to help me maintain my health. It was impossible for me to find a culinary plant that did nothing to help me. This is significant because it explained why, during fieldwork, the discussion on medicinal plants always led to food. It was because medicinal and culinary plants have one thing in common: health.

Food actually revealed itself to be a pivotal point of health. As Nadia put it, for the body to remain healthy, “alimentation is sufficient. There is no need to kill the liver⁴¹ with something else.” In other words, feeding oneself or others is part of one’s duty towards maintaining health (alongside other things). Thus, feeding is not simply a question of sustenance or pleasure.

⁴¹ Here, Nadia was referring to how most allopathic drugs tend to be harsh on the liver.

The paramountcy of food in the maintenance of health even led some collaborators to give me tricks to make sure I was eating well enough. Some of those tricks were as simple as “You must eat from everything”, which meant people should have a varied diet. Others were more elaborate. For example, Ileana said I should apply the “traffic light technique”, meaning that in my plate I should have something green, something yellow and something red. If these three colors (or similar ones) were in my plate, then I was relatively certain to supply my body with most of the nutrients it needed.

This meant that everywhere I went, if plants were in the conversation, I was guaranteed to find out their health-maintaining properties – even in the smallest of conversations in the market. Once, I was walking around the market with my grandmother for groceries when a stall selling berries caught my attention. My grandmother and I stopped by the stall, and she pointed at each berry, naming it - sea buckthorns (*cătină*), lingonberries (*merișoare*), and cornelian cherries (*coarne*). The cornelian cherries caught my attention more than the rest because while I knew I must have had them before; I didn’t remember their taste. The seller must have noticed my long stare, because the next second she ruffled the cornelian cherries and told us they were “very good” and “rich in vitamin K”. She offered me one of them to taste. As I said earlier, I was guaranteed to find out their properties.

Similarly, the newspapers and magazines Ileana suggested I read contained several articles which pertained to the curative and health-maintaining properties of common culinary plants and educated readers on the necessity to eat a varied diet to avoid illness with explanations and examples.

These types of interactions and materials made it more and more difficult to dissociate the culinary from the medicinal as time went by on the field. The more time I spent in Romania the more I found out that most plants often belong to both categories, or rather that the culinary is never *just* culinary. Some plants, such as calendula, are explicitly associated to the realm of the “medicinal” and intentionally used for their ability to cure or prevent ailments but there are also culinary plants which people do not necessarily identify as “medicinal” and that are still used for the same purposes albeit without the “explicit intention”.

For instance, tomatoes are never intentionally consumed to heal an established or onsetting ailment but, like all plants, have important health-maintaining properties. People are aware that eating tomatoes is good for maintaining their health and, in turn, for preventing illness. If we

consider “health maintenance” as a form of healing which takes place daily, then this makes the tomato *both* a culinary and medicinal plant, even though it is normally only explicitly identified as a culinary plant.

For other plants such as sea buckthorns, this belonging to both categories was better recognized explicitly. Sea buckthorns can be and are consumed as a snack, but they are also intentionally used as an immune system strengthener whether to prevent or treat colds. For example, Violet, a florist I befriended on the field and who later became one of my collaborators, told me she liked to eat them with honey as a snack whenever they were in season, but that sometimes she also specifically bought and consumed them for their medicinal or health-maintaining properties and listed a few examples⁴². Personally, I usually consume sea buckthorns with yogurt or sugar because I like berries. However, I once found myself specifically choosing sea buckthorns over blueberries to throw in my yogurt because I felt I was coming down with something and wanted to help my immune system along in fighting it.

This “ability” of plants to blur the boundaries of categories such as the “medicinal” and the “culinary” is a good way to grasp why feeding matters as a daily act of care towards health. It is because, for my collaborators in Cluj, food is medicine. However, this shift in attention from medicinal plants, in the restricted sense of the word, to food as medicine brings up a contradiction.

4.1 Contradiction

In Romanian, we say “*Nu ști nici o dată de unde sare iepurele.*” – “You never know from where the rabbit will jump”. This sentence is used to indicate you never know how an opportunity may arise. For me, the rabbit jumped in a parking lot: I was in front of the building in which I was residing during my fieldwork, speaking with certain family members and acquaintances when Adina, who would later become one my collaborators, diverted from the larger conversation, and asked me – as my grandparents had – what I was doing here.

While the others spoke amongst themselves, I quickly explained myself and the conversation continued. It could have been because she is a nurse, or it could have been because of the “rabbit”, but in a few minutes, Adina passed – in a condensed form – over every topic I had identified in my interview guide just like my grandparents had done. Among the things she said, a

⁴² She told me she fed them to her child every day for a few weeks whenever fall began to prevent colds and infections.

few struck me, particularly the way she spoke about plants as something that you must believe in, and about allopathic medicine as a double-edged sword. For plants to work well, she explained, you need to believe, to *trust*, in their power to heal. This is not to generate a placebo effect, but to engage the power of the mind alongside the power of the plant – to work *with* the plant in order to maximize its beneficial effects. This was interesting because it directly pointed towards a conception of health and care which went beyond and even against biomedical ideas as I explained in the previous section, but what she said afterwards piqued my curiosity even more: “It all comes from the human psyche,” she said before adding: “I believe [in plants], especially since I work in a field where a lot of chemicals are used.”

All these little pills full of chemicals, she continued to explain, they “repair” on one side, and “break” on the other. She gave the example of the pills prescribed to patients with diabetes: they repair the problems created by diabetes, but also ruin the liver and kidneys. Once more, I found myself thinking, “I should be recording this.”

The field must have heard my plea that time, because this “rabbit” – this narrative of allopathic medicine as a double-edged sword full of harmful chemicals – came back in multiple interviews and discussions, if not all; and found itself in opposition with plants. As Ileana explained during one of our conversations:

“Synthetic drugs have harmful action. So, on the one hand, they have a beneficial action but, on the other hand, they also attack.”

“So, they destroy that [biochemical] balance [of the body] that you were talking about,” I said.

“Yes. Yes.”

“And the plant doesn't?”

“The plant doesn't.”

It seemed simple: allopathic medicine is both beneficial and harmful; plants are simply beneficial. *Absolutely not*. A few minutes later, when I asked Ileana, who lives in the city of Cluj-Napoca, whether she would pick plants from the urban flora, she said “No”.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because they are polluted.”

"So, it would better to buy them from the countryside, so to say."

“Yes. Or pick them.”

“Or go pick them yourself,” I nodded.

“From a place where there are not many cars. Where there is not much traffic. And far from places where they discharge trash from the stable, or peasant latrines because these pollute with a lot of nitrites.”

“And then they go into the plant, so to say?”

“Of course,” she confirmed.

“And from there you intoxicate yourself with it. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

Thus, while edible plants do not contain harmful substances themselves⁴³, they may become contaminated with such substances, and these will be passed on to the consumer – like a virus. Naturally, this explanation, reiterated by nearly all my collaborators, extended to more than plants. It extended to *food* as a whole. Here, we run into the contradiction that followed me during my entire fieldwork, popping up every time I ate:

Food is what keeps you healthy, but it is also what makes you ill.

Why?

Chemicals.

They are the ones who swung my thesis in a different direction. They are the ones who made my inquiry into medicinal plants impossible without discussing the other subjects this thesis touches upon like alimentation, health, and the environmental crisis. If it were not for chemicals, none of the phenomena I analyze in this thesis would exist the way they do now.

Chemicals were defined on the field as *toxic synthetic substances*. They are 1) toxic because, despite their benefits, they always cause harm – pointing towards a definition of toxicity which is inextricably linked with harm – and 2) synthetic because they are made or synthesized in laboratories by humans rather than “given” by nature. They came up strikingly often in the

⁴³ This sentence here refers specifically to substances which are not found in plants “by nature”. I am aware some edible plants may be toxic in certain doses and that others are simply toxic to the human body.

conversations I had on the field and Nadia's explanation of "chemicals", in particular, was one of the hallmarks of my fieldwork.

We were outside on the terrace of Nadia's home in Câmpenești. Homegrown green peaches, store-bought candy and forest-picked hazelnuts sat in between us on the table when I asked her: "If I asked you [lit. put you] to give a definition to chemicals, how would you explain this thing?" She looked me straight into the eyes and leaned in, crossing her arms atop the plastic table. "*Otravă*," she told me firmly.

Poison.

This exchange marked me by its weight and made me revisit the instances in which my collaborators referred to chemicals with more attention. The first instances of chemicals I came across on the field were found in the discussions on medicine, in particular allopathic medicine. As I have demonstrated with certain examples above, allopathic drugs are described by my collaborators as chemicals which act like a double-edged sword. However, allopathic drugs are not the only chemicals there are. Growth hormones, which I will discuss later, and certain pesticides are also identified as chemicals – toxic synthetic substances. As Lucian explained to me in his kitchen, accompanied by the family's little Yorkshire Terrier:

"Now, with this technologization... *Ce să mai stai?*⁴⁴ We are 8 billion people. Do you still have time to go collect the Colorado beetles? Well, no. Then, you go, *vvt*, you sprayed, the Colorado [beetles] died, the birds, or other *viețuitoare*⁴⁵ that would feed themselves with this no longer live, or they get sick too. Those *viețuitoare* also became filled with chemicals, and we eat tubers full of pesticides and insecticides. [...] [I]t is an evil – an evil which we do to ourselves knowingly.

"[...] We get sick from cancer from all kinds of chemicals that we take [inside us], and now we see that more and more solutions, substances that are and are not tracked by the authorities in the respective states appear on the lists of prohibited substances. Because they [the substances], practically, should not be found in any product."

⁴⁴ There is no appropriate English translation to this expression. Literally, this expression would translate to "What to stay more?", but a more understandable translation would be "Why stay?". This expression is often used to refer to the futility of waiting or staying, but in this context, Lucian uses it to indicate the impossibility of waiting in the current planetary context.

⁴⁵ This word somewhat translates to a combination of "living things" and "vitalities".

During the conversation in which this exchange took place, Lucian painted the picture of a modern agricultural landscape that had come to “kill off beings that are not recognized as assets” (Tsing, 2017, p.52) but also those who *were* recognized as such through the use of chemicals and other toxic practices. However, he also brought up important nuances to be made here: not *all* pesticides are chemicals. As Lucian pointed out, Romanian ancestors also used to seek to control certain lives they perceived as nuisances:

“Yes, our elders⁴⁶, they also did treatments. They [...] did nettle treatments back in the day, with chains stuck inside [of the barrels] to clean the barrels. A little later after that, with sulfur. It was later seen that sulfur destroys many of the bacteria and preserves the wine for a longer period of time. *No*, yes, but until then wine was used for spraying in agriculture - on trees⁴⁷. They [our elders] were also spraying, but they were still using natural products. Wine was not made from pills. Wine was made from grapes.”

Thus, Romanian ancestors also used to intervene in the lives of other vitalities and in plant growth more specifically, but the difference is in *how* they intervened. As Lucian explained above, they did not use chemicals – synthetic substances. They used “natural” products – an expression my collaborators used to describe products which usually occur spontaneously without human intervention, or which may be minimally processed by humans (with other spontaneously occurring products).

This distinction between synthetic and natural pesticides – or in between synthetic poisons and natural poisons more largely – points towards something important: the problem is not in human intervention or in poison at large. It is in the *manner* in which the human intervenes, and the *effects* of the intervention or the poison in question. In other words, this distinction points towards a discussion on ethics.

4.2 Ethics

Following Brighupati Singh and Naisargi Dave (2015), I “take ethics [...] to mean a mode of relatedness, even if the relation is as ephemeral as a mood that may escape measure or description” (Singh and Dave, 2015, p.233). I also strive to engage a “nonmoral” discussion on

⁴⁶ In Romanian, “our elders” is used as a synonym of “our ancestors”.

⁴⁷ In another extract of our conversation, E explained how every household used to have leftover wine, so until people found out how to preserve it longer, they found other uses for it.

ethics, meaning without “an a priori moral code based on which we might predict or justify our emotional responses” as they relate to particular actions (Singh and Dave, 2015, p.233).

Brian Massumi has made a similar distinction between ethics and morals by drawing on Gilles Deleuze, writing that “[i]n an ethics, the transcendent moral opposition (Good/Evil) and its attenuated democratic offspring (normal/pathological) are ‘supplanted by the qualitative difference of modes of existence’ (Massumi, 2018, p.4, citing Deleuze, 1988, p.23). He explains that “[e]thics bear on what, qualitatively a processes can do, and in what direction that capacitation leads. It evaluates the singular how of ‘an immanent power’s’ mode of operation, as it consequentially unfolds” (Massumi, 2018, p.4, citing Deleuze, 1988, p.25). Thus, he argues for “a processual ethics” which “is thoroughly relational”, explaining that “[t]he immanently self-powering modes of existence it concerns come in multiples and mutually inflect” (Massumi, 2018, p.4) which is similar to Singh and Dave’s definition.

Furthermore, Singh and Dave write that “[o]ne of the defining features of the anthropology of ethics has been to view morality not just as locatable in normative codes and idealized thoughts but also in the unresolved quandaries of lived experience” (Singh and Dave, 2015, p.232). However, such a framework often reduces ethics to the question of “How ought one to live?” (Singh and Dave, 2015, p.233). Singh and Dave unsettle this definition of ethics by suggesting that “How ought one to kill?” is also the subject of ethics (Singh and Dave, 2015, p.233); and conclude that despite the inevitability of death, the mode and mood of death *do* matter (Singh and Dave, 2015, p.244).

The development of “multispecies ethnography” and the reflections of anthropologists such as Radhika Govindrajan (2018) into the everyday act of killing other-than-human beings have been particularly liable to unsettle ethics in the manner of Singh and Dave and have brought ethical discussions in anthropology a step further, bringing under fire the argument that “the emphasis on the ordinary and everyday in the anthropology of ethics runs the risk of diluting the specificity of the ethical” (Govindrajan, 2018, p.53). Govindrajan has explicitly argued against this argument, suggesting that the “two ethical registers [of] the everyday and the “eventful” [...] are mutually constitutive rather than opposed” (Govindrajan, 2018, p.53).

This ethical debate finds itself to be extremely pertinent here because as Gregg Hetherington explains very well, “[a]griculture is all about intimate multispecies relationships, relationships that necessarily involve killing” (2019, p.52).

“Harvesting, slaughtering, burning, cutting, ploughing, poisoning, shooting, clearing, trapping, weeding, culling, and selecting are all forms of killing. Even growing a leguminous cover crop between rows of organic corn and squash is a way of choking out undesirable organisms that are constantly trying to take over a garden. As Donna Haraway (2008) might put it, agrarian work is all about figuring out how to make certain combinations of companion species flourish at the expense of others. By extension, the kind of specialization that made it possible to scale up modern agriculture was also about finding new and more efficient ways of killing, and distributing these as specialized forms of work, and figuring out how many of them could be automated.”

(Hetherington, 2019, p.52)

The issues Lucian brought forward with regard to synthetic pesticides support the ethical arguments above and show that, indeed, “How ought one to kill?” matters as he explains that the problem with synthetic pesticides is not that they kill, but that they kill *in bad way*. However, his example also brings this discussion a step further by suggesting that “How ought one to kill?” is not so different from “How ought one to live?” as modes and moods of killing undesirable beings ultimately impact how desirable ones live. Furthermore, his example and those on allopathic drugs I have laid out above also highlight “the way killing and death circulate alongside care and life” (Ginn et al, 2014, p.113) and demonstrate how care can *also* be harmful, violent or toxic as scholars, such as Michelle Murphy (2015) and Sameena Mulla (2014), have already argued in a variety of fields.

Synthetic pesticides are intended to care for (desirable) crops and shield them from (undesirable) “pests”, but they also harm these same crops as they are a hazard to soil health and other beings and things which are beneficial to plant life. Similarly, allopathic drugs are intended to care for human bodies, but while they help certain body parts, they also harm others – nurturing and harming the body at the same time⁴⁸.

Hetherington’s work (2019) in eastern Paraguay on the “Front for the Defense of Sovereignty and Life” – although quite different from my own in scope and in nature – has brought forward similar discussions. The Front for the Defense of Sovereignty and Life aimed “to counteract what it saw as an existential threat to campesino (peasant) life”, “opposed land concentration, and [was] built around a nationalist rejection of Brazilian settlers” which “were

⁴⁸ This may be reminiscent of the term *pharmakon*, both a remedy and a poison, as well as certain academic conversations on the topic such as Jacques Derrida’s (1981) and João Biehl’s (2010).

buying up land in these communities, consolidating it into large soybean fields that could be harvested mechanically” (Hetherington, 2019. p.41). However, “they also opposed soy in general, claiming that soy farms led to widespread killing: deforestation, poisonous contamination, and even murder” (Hetherington, 2019. p.41).

Interestingly, “campesino activists were always forced to admit that the environmental devastation wrought by soy was related to devastation that they themselves participated in, from cutting forest to using “poison” to cultivate their own crops” (Hetherington, 2019, p.42). This contradiction and further ethnographic data bring Hetherington to conclude that what is defended here is “a specific *way of life*” and that “[t]he relevant question about soy is not whether it kills, but *how* it kills, and what relations of living and killing (or living through killing) it promotes” (Hetherington, 2019. p.42).

This is to say that further examples which extend beyond chemicals can also be used to argue that “How one ought to kill?” is not always so different from “How ought one to live?”, and that care and violence may also come hand in hand. In my own fieldwork, excessively controlled growing conditions were notably identified as one of these examples which extend beyond chemicals.

Indeed, the fact that there are environmental conditions and practices which are deemed to be good and others which are deemed to be bad for growing produce was made very clear by my collaborators. They valued produce which they qualified as “natural”, “bio” or “real”, associated them with goodness and used several markers to identify them. Smell, taste, and bodily affect in particular were privileged tools with which to test the realness or goodness of produce. If produce was fragrant, rich in flavor, and made you (feel) well, then it was deemed to be good. In turn, this meant its growing conditions were good as well. If it was not fragrant and rich in flavor or if it made you feel unwell, then its harmful effects were highlighted, its “true nature” was questioned and so were its growth conditions, which were either doubted to be good or straight up “blacklisted”. One of the conversations I had with Adina illustrates this well, as she deplores the conditions in which produce from the supermarket is grown, using the specific example of Dutch bell peppers:

“[W]e do not spray them [our fruits and vegetables] much. I prefer not to spray them much. Rather than spraying them – I prefer them to have a worm rather than be ‘I do not know how’. Because there is enough [food that is] eaten from the

supermarket, [enough] fruits grown ‘I don't know how⁴⁹’. Or Dutch bell peppers that they put substances at their roots. And the bell pepper made itself full of water, it has a bell pepper flavor, but you don't know what you're eating.

“[...] We put some [fruits and vegetables] in our garden to have [some to eat] – to take [some], you ⁵⁰, from there [the garden], [to] know that you cultivated it [the fruit or the vegetable], that you have grown/raised⁵¹ it. It was rained from above; it took from the earth. You know it is natural. It is “bio”, or at least we try for it to be as “bio” as possible, taking into account what I said is happening⁵². But [at least], it was not grown/raised in greenhouses and, as I told you, with the dripper [which] gives it this much substance, so... When the daughter of a friend of mine [told me]⁵³ who worked in the Netherlands at a... at one of those farms –I don't even know how to call it – where the bell peppers grew in greenhouses on, I don't know, like in that movie with Jack and the Beanstalk. Like that, until I do not know [which height] there was a bell pepper. (*She gesticulates, showing big heights.*) So, on my word if not. And on it [the plant], [there were] I don't know how many vines and [they were] full of bell peppers. So, I was shocked [when she told me]. And she said that they had established periods when to give it [the plant] water, when to have it drip I don't know what substance, when to do that, when to do this. And they [the bell peppers] all have the same shape, and they are all cloned, or the saint knows what's up with them.

“Ours? They are not so fat, and beautiful, but instead when I take a bite from a bell pepper [from my garden], well, that one has the aroma⁵⁴ of a bell pepper, and it is a bell pepper. It is a bell pepper, *bell pepper*. No, the one everyone knows. I mean... What I wanted to say is that it seems to everyone that indigenous vegetables, fruits, and so on, that you get from the peasant – so [the person] who cultivated and worked the land – are much more pregnant in flavors and much tastier than a fruit or vegetable – as I told you – made⁵⁵ in a greenhouse.”

⁴⁹ I would like to quickly note that throughout my fieldwork “I don't know” was often paired with mistrust and even fear with regards to what my collaborators discussed in the moment.

⁵⁰ Here, the switch to the second person singular is made to demonstrate that this reason could be important to anyone, not just the speaker.

⁵¹ In Romanian, the word used here is *crescut*, from the verb *a crește*, which means both to grow and to raise.

⁵² Earlier, Adina explained it was nearly impossible to grow truly natural produce as 1) we have lost control of seeds which were genetically modified in a laboratory, 2) synthetic pesticides are spread by the wind from a field to another even across large distances; and 3) the rain across the world is also contaminated with chemicals due to global pollution.

⁵³ This sentence is oddly translated because the verb here comes very early on in the Romanian sentence but would actually be omitted in the English language. The verb comes so far down the English grammatical structure Adina would have never gotten to it as she diverts subjects.

⁵⁴ Here, aroma refers both to taste and smell.

⁵⁵ I would like to note the interesting shift Adina makes here from “grown/raised” to “made” which is reminiscent of Tim Ingold's (2022 [2000]) discussion on the dichotomies between collection and production as well as grow and make.

In this excerpt, Adina describes herself as shocked, not simply by the extremely controlled environment in which Dutch bell peppers are grown – going as far as being hesitant to call those environments “farms” (rather than laboratories perhaps) – but also by the results the methods used to grow them yield. They yield results that are impossible in an environment in which the human does not intervene extensively: plants high as the one in the story of Jack and the Beanstalk, full of bell peppers that all look the same as if they were cloned. In turn, this begs the question of whether Dutch bell peppers are truly bell peppers – “real” and “good” bell peppers. She hints that Dutch bell peppers are not as good as they seem before she compares them with the ones that grow in her garden through her senses of taste and smell and identifies a difference in flavor in between them.

A clearer example would be the exchange we had on store-bought produce a little later in this same conversation. Adina explained to me that a fruit dehydrates itself becoming wrinkly and mushy as it sits in time, losing from its life, but she specified this loss of “life” that occurs through time only applies to produce that is natural. At first, I was perplexed as to why she was making this precision, but when she pointed to some oranges on top of the freezer – fresh-looking oranges that she had bought from the store⁵⁶ – it all made sense.

“And what I notice [lit. observe] [about the produce I buy at the store], maybe you noticed [lit. observed] too. I have oranges in the basket over there. They are, I think, from... March? February?⁵⁷ So, if...”

“They don’t go bad [lit. break],” I said.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “Do you consider it’s a natural product? Because anyway, it still—” She lowered her voice and shook her head. “What is natural... doesn’t stay that much. It decomposes, rots, stinks⁵⁸... I mean, smells, sorry.” She paused, then added: “So then, tell me, that tomato [from the store] that you ingest and eat, does it do good to you? Are you healthy after them? No! No. That is the truth. That no! That is also, *that is also* why we get sick.”

Food is what keeps you healthy, but also what makes you ill.

⁵⁶ Oranges that were not qualified as “bio” or “natural”.

⁵⁷ This conversation took place at the end of July which means the oranges had been sitting in the basket for five or six months.

⁵⁸ The use of *pute*, or stinks, can be sometimes considered crude in Romanian.

Adina noted several times through the use taste, smell, sight and bodily affect how store-bought produce, whether it was bell peppers, oranges, tomatoes, sunflower oil, milk, meat, or others, was different from homegrown produce in taste, in smell, in appearance and in “behaviour”. Compared to homegrown produce, store-bought produce was tasteless, smell-less, looked too perfect, decomposed (way) too slowly or not at all, and harmed her and her family’s health. For instance, she specifically criticized store-bought milk for upsetting their stomachs and store-bought meat for making their skin break out. She explained these differences and harmful effects stemmed from the conditions in which store-bought produce was grown and kept – conditions which involved extremely controlled environments and chemicals (which are tools of control themselves) – and described them as toxic.

Most of my collaborators made the same observations and drew the same conclusions; all while inviting me to experience the differences myself. In most cases, this invitation came directly with food from my collaborators’ gardens being laid out on the table and I was especially encouraged to notice the difference in taste between “types” of produce.

Overall, the things I heard about the fruits, vegetables, and other products (ex. milk and meat) being sold in supermarkets were almost never positive and tended to contain a dose of doubt and fear as to what those fruits, vegetables and other products really were. I often heard statements such as “Those are not good”; “Those are not very healthy”; “Those are full of chemicals”; “Those are just water”; “Those are not really [fruits, vegetables, etc.]”.⁵⁹ However, upon taking a bite out of something my collaborators qualified as “real”, “bio”, “natural” – terms they used interchangeably and which were associated with good environmental conditions and practices – I was asked questions such as “Is it good?” or “Do you like it?”. I always found myself nodding in approval, and then I was often told “See? Now, *this* is [noun].” – Now, *this* is a tomato. Now, *this* is milk. Now, *this* is... Sometimes, I was even warned before I was served something, especially when it came to products from animal provenance: “Be careful. This is cow’s milk, not the kind you get from the store.”⁶⁰ Indeed, my collaborators often explain that store-bought milk could not

⁵⁹ For example, I distinctly remember the day I asked my grandfather why we never bought fruits and vegetables from Carrefour even though we always began our grocery runs there; and he answered with a grimace: “Those are not very good.” Instead, we walked a little further down the street to buy them from a small marketplace where people sold produce they grew at home without the use of synthetic pesticides.

⁶⁰ In passing, perhaps it would be interesting to share that while I enjoyed the tastes I experienced throughout my fieldwork, my brother, who was born in Canada and rarely visited Romania, cannot drink the milk or eat the eggs my family brings from the neighbours’ farms in Romania at all because he finds the taste “too heavy”, in his words.

be considered real cow's milk after it had gone through so much processing. Rather, it would be more appropriately described as liquid calcium and protein⁶¹.

Following these discussions on toxic (care) practices – agricultural practices, processing practices, but also feeding practices – many of my collaborators expressed the need for humans to re-evaluate “what is good” and “what is bad” to find better ways of life (and death), adding their voices to a larger “global realignment in the relationship between human health and agriculture” (Hetherington, 2020a, p.2). As Lucian told me: “We also need to think about these things: what *was* good, what *is* good and what must be maintained even today.” Interestingly – but unsurprisingly if you recall Section 3 – my collaborators and the examples I have given above suggest that in order to find the answers to these questions we need to *experience* the effects and affects of our actions; and this is precisely what they did, and encouraged me to do, on the field.

Throughout my fieldwork, my collaborators used the senses, whether physical, mental, social or spiritual, as tools through which to experience the world and to determine whether produce, environmental conditions and practices are good or bad. In order to determine whether something *is* good or bad, they need to find out whether it *feels* good or bad. In other words, the sensuous observations my collaborators made and encouraged me to make were there to tell me that their ethics are fundamentally experiential and sensuous. To determine what is good or bad, how to live and how to kill – what and how to do – the senses need to come into play. By extension, this also makes ethics fundamentally practical. As Tim Ingold (Ingold and Howes, 2011) argues, the particularly of the senses is that they are practical – or rather *practices* which, as I have said in Section 3, are one of the focuses of this thesis:

“I take actions to be practical because they are *performed* – they are things people do, or carry out. Thus sowing seeds in the fields is practical, as is performing a ritual or sniffing the air for signs of other people (as the Desana of Colombia do), or listening and watching for traffic before crossing a city street.”

(Ingold and Howes, 2011, p.324)

⁶¹ I would like to add a personal anecdote from my childhood here. In my Romanian childhood, I was almost only served milk which was simply boiled to eliminate harmful bacteria. This means milk retains most of its nutrients and fat (nearing 5%) which are also said to be responsible for its rich taste. The first time my parents served me store-bought milk in Canada, I asked them why they were giving me “coloured water”. Even today, I find myself unable to drink milk which holds less than 3,8% fat because of its lack of taste.

This is to say that as anthropological theory has already argued, for my collaborators, “living in a time of planetary catastrophe thus begins with a practice at once humble and difficult: noticing the worlds around us” (Tsing et al, 2017, p.M7).

I would like to clarify that what I mean by the “senses” is not limited to the five classical senses of Western thought – sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch – which anthropology has particularly attended to so far⁶². On the field, other physical sensations as well as non-physical sensations which invoke other senses in order to be perceived were also brought up by my collaborators; but I do not have a name for these senses, I refer to them more broadly as “bodily affects” or “emotional” and “spiritual” senses as I have done in Adina’s example above. This particularity of the field extends the notion of the senses and blurs the line between the “external” environment and our “inner” ones as certain sensations only arise when the “outside” becomes the “inside”.

To return to ethics, the relation between ethics and sensory experience has been drawn before albeit it seems to have mostly received “indirect” attention in anthropology. Indeed, medical anthropology studies on “embodiment” have often made the link with ethics and the “lived body” but rarely mentioned the “senses” explicitly⁶³. Perhaps because these studies often attend to bodily affect which is not traditionally associated with the senses in Western thought.

Philosophers have introduced similar ideas well ahead of anthropology. Immanuel Kant, for example, has notably been cited for his “pragmatic anthropology,” “an ethics concerning the realm of actual lived experience, where humans are always in relation to one another in a social enterprise” (Ercolini, 2012, p.314). However, more recent philosophical discussions about “plant ethics” have addressed the senses more explicitly and suggested that caring for plants “requires sensory experience and attention to their condition in order to respond effectively” (Hiernaux, 2021, p.4).

Still, the point my collaborators are trying to make here is not limited to a certain group or species. By this, I mean that for my collaborators, there was no distinction between “human ethics”, “animal ethics”, “plant ethics” and so on when it came to topics such as health (and

⁶² Indeed, Sarah Pink, David Howes and Tim Ingold, all important figures in the field of sensory anthropology/sensorial anthropology/the anthropology of the senses, have all focused on these five senses in their analysis (although I do not pretend they believe the senses are limited to those they analyze).

⁶³ See *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment* (2011) for multiple examples on this point, especially the text of Nora L. Jones.

toxicity). That is because beings, things, and processes are all considered to be connected. As Adina told me: “We are linked/bound/tied⁶⁴ in a chain, whether some [people] want to or not. We are linked/bound/tied with nature and with plants and with everything that surrounds us in a way or another⁶⁵”. This is why for my collaborators in Cluj, the environment and its state are considered to play a part in our human health as I have said in the beginning of this chapter.

Indeed, numerous examples above hint that, for my collaborators, beings, things and processes are considered to be physically or “biochemically” interdependent. We need other beings, things and processes to sustain ourselves and what affects them also affects us. For instance, one can apply the “traffic light technique” to make sure they are getting all the nutrients they need to sustain themselves, but if harmful chemicals seeped into the food they eat, then one will still become sick. In this sense, “plant ethics” *are* “human ethics” and “human ethics” *are* “plant ethics” too. How we treat the beings, things and processes around us are ultimately a question of how we treat ourselves. As such, when we think about what and how to do, we have to think of everyone and everything our actions may affect – or as Hetherington would put it, “if human welfare is also dependent on plant welfare, it is incumbent on us to think with models that do not pit one against the other” (2020a, p.12).

However, as I have explained in Section 3, health for my collaborators is not merely a physical affair and it comes at no surprise that the role the environment plays in our human health and, by extension, environmental toxicity is not merely a physical affair either. For my collaborators in Cluj, the connections and interdependencies between the beings, things and processes which compose the environment go beyond the physical or the biochemical. In fact, beings, things and processes are connected by something they called “vitality” or a “form of energy” – something which is more readily associated with the metaphysical than the physical.

For example, Adina told me humans source this form of energy from the earth. Thus, we should eat food given by this earth, but also engage in practices such as walking barefoot to come

⁶⁴ The verb which is used in Romanian here, *a lega*, is used to mean “to link”, “to bound” or “to tie”.

⁶⁵ In fact, this sentence (“*Suntem legați de natură și de plante și de tot ceea ce ne înconjoară într-un fel sau altul*”) literally translates to “We are linked/bound of nature, and of plants and of everything that surrounds us in a way or another.” which I find holds a layer of significance which cannot be translated in English.

into contact with the earth's vitality. "It is very healthy, and practically they say that you *ground*⁶⁶ yourself," she told me.

While the processes involved in how we can access the earth's vitality through food are rather clear and mostly based in physicality, those involved in how we can access it through "grounding" practices are not. Yet, her experience and those of others have taught her that it is not because she does not see or understand these immaterial processes that they are not there.

Before I move on and expand this notion of vitality, I would like to note that "vitality" may not be the right word for this form of energy at all. In fact, my collaborators (and I) struggle to describe this form of energy; and while some eventually settled for "vitality", they also admitted it was not exactly the right word as they also used "vitality" as a term to refer to something which was to be understood as "live-ness" or something that distinguished beings from things. However, for the sake of clarity, I will use "vitality" to denote this energy which connects beings, things and processes; and "vivacity" to denote that which separate those who live from those who do not⁶⁷.

4.3 Vitality

Vitality, as a concept, may be reminiscent of the classical, 18th-century theory of vitalism – the idea that "life is generated and sustained through some form of non-mechanical force or power specific to and located in living bodies" (Packham, 2012, p.1) – or of the theories that have stemmed from it later in the history of academia. It can also be reminiscent of the increasingly recent work on vitalism.

Indeed, social sciences have undergone a "revitalization" in recent years as new approaches to the concept of "vitality" are becoming more and more discussed by scholars as they seek to "bring alive" natural and social entities (Fraser et al., 2006, p.1). According to Mariam Fraser et al., these new approaches are marked by significant differences, but also by certain similarities, notably "a view that entities are constituted in relations" (2006, p.3). In this context, "vital processes", as the authors call them, are "characterized by a radical relationality: the (social and

⁶⁶ I found it interesting that the expression Adina used in Romanian here is "*te impământezi*" which is composed of the prefix "*im*", meaning "in", and the word "*pământ*", meaning earth. I could literally be understood as putting oneself *in* the earth.

⁶⁷ It seems to me – and this is just a theory – that this missing piece of our vocabulary related to vitality may be due to the fact that up until our chemically altered era, there may not have been a need to name this energy, similar to how if we had societies without slavery, there might have been no need for the word "freedom".

natural) world is understood in terms of constantly shifting relations between open-ended objects” and life is redefined not as “confined to living organisms, but as movement, a radical becoming” (Fraser et al., 2006, p.3). This presents “a challenge to all kinds of reductionism” (Fraser et al., 2006, p.6). Certain social scientists have thus come to loosely privilege “an ontology of *becoming* over being”, something which is consistent with other scholarly works which do not touch upon vitality, for instance Judith Butler’s (1993) work on performativity (Fraser et al., 2006, p.4).

I suggest that among the entirety of the work on vitalism, perhaps, my collaborators’ conceptualization of vitality comes closest to Moises Bertoni’s (1857-1929) whose vitalist ecology was unusual compared to other vitalist theories of his time. As Gregg Hetherington explains, “most vitalists of Bertoni’s generation thought about life, and life force, as residing in single organisms” (2020b, p.178) and considered “vital force” as “a metaphysical premise that served to explain the peculiar relationship between organic matter and time, particularly its apparent tendency to grow and dissipate, to reiterate in a linear fashion way without ever repeating” (2020a, p.5). Yet, Bertoni’s vitalism “was less a theory of individual organisms than an ecological theory that saw organisms as part of heterogeneous systems” (Hetherington, 2020b p.178), where “ecology” accounted for “relations that could be reduced to mechanistic explanations” but also those that could not (Hetherington, 2020b, p.179). In other words, it was about relational properties, much like recent work in environmental anthropology.

Moreover, although he “had no trouble with killing things” as a “experimenter and plant breeder, committed to the modernization of export agriculture”, Bertoni notably argued one should avoid agricultural techniques which tended to kill indiscriminately as much as possible (such as the use of fire for clearing fields) “because the long-term effects of such indiscriminate killing outweighed any of fire’s short term benefits.” (Hetherington, 2020a, p.12).

This vitalist ecology largely echoes the ideas of my collaborators which I started laying out above and which I will continue to expand on below. However, for Bertoni, “[v]itality always came from assemblages of living beings” (Hetherington, 2020b, p.179) which is where the similarities between his conception of vitality and the one of my collaborators end. As I have started to explain earlier, the concept of vitality my collaborators propose suggests that entities are constituted in and by relations, or the lack thereof, as I will explain below. Yet, vitality in their understanding is not something that distinguishes “beings” from “things” or the “animate” from the “inanimate” but rather something that loops them in together. This means that for something

to be vital, it does not need to be alive. The earth or the soil, water, and other things such as hay were mentioned by my collaborators as possessing this form of energy.

However, this does not mean *all* beings and things are vital. Indeed, something important to mention about vitality is that, like health, it is “given”. It is understood as a “natural” form of energy. It cannot be synthesized, and it cannot be forced, but it *can* be altered, directed or disrupted. Vital flows are complex, intricate and incredibly powerful, but they are also fragile, or rather incredibly prone to alteration. As Tsing et al. write “the fate of one species can change whole ecosystems” (2017, p.M5). Beings, things, and processes can all easily influence and alter vital flows often by intervening in the connections within and between entities – connections which are both generated by and generative of vital flows, effectively altering them in ways we may not always understand. This is regardless of whether these beings, things and processes contain any vitality themselves.

Chemicals, for instance, are things, but they are not considered to contain any vitality because they are synthetic. Yet, they *can* alter vital flows by intervening in the connections within and between entities. For example, certain synthetic pesticides sever the connections between certain insects and plants, effectively inhibiting certain vital flows from flowing from and to the plants through the contact with these insects. Another example could be wax or other preservatives. By inhibiting the decomposition of produce, wax also inhibits certain life forms which are born from such decomposition processes from proliferating and effectively limits the “directions” vital flows can take. This is to say that chemicals and their processes still take part in vital flows, even if they are not vital.

Thus, beyond being a form of energy, vitality can also be understood as a form of connection. It connects or links beings and things through processes, which are what enable vitality to flow within or between entities. Here, we can think of processes such as weather cycles, reproduction and feeding, but also death and other processes which we may not know or understand. This idea of vitality – or rather vital flows – disrupts common definitions of life and death. Indeed, in the past, vitality has often been relegated to the domain of life, but here it is presented as something that overarches life, death and everything else between and around them, connecting them together in the same flows. Therefore, vitality may sometimes be about what Donna Haraway (2016) calls “sympoiesis” – making with, becoming with, or symbiotic makings per Tsing et al.’s (2017) explanation – but *also* about (symbiotic) unmakings.

Furthermore, *sensing* is *also* a process (Ingold, 2022 [2000], p.306⁶⁸) through which vitality flows. Indeed, earlier, I explained that my collaborators used certain markers to determine whether produce was “natural” (or “real”). What I did not mention right away is that “natural” is inextricably linked with “vital”. Someone or something cannot be vital if it is not natural, and someone or something cannot be natural if it is not vital either. Thus, markers of naturalness are also markers of vitality. In turn, these markers largely involve the senses in order to be perceived, as I have demonstrated with certain examples above.

Additionally, while the paragraphs above discuss examples which especially involve physical senses, vitality can also be experienced or sensed physically, socially, mentally or spiritually. For example, (vital/natural) hay is said to induce a state of physical, mental and emotional calmness in Romania – a state which cannot be fully experienced without the engagement of mental or emotional senses⁶⁹. Adina in particular expanded on this example describing it as one of many “grounding practices”:

“[My g]randmother, for example, had [mattresses] from the first grass that was cut. [...] It was dried and, in the old days, they made mattresses [from it]. It was called *strujac*⁷⁰. Mattresses were made from that dried hay and... *No*, you [unfortunately] don’t stay here [long enough] to feel how the grass is and how it smells like hay when it starts to dry. [...] [Hay] is very beneficial, even for the respiratory system. Hay is good. [They] also made, also like this, mattresses for the bed out of corn cobs husks, but hay [was privileged] precisely because it creates a feeling of well-being, of calm, of comfort and induces sleep.”

Adina also spoke from her own experience sleeping on hay about these feelings. Additionally, I have heard several times throughout my life that sleeping on *strujac* feels “beautiful”: healthy, restorative and extremely comfortable as it takes pain and stress away. These feelings can be bodily or physical, but they also have important mental and emotional components. Many examples I have used throughout the thesis demonstrate the same.

⁶⁸ For greater clarity, here, I refer to the following quote where Ingold explains the views of philosophers and psychologists on the matter: “This is why visual and aural perception are usually described, in the writings of philosophers and psychologists, as processes of *seeing* and *hearing*.” (Ingold, 2022 [2000], p.306).

⁶⁹ Hay is also a good example to illustrate how vitality overarches life and death, seeing as this “dead” plant material is said to “re-energize” those who sleep in it.

⁷⁰ *Strujac* is the name for the traditional Romanian mattress. It is made, like Adina explained, from corn husks or hay and other plants, such as yarrow, plantain or clover are also added to the mix. The dried plant material is then stuffed into a sheet made out of hemp or cotton and changed yearly.

In short, vitality overarches physical, but also social, mental and spiritual domains. Again, vitality finds itself to be described very much like health as it is conceptualized by my collaborators, meaning something that is “given” and that does not limit itself to the physical world. On the field, I sometimes even had trouble distinguishing vitality from health. For most of my collaborators, vitality was an essential element of human health, just like healthy relationships or varied diets, but for one of them, vitality *was* health.

Roxana immigrated to Canada as a child and studied naturopathy in Europe before returning to Romania and opening her own naturopathy clinic. I have met her only once on the field for an interview in a charming tea house in downtown Cluj-Napoca. She defined health as a triangle composed of physical, emotional and spiritual health which must all be addressed in order for someone to be healthy and explained to me that, in naturopathy, vitality and health are more or less the same thing as vitality is an indicator of overall health.

She further explained the therapist’s objective in naturopathy is to re-equilibrate a person (or the terrain, as it is also called) through multiple natural means⁷¹ in order to restore their vitality. This is done by eliminating toxins which may impede organ functions or vital flows with remedies which are compatible with one’s “temperament”⁷² as not all remedies are appropriate for everyone. In fact, some remedies might harm one’s vitality further⁷³. These toxins can be physical, mental, relational, or more broadly, environmental; and if they are left to accumulate, they can manifest as diseases or illnesses⁷⁴. She identified cancer as being the “final stage” of toxic accumulation.

Roxana’s explanation of vitality (and toxicity) was singular as she articulated it with the help of an established medical model my other collaborators were not experts in, but it *did* echo (although not entirely) other things my collaborators had said as I will show below. As I spent

⁷¹ Roxana named nutrition, exercise, phytotherapy, hydrotherapy, manual techniques (massage, acupuncture), energetic techniques (Reiki), and psychotherapy as some examples of those natural means. When it comes to psychotherapy, the naturopath will refer their patient to a psychologist.

⁷² Temperaments are dependent on factors such as age, daily habits and personality and they may change through time. They directly affect vitality.

⁷³ For example, Roxana explained to me that she could not prescribe artichoke to someone who had liver *and* gallbladder problems as it tends to solicit the gallbladder exceedingly. Instead, she would prescribe dandelion root, which has similar effects but does not tax the gallbladder as much. Similarly, she could not prescribe certain “strong” plants to a person who is skinny and tired because they would require a lot of vitality on this person’s part in order to work – something they are already lacking – and make them more tired. Instead, gentler plants are to be privileged in these conditions. She mentioned, nowadays, many people have poor vitality, and it is often necessary to combine multiple plants, minerals and techniques in order to offset the effects which are not wanted.

⁷⁴ This is to say that, in naturopathy, there aren’t really “diseases” or “illnesses” to treat. Rather, there are toxins to eliminate as they are considered the root cause of these diseases or illnesses.

more time on the field, I found that the underlying issue with chemicals and excessively controlled environments was that they disrupted or corrupted vital flows in a way that negatively impacted our health and the one of those and that which surrounds us.

When my collaborators point out the difference between homegrown produce and store-bought or chemically treated produce and the effects of each on their health through the use of their senses, it is not merely to point out differences. It is to point out the lack of markers of vitality in store-bought or chemically treated produce and to communicate a growing worry: Is there any vitality in store-bought or chemically treated produce at all? Are we eating “empty” food full of poison? More importantly: If the beings and things that can supply us with the vitality we need to remain healthy are no more, then... what will?

Chemicals and excessively controlled environments disrupted vitality either by “de-vitalizing” beings and things as they were forced to grow or by severing too many connections for the sake of one. Often, these things went hand in hand. The following exchange I had with Nadia on her terrace is useful to illustrate this:

“Probably that our grandparents also had high blood pressure, they were dying of cancer. [...] But the incidence was not as high as it is nowadays. Eh, one of the reasons why they didn't get sick so often and with such serious diseases: alimentation. It is one thing to drink processed milk and another to drink fresh milk. I'm giving you just one example. It is one thing to use natural products from home and another to use processed products from animals raised with – raised *forcibly*. You raise a chicken in the garden from zero to six months so that it is good for cutting. A chicken in a chicken farm, in three weeks you made it good for cutting and you *commercialize* it. That [chicken], without help, that [chicken] has no way to grow in three weeks – to have the chicken be made up to 1 kg. And *all* of these, they accumulate upon our health.”

“How?” I asked.

“The chemicals that we eat from the chicken. Because that chicken was helped with chemicals to grow. The chemicals that we eat from vegetables and fruits *commercialized* in the supermarket. Eat a bell pepper from the supermarket and eat a bell pepper from the garden or from the farm, and you will see the difference. Take an apple from the tree and take an apple from the supermarket. The apple from the supermarket will shine because it has *wax* on it so that it lasts for three weeks, a month until they bring the apple from Tunisia, from Turkey, from Greece, from

wherever they bring it from. [...] That [apple] is raised *forcibly*. You will never find a worm in an apple from the supermarket. In an apple from the garden, in a plum from the garden, in a peach from the garden, you will find a worm. *That* is ‘bio’. Where the worm exists. Because in processed food, in a [processed] fruit, in a processed vegetable stuffed with growth hormones, with chemicals, with... Well, the worm does not stay there. The *bee* does not come [lit. walk] there.”

“Because it is...?”

“[Because t]hey are full of chemicals.”

Other anthropologists have found similar discourses on their respective fields, especially in the study of food systems. For example, during her fieldwork in Bangladesh, Camelia Dewan’s interlocutors described how “food today - grown with synthetic chemicals - is *bhejal* (impure, adulterated)” and lacks “both *shakti* (strength, power) and *pushti* (nutrition)”, making people “weak and ill, while the use of agrochemicals degrades the soil for future cultivation” (Dewan, 2019, p.99). She writes:

“Shakti means power and, in Hinduism, shakti is the primordial cosmic energy that gives birth to the universe [...]. Farmers [in Bangladesh] explained that synthetic fertilizers lack shakti and thereby “suck the earth dry”, making it inhospitable to earthworms essential for shakti.”

(Dewan, 2019, p.99)

Dewan draws the link between her interlocutor’s discourse and the work of Anna Tsing (2015) and Tim Ingold (2008), explaining how both these authors use fungi to illustrate how different entities are entangled and influenced by each other in open-ended assemblages (Dewan, 2019, p.99). She argues alongside these authors as her ethnographic fieldwork also demonstrates this type of entanglement, which is at the root of her interlocutors’ discourse (Dewan, 2019).

The work of Tsing and Ingold are both closely related to the body of scholarship characterized by a radical relationality which I wrote about in the beginning of this subsection and the same links Dewan has drawn between her work and theirs can be drawn between my thesis and theirs. Ingold, for instance, has continuously insisted, as my collaborators also do, that:

“If human beings on the one hand, and plants and animals on the other, can be regarded alternately as components of each others’ environments, then we can no longer think of humans as inhabiting a social world of their own, over and above the world of nature in which the lives of all other living things are contained. Rather,

both humans and the animals and plants on which they depend for a livelihood must be regarded as fellow participants in the same world, a world that is at once social and natural. And the forms that all these creatures take are neither given in advance nor imposed from above, but emerge within the context of their mutual involvement in a single, continuous field of relationships.”

(Ingold, 2022 [2000], p.106-107)

However, my ethnographic fieldwork somewhat moves away from Dewan’s when it comes to the point of “purity” which I will discuss in the following paragraphs. I have explained above how chemicals can sever connections within and between entities, but Nadia’s example above serves to demonstrate they can also *force* them. Connections can be made, but as vitality cannot be forced nor synthesized, this process disrupts or cuts it. In some ways, these connections are thus “sterile”. Sometimes, this goes to the point other beings and things will avoid the entity whose vitality has been disrupted (the apple in the example) altogether, further limiting, severing or disrupting vital flows.

Combined with further disruptive practices, chemicals also become more potent in limiting, severing or disrupting vital flows. Greenhouses, for instance, are isolating environments in which plants are cut off from most vitalities, including those of the earth and the rain. Fed mostly by chemicals and permeated by little to no vitality, produce in greenhouses become tasteless – a complex set of molecules with little to no vitality to pass on, starving or choking further vital flows especially as they pass on chemical harm.

The interaction between chemicals, certain harmful practices and vitality is important to address because it offers interesting theoretical insights into the concept of toxicity. On the field, I noticed that when it came to food, ultimately, what my collaborators were really concerned about was the excessively *isolating* conditions in which produce (from the supermarket) could be grown – cut from the sky, cut from the earth, cut from other vitalities, rushed through and cut from certain processes as they are forced to grow while they are stuffed with chemicals. These conditions were problematic not by the fact they were considered impure, but the opposite. As my collaborators explained to me, it is the standalone molecules in allopathic drugs that attack our bodies, and it is the bell pepper grown in isolation in a greenhouse – the “purest” form of the bell pepper – that is the worst kind of bell pepper. In part, chemicals, excessively controlled environments, and other elements my collaborators deemed harmful were harmful precisely because they were *too* clean – stripped even of vitality as they are isolated or forced to grow by “unnatural” means.

As I explained in Section 2, anthropological work has already pointed out the complicit relation between toxicity and purity reminding us the practices of purification which have been developed against toxicity have justified violence and strengthened the segregation of various beings, things, concepts and more (Shotwell, 2016; Langwick, 2018). Paying attention to how my collaborators in Cluj conceptualize vitality and what is toxic to it not only strengthens these arguments but also brings them a step further.

On the field, purity presented itself as a toxic form of isolation which both fed and fed off vital disruption in a process where isolation and disruption entwined in a vicious cycle, as Nadia's example demonstrates. The more an entity was isolated, the more its vitality became disrupted; and the more its vitality was disrupted, the more isolated it became, eventually reaching the conditions in which no vitality could flow through it at all. In other words, purity was conceptualized as a form of toxicity itself, not simply its counterpart.

Tsing et al. have made a similar argument in their book, *Arts on Living on a Damaged Planet*, where they explain how “[i]ndustrial campaigns exterminate impurities, undermining the coordinations that make life possible” (2017, p.M4) and give multiple examples which demonstrate how the human denial of certain entanglements, notably in agriculture⁷⁵ has turned against us, unleashing processes which have come to harm us.

The conceptualization of vitality and toxicity my collaborators put forward also makes further sense when considering how they conceptualize health. In the previous section, I explained that my collaborators' understanding, health also has a social dimension: humans when isolated become sick. Something similar applies to the rest of the world: beings and things when isolated, when cut from the processes which enable them to connect with other beings, things and vital flows, become sick or toxic. Again, the issue of environmental toxicity or “environmental sickness” for my collaborators in Cluj goes beyond the material and touches upon relational processes which may find root in the material world, but not only.

That being said, there was one instance on the field in which purity arose as a positive thing, but it did contain its lot of nuances. I am referring to one of my first conversations on the field with Ileana, as she explained the need to brew herbal tea in the purest water possible one can

⁷⁵ Here, we can think of mono-crop plantations and the issues which arise from denying plants “the intimacies of companion species” (Tsing et al., 2017, p.M4).

obtain in their conditions, preferably water *neîncepută*⁷⁶ from a spring. However, it is my understanding she used “purity” to denote something “without harmful contaminants” rather than isolation:

“Many folk remedies are based on the use of water. Spring water *neîncepută*. You go to the spring in the morning, very early in the morning, when the water is not disturbed by plants and animals, then you can say that you are using water *neîncepută*. This is very important: spring water *neîncepută*. Because the spring is not polluted, not... Very important.”

“And that is used for...”

“Yes,” she replied. “To make all kinds of things - for wraps, for teas, for... even for plasters.

“So the water also enters the [category of things we must make sure are not polluted]...”

“Yes. Yes.”

“And this water here [in the apartment], well, this water is not from a spring...”

“No, it is not from a spring. It is not from a spring, it is from a lake of accumulation [reservoir], and it is treated. Treated with chlorine, with all kinds of, I don’t know, drugs.”

“Do you think it has influence on...”

“It has. It has, and unfortunately now these spring waters are also polluted as people used to use the water from the well. It is polluted with nitrites which are very harmful to the body.”

“So, when you make a tea, you have to eliminate, so to say, whatever is in the water.”

“Yes. A water as pure as possible, a water as good as possible.”

Ileana prized water *neîncepută* in part because as it is “untouched” by others, it is less likely to contain harmful substances which may have been deposited in it by others, not because it is somehow “truly pure”. In fact, she recognized spring water is never “truly pure”. Once, I came across a spring with Ileana’s husband and she stopped him from using the water we had gathered from it to wash the car’s windshield because the high content of minerals would just dry on it, making visibility worse. She mentioned to me the water’s benefits came notably from its

⁷⁶ Originally, *apei neîncepute*. I used the Romanian word here as it does not exist in English. *Neînceput* means something that has not begun or that has not started. Here, it refers to water collected from natural springs or wells in the early morning before anyone else has had time to use it or collect it. In Romanian folklore, miraculous powers are attributed to this type of water.

interaction with rocks which mineralize it and decontaminate it from harmful substances. That is why it was deemed to be so good.

This is all to say that, throughout my fieldwork, my collaborators problematized the separation and isolation of beings and things, even when it came to themselves. They continuously insisted on the fact that “everything is linked” and that believing the contrary was a mistake. This brings me to argue, like other scholars, “against purity” and “to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous” (Shotwell, 2016, p.15). Yet, it also brings me to argue against scholars like Chen.

Indeed, the idea of vitality I have laid out above oddly echoes Chen’s argument to release toxicity from its negative connotation in order to leave open the possibility for this concept to “intervene into the binary between the segregated fields of “life” and “death,” vitality and morbidity” (Chen, 2012, p.218). For Chen, “[t]oxicity straddles boundaries of “life” and “nonlife,” as well as the literal bounds of bodies [...] in ways that introduce a certain complexity to the presumption of integrity of either lively or deathly subjects” (Chen, 2012, p.218). Meanwhile, in my collaborators’ conceptions, this “role” would rather be attributed to vitality rather than toxicity.

Despite this echo which seems to be a mere difference in terminology at first glance, I find myself arguing against the idea to consider toxicity as a “neutral” concept which can straddle life and death, beings and things and unsettle the boundaries of bodies. Toxicity *does* straddle life and death, beings, and things, and unsettles the boundaries of bodies, but it *also* strengthens the dichotomies between these concepts and isolates entities. On the other hand, I find vitality as conceptualized by my collaborators is difficult to use to strengthen separatist claims (although it can be used for such purposes as well).

Based on ethnographic data, releasing toxicity from its negative connotations as Chen suggests would also seem impossible as my collaborators draw a clear, immovable correlation between toxicity and harm. Chemicals and excessively controlled environments are considered toxic because they are inherently harmful, *even if* they are beneficial in other ways. This is not to say that chemicals or controlled environments are inherently bad, nor inherently disruptive to vitality. “Harmful” is not all chemicals and excessively controlled environments are and my collaborators recognized this.

For instance, Roxana criticized allopathic drugs extensively, explaining how “drugs are, in naturopathy, toxins”. Upon asking her how these substances were harmful toxins, she told me she

could not explain to me the exact biochemical processes behind their harmful action, but she could explain this:

“You practically come with a very powerful synthetic dose, you introduce it in the body, and it is somehow shocked because it is not something natural. It does not know what to do with it. It processes it how it can and what remains of it – because it doesn’t use it entirely – it needs to transform it into a less toxic substance for the organism [...]. You supra-solicit a lot [of things], especially the liver [through this process]. Filtering these toxins, you automatically supra-solicit certain organs and these substances enter those organs and harm [them] automatically. [...] [T]hey are very powerful, very concentrated doses. They are not *firești*⁷⁷. [The body] doesn’t know what to do with them. [...] It’s not compatible with human nature because they are invented molecules with another structure than the molecules which are— So, it imitates that which is in nature, but they usually have a different structure [which] is not found in a natural mode. It is... How do I say this? It is as if I fed you disinfectant. It isn’t a natural product. It is made in a laboratory. It is poison.”

She explained to me it was this way because humans are *part* of nature. Yet, she also recognized the usage and importance of drugs (with a few nuances): “Drugs, yes. I agree [with their usage] when it is a medical emergency. [...] I totally agree [...], save the man. But when it is about treating a chronic illness, like diabetes or hypertension, I opt for naturopathy. Clearly.”

Similarly, Ioana recognized there were benefits to plant medicine and that there were things which modern medicine could not explain, such as the power of the mind to heal the body. However, she also said that she did not see how you could heal from cancer with plants. She specifically warned against the danger of putting too much faith into plants – that is losing months of your life – instead of relying on allopathic medicine. When I asked her about what came to mind when I said “the power of plants”, she also said:

“Energy. Energy and... that’s basically it. We are a form of energy and practically... The drug is a chemical produced in a laboratory. We are a form of energy. The plant is a form of energy. Somehow, I believe it is much closer to us to treat ourselves with plants, but, as you have also said, they also have a limit and then chemical products intervene.”

⁷⁷ *Firești* is an adjective which comes from the noun *fire*, meaning the mental and moral structure of an entity. *Fire* is sometimes used as a synonym of “character” or “temperament”. Etymologically, both *fire* and *firești* come from the verb, *a fi*, to be. When something is not “*firești*” it means it is not “in character”, “compatible with temperament”, or “compatible with someone’s essence” – essentially it is not something natural.

Thus, sometimes, chemicals (and extremely controlled environments) are necessary to save our lives, to save our crops – to *maintain* certain vital flows which find themselves threatened by others. Thus, vitality and toxicity are not necessarily opposed – neither are vitality and chemicals – even if it may sometimes seem like I seek to create a dichotomy between them. On the contrary, sometimes, certain vital flows are toxic to others, and other times chemicals nurture vital flows which are on the verge to end. The same way death is a vital process, so is the alteration of vital flows necessary for them to keep flowing.

By this, I mean to say that the issue with chemicals and excessively controlled growing conditions and other toxic care practices is not always *in* those chemicals and excessively controlled growing conditions and other toxic care practices themselves. Instead, it can be, again, in our usage of them. It can be the *how* rather than the *what* that is problematic. Yes, certain chemicals kill in a bad way, but sometimes *we* use them in a bad way.

Despite this, it remains that toxicity, as supported by ethnographic data, cannot be released from its harmful effects even if sometimes the benefits outweigh the costs. I am worried that arguments like Chen's which encourage us to consider toxicity in a symbiotic light may diminish the seriousness of toxic harm. I am sympathetic to Chen's effort to capture some of toxicity's positive effects and affects, and the reluctance to deny its productivity. Afterall, toxic substances such as allopathic medicine do save lives. Yet, I feel that if we open the door to releasing toxicity from its negative effects and affects, it will leave room for further justification of harmful practices and lead us to stop looking for and using alternatives and solutions. Instead of opening this door, I suggest we bring attention to the resilience of vital flows despite their fragility in the face of entities and processes which would seek to choke them and the (un)ethical choices we may make to maintain them.

Toxicity has been previously theorized as "that which attenuates and diminishes [vital] forces over time" (Langwick, 2018, p.432) and "a way to think about the conditions under which life becomes attenuated, diminished, depleted, exhausted, drained away" (Langwick, 2018, p.434). This argument can hold true based on my fieldwork, but it is also incomplete. Vitality is just as apt as toxicity – if not more – to attenuate, exhaust, or drain life, as it is to produce it. Afterall, most forms of life need to harm or to kill in order to survive. In this sense, vitality not only offers the possibility to engage with the theoretical analysis Chen seeks to make, but also avoids potential "political" risks associated with using toxicity instead.

In a similar vein, the concept of vitality I have come across on the field also brings me to note other limits of anthropological theory when compared to “ethnographic theory”⁷⁸. While some scholars have departed from bodies and chemical relations to challenge the notion of the individualized subject, my collaborators in Cluj suggest that bodies and chemical relations may not be entirely appropriate to challenge these delimitations as they sometimes reify and create them through “purification” processes. Using the example of the concept of “alterlife” – “life already altered, which is also life open to alteration” (Murphy, 2017, p.497) – is useful to further explain what I mean.

Murphy writes “alterlife” “indexes collectivities of life recomposed by the molecular productions of capitalism” (Murphy, 2017, p.497) and acknowledges “a shared, entangling, and extensive condition of being with capitalism and its racist colonial manifestations” (Murphy, 2017, p.498). She also explains that “forms of alterlife are systematically and brutally harmed and even exterminated in chemical relations” (Murphy, 2017, p.497). I understand this is a figuration which refers to specific forms of life in specific contexts. Yet, the analysis of the phenomena I describe in this thesis cannot limit itself to “alterlife” even if it touches upon it because the concept of vitality the field reveals forces me to go beyond it.

First, vitality is not solely concerned with *life*. It also concerns other processes, such as weather cycles and death, or rather it blurs the line between them. Furthermore, vitality suggests these processes are always altered and open to alteration or, at least, they should be. In fact, they cannot *be* without alteration and entanglement, as vitality and the processes which enable it to flow are produced by alteration and entanglement. Second, vitality and its alteration are not only a question of chemical relations, neither are harm and extermination⁷⁹.

Thus, while concepts such as “alterlife” are useful figurations to circumscribe a subject or object of study, I find they also create blind spots which “ethnographic theory” judges unavoidable to properly address phenomena such as toxic exposure. I am worried that through their self-imposed limitations, concepts such as “alterlife” may leave anthropological theory unable to properly address key issues related to toxicity, such as instances in which toxic harm comes from

⁷⁸ By this expression, I mean the theories my collaborators shared with me on the field.

⁷⁹ For greater clarity, this is not to say Murphy does not acknowledge these things. She explicitly acknowledges in her work that life has always been altered as chemical relations precede man-made chemicals; and that harm and extermination go beyond chemical relations. This is simply to point out that “alterlife” is an inadequate concept for the analysis at hand because ethnographic data goes beyond what it is concerned with.

the *lack* of alteration, especially by other than chemical relations and capitalism. I am also concerned they might leave the connections which present themselves as a solution to a toxic world out of the analytical scope of social sciences, further settling academia into a “dark” era.

4.4 Recapitulation

This chapter served to answer some of the questions I had begun addressing in the previous section of this thesis: What are the conceptions of care and health associated with daily acts of care? Why is it impossible to address healthcare without addressing environmental toxicity (in the broad sense of the term)? It also served to answer further questions I had brought forward in my introduction, such as: What are the conceptions of vitality and toxicity associated with daily acts of care?

Throughout this chapter, I explained how my collaborators put forward a notion of vitality which can be defined as a form of radical relationality intrinsic to human and other-than human health; as well as a notion of toxicity which is inextricably linked with harm, purity and isolation. I discussed how both these notions go beyond the material world and pertain not only to humans, but also to other beings, things and processes which may sometimes touch upon the metaphysical.

I began this chapter with a few ethnographic fragments which served to demonstrate that, for my collaborators in Cluj, food is medicine, but also to introduce the contradiction which fuels this thesis: Food is what keeps you healthy, but also what makes you ill. I have also explained how this contradiction stems from the toxic synthetic substances which may permeate food – chemicals – and how the latter brings up an ethical discussion.

In the first subsection, I have expanded on this ethical discussion and argued the discourse of my collaborators on chemicals is useful to point out “How ought one to live?” is not so different from “How ought one to kill?”; and how care practices may sometimes also be harmful, violent or toxic. I have highlighted the intimate link between ethics and experience through the specificity of my collaborators’ sensorial practices and their attunement to specific sensations. That is those who can tell us what is toxic and what is not as well as those who can tell us what is good and what is bad – *what* and *how* to do. The sensory experiences that I have drawn upon especially brought to attention 1) how practices may embody certain “cultural” notions (ex. health and toxicity), 2) how sensory experience may constitute a tool of knowledge production and of ethical engagement and 3) how senses can be trained in particular ways and, as such, how they are also skills. I also

concluded the subsection by explaining how the ethics of my collaborators do not situate themselves vis-à-vis a specific species as beings, things and processes are all considered to be intertwined through vitality.

In the second subsection, I have especially attended to this concept of vitality, defining it as a relational form of energy which connects beings and things through processes. I have insisted on its ability to blur the lines between life and death; on its “plasticity”; and on its correlation with health as defined by my collaborators, positing vitality is why the environment comes to play such an important part in human health. I also departed from vitality to open the discussion on toxicity as a form of purity which disturbs vital flows and the health of the beings and things which compose the world we inhabit. However, I also insisted on an important nuance: vitality and toxicity are not necessarily opposed as certain toxic substances can also maintain vital flows, the same way certain vital flows can be toxic to others.

In the next chapter, I will continue the discussion on toxicity by focusing on its apparent inevitability through its association to capitalist ideals before returning to the discussion on ethics in the last section of this thesis.

5 Monsters

“Pai, este un rău – un rău pe care ni-l facem cu bună știință.”⁸⁰

In this thesis, I argue that the daily acts of care of my collaborators in Cluj, Romania embody historical, metaphysical, and capitalist narratives and dynamics which inform and are informed by notions of health and toxicity. Health and toxicity thus emerge as notions which cannot be understood separately from these narratives and dynamics.

In the last chapter, I explained my collaborators put forward a notion of vitality which can be defined as a form of radical relationality intrinsic to human and other-than human health; as well as a notion of toxicity which is inextricably linked with harm, purity and isolation. I discussed how both these notions go beyond the material world and pertain not only to humans, but also to other beings, things and processes which may sometimes touch upon the metaphysical. In turn, this also explains why the environment – whether material or immaterial – is considered to play a part in human health.

In this chapter, I continue the discussion on vitality and toxicity by quickly addressing their systemic and institutional relations as identified by my collaborators. Starting from important arguments they have made during my fieldwork, I posit that current forms of environmental toxicity not only feed capitalist ideals, but are also fed by them, creating a nearly inescapable vicious circle where toxicity is the norm rather than the exception. This discussion takes place through two subsections which discuss capitalist articulations of 1) time and 2) money and how they relate to environmental toxicity.

Per my collaborators’ understanding, fruits, vegetables, plants, but also animals, soils, rain and many others would ordinarily fall into the category of *vital* beings and things, except – and this is what their experience demonstrates – this is no longer a given, not anymore, not when their vital flows are compromised by chemicals and other toxic practices. Dutch bell peppers which feed on man-made substances in a greenhouse are not (so) vital, neither are store-bought oranges which

⁸⁰ Well, it is an evil – an evil which we do to ourselves knowingly.

remain fresh over five months or chickens which grow to maturity in three weeks. Dutch bell peppers, store-brought oranges and fast-growing chickens are something else. They are unnatural, nearly *supernatural*, lying in an in-between where they are not simply given by nature, but also man-made.

They are monsters – “the wonders of symbiosis and the threats of ecological disruption” (Tsing et al., 2017, p.M2) – and we are monsters too.

“Monsters” as conceptualized by Tsing et al. (2017) have a double meaning. “On one hand, they help us pay attention to ancient chimeric entanglements” – “crucial and ancient forms of monstrosity that modernity tried to extinguish: the multispecies entanglements that make life across the earth” (Tsing et al., 2017, p.M2). “[O]n the other, they point us toward the monstrosities of modern Man” – “new and terrifying threats [unleashed by modern human activities]: from invasive predators such as jellyfish to virulent new pathogens to out-of-control chemical processes” (Tsing et al., 2017, p. M2). As the authors explain, “[w]hile ghosts [...] help us read life’s enmeshment in landscapes, monsters point us toward life’s symbiotic entanglement across bodies” (Tsing et al., 2017, p. M2).

Whereas the past chapter of this thesis mostly attended to the “first” meaning, this chapter mostly intends to delve into the “second” one (although they cannot really be separated) and situates itself in this narrative by quickly tackling certain elements which are as monstrous as Tsing et al.’s monsters themselves: time and money, or rather their capitalist articulations.

Capitalism, as the name suggests, is essentially characterized by the accumulation of capital (Marx, 1867) in the name of profit – which is often synonymous with money in the current world. In order to do so, capitalism controls, exploits or wields various systems, institutions, ideologies, concept, beings and things for its direct benefit, including money and time. Indeed, capitalism has the particularity of being able to capitalize on *anything*. In capitalist systems, “[p]eople, labor, sentiments, plants, animals and life-ways are converted into resources for various projects of production” (Bear, Ho, Tsing and Yanagisako, 2015, p.6). Crises are no exception to this. In fact, Jason Moore and Raj Patel claim that capitalism only exists through “frontiers” – where “crises encourage new strategies for profit” (2017, p.18).

Historically, capitalism is said to have been preceded by “primitive accumulation”, that is “the [violent] historical processes through which the separation of ‘the producer from his means

of production’ was consciously and explicitly forced” (Giroux, 2020 [2018], p.11, free translation) – a form of accumulation by dispossession. People were notably dispossessed of their (farming) lands and forced into salaried work, slowly turning money into the main “means of livelihood”. In the modern era, “workers [also] f[i]nd themselves in the position to carry their main means of production in their own bodies (their cognitive capacities, their memory, their know-how, their good management of affects, their interpersonal skills, their address book)” (Citton, 2018, p.73, free translation), although they still do not benefit from the immediate profits which result from their usage⁸¹.

Thus, as Moore and Patel explain, “capitalism has thrived not because it is violent and destructive (it is) but because it is productive in a particular way. Capitalism thrives not by destroying natures but by putting natures to work – as cheaply as possible” (Patel et Moore, 2017, p.19). This process of “putting natures to work as cheaply as possible” supposes a *quantification* of value. Indeed, as Brian Massumi explains, capitalism strives to quantify value even if it can only be qualified (2018, p.81). Life, death, vitality and toxicity, as I will discuss later, are no exceptions to this logic of quantification, meaning they *are* also quantified and capitalized upon.

Of course, time plays an important role in capitalist endeavors. Productivity, which is essential to the accumulation of capital, can be defined as “the production capacity of an input or a group of inputs within a given time period” (Da Silva and Santugini, 2009, p.1, free translation). In turn, “saving time is a simple and straightforward tool for reducing costs and gaining a competitive advantage” (Rosa, 2012 [2010], p.34, free translation). In other words, saving time is a simple and straightforward way to be more productive.

In economic sectors where the means of production are inside human bodies, “more, faster” has become a human imperative. In capitalist systems, the value of an employee depends largely on their productivity rate. Thus, it becomes necessary to be more productive to obtain and maintain a job in order to earn the salary which allows one to buy necessities for survival: food, water, shelter, etc. Being and remaining (or becoming increasingly) productive and competitive in capitalist economies is a human tactic for survival, as well as a means to secure a place in society and remaining a socially accepted individual. Indeed, lack of work often leads one to fall through the cracks of the societal fabric and to be ostracized as the example of homeless people can

⁸¹ Here, we can think of industries which capitalize on our attention, such as social media, as an example (Citton, 2013).

unfortunately demonstrate. In other words, capitalism has come to be “internalized” by humans, meaning humans have come to take on characteristics of capitalism, such as the accumulation of capital – by extension the efficiency of productivity – competition, and the quantification of value.

In *The Perception of the Environment*, Ingold also addresses the particular relationship humans have with time as a result of capitalism, proposing “the concepts of time and work have indeed acquired specific meanings through their implication in [...] key historical transitions as the rise of capitalism and the growth of industrial manufacture” (2022 [2000], p.406). He writes the concept of time has come to divide work and social life and explains that this division “does not naturally conform to experience but is rather enforced (Ingold, 2022 [2000], p.406). This creates a “mismatch between our shared experience of dwelling in the lived-in world and the demands placed on us by external structures of production and control that seem to leave only a residual space, divorced from culture and social life, where we can truly be ourselves” (Ingold, 2022 [2000], p.406). While Ingold proposes this mismatch is specifically Western, it can also be observed in other parts of the world, such as Romania as I will explain later.

Of course, the issue of time also goes beyond capitalism, becoming more sensitive and taking on bigger implications when considering the modern era as a whole. As Hartmut Rosa explains in his essay *Alienation and Acceleration*, the acceleration of time and its logics are “imperceptibly linked to the concept to the essence of modernity” (2012 [2010], p.9, free translation) and compromise the “good life”. Modern Man has come to be afflicted with a “temporal famine” in which “time [is] perceived as a consumable raw material”, a “consequence of the desire or of the need felt to *do more things in less time*” (Rosa, 2012 [2010], p.25, free translation). Following Tim Ingold, who established the distinction between “occupying” and “inhabiting” a space (Ingold cited in Citton, 2012, p.6-7), modernity thus brings humans to “occupy” their time rather than “inhabit” it. Therefore, “social acceleration in general and technical acceleration in particular are [indeed] a logical consequence of a competitive capitalist market system” (Rosa, 2012 [2010], p.34, free translation), but the acceleration of time in general is also due to other causes Rosa identified in his essay and which I will not expand on here.

Instead, this chapter will continue to tackle the capitalist articulations of time and money by beginning with another contradiction that arose from the field where my collaborators (as well as humans in general) still “indulged” in certain chemicals and practices despite their comprehensive knowledge on how these were toxic to health and to the environment.

Homegrown produce and their **derivatives** (fruits, vegetables, roots, extracts, syrups, meat, eggs, etc.) are accessible things in Romania, provided one can secure some land or some income. During the warm seasons, people who own land grow plants in their own backyards and for those who do not have backyards, there are always family members, friends or local markets where peasants sell their small-scale productions at cheaper prices than in stores. Growing or buying fresh, “organic” or “natural” – essentially nontoxic – produce from local producers is often the cheapest option when they are in season. Medicinal plants, as I have explained in the introduction, are just as easily accessible. Meat and animal produce which come from animals grown “naturally” – without any grown hormones and antibiotics – is much harder to find, but still found, notably through acquaintances. Some people I have met also rear animals themselves. For instance, two of Maria’s living sisters raise animals at home – chickens, ducks, other small animals but also larger ones – and Adina’s husband owns a pigsty.

Despite this context, many collaborators acknowledged the difficulty of avoiding toxicity as well as its omnipresence in their life, notably when it came to food. When I inquired about the reasons, many of them identified phenomena which can be linked to the simple fact of living in our current world. Essentially, they acknowledged toxicity as a *condition of modern life*, as it has already been theorized in social sciences (as explained in Section 2), and they particularly insisted on capitalist articulations of time and money as the driving forces behind this inevitable toxic exposure. The excerpt of a conversation I had with Lucian which I introduced in the last chapter, but which I did not quote or discuss in full, is useful to illustrate this:

“Now, with this technologization... *Ce să mai stai?*⁸² We are 8 billion people. Do you still have time to go collect the Colorado beetles? Well, no. Then, you go, *vvt*, you sprayed, the Colorado [beetles] died, the birds, or other *viețuitoare*⁸³ that would feed themselves with this no longer live, or they get sick too. Those *viețuitoare* also became filled with chemicals, and we eat tubers full of pesticides and insecticides. [...] [I]t is an evil – an evil which we do to ourselves knowingly.”

Following this, there was a short exchange which I cut from the previous chapter to facilitate the understanding of my previous argument:

⁸² There is no appropriate English translation to this expression. Literally, this expression would translate to “What to stay more?”, but a more understandable translation would be “Why stay?”. This expression is often used to refer to the futility of waiting or staying, but in this context, Lucian uses it to indicate the impossibility of waiting in the current planetary context.

⁸³ This word somewhat translates to a combination of “living things” and “vitalities”.

“In a sense, [it is as if] we cut ourselves from the environment,” I said, recalling a conversation with another collaborator. “No? Because the tomato which is full of chemicals, maybe it was not grown in a field in the sun, but in a...”

“Well, [it is grown] where a space which is desired to be able to realize a product rapidly – that is sellable and that will bring profit – is found. However, afterwards, it is of no interest what it is and how it is.” He added a few sentences later: “This rapid technologization has advantages and disadvantages. *No*, there are also a lot [of people] to feed on the globe, and then what does that guy say? We make them fast. And then, you give [spray] on those [plants].”

Here, capitalist articulations of time and money, especially when combined with the necessity to feed a large human population become reasons to justify toxic practices. Such excerpts echo other arguments which have arisen in anthropological work done on similar subjects, notably Dewan’s which I have also introduced in the last chapter:

“With the intensification of commercial agriculture and the commodification of food, food shifted from being embedded in a social context to an anonymous commodity to be sold in a depersonalized market by nameless sellers. [...] The concept of bhejal in the Bangladeshi context points to the ways in which things are allowed to become adulterated, whether through an overuse of fertilizer and a lack of shakti, the use of banned and toxic pesticides, or the adulteration of food—all in order to increase profit.”

(Dewan, 2019, p.100)

Nadia also explained something similar to her husband in the excerpts I shared in the previous chapter by drawing a clear correlation between produce that is forced to grow (fast) and commercialization, as well as between produce which is sprayed with chemicals to last longer and commercialization. Meaning, if humans engage in toxic growing practices, it is (in part) to answer current capitalist market logics. Here, I refer to these two passages specifically:

“A chicken in a chicken farm, in three weeks you made it good for cutting and you *commercialize* it. That [chicken], without help, that [chicken] has no way to grow in three weeks – to have the chicken be made up to 1 kg. And *all* of these, they accumulate upon our health.”

“The chemicals that we eat from vegetables and fruits *commercialized* in the supermarket. [...] Take an apple from the tree and take an apple from the supermarket. The apple from the supermarket will shine because it has *wax* on it so

that it lasts for three weeks, a month until they bring the apple from Tunisia, from Turkey, from Greece, from wherever they bring it from. [...] That [apple] is raised *forcibly*.”

Other collaborators have also addressed the links between commercialization and toxic exposure, notably by questioning the reasoning behind turning food into something toxic or devoid of vitality and expressing discontent, anger and confusion about it. For example, Adina spoke about this in relation to seeds that are genetically modified in laboratories, which she did not consider to be (truly) vital or natural:

“Anything you modify genetically is not as... So, this genetic modification, even at the [level of] the seeds of plants... This is why I am saying there is a difference between a plant which rose from the ground and another to which you... Like it is with vegetables or something else, with fruit trees or anything else you want, Man has intervened genetically. By changing [the plant] genetically, yes, maybe they made them bigger, more this, more that, but they don’t... It lost from what it was originally, at its base. Why wasn’t it... (*She raises her tone.*) Why couldn’t it stay the way it was? Because it was very well created by nature. It had everything it needed, but... I don’t know the reasons why – probably for bigger production, for them to be bigger, to be more beautiful, to be more... But they are not... They are not what they seem to be. It’s because, as I have already said: eat an apple taken or grown, I don’t know, through other methods, and eat an apple from your own orchard that you did not spray that... And you will see that the flavors differ.”

In the following pages, I address time and money in two different subsections where I discuss in further details how my collaborators find themselves forced to intoxicate themselves with the same harmful chemicals they seek to avoid and posit certain monstrous man-made forms of “intoxication” are often as toxic (harmful) as they are “seductive” and “addictive”.

5.1 Time: Slow Violence as a Condition of Modern Life

Throughout my fieldwork, my collaborators repetitively pointed towards the inevitability of toxic exposure in our modern world and recognized it as a condition of modern life, as I have explained above. For example, during one of my conversations with Nadia in which she deplored the use of chemicals to grow food (as shown by the excerpts in the last chapter), she also added: “Unfortunately, we don’t always have alternatives because we have to eat. Then, with chemicals,

without chemicals, with growth hormones, without growth hormones... It is the fight for survival.” Thus, while she acknowledged the downfalls of toxic food on human health, she also recognized that in the absence of alternatives (such as homegrown “natural” food), humans simply have no other choice than to eat whatever they can find, in this case, whatever they can find in the supermarket where produce is known to be toxic.

Nadia’s statement may seem strong, especially in a country like Romania where “non-toxic” food is easily accessible⁸⁴, but it holds. Humans have always depended on each other for sustenance. One cannot grow or make everything alone, especially not in a modern era where capitalism created an extremely hostile environment for self-sufficiency and non-capitalist forms of collaboration, enabling the capitalization of basic human needs and human forms of dependency. The land and resources that growing or making food takes are increasingly difficult to access due to privatization, increased costs, corporate control and environmental destruction. Much knowledge on small-scale food production has also been lost or deliberately erased. Furthermore, growing or making food especially requires *time* – often, much more than my collaborators (or modern Man) have on hand, especially for those who are not retired. The latter uphold busy lifestyles, mostly occupied by their salaried positions which provide them with the money they need in order to survive this modern era.

These modern difficulties of growing or making food have rendered most of the global population dependent on commercial food sources which belong to various corporations, some being more dependent than others. This is precisely what forces my collaborators to expose themselves to toxic foods, and later to toxic medicine as I will explain in the following subsections. As Lucian and Nadia explained (and as other collaborators have as well), “corporate” food is often permeated with toxins that farmers and producers rely on to answer capitalist logics, whether these logics were imposed on them or not: make more produce faster, prettier and last longer, but not necessarily better – for health, at least. As Rob Nixon notes when he quotes William Finnegan, “while we make the world safe for multinational corporations, it is by no means clear that they intend to return the favor” (Finnegan, 2003, p.54 in Nixon, 2011, p.36).

Bread, which is a staple of Romanian alimentation, is a good example to illustrate this. Some of my collaborators made their own bread (when they had time) to avoid the preservatives

⁸⁴ At least, in comparison with Canada where fresh food grown without chemicals is not only hard to find but also extremely expensive compared to other produce and products on shelves or in restaurants.

and other strange ingredients in store-bought bread. Yet, none could afford to go through the trouble of making their own flour. They bought it from the store, even though they knew most flours on store shelves are heavily processed and partially harmful to human health. Ioana, to give another, more specific example, started making her own peanut butter after she realized the peanut butter labelled as “organic” in stores was, in fact, not “organic” at all in her understanding once she read the list of ingredients. Yet, the peanuts she uses to make the butter at home are bought and probably not as “organic” as she would like either. Many collaborators recognized either explicitly or implicitly that the only way to avoid toxic food nowadays was either to restrain oneself from most foods or to stop eating altogether.

Indeed, as Adina pointed out in the last chapter, humans can only try to grow food “as ‘bio’ as possible”. Chemicals and pollutants spread through winds, seep into groundwater, fall back with the rain... They *flow* through the same processes which vitality does. Nothing is guaranteed to be entirely free of chemicals in this day and age – if that is even possible. Thus, the best one can do in our modern era is either to “pick one’s poison” or to “pick one’s dose” (when that is possible). Certain collaborators notably imposed restrictions on themselves to that effect. For example, Roxana does not buy anything from a marketplace because she does not trust the peasants selling there that they are telling the truth about their produce being unsprayed, being particularly worried about *what* they’re sprayed with as she does not know how tightly those small farms are supervised by the State. Instead, she prefers to buy them from people she knows or from the supermarket as she trusts large-scale production to respect European Union regulations on which kind of pesticides may be used on produce. On the contrary, Ileana and her husband do not buy any fruits, vegetables, herbs, spices or honey from the supermarket in the warmer seasons, they buy them from a local market because they trust peasants when they say the produce is (as) “natural” (as it can be). Maria and her husband only buy raw milk which they later pasteurize themselves. Ioana, who has a harder time procuring herself organic cow’s milk in the city of Cluj-Napoca, simply gave it up because store-bought milk constantly made her sick. Adina only buys Sibiu salami for her children – a specific kind and brand of salami which she notes is rather hard to find in her area – because any other commercialized salami upsets their stomachs and makes their skin break out more than this one.

In essence, the monopolization of material and temporal resources by capitalist structures often creates logics of dependency (or addiction, as I put it more poetically to insist on its negative

connotations) which create and sustain toxic exposures as conditions of modern life despite one's best efforts. As I have explained in Section 2, academic theory has already acknowledged toxicity as a condition of modern life, and the conclusions of scholars on the topic are reflected in the words and experiences of my collaborators. My collaborators' statements from above particularly reflect Michelle Murphy's conclusions on alterlife⁸⁵ and how it "includes being in the mess of consumption, subsistence, and side effect, being in the contradictions of existing in worlds that demand chemical exposures as the conditions for eating, drinking, breathing" (Murphy, 2017, p.498).

Furthermore, these logics of dependency may also be fed by logics of attraction or seduction which also create and sustain toxic exposure. For example, I sometimes noticed my collaborators would value *efficiency* at the expense of toxic exposure. Maria's husband, for instance, often preferred to buy produce from the supermarket near his home rather than drive up to his daughter's house where she grows her own because the supermarket was "right there" and had "everything he needed". It was simpler and faster to walk to the supermarket.

I do not believe the human tendency to value efficiency can solely be attributed to a form of "internalized capitalism" or to a modern "famine for time", but they surely play a role in such values. Moreover, I cannot deny the convenience of supermarkets is especially attractive for those who value efficiency, nor how supermarkets certainly take advantage of this to benefit their sales. Thus, even when there *are* alternatives, toxic exposure remains a danger, either because toxins are everywhere or because capitalist institutions may sometimes be so attractive and seductive, people do not bother with the alternatives altogether.

The discourse of my collaborators on food toxicity as a whole is rarely alone. It is often accompanied by discourses on other forms of toxicity – social, mental, emotional, spiritual, etc. – and which were linked to similar struggles with time that stem from modern and capitalist conditions. For example, Ioana spoke of stressful work environments, their downsides on the entire human being, and our human dependence on them in order to survive, leading us to dedicate most of our time to them. Similarly, Adina pointed out modernity's tendency to monopolize our time for work and, in turn, to compromise our ability to connect with other beings and things, ultimately

⁸⁵ For greater clarity, this thesis *does* engage with what Murphy calls "alterlife", and while it does not limit itself to it, Murphy's work remains particularly relevant for this thesis.

sapping our world's shared vitality. Maria also spoke of our world's tendency to isolate people for similar reasons and make them sick because of it.

These non-physical forms of toxicity also often found themselves directly intertwined with food toxicity, meaning food was sometimes deemed to be toxic *because* of these other forms of non-physical toxicity related to capitalist articulations of time and their potential to change human priorities. For example, Maria's husband was adamant the food in Canada was not *real* food because, in his opinion, Canadians had lost their connection with the earth and with God as a result of its heavy modernization⁸⁶. He had the habit of serving me a lot of fruits and vegetables with invitations such as "Come eat some plums because you don't have those in Canada" and after I communicated something was flavorful and tasted good, he would say: "See? You don't have these in Canada". His wife always corrected him: "How do they not have these in Canada? They have these in Canada," she often said, sounding as if what he was claiming was being silly, yet always looking my way with a question in the back of her eyes: *Do you have these in Canada?* His answer to his wife was more or less the same from one experience to another: a click of his tongue, a shake of his head and a statement along the lines of "No, they don't have these in Canada."

Later, I understood what he meant to say was not that there were no cucumbers, plums, and all the other things he served me in Canada. He meant to say that Canada did not have *these* cucumbers, plums and all the other things he served me. He meant "No, they're not like *these* ones", sometimes outright saying something like "Those aren't plums". In his understanding, all the food in Canada was grown in controlled environments pumped full of pesticides or antibiotics – or in his terms "full of chemicals" – and he invited me to ascertain that nothing in Canada was like "*these* ones" because "*these* ones" were much richer in "aroma".

According to him, if produce was richer in aroma in Romania, it was as a result of their growth conditions in a country where people still maintained their connection to the land and to God, where they took the time to value such connections rather than grow or make things as fast as possible. For Maria's husband, social and spiritual toxicity are among the causes of food toxicity and his example serves to demonstrate, as other collaborators have also explained, that humans are also part of the environment in which a plant, an animal or another being or thing may grow. If

⁸⁶ Here, I found somewhat of an interesting turn in discourse. If modern and industrialized countries used to be the best places to live in for better life conditions, they no longer were. For Maria's husband, they were the worst places to live in, often swearing on his life he would never leave Romania for a country such as Canada where, for him, people valued unhealthy habits rather than the opposite.

humans no longer (have the time to) care about the land, or if they cultivate unhealthy habits and lifestyles to answer certain imperatives, then food grows unhealthy as well. In other words, *caring* is also a process through which vitality *and* toxicity flow – another reminder that care can also be toxic.

Something which struck me throughout my fieldwork was that while my collaborators skillfully pointed out the harm and the “badness” in various forms of toxicity which stem from capitalist and modern imperatives, they never categorized them as “violent” even though, in my opinion, they undoubtedly are. Following Rob Nixon, this brings me to theorize environmental toxicity as a form of *slow violence*.

Indeed, as I explained in Section 2, scholars have already acknowledged the violent structures which uphold the toxic conditions of modern life and which are often the product of racist, colonial, capitalist and imperialist structures. Rob Nixon, more particularly, theorizes environmental toxicity as a form of slow violence – “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon, 2011, p.2). He describes slow violence “not just [as] attritional but also [as] exponential, operating as a major threat multiplier” (Nixon, 2011, p.3) and draw attention to the necessity of addressing slow violence “as a contest not only over space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but also over *time*” (Nixon, 2011, p.7-8, emphasis added). As he explains, “[s]tories of toxic buildup, massing greenhouse gases, and accelerated species loss due to ravaged habitats are all cataclysmic, but they are scientifically convoluted cataclysms in which casualties are postponed, often for generations” (Nixon, 2011, p.3).

Through the concept of slow violence, Nixon addresses “the resistance mounted by impoverished communities who have been involuntarily moved out of their knowledge [...] as well as the powers – transnational, national, and local – behind such forced removals” (Nixon, 2011, p.19) He also proposes “a more radical notion of displacement, one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable” (Nixon, 2011, p.19).

This concept of slow violence echoes particularly well the situation my collaborators grapple with every day. First, as I explained in Section 4 through the example of food,

environmental toxicity for my collaborators is fundamentally impersonal and insidious, spreading exponentially through time and space: beings and things which become intoxicated may spread this intoxication to all those who and which connect to them through vital flows, but the effects of such intoxication are not immediate. They become noticeable only much later in time, sometimes over generations and well beyond the point of no return.

Second, as I have sought to demonstrate above, toxicity also spreads through the human modern relationship with time – a relationship which strives to move my collaborators out of their ancestral knowledge and practices related to vitality and health by forcing them to partake in unhealthy and overly toxic systems and lifestyles. In fact, something similar came up in my conversation with Roxana as we somewhat diverted from the main topic and spoke of our shared experiences with the Canadian medical system. I had just told her about the little papers Canadian pharmacies had in their “natural” remedies aisles which stated these remedies were not proven to work and were not recommended by pharmacists.

“Yes, I heard that in Canada, doctors are very close-minded when it comes to these naturist treatments. Here, they are more open. There are enough people who are also close-minded when I go to the doctor, but they are a little bit more open here. Probably because we are a very old people/nation⁸⁷ – the Romanian land is an extremely old land – and [because] practically, it is [in this region] where this naturist medicine [which draws on] Hippocrates and so on⁸⁸ has rooted itself. I believe it is because of this. [Canadians] being colonizers, they moved away from their roots.”

Thus, as Nixon writes, “to talk about slow violence, then, is to engage directly with our contemporary politics of speed (2011, p.11), but it is also to engage with “ghosts” per Tsing et al. (2017), including those who have “banished” and “exorcised” by violent processes, such as knowledge erasure. Humans live in a fast-paced world where “slow” often passes unnoticed: “the media venerate the spectacular, [...] public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need” (Nixon, 2011, p.3), and humans constantly race against time in their daily lives. This lack of noticeability related to slow and ancient temporalities is precisely what makes toxicity so dangerous. Its slow processes may continue to operate unbothered, and slow or ancient solutions are either discarded or become covers for further toxic damage.

⁸⁷ Here, the word Roxana used was “*popor*” which holds both the notion of a people and a nation.

⁸⁸ Here, Roxana refers to the specific naturist model most European countries follow, not naturist medicine in general.

Indeed, as Nixon explains as he draws a clear parallel between slow violence, fast capitalism and the environmental crises, “the time frames of damage assessment and potential recovery are wildly out of sync. The deep-time thinking that celebrates natural healing is strategically disastrous if it provides political cover for reckless corporate short-termism” (Nixon, 2011, p.22). This is why he argues fervently for a conversion of “the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant [immediate] political intervention” in the face of “the most critical challenges of our time” (Nixon, 2011, p.3).

Thus, slow violence is analytically useful to point out environmental toxicity’s complex relationship with modern (and ancient) time. While it hides in slow temporalities which are nearly invisible in the modern world, it also spreads widely due to the speed of capitalist endeavors. Yet, even when the slow violence of toxicity is unveiled, capitalist forces manage to secure human inaction through the cultivation of doubt (Nixon, 2011, p.39), persuading us toxicity’s slow violence is but an elaborate optical illusion – yet another form of capitalist “seduction”.

“In “Concerning Violence,” the opening chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes of the role played under capitalism by an army of cultural “bewilderers.” The spread of slow violence in our own times has been exacerbated by a lavishly funded army of new bewilderers, those doubt producers and doubt disseminators whose job it is to maintain populist levels of uncertainty sufficient to guarantee inaction. We thus need to recognize that slow violence involves more than a perceptual problem created by the gap between destructive policies or practices and their deferred, invisible consequences. For in addition, slow violence provides prevaricative cover for the forces that have the most to profit from inaction: under cover of deferred consequences, these energetic new bewilderers literally buy time. For the new bewilderers, led by Big Oil and Big Coal, doubt is more than a state of mind – it’s a bankable product.”

(Nixon, 2011, p.40)

To talk about slow violence, then, is not simply about engaging directly with our contemporary politics of time, but also our “contemporary politics of money”. This brings me to the next subsection.

On the field, Big Oil and Big Coal did not come up in the discussions I had with my collaborators, but Big Pharma certainly did. Several collaborators noted how the pharmaceutical industry and its chemicals contributed environmental toxicity, but also how the market logics which push humans to engage in various toxic (care) practices are quite convenient for the pharmaceutical industry.

5.2 Money: Necroeconomies of the 21st Century

“In the twenty-first century, humans are chemically transformed beings” (Murphy, 2008, p.696). This is how Murphy concludes a small passage in “Chemical Regimes of Living”, where she skillfully explains how humans “are further altered by the pharmaceuticals imbibed at record-profit rates, which are then excreted half metabolized back into the sewer to flow back to local bodies of water, and then again redispersed to the populace en masse through the tap” (Murphy, 2008, p.696).

My collaborators were well aware of this dynamic, pointing out how pharmaceuticals also polluted soils and water. However, they especially insisted on how environmental (and pharmaceutical) toxicity was “convenient” for the pharmaceutical industry. More specifically, they pointed out how the pharmaceutical industry is eager to capitalize on the sickness that results from toxic exposure. Our human sugary, carcinogenic food gives us diabetes and cancer, our isolation from other people gives us social anxiety, our constant working states give us depression – our devitalized world does too – and the pharmaceutical industry has a little pill or a shot for it all. “It’s a question of money,” said Nadia as other collaborators had. Some of them, like Roxana, even went a little further: It’s a question of control.

By this, I do not mean to suggest there is a conspiracy at work between the agricultural and pharmaceutical sectors and that food is purposely made toxic to serve pharmaceutical interests⁸⁹. Rather, following Moore and Patel (2017), I suggest that environmental and food toxicity are a crisis which encourages a strategy for profit. “Questions of money” in the agricultural sector have created a health crisis which becomes a “question of money” in the pharmaceutical sector. In other words, pharmaceutical corporations capitalize on health and toxicity. Sometimes, they even create their own crisis to that effect as I explain below.

During our conversation, Roxana told me her work as a naturopath was to *cure* people by addressing the root cause of what ails them. She explained naturopaths “do not like to treat symptoms because those reappear or they transform into other symptoms, maybe even more severe, or in diseases”. During her first consultation with a patient, she builds a “Statement of Vitality” with the help of over 300 questions which essentially address the patient’s entire life:

⁸⁹ However, certain corporations like Bayer are giants in both agricultural and pharmaceutical sectors, which can certainly raise ethical questions.

their basic information, birth, childhood, significant events, family antecedents, allergies, vaccines, drugs, supplements, stress, conflicts, relationships, surgical interventions, eating habits, exercise habits, sleep habits, and so on. She looks for signs of blockages by toxins and devises a treatment plan for them.

When I asked her more specifically about the role of plants in her practice, she told me that nearly all the treatments plans she recommends involve the use of plants in various forms, but she also warned against their limited effects:

“All plants are medicinal, according to me. [They] are therapeutic. They help you to treat a problem [...] although plants in themselves are unfortunately also very often symptomatic. Yes, they help you to detoxify your organs. Yes, they help you to keep a certain disease under control, but... *Why* was this disease triggered? That’s what interests us [naturopaths].”

Symptomatic, she explained to me, means something which does not treat the cause of the ailment necessarily. In comparison with her work, she criticized allopathic medicine for often being “symptomatic”, like plants, and linked this “symptomatic-ness” to economic motivations. As she explained:

“[P]eople used to treat themselves naturally, and then came those... The Rockefeller Foundation, (inaudible), and they established these [new] faculties of medicine, they “put them in order”⁹⁰ and *they* imposed the subjects [taught] in universities. So, they removed everything that means naturopathy, homeopathy... They said these are not proven scientifically, they are not good for anything... Because they wanted us to be some patients for life dependent on *their* drugs! That’s why. That’s what they wanted. [...] [W]hen I give out a treatment – not necessarily symptomatic, some people want [a] symptomatic [treatment] – [...] people feel well for *years*. You know? So, I fix a problem. Well, others may appear as well [over time]. But they don’t depend on drugs all their life. The treatment is naturopathic: if, indeed, you go to the cause, [drugs] don’t need to be taken all your life.”

The origins of the process which Roxana speaks about in the excerpt above are multiple and are hard to pinpoint as the biomedical model and the modern pharmaceutical industry used many tactics to their mutual advantage, such as their alliance as well as tying into sexist and capitalist logics. For instance, in 19th-century Europe, the biomedical model and pharmaceutical

⁹⁰ Here, the expression Roxana used in Romanian is “*pus la punct*”, literally “put to the point”, meaning that something was put in order, updated or perfected.

industry gradually gained influence by removing professions, such as herbalists and midwives (essentially, women), which held different ideas of the body and health from the landscape of formal medical practice, and by restricting the use and prescription of the most potent medicinal plants to the pharmaceutical industry through lawmaking devices, thus ensuring the hold of biomedicine and the pharmaceutical industry on the health system. (Bost, 2015; Russell, 2013, p.7-14).

Today, there are various post-secondary schools of naturopathy throughout the world, but Roxana was careful to note that the ideas of health formal education promotes outside these schools are very much biomedical, especially in North American schools, and only reinforce the position of those which would seek to make humans lifetime patients. Indeed, a few sentences after the extract above, she used the example of Canada by adding:

“Even in [Canadian] schools you are not taught anything about plants, how to treat a cold at home, or... No. ‘Take an Advil’, take I don’t know which syrup. You know? Yes, in Canada things are much more... [...] extremely extremist. This is a question of control. There is more control there than here, unfortunately, from the sanitary point of view.”

Regardless of whether it was Romania or Canada, Roxana explicitly linked the current allopathic medical model to pharmaceutical capitalist endeavors where the objective is not to cure anyone, but to make them lifetime drug-dependent patients. This is achieved through control of various educational, medical and economic institutions, and especially lives and bodies – a form of control which echoes very well the concept of slow violence as I will explain later.

The idea of “drugs for life” has been studied by scholars beforehand, notably by medical anthropologist Joseph Dumit (2012). In his book, “Drugs for Life”, he points out a significant change in the United States medical paradigm where “normal” and “healthy” have become separated: the body is considered to be inherently ill, the majority of illnesses are treated as “chronic” and prescriptions are increasingly based on “risk factors” rather than illness itself. Indeed, towards their thirties, Americans are prescribed various drugs which target chronic diseases such as high cholesterol based on statistical “risk factors” whether or not they are sick. “As an index of this paradigm shift, health itself is starting to disappear in pharmaceutical reports. The word often appears in quotation marks.” (Dumit, 2012, p.7) He also notes this paradigm shift aligns itself with money-making objectives.

“Chronic treatments, especially long-term risk-reduction prescriptions, will generate a much larger market than acute treatments. Onetime treatments like vaccines that actually prevent illness are ‘more likely to interfere with the spread of the disease than are drug treatments, thus reducing demand for the product,’ while mental illness treatments are highly valued precisely because these illnesses ‘share the distinction of not being cured by these pharmacological treatments. This makes the market even more attractive. The patients have to take the drugs chronically.’ With these clinical trials in hand, the pharma companies’ and advertisers’ objective is to ‘maximize the number of new prescriptions’ and to make sure consumers stay on their medication as long as possible.”

(Dumit, 2012, p.6, citing Kremer and Snyder 2003, p.2 and Bartfai and Lees 2006, p. 221).

As Dumit writes, this “express[es] a logic of generalized medication” (2012, p.16) where even “clinical trials are driven by the need to grow the market in medicine and that this is a very different goal for a clinical trial than arriving at the best therapy for people” (2012, p.23). This is precisely what Roxana explains in the extracts above, noting how this paradigm shift also affects Romania, although less intensely.

On the field, most of my collaborators addressed this situation by expressing confusion or discontent in the face of the refusal of the medical system to consider other therapies than those focused on drugs. As I have quickly mentioned in Section 3, my collaborators are increasingly frustrated with the allopathic medical system. For example, Adina said that:

“Nothing is what it used to be. *No*, but... I still remain of the same opinion that plants are an alternative [to drugs] and that doctors nowadays should also accept this part as an alternative. ‘It doesn’t work with this’, or I don’t know what, ‘let’s try something on the side of plants, or vegetables, or fruits or...’”

I should also note that, in Romania, the argument that the medical system is more interested in money than in patient health is further strengthened by the “implicit” rules of the Romanian formal medical system. Here, I will draw on the specific example of my grandfather to illustrate what I mean: During my stay in Romania, my grandfather was afflicted with a severe otitis. He usually avoids going to the doctor until the very last minute, so he only sought help in a nearby (allopathic) clinic by the time the inflammation had taken out his hearing in one ear. Upon coming back from the clinic, my grandmother asked him if he had managed to secure an appointment with a doctor. This is (roughly) the exchange that took place afterwards (as I did not record it):

“She [the secretary] sat with me, put a sheet on the desk, and told me there were no appointments available for the next month,” said my grandfather.

“So, what did you do?” asked my grandmother, exclaiming herself.

“I pulled out a 20 lei bill, slid it under her sheet, and then she told me there was an appointment tomorrow morning.”

This is not an isolated incident. The necessity to bribe medical personnel to receive basic health care in Romania is a significant problem, and I have heard several horror stories on the consequences of refusing to offer a bribe or offering a smaller bribe than anticipated. Doctors may provide bad healthcare or refuse to provide it altogether by dismissing their patients with phrases such as “There is nothing I can do for you”. They might also not show up at the appointment, at the surgery or in the delivery room. This problem seems to be in decline since several government-led reforms, but it still persists as one of the worst cases of healthcare corruption in Europe (Simičević, 2024).

This is another reason why my collaborators are increasingly frustrated with the Romanian biomedical system. Again, my collaborators recognize allopathic medicine’s benefits and its necessity, but as I have mentioned in Section 3, they are frustrated with the biomedical model because it ignores a number of things which seem obvious to them and fails them in the process. It operates with notions of health which do not hold, or, more recently, does not operate with a notion of health at all; neglects aspects of health which cannot be physically observed; pushes “Band-Aid” drugs when it shouldn’t; does sometimes more harm than good; and, overall, supports and feeds off the same capitalist toxic logics which make people sick, even when it is not “visibly” corrupt. The biomedical system is not what makes people sick – mostly – but by remaining silent in the face of threats to our human health, it does not cure them either. Furthermore, the biomedical system is not only silent in the face of threats to our health, but actively supports them, even encourages them, as it participates in creating lifetime patients. This is to say, as Nixon would, that “the forces of inaction have deep pockets” (Nixon, 2011, p.39).

Thus, I suggest that the biomedical system and the pharmaceutical industry do not only fail their patients but are toxic to them as they propel various forms of hidden, slow violence through the control they enact over lives and various institutions in order to remain “in power”. The modern capitalist agricultural system behaves very much the same way, propelling various forms of

hidden, slow violence as it intoxicates its clients. Here, I would thus like to draw attention to the particularly disastrous consequences depriving humans from their ancestral knowledge of health and healing has had on human societies over time: ravaging physical, mental and spiritual health and securing the hold of one of the most destructive economic systems in history.

Of course, the biomedical system, the pharmaceutical industry and the modern agricultural system are not the sole culprits when it comes to our human suffering – neither is capitalism. Various other systems, institutions, ideologies and processes are also responsible for upholding modern violent dynamics. Changes to human ways of life, ways of knowing and ways of relating to the world, even to time (as I have discussed above) were brought on by a myriad of political, economical, social, religious, technological and ideological processes. Here, we can think of the rise of state governments and their decline in power in the last century just to cite an example.

However, the capitalist, biomedical pharmaceutical industry also has its role to play in the (slowly) violent dynamics we suffer from, especially as it concerns knowledge erasure. As I have explained above, its first step towards a successful capitalist pharmaceutical enterprise was to discredit other health models by moving people out of their ancestral knowledge on natural healing through the control of educational and medical systems. This was a surefire way to “create an army of bewildered” which can support and feed the pharmaceutical industry and allow it to proliferate its violent logics of dependency where health is sacrificed at the profit of, well, profit – something which was further strengthened by its combination with others I mentioned above. Nonetheless, in



Figure 5: Maria's balcony.

all my honest, personal, Romanian-ness, I find it mind-boggling how the biomedical pharmaceutical industry's army of bewildered has been so successful in creating doubt that it convinced certain individuals that the naturist therapies that have kept their ancestors alive for centuries do not work.

This mind-boggling situation actually struck me particularly hard one day during fieldwork as I sat with Maria on her balcony eating tomatoes from her

daughter's garden and fresh *jumări* made from the pigs her daughter's husband raised. As I have written previously, Maria used medicinal plants throughout her life with success, especially as a young woman and as a mother. Nowadays, she also swears on coffee (like me) as being able to prevent and cure her migraines (which is something we bonded over). Despite this, when I asked her whether she still used plants to heal or prevent ailments, she said that aside from coffee, she rarely does anymore because "they do not work". I remember freezing with *jumări* halfway through my mouth, feeling utterly confused.

Maria specified that she still drinks certain teas here and there, for example, when her stomach hurts, but she steers clear of plants when it is something more serious as they either do not work or take too long to work – she was not sure which one it was herself. She gave me the specific example of trying to manage her husband's diabetes with an herbal tea made of a combination of plants, and being unsuccessful despite a 3-month treatment. I did not have the chance to ask further about this, so I do not know the conditions in which this failure took place – whether they followed treatment accurately or not; or whether her husband had even come off his usual medications for this – but I did find it particularly shocking for Maria to say "plants do not work" despite being clear that they also *did* work. Perhaps, she meant that they do not work as she wishes they did or that they do not work for diabetes, I will never know.

I would like to note, however, that during my interview with Roxana (which is significantly better informed on plant medicine than Maria), I learned that she rarely recommends herbal tea as a treatment. She prefers to prescribe other things such as plant extracts, because it takes over a liter per day of herbal tea for plants to work effectively and patients can rarely stick to the treatment regimen. She also mentioned diabetes as one of the chronic illnesses which could successfully be managed through naturist means.

Hearing this, I could not help but think Maria's disappointment in the face of the efficacy of plants might be due to misinformation or lack of information – to being moved out from ancestral knowledge. It would certainly be something which the pharmaceutical industry would benefit from as her husband still relies on diabetes drugs (and to top it all off, these medications give him kidney problems which are also managed through other drugs).

In retrospect, it seems to me that a discussion and reflection on what "work" means would have been necessary. In many ways, it does not only seem to be a question of physical therapeutic efficacy. Perhaps, the right question does not even lie in whether remedies work or not at all. In

my opinion, what Maria's contradictory opinions demonstrate is that when divorced from their respective "cultural" and medical frameworks, remedies... stop being remedies. This is how I can make sense on all the contradictory statements on the efficacy of plant remedies that have arisen from the field; and it seems to me that this is also precisely what the field seeks to expose. Indeed, throughout my fieldwork, my collaborators repeatedly insisted, not on the efficacy of remedies, but on the health dangers associated to the replacement of a way of life with another that is toxic.

Thus, Maria's situation, especially when compared with Roxana's is useful to demonstrate how the biomedical system can be slowly violent. As humans are moved out of knowledge, the violence the biomedical model enacts on its patients has the particularity of not being seen as violence at all. Instead, other models are vilified as treacherous and unreliable. The biomedical system remains the favored medical system – that is therapeutic system, able to solve a problem – despite its increasingly toxic and violent dispositions. The harm imposed by pharmaceutical drugs is simply seen as an unfortunate but an unavoidable side-effect which demands other drugs to be managed – not as unnecessary money-making suffering.

Many collaborators, such as Adina, criticized the biomedical system for this very reason: Why doesn't it accept and begin treatment with gentler remedies before resorting to those that, indeed, work but also harm us? Why does it dismiss Dacian medical models which holistically addressed health at the profit of harmful ones? In other words, many collaborators criticized the biomedical medical system and the pharmaceutical industry very much like they criticized synthetic pesticides. Drugs and synthetic pesticides can indeed solve certain problems efficiently, and they indeed bring in a *lot* of money – they're good for the economy – but they also have significant costs, toxic costs which often come at the price of health and vitality. Here, the ethical discussion from the previous chapter imposes itself again: How ought one to live? How ought one to kill? How ought one to *heal*?

As a whole, these discussions above may be reminiscent of Michel Foucault's (1997) biopolitics, especially as they touch upon notions such as bodily control. However, I argue that as this "control" finds itself enmeshed with toxicity, money, and *especially* devitalizing processes, these discussions are much closer to Achille Mbembe's (2019) necropolitics. More specifically, I argue environmental toxicity in the 21st century is a symptom of monstrous necroeconomies.

Necropolitics are defined by Mbembe as forms of "subjugating life to the power of death" (2019, p.92). He argues that Foucault's "notion of biopower is insufficient to account for

contemporary forms of the subjugation of life to the power of death” and, instead, puts forward the notion of necropolitics.

“[T]he notion of necropolitics, or necropower, [is] to account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*”.

(Mbembe, 2019, p.92)

Mbembe is especially concerned with the notions of resistance, sacrifice, terror and touches upon themes like politics and warfare which are not the focus of this thesis, but his reflections remain nonetheless pertinent for the analysis at hand. Indeed, his “concern is those figures of sovereignty⁹¹ whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (Mbembe, 2019, p.68) which is, in part, what is at work in the context of this thesis through toxic exposure. I would only add that this destruction is never just material.

Furthermore, Mbembe writes that “[t]o live under late-modern occupation is to experience a permanent condition of ‘being in pain’” (2019, p.91). Yet, living under late-stage capitalism is quite a similar experience where exposure to toxicity and harm is a condition for living. Humans are killed “in small doses” (Mbembe, 2019, p.35), their health increasingly repressed over generations by an exposure to partial death, so they may continue to serve capitalist interests. The pharmaceutical industry in particular wages a “war that draws its weapons from the ‘evil’ that it pretends to be eradicating”, as Mbembe writes about modern States and their “war on terror” (2019, p.38).

Certain authors such as Fatmir Haskaj have addressed similar parallels between necropolitics and capitalism (and neoliberalism) by working with the concept of “necroeconomy”:

“Death as a source of value marks a new space in capital that exceeds the former limits identified under modernity (in the broad sense of the term) in which living labor is the primary source of value. This new space of capital, I suggest, exceeds commodification, entering instead the realm of equivalency and abstraction of all, including life and death. My argument is that this is a direct product of neoliberalism’s tendency to marketize all aspects of human activity and I maintain

⁹¹ In the context of his work, Mbembe comes to define sovereignty as “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (Mbembe, 2019, p.80)

that this is a new space of capital that profits in killing and death, not to produce commodities, but as the commodity itself—a *necroeconomy*.”

(Haskaj, 2018, p.1149)

Other authors such as Hetherington have discussed the centrality of killing and death in various economical projects through ethnographical examples and how this is often not completely new, “but rather an appropriation and concentration of past forms of killing in the project of new, more efficient techniques for generating property from death” (Hetherington, 2019, p54).

Combining Mbembe’s and Haskaj ideas while slightly diverting from them at the same time, I propose capitalism (rather than neoliberalism) is a source and form of necroeconomy which capitalizes not only death but also on exposure to *partial* death, both addressed by Mbembe’s necropolitics.

Indeed, my fieldwork has brought me to notice the capitalist models which were at work on the field were often just toxic *enough* to control the vital flows they need to exploit without letting them fade into nothingness. (At least, for now, as my collaborators argue these models will not hold for much longer.) Food is poisonous, but it is edible; drugs deplete our health, but they maintain it; air burns our lungs, but it is breathable; and our economy makes us miserable but promises happiness if we just indulge in it a bit more. This brings me to define health toxicity itself as a form of partial death where humans are not dead, but not entirely lively either. Lives and health are crippled by toxic exposure, plunging people into a persistent state of pain and discomfort.

In the medical system more particularly, toxicity *itself* is a tool of control where profit is generated from exposure to partial death – patients are always harmed and intoxicated through pharmaceutical drugs but (almost) never enough to be killed, making them “living dead” (sometimes quite literally) generators of profit. In the agricultural system, this is also what happens to plants and animals which are grown or made in corporate settings: they are harmed and intoxicated through various means, but never enough to be killed (until they are judged ready), making them “living dead” generators of profits, much like Dutch bell peppers and chickens who only get to live three weeks.

By this, I mean to argue that environmental toxicity at large – whether from pesticides or drugs or any other chemicals and toxic practices, including knowledge erasure – is a result of necropolitical and necroeconomical frameworks which impose (slow) violence on humans and

other-than-humans alike for the sake of the few who make money off it. Like I have already established in the previous chapter, one suffers from this violence, even when it is not directly imposed, as beings, things and processes are all linked, something which capitalist interests continue to insist is fallacy. Thus, drawing on Mbembe, in this capitalist era, “[g]radually replacing the proposition of universal equality [...] is the oftentimes violent separation of a “world without.” This is the ‘world of undesirables’” (Mbembe, 2019, p.38) where the undesirables are everyone and everything which impedes a money transfer.

Indeed, Mbembe writes that systems and ideologies which adopt the necropolitical principle require “on the one hand, a generalized cheapening of the price of life and, on the other, a habituation to loss” (2019, p.38). Based on ethnographical data, this seems to be precisely what happens in corporate agricultural fields and behind the closed doors of biomedical doctor’s offices. While humans devalue the multitude of lifeforms (and deathforms) which constitute and uphold the world’s shared vitality, it has become normal to suffer from food and drug toxicity and to come out a “loser” of health.

However, I would like to end this section by bringing some nuance or criticism to my own argument. Previously, I have explained vitality encompasses life as well as death, meaning the concept of “necropolitics” or “necroeconomies” which both rely on death, might not be entirely appropriate here. Thus, while I believe environmental toxicity is indeed a manifestation of the necropolitics and necroeconomies of the 21st century, I also believe capitalism is not *only* a necroeconomy. In many ways, it fundamentally relies on the same processes as vitality in order to “subsist”, meaning *both* life and death and especially their in-betweens. In this sense, it would therefore be more appropriate to write of environmental toxicity as a manifestation of various *toxic flows* capitalism uses to generate profit.

5.3 Recapitulation

This chapter addressed some of the questions I had outlined in the introduction of this thesis such as “What are the conceptions of toxicity associated with daily acts of care?”, “How do people in Cluj compose with environmental toxicity (in the broad sense of the term)?” as well as “Why is it impossible to address healthcare without addressing environmental toxicity (in the broad sense of the term)?”. Throughout the chapter, I have drawn on ethnographical data in order to posit toxicity as a form of slow violence and a manifestation of contemporary necroeconomies.

I began this chapter by explaining how my collaborators contradictorily intoxicated themselves with the same chemicals and through the same practices they deplored as harmful. I exposed how this intoxication was due to toxicity being a condition of modern life and focused on modern capitalist articulations of time and money as specific causes.

In the first subsection, I addressed how the monopolization of material and temporal resources by capitalist structures often create logics of dependency which create and sustain toxic exposures as conditions of modern life despite one's best efforts. I explained how such structures have made a large part of the human population dependent on corporate toxic food sources and how capitalist market logics have spread chemicals throughout the world, making it impossible to avoid food toxicity even when one grows their own food. I have also addressed how capitalist institutions such as supermarkets may seem attractive in a modern era where people are "hungry for time" and further justify toxic exposure.

I have identified the monopolization of temporal resources as an issue which affects all spheres of life, and which is often implicated in various forms of toxicity which find themselves intertwined. Despite this, I have also pointed how my collaborators did not characterize the inevitability of toxicity as something "violent" bringing me to theorize environmental toxicity (which encompasses food, social and medical toxicity) as a form of slow violence – a hidden form of violence which operates slowly across time and space. This has brought me to consider toxicity's slow violence as a way to engage with our contemporary and ancient politics of time – with speed and ghosts – as well as our contemporary politics of money.

In the second subsection, I expanded on these contemporary politics of money and pointed out how toxicity serves capitalist monetary interests, but also how capitalist monetary interests encourage toxic exposure. I have theorized this is not only slowly violent in itself, but a clear manifestation of contemporary necroeconomies which capitalize on exposure to partial and complete death, both sometimes a result of toxicity. Throughout this discussion, I have particularly focused on the pharmaceutical industry and written about the modern medical system as symptomatic as well as driven towards creating lifetime patients through knowledge erasure and intoxication. Yet, I have also briefly addressed how the corporate agricultural system does very much the same to plants and animals. I argued that environmental toxicity at large – whether from pesticides or drugs or any other chemicals and toxic practices – is a result of necropolitical and

necroeconomical frameworks which impose (slow) violence on humans and other-than-humans alike, mostly for the sake of money.

This mess of interactions between health, various forms of toxicity, time and money that I have addressed throughout this chapter are well articulated by an informal conversation I had with Nadia over coffee and by a formal conversation I had with Violet in her flower shop. Our modern era, explained Nadia to me, does not *allow* us to escape toxicity even if one has alternatives and can see the toxins plainly. If your head hurts, she asked me, do you have time to rest at home and sip tea? *No*. So, then, you take an ibuprofen, and you go to work hoping it works. Yet, even *if* we had the time and the means, said Violet, nature can no longer cure us. Our modern diseases are a result of man-made toxins. Nature does not know how to defend against them efficiently. It takes man-made toxins to get rid of them.

It takes a monster to fight a monster.

This brings me back to Tsing et al. monstrosities and invites me to inspire myself from the experience of my collaborators and suggest, perhaps on a more hopeful note than Violet, that the solution to our man-made monsters lies in the ancient chimeric ones which humankind seems so eager to eradicate at times.

6 Care

“Trebuie să păstrezi.”⁹²

In the beginning, I wrote this thesis is about why an inquiry into medicinal plants became impossible without discussing food, the environmental crisis, capitalism, and history; and about how medical anthropology became environmental anthropology in the really broad sense of the term. I wrote that, ultimately, it is an ethical discussion on “the good life” and the toxic elements that prevent us from living it as my collaborators understand it. The research question which drove this discussion was the following: How do notions of health and toxicity emerge through daily acts of care in Cluj, Romania?

Throughout this thesis, the daily acts of care of my collaborators revealed health and toxicity as notions which go beyond materiality, and which highlight the interconnectedness of beings, things and processes that compose the world through space and through time. Paying attention to how these notions emerged on the field, I argued that the daily acts of care of my collaborators in Cluj, Romania embody historical, metaphysical, and capitalist narratives and dynamics which inform and are informed by notions of health and toxicity. Health and toxicity are thus notions which cannot be understood separately from these narratives and dynamics. I have developed this argument in three sections – Ancestors, Chemicals and Monsters – which each exposed a different part of this argument and aimed to offer a better understanding of how humans grapple with health and toxicity as it relates to our food, our medicine, our environment at large and the relation we foster with other beings and things.

6.1 History

In “Ancestors”, I addressed the historical part of my argument and especially attended to the concept of health. I laid out the historical, epistemological and medical context in which my collaborators daily acts of care took place as well as in which the concepts of health and toxicity I have discussed must be understood.

I explained my collaborators’ epistemologies as being informed by what Tsing et al. (2017) call “ghosts” as well as being fundamentally *experiential* – practical and sensuous. Experiences

⁹² You must keep/preserve/conserve.

are therefore valued as epistemic and empirical tools. Engaging with theories and approaches which consider practices and concepts as co-constituted, I thus argued health and toxicity must be discussed as historicized elements which were and are informed by ancient “collective” life experiences as well as by recent and personal ones.

I also stressed how, for my collaborators in Cluj, health is not merely a bodily affair. In turn, daily acts of care are not either. I have put forward various examples which demonstrate the mind, the heart and the soul are elements deemed essential to consider in healthcare, supporting authors which argue scholarly work should pay attention to health both inside and outside the clinic and consider the possibility that bodies do not always have their place in discussions related to health. In the following section, however, I especially focused on a daily act of care in particular: feeding.

6.2 Metaphysics

In “Chemicals”, I developed the metaphysical part of my argument, especially by attending to the daily act of feeding as well as the (sensory) experiences which accompanied it on the field. Focusing on this daily act of care revealed how health and toxicity are notions which go beyond materiality, and which are impossible to grasp properly without discussing other-than-human beings, things, and processes which sometimes pertain to metaphysical understandings of the world.

On the field, food revealed itself as a way for humans to maintain their health, but it always came with a contradiction that humans now face due to the chemicals – toxic synthetic substances – which may permeate it: Food is what keeps you healthy, but also what makes you ill. This contradiction demonstrates that the distinctions between the categories of food and medicine, natural and artificial as well as their good and bad connotations are blurry; and highlights how care practices may sometimes also be harmful, violent or toxic.

Delving deeper into this contradiction revealed that while my collaborators problematize chemicals and other modern agricultural practices they identified as toxic⁹³, they do not problematize them simply for being toxic, but for being toxic in *specific ways*. More precisely, they problematize them for unethically disturbing “vitality” – a relational form of energy which

⁹³ Examples include excessively controlled environments in greenhouses or monocultures.

connects beings and things through processes, and which is intrinsic to human and other-than human health. Indeed, chemicals and other toxic modern agricultural practices harm beings and things, including humans, by unnecessarily and excessively cutting them from healthy vital flows, fostering flows which pass on toxic harm instead. This explains why the environment is deemed to play a role in human health and puts forward a notion of toxicity inextricably linked with harm, purity and isolation.

Throughout the chapter, I sometimes discussed other acts of care than feeding to explain that vitality can flow and be sensed through the material world, but not only, manifesting as that which connects entities beyond it, touching upon the mental, social and spirituals planes. Toxicity's ability to manifest on any of these planes also revealed it as a concept which went beyond the material world. I also specified vitality and toxicity are not necessarily opposed – certain toxic substances can also maintain vital flows; the same way certain vital flows can be toxic to others – nor vitality and toxicity opposed to death and life respectively. Feeding is a good example in this regard as many creatures require to kill in order to survive, but there are good and bad ways to do it which is what my collaborators strived to explain.

This brought up an ethical discussion where “How ought one to live?” is not so different from “How ought one to kill?” as modes and moods of killing undesirable beings ultimately impact how desirable ones live. This ethical discussion as well as ethics more largely also revealed themselves to be fundamentally experiential. For my collaborators, sensory experiences can indicate what is toxic and what is not as well as what is good and what is bad – *what* and *how* to do. Building on this discussion, the following section tackled how even when we know *what* and *how* to do, oftentimes, the ability to practice these ethics and to avoid toxicity is impeded by capitalist imperatives.

6.3 Capitalism

In “Monsters”, I addressed the part of my argument which pertains to capitalism and explained how the ongoing disturbance of “vitality” – encouraged among others by the modern capitalist articulation of time and money – not only feeds capitalist ideals, but is also fed by them, creating a nearly inescapable vicious circle where toxicity is the norm rather than the exception.

Once again, I departed from a contradiction, albeit a different one, where my collaborators intoxicated themselves with the same chemicals and through the same practices they deplored as

harmful. I explained this intoxication was inevitable, theorizing toxicity as a condition of modern life like various previous scholars. More specifically, I addressed how the monopolization of material and temporal resources by capitalist structures often create logics of dependency on toxic food sources and toxic medicines which create and sustain toxic exposures as conditions of modern life despite one's best efforts. I have also addressed how capitalism often puts forward institutions (ex. supermarkets) and products (ex. modern medicines) which may seem attractive in a modern era where people are "hungry for time" and further justify toxic exposure.

I have noted the lack of "violent" connotations given by collaborators to this inevitable exposure to toxicity which has brought me to posit toxicity as a form of slow violence as other scholars have also done in the past. Focusing on the slowly violent dimensions of toxicity brought me to consider toxicity as a way to engage with our contemporary and ancient politics of time, but also our contemporary politics of money.

Indeed, I discussed how toxicity often serves capitalist monetary interests, and how these interests encourage toxic exposure. For this discussion, I especially focused on the pharmaceutical and agricultural industry and how they foster capitalization on the exposure to partial and complete death, both sometimes a result of toxicity. I explained how the biomedical pharmaceutical industry is driven towards creating lifetime patients, permanently stuck between life and death, and how this process is made easier by ancestral knowledge erasure and toxic exposure. I have also explained how the modern agricultural industry encourages this state of partial death in humans through the sale of toxic food and how it also keeps animals and plants in a similar state of partial death before they are killed to further capitalist monetary interests. This has brought me to posit environmental toxicity at large (agricultural, medical or other) as a manifestation of contemporary necropolitical and necroeconomical frameworks which impose (slow) violence on humans and other-than-humans alike, mostly for the sake of money.

Despite this, I ended the chapter by suggesting that despite toxicity's apparent inevitability, there are also solutions to be considered. One of these solutions is the subject of the rest of this conclusion.

6.4 Hope

During a summer morning, when the sun was not yet high enough to see the heat rising off the pavement, Lucian and Nadia brought me along for a visit to a friend's house in the small, yet

rapidly developing town of Apahida. Nadia and I entered through the yard and were led to the back of the house by her friend, all while she presented to us the plants along our path, sharing a bit about their growth process. Once we reached the back of the yard, I was faced with a lush fruit and vegetable garden and the clucks and squawks of chickens.

This scene is common in Romanian towns and villages. Sometimes, it can even be found in cities. I have visited quite a few people in Romania throughout my life, and if they owned some land, then there was always something they grew on it, whether it was plants or animals, to feed their families. In fact, Adina acknowledged this explicitly during our conversations: “In Romania – in comparison with other states – what I want to say is that we still cultivate. If someone had a piece of land... Like your mother! See? This is given like... like this is how they have been taught at home. Understand?” Here, Adina refers to a broader ancestral set of teachings and values that follow Romanians everywhere they go, and which relate to cultivating your own food. She gives the example of my mother, whom she knows to have a vegetable garden in her backyard despite having immigrated to Canada.

Anthropology teaches such simple moments are often the most heavily charged with history, with knowledge, with meaning and relations that stretch through species, space and time. Anthropology also teaches such simple moments could spark as many theses as there are anthropologists. In another life, perhaps I would have brought my fieldwork elsewhere and spoken about the place of women in Romanian healthcare, but instead I aimed to engage with Tsing et al.’s (2017) book, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, as well as their ghosts and monsters.

“Ancestors” has focused on ghosts, “Chemicals” has focused on the “first” meaning of monsters, and “Monsters” has focused on the “second” meaning of these monsters. However, I hope that this thesis also made it clear that they cannot really be separated. In the “monstrous”⁹⁴ beginning of their book, Tsing et al. explain this artfully about the first and second meaning of monsters:

“We are mixed up with other species; we cannot live without them. Without intestinal bacteria, we cannot digest our food. Without endosymbiotic dinoflagellates, coral polyps lose their vitality. Yet such monstrosities have been anathema to the organization of modern industrial progress. Ironically, the denial of the monstrosity of entanglement has turned this life-making trait against us.

⁹⁴ The volume is divided into two “books”, “Ghosts” and “Monsters”, each with their own introductions, chapters and conclusions.

Industrial campaigns exterminate impurities, undermining the coordinations that make life possible. Plantations grow monocultures, or single crops that deny the intimacies of companion species. Modern dairy and meat farms raise a handful of supercharged breeds. A new kind of monstrosity attacks us: our entanglements, blocked and concealed in these simplifications, return as virulent pathogens and spreading toxins. Industrial chemicals weave their way through our food webs; nuclear by-products sicken us not just through our human cells but also through our bacteria.”

(Tsing et al., 2017, p.M4)

As such, in the ghostly beginning of their book, the authors explain how ancient chimeric monsters have lost limbs to our modern era, becoming ghosts which haunt landscapes:

“Our era of human destruction has trained our eyes only on the immediate promises of power and profits. This refusal of the past, and even the present, will condemn us to continue fouling our own nests. How can we get back to the pasts we need to see the present more clearly? We call this return to multiple pasts, human and not human, “ghosts.” Every landscape is haunted by past ways of life. We see this clearly in the presence of plants whose animal seed-dispersers are no longer with us. Some plants have seeds so big that only big animals can carry them to new places to germinate. When these animals became extinct, their plants could continue without them, but they have been unable to disperse their seeds very well. Their distribution is curtailed; their population dwindles. This is an example of what we are calling haunting.

(Tsing et al., 2017, p.G2)

Following the authors, I hope that this thesis has shown how “monsters and ghosts help us notice landscapes of entanglement, bodies with other bodies, time with other times” (Tsing et al., 2017, p.M7), but has also gone beyond this idea by suggesting our entanglements are also much more than bodily. They are also mental, emotional, spiritual and deeply relational. Moreover, we oftentimes rely on these entanglements for our human health, as the following conversation I had with Ileana suggests:

“Do you believe that humans create relations with plants?” I asked her.

“Yes. The relation of man with spontaneous flora, with the vegetal world exists. Well, this is what ethnobotany is based on, for example – on the relationship between humans and the vegetal world, and vice versa. [...] [Plants] influence society at large.”

“How?” I asked. “I agree, but... How?”

“How? For example, if we don't take care of medicinal plants, they disappear. [Consequently], [f]or sure that it also [makes] disappear, how do I say this, an opportunity for humans to...”

“Care for themselves?” I completed.

“To care, to heal,” she nodded. “The same goes for animals.”

“So, we have some sort of respon-”

“Responsibility, yes,” she completed. “Nowadays, the accent is on, how should I say this, the environment, environmental protection. [Plants and animals] are allies of Man.”

My time on the field has taught me this over and over: humans have a responsibility to care for other beings and things, to protect them, to preserve and conserve their vital flows. It is not simply a question of human health or a question of other-than-human health – as vitality shows us, both are often the same thing. It is a question of health, period; and as I have explained in the beginning of this thesis, health is about maintenance, maintenance is about care and care is about *duty*. Humans have a duty towards other beings and things which does not rely on affection, but on respect towards humans and other-than-humans alike as vitality connects us all.

A basic lesson to retain from my fieldwork is that it is important not to let our human modern lives erase such responsibilities, such knowledge and such connections. As Adina explained to me, even cities tend to be toxic environments not only by their heavily polluted air, but also through their design which tends to cut people from other vitalities and make them forget beings, things and processes are all linked – not to mention the busy, corporate lifestyles which are usually prevalent in cities, and which enhance this isolating phenomena. In a touching exchange in her kitchen, where sadness transpired in her voice towards the end, she said to me:

“We are linked/bound/tied⁹⁵ in a chain, whether some [people] want to or not. We are linked/bound/tied with nature and with plants and with everything that surrounds us in a way or another⁹⁶. But Man, because of the fact he is too busy... [he forgets this]. The majority [of people] live in metropolises, in cities. They do not have time anymore to stay and to watch how a tree blossoms, or how it [makes]

⁹⁵ The verb which is used in Romanian here, *a lega*, is used to mean “to link”, “to bound” or “to tie”.

⁹⁶ As I have mentioned before, in fact, this sentence (“*Suntem legați de natură și de plante și de tot ceea ce ne înconjoară într-un fel sau altul*”) literally translates to “We are linked/bound of nature, and of plants and of everything that surrounds us in a way or another.” which I find holds a layer of significance which cannot be translated in English.

leaves, or to smell a flower, or... We are too used maybe with... Or it seems like something trivial to stay and [notice] how an apple blossom is red and... and time passes like this, and the flowers disappear and...”

In our human modern era, the attention to vital flows has subsided. Instead, we focus on toxic ones, going as far as to encourage them for the sake of capital. Even in academia, “dark anthropology” has come to dominate the ethnographical landscape.

I believe breaking away from such a heavy focus on toxicity should be the beginning of a solution our toxic world. I do not suggest leaving behind the attention to toxicity altogether. Such attention is extremely important to identify our shared causes of suffering, but as my collaborators suggest, while *problems* can be found through attention to toxic flows, *solutions* cannot. Solutions are found in the evaluation of, as Lucian said, in what is *good*. Naturally, *that* is a question of ethics.

Thus, while “environmental degradation may ‘masquerade as inevitable’” (Nixon, 2011, p.11, quoting Schneiderman, 2010, p.7) , I would like to end this thesis by suggesting the solution to our toxic world relies on a re-articulation of our ethical attention. On the field, my collaborators taught me the most common ethical formats are too often inappropriate to tackle health toxicity: they separate ethics too often by species and concepts and are disproportionately concerned with life when death is not the focus of ethical discussions. Even current environmental ethical discourses which are concerned with the staggering destruction of ecosystems often separate the extinction of species from our own. They also rarely argue for better, more *careful*, ways of killing. Instead, they focus on solutions which, in our current world, often seem like equivalents to stopping to eat.

Consequently, I propose the ethics of vitality – ethics which pay attention to vital flows without leaving behind toxic ones; ethics which recognize the complex enmeshments between beings, things and processes; ethics which attend to “How ought one to live?” as well as “How ought one to kill?” – the most complex and important questions of our era. I argue for ethics which suggest that if our man-made monstrosities are able to cut the limbs off ancient chimeric ones, there is no reason why ancient chimeric monsters would not be able to cut off the limbs of our man-made ones.

It takes a monster to fight a monster.

I believe that the solution to our modern toxic world lies here. I believe that the solution to our man-made monsters lies in the ancient chimeric ones which humankind seems so eager to eradicate at times. I believe that the solution to our man-made monsters lies in the entanglements which cross the boundaries of space and time; in monsters and ghosts alike and in the resilience of vital flows which connects us all. I believe solutions lie in fostering one connection at a time, in one vital sensorial experience towards finding and answering the right questions which haunt our shared existence.

I also believe my collaborators would tell me this thesis is but common sense; and I agree with them, but anthropology teaches common sense is often not common. Thus, while this solution is not much for me, I hope it is something for others. I hope this thesis made some sense even as it was sometimes as messy and dense as the concepts of health and toxicity themselves; I hope I have done justice to the wisdom of my collaborators and our ancestors; and I hope that my writing and your reading were also processes through which vitality flowed.

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